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gendered images and brands. the social production of contemporary artists

● The aim of this paper is to present and analyse different strategies that are used today in creating an image, a name and fame for contemporary artists. My approach will be rather empirical not only because of the limited time I have been given but also due to a research project I am doing that has not yet come to an end.

So far I have interviewed a number of influential people from the New York and London art scenes and am in the process of doing the same in Finland, where I am from. The idea is to create a comparative study of three different art scenes. Two of them are large, established and most central and one of them is small and peripheral - at least geographically.

Concerning the social production of contemporary artists I have been asking several questions. Who can or who cannot be 'great' according to contemporary standards? Has the process of making a 'name' as an artist changed in any ways since the sixties?

Paula Cooper, one of New York's most prominent gallerists, thinks that the art world has become much more aggressive, competitive and commercial than it was when she started in the business 40 years ago. Until quite recently attitudes towards commercial elements in the art world were quite critical especially in the European countries where the state used to strongly support the arts. Now sponsors are here to stay and have become increasingly more important in Europe as well. Branding and packaging have become everyday art jargon. Artists are encouraged to sell and brand themselves while still only art students, although this trend seems to be much stronger in London and New York based art schools than it is in the Nordic-Baltic region or in Finland.

In an atmosphere such as this it is the artist's social skills and, if you like, her/his sex appeal in the media that have become more important than before. Gender, colour and sexual orientation are now important tools in the making of an image and name. Sometimes the artist's flirtation with publicity becomes inseparable from her/his pieces. Publicity becomes art and art becomes publicity.

In this situation the media should be more aware of its role in the branding and mythmaking process. The gallerists still launch the artist to the permanent collectors and the media still launches the artists

to the wider public. If the media only reprints and repeats the content of the press releases - as it often is the case especially with newspapers - then art criticism and journalism on the visual arts is nothing else but a continuation of the branding process in exactly the way the gallerist and artist want it to be.

In discussing mythmaking most critics seem to think of the concept of genius as entirely historical or as something belonging to modernism. However, it was the Romans who initially celebrated the Neo-Platonic concept in antiquity as a manifestation of male sexuality. The male genius was also flying high in the Renaissance era and again during the Romantic Period. Charles Baudelaire wrote that genius is just childhood rediscovered but in order to be expressed it needs both male organs and analytical reason.

As for the concept of genius today, my notion is that it leads to a kind of secret life between the lines. The word 'genius' is avoided by critics writing today as old-fashioned and historical, but nobody has ever stopped looking for and writing about star artists and exceptional talents. It also seems temptingly easy to discover old artist stereotypes as if they were new.

Damien Hirst is a good example of this. As the American art critic David Rimanelli puts it (Artforum, December 2000), "...Hirst possesses that supremely uncritical attribute, "talent". "Furthermore he praises Hirst's brilliance as a Pop personage. "One can't deny Hirst his success, and not only as a star of the art world (and the world at large)." One can't help thinking here how very well Rimanelli himself would deserve some supremely uncritical attribute.

Damien Hirst became a star artist in the late 80's after a successful branding process combining sensational and provocative elements. Hirst's working class rudeness makes you think of young British rock stars but otherwise he is a rather conventional bohemian macho stereotype. This power strategy seems to be highly rated even today. There have been systematically provocative women artists of the same YBA (Young British Artists) generation, Tracey Emin for instance, who have not reached the same position as Hirst even though they are well known. Emin's strategy seems to be choosing the whore role from the classic western Madonna - whore polarization. Yet

in doing that she is very much the kind of bad girl who is just another lad, a bad boy, using the same kind of tricks to get attention.

In an article written by the British art critic Sarah Kent (World of Art Newspaper, 45th Birthday Issue 2001), Kent refers to Tracey Emin as having stated that for women of her generation gender is not an issue because they are taken for granted and treated on an equal footing by their male colleagues. But Kent also points out: "Last year Damien Hirst notoriously sold *Hymn*, a bronze enlargement of an anatomical toy, to Charles Saatchi for 1,000 000 pounds. Soon afterwards Saatchi paid 150 000 pounds for Tracey Emin's bed, which she showed at the Tate Gallery when short listed for the Turner Prize. Given that Hirst and Emin are roughly the same age, thirty-six and thirty-seven respectively, and have similarly high-profile careers - they could be described as the king and queen of the YBAs - the 850 000 pounds discrepancy in the price paid for the two pieces is astounding."

Speaking of a very different gender role taker compared to Hirst and Emin I would like to mention the Serbian born artist Tanja Ostojić. At the Venice Biennale in the summer 2001 Tanja Ostojić explored power strategies and sexual roles very daringly. In her performance *I'll Be Your Angel* she appeared at the side of chief curator Harald Szeemann as his luxuriously dressed consort, his "angel", which raised not only a few eyebrows. Her provocation was so effective that most people truly believed there was some liaison between the artist and curator. With her performance Ostojić managed to raise a lot of questions about double standard, power and power play in the art world.

At last I would like to take up Magnus Scharmanoff, a Finnish artist who examines his own masculinity in an intelligent and ironic way. His way of approaching the subject is something I would like to call domestic heroism. In his carefully, absurdly and humorously staged photographs Scharmanoff poses himself as a *Man Who Washed His Socks*, *A Man who Made His Bed*, *A Man Who Shaved* and *A Man Who Did Up His Shoelaces*.

It seems that very different power strategies exist in the art world today and many of them have to do with gender and sexual identity. When trying to analyze

things that are new it is also necessary to try to recognize phenomena that are not, they might just be camouflaged in different words. ●

1. M. Scharmanoff, *The man who washed his socks*, 1993.

2. M. Scharmanoff, *The man who made up his bed*, 1993.



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