

Cultural Daily

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CITY STILLS: Socializing Urban Advertising

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, May 7th, 2014

Urban advertising

... is part of what we may call urban visual white noise, be it on top of buildings or carried by public transportation.

There is one category of urban ads with which we sometimes come in socializing distance and that is in small settings such as bus stop shelters, where the line between real and virtual socializing can become blurred due to crowding.

These ads are generally located at eye level, are rear lit and include human figures on a 1:1 scale or larger, turning them sometimes into wily participants in the setting.

I have selected two photos from my exhibited “White noise” series, where I explored this phenomenon along with urban reflections, and which I present and discuss below.

Big brother



We were the three of us in the bus shelter; with a nod of the head to my camera I asked silently the permission to photograph the two schoolgirls next to the ad. The nearest one to me lowered her eyes...the other averted her eyes ... a “n-yes” answer I supposed.

The dominating stare of the fellow in the ad and the rather submissive stance of the schoolgirls, taken together, had an *1984*-ish look to them.

I think that for a short moment, in a strange transfer of situational reality, we all did feel a bit cast in Orwellian roles—had I become unwittingly, by photographing, a big brother of sort myself?

Seduction



This was almost a set up...

I had located the ad when driving once by it, then had returned and posted myself at a socially neutral distance with a pre-set zoom and pre-focused camera and waited.

The tall fellow had turned his head to watch the opposite bus traffic and it just felt as if he had done it out of embarrassment from being so close, maybe out of uncertainty as to the meaning of being the subject of interest of the woman in the ad?

This may have been the intended virtual situation caused by the woman looking up—seductively? affirmatively?—to the male bus user, while the caption above her stated: “Aim high. Invest early.”

Discussion

These ads are clearly site specific: at night they provide an oasis of lit security and during the day, at rush hour, they provide a mental escape from the uncomfortable proximity due to crowding in the closet sized bus stop shelter.

The mini scenarios or dramas these ads portray allow one to avoid meeting the stare of the other travelers and be absorbed by the virtual situations presented by the ads.

Virtual socialization with the ads becomes an interesting example of environmentally mediated case of urban sociability (how to avoid the relative embarrassment of being too close to strangers), while entering, unwittingly, in a marketing-informed dialogue with the ads (how to get and hold the attention, and how to access the “memory and other buttons” of bus users).

Photos and collage credit Maurice Amiel

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