

Marta Gili

## **FREEDOM AND DEPENDENCE**

Andreas M. Kaufmann, like many other artists of his generation, is not a producer of objects, but a producer of ideas and experiments. On the whole, his work is based on a critical observation of the world of *the media*, considering it to be the place where the traditional limits between communication, mass culture and advertising dissolve.

Although image is the main material with which he works, the universe of sound and the universe of text take on greater relevance in his more recent works. Therefore, we are dealing with an artist for whom the digital revolution of the experience of communication (when "*the machines of communication merge: the telephone, the television and the computer*", in the words of Ignacio Ramonet) is at the same time his object, his subject and his means of study and analysis.

After the exhaustion of the great stories that fence our existence in within the frameworks of what is historic, what is collective and what is personal (in other words, those who told us the stories of the kings, noblemen, wars, treaties, forms of life or divine plans), the mass media has taken over in the task of filling us, day and night, with traditions, rituals, magic and other dependence strategies.

The media narrate the life we are living and we live the life that the means of communication are narrating to us. This apparent truism has no other aim than to point out something that has become obvious: a good part of our contemporary experience of reality is constructed on the symbolic landscape produced by the media cultures. These, with its eminently narrative nature, has filled in the cracks which both ideologically as well as politically and affectively, have appeared due to this crisis of the narration of the subject and of the community. The media produces meaning, it socializes stories and constructs identity, a feeling of belonging, affection, need, desire, homogeneity, dependence and so on.

If the media system constructs the illusion of possessing a conclusive argument of its own that gives meaning to existence, this very illusion sometimes manages to glide towards a state of critical exaltation, of paroxysm, thus favoring the disintegration or the fragmentation of its internal logic. In fact, a great part of Andreas Kaufmann's work consists of moving through the universe of media stories and operating with them, with what they do not say or what they do not show, with their impostures and their fragilities.

Kaufmann has been collecting images for years. He is not interested in registering the world around him with his camera, but of showing that the world already possesses all its images and that all we have to do is play with them, manipulate them, disarticulate them and create new discourses from them. Therefore, all these fragments of reality are, to Kaufmann, objects to be managed and with which to interact rather than subjective interpretations of reality. In this case then, photography abandons its traditional function of offering the photographer's point of view or intention to become "*the wrapping of the world, more than its screen*".

*"Mediated images are what we have to go on, our way to understand the world around us. They are our nature, our source material, and our fount of inspiration. Is this what Andreas Kaufmann wants us to think about?"* This is one of the many "anonymous" reflections included in one of the artist's latest works. It is the project "*Your eyes are not pained by what you see*", a

voluminous book created thanks to the contribution of more than one hundred people (including architects, designers, film makers, artists, critics, exhibition commissaries, etc.) to whom Kaufmann sent a CD with images of public domain, taken from the mass media. Political or cultural themes were mixed with sporting or society events, whose images Kaufmann edited following an intuitive rhythm. The deal the artist proposed to his collaborators involved exchanging images for words or for other images. The contributors received the CD, examined the images compiled by Kaufmann and shared all kinds of reactions with him, from the most emotional to the most indifferent ones, from critical discourses to ideological suggestions.

In fact, the dissection of this project shows diverse critical strata that are repeated throughout the artist's work and that are worthwhile noting. On the one hand, it puts in crisis the very notion of "artist-creator of images", which in this case would become "artist-user of images", in other words, a task that unites it or compares it to the "viewer-user of images". Author and viewer come together here on the same side, in the same gang. Far removed is the notion of the artist crouched behind a dark mystery that the viewer will try to discover, or behind a complex message to be deciphered. Both the artist and the viewer recognize each other as being users of images and from this their empathy and their mutual anonymity is born at the same time. "*Images*" – as Joy Garnett would say- "*rather than linking up experiences and solidifying contents do precisely the opposite: they draw a bottomless abyss between these experiences, at the same time as maintaining the perception of placing a bridge over this abyss*".

The disappearance of the author, but also the disappearance of the viewer, in the media magma, is then another of the layers that make up this work. In the first part of the book in which the majority of the reactions -in the form of new images or texts- to the photographs sent by Kaufmann are published, these contributions are shown anonymously or unsigned, like the images on the CD: Anonymity for the sake of anonymity? Is it just as much an exercise of sham of the disappearance of the author as a staging of the eclipse of the viewer? Probably some of us react to the images in the same way that they react to us: sometimes with fury and other times with indifference, but always with the echo of what is indescribable resounding in our ears. "*I believe in sharing*", exclaimed Kaufmann at the beginning of his programmatic text. And it is true, "*Your eyes are not pained ...*" is a collaboration project, but also the dissolving of the author and of the viewer in the interior of an amalgam of floating images that inhabit the depths, both in the public sphere as well as the private sphere. The artist proposes a strategy, some rules, a compilation of images, – in some way it forms an almost film-like syntax of them, an order. The viewers, the collaborators, also decline these images, they give them logic outside their context; in short, and they supply a story of their own, "*placing bridges over the abyss*". Neither the author nor the viewers restore the images to reality, but they manage their discontinuity, shaping in some way, this interactive act taken up by the author: "*I believe in sharing*". It is precisely this relationship between author and viewers that is referred to, and therefore returned to the area of the prefigured identities, in the second part of the book, full of references, biographies, translations and copyrights.

This dissolving of the limits between the public space and the private space has also favored reformulating exhibition spaces, as well as the very function of the artist with regard to the community. The installations that are called "site specific" or "site oriented" are evidence of this phenomenon. A project such as "*Your eyes are not pained...*" could be considered to be a work specifically designed for the space/book –without affecting the possibility of unfolding its content in an exhibition hall, such as presented in Bunkier Sztuki in Kraków. However, Andreas Kaufmann has also conceived many projects for urban or cultural spaces that combine formulations about the city, its architecture and its urban planning with critical approaches about the processes of perception and communication in the heart of the community.

In “*no agreement today, no agreement tomorrow*” Kaufmann installed a sculpture in one of the busiest roundabouts for directing traffic in the city of Bergkamen. In this project, which was born after winning a competition for a public project, led by the city town council, Kaufmann created a sculptural object whose cylindrical form corresponded to that of the roundabout. Inside this contraption, built in steel and acrylic glass, four projectors projected six images each, making a total of 24 slides. These images corresponded to other portraits and gestures of people taken from the mass media and which belonged to the political (Bush, Bin Laden, Blair), sporting (Schumacher) or cultural (Gerard Depardieu, Halle Berry, Michael Jackson) area, or which were quite simply, anonymous people.

Pedestrians in Bergkamen live with these images, decontextualised from their original sources, and in this way are interpolated to construct their own story about the appearances or disappearances of portraits on the circular screen. In fact, Kaufmann conceived the project as a work under way, which will conclude in 2028. During this time, the artist intends to change one of the images year after year, in a ritual that he conceives as a trigger of communication rather than as an act of invasion of public space. Kaufmann’s procedure consists of subjecting a certain collective of the city to a series of portraits of the same person which, in the artist’s opinion, could act as the “representative” of the previous year, thus promoting an exchange of ideas, opinions and affection about matters concerning the community and the very presence of the artist in it. Once the image has been chosen collectively, it goes on to increase the total of portraits projected in the media sculpture in the roundabout.

For Andreas Kaufmann, the public space is not a neutral place in which collective or subjective experiences parade, nor is it an article of consumption, but an ideological instrument. Its gesture is that of promoting spaces critical of communication and exchange. “*Public spaces*” –declares Kaufmann- “*have their deeper sense in creating common experiences and they are not only the playground of commercial interests, architects, designers, artists, etc.*”.

Along this same line of work, he developed “*Values on demand*”. In this project, the video installation “*Stuffed Silence*” consists of creating an inventory of words extracted from the drafting of the Constitutions of various countries, of the Declaration of Human Rights and other agreements of this kind scattered all over the planet. Words such as “freedom”, “justice”, “god”, “fraternity”, “peace” move from constitution to constitution, independently of the degree of credibility that they are given in each case. You will probably recall contexts in which these values become rhetoric (Guantanamo, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Indonesia). But we all know that civil rights are violated, second after second, by both the “barbarians” and the “civilized” nations. As Juan Goytisolo would say: “*from childhood we have inculcated in us the idea that the enemy of civilization is barbarism; civilization is obviously ours; barbarism is of others*”.

For Kaufmann, not only has humanity reached the point of being unable to understand its own civilization, but also the new stories provided by the mass media tend to subvert all kind of collective Memory that is not susceptible to being reconverted into a product. Kaufmann’s lucidity in this project lies, not only in making a melancholic list of violated “good practices” visible, but also in placing them in time and space in front of the viewer’s gaze.

This series of words reviled by the very imposture of the human condition which Kaufmann collects for the project “*Values on Demand*” perfectly harmonizes with the other collection, in this case of images, of “*Your eyes are not pained...*” In both cases, the artist reveals, through accumulation, excess, speed and saturation, some of the impostures of the media stories. There are increasingly more images, words and sounds we are unable to metabolize correctly; in other

words to assimilate in a critical way to distinguish what can be taken advantage of from what is disposable. For good or for bad, this is the ambiguous landscape of contemporary human existence.

In all his works, Kaufmann insists on disarticulating the strategies through which the mass media generates subjectivity and community. It is as impossible to live apart from this ambiguous and plotted media landscape as it is feasible to pull the strings with which our experience of life is interwoven in it. Maybe this is the reason that makes Kaufmann sentence, in one of his works still under way: *“Freedom is the best distribution of dependency”*.

1 TISSERON, Serge. “El misterio de la cámara lúcida”. Pp. 103-118. Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca.

2 CRANDALL, Jordan. Editor. “Under the fire. The organization and representation of violence”. Vols. 1 & 2. Published by Witte the With, Rotterdam, 2004

3 GOYTISOLO, Juan. An editorial that appeared in the newspaper, EL PAIS, “Alianzadevalores”. Monday, 11th September 2006