Graven Images (What's in a Brand?)

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Abstract. The research topics most relevant to my studio art practice are branding, advertising and semiotics (the study of sign systems and their meanings). My intention is to formulate a critique of capitalist globalization that closely examines the relationship between corporate insignia and the means of commodification. I will present the research behind my large-scale paintings, in which I appropriate logos of national or multinational corporations to create images that are reminiscent of traditional Western religious imagery, thus creating analogies between globalization as proselytization and brand loyalty as faith.

1. Introduction

Using Catholic icon paintings and stained glass windows as inspiration and as reference, I create large-scale paintings that draw in the viewer through the use of centralized compositions, geometric patterns and subtle illusionistic rendering. I create each piece by arranging a preliminary digital sketch using appropriated corporate logos, making an initial underpainting in acrylic on a stretched canvas support and then finishing each piece with multiple layers of glazing in oil paint to create a more three-dimensional, modeled aesthetic. This is meant to reflect, historically, the rendering observed in religious icon paintings depicting divine persons, entities or scenes and, more currently, the reflective and volumetric aesthetic seen in many logo designs and graphical user interface icons. I want the paintings to have an aura – a certain glow that communicates a sense of the divine, merged with visual suggestions of the deterioration often seen in surviving medieval devotional images. In my work, however, I am replacing the literal representation of holy figures with corporate logos, which are by design more abstract and symbolic. The logos in essence become the icons.

2. Research, Discussion and Significance

Why do images, even highly abstract ones, such as religious iconography or corporate brands have such power to inspire devotion or provoke antagonism? To answer these questions one might look to semiotics (the study of signs, sign systems and their culturally relative meanings) and its connections to simulacra (visual copies or imitations that may or may not have an authentic original source, including digital images and mass-produced objects). Swiss lecturer Ferdinand de Saussure created and adhered to a philosophy he dubbed “semiology” (now called semiotics), a structuralist philosophy that originally described linguistic phenomena. It has since been extended to a wide variety of other fields and disciplines such as anthropology, psychology and visual communication (especially in relation to marketing and advertising). It is a broad philosophy that seeks to understand the nature of human communication [1]. According to Saussure, the sign (a representation of something that implies a relationship between it and its referent) is dyadic, meaning it is split into two separate parts – the signifier and the signified. In relation to language, a signifier is the sound, image or word and the signified is the concept, event or object a signifier represents [2].

The American theorist Charles Sanders Peirce elaborated upon this concept by asserting that there are three different kinds of signs: icons (or likenesses), symbols and indexes. Icons are a direct representation of the sign, such as photographs, realistic paintings or veristic sculptures. Symbols are an abstract representation of an object or idea, such as a national flag, logo or the constituent components of language (letters, words and pictograms). An index is a sign that communicates meaning by association – indicating the present or former presence of something else, like a footprint, shadow or stain. With conventional signs (especially symbols), it is important to note that the relationship between the two is arbitrary and based upon common usage. This means that there is no natural reason why a particular combination of sounds (spoken language) or visual marks (written language) should denote or connote a particular object in the physical world [2]. Language is defined by a community of speakers (and writers) who create a common understanding of these sign systems through a majority consensus.

The arbitrary, conventional nature of a symbol becomes important in a visible and direct way to a market-based global economy when considering how specific consumer products branded with certain corporate logos gain a
higher market value simply because of the presence of such a sign. Even at many second-hand thrift shops, used brand-name t-shirts embellished with something as simple as a Nike “swoosh” are priced more highly than their plain unbranded counterparts, even though they were likely manufactured under similar conditions and the basic design of material used to create the articles of clothing could be nearly identical. Industry leaders in business and marketing are acutely aware of the power that branding has over consumer behavior, and tailor brands and advertisements to suit specific markets and demographics, whether a product is intended to have a mass appeal or only to entice a very niche audience.

The ubiquity of branding, advertising and marketing through increasingly simulated and digital formats provides consumers with a seemingly limitless array of images – whether still, moving or interactive – that are essentially copies without a “real” original. This is currently the most pervasive and relevant embodiment of simulacra [3]. The term “simulacrum” has a shared linguistic root with the words “similarity,” “simile” and “simulation.” Originally this word could be applied to nearly any representation of tangible or intangible beings or phenomena (especially with regard to painting or sculpture). However, with time, simulacrum took on a more pejorative connotation, and now often refers to decidedly inferior copies that somehow lack the substance of their original source. This can be demonstrated by depictions of supernatural deities and the supposedly “real” thing. For example, the well-known God figure reaching out to a nude Adam in Michelangelo's fresco mural The Creation of Adam (c. 1511-1512), on a ceiling panel in the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, depicts the Lord in an anthropomorphized fashion, despite His ostensibly spiritual and immaterial nature. Some Jewish and Islamic traditions often still forbid the literal or figurative representation of holy entities for this precise reason; any man-made imitation of divinity will inherently be inferior and should not be worshiped as a false idol [4]. This is a rather direct illustration of the power of images, and the connections between religion, politics and visual culture. In contemporary, largely secular Western nations such as the United States, a formal separation of church prevents any one religious institution from dominating public space and the role of government. This, combined with the pervasive influence of an industrialized and technocratic globalized economy, has led many contemporary cultures to adopt a new, more powerful and adaptable sign system in the form of omnipresent branding representing the omnipotence of the “free market” [5]. Central to my thesis is the idea that logos and the visual vocabulary of corporate branding are, as per the Ten Commandments in Exodus of the Christian Holy Bible, false idols (or “graven images”).

3. Conclusions

My artwork visually and conceptually draws a parallel between the collusion of church and state in Western civilizations prior to the Industrial Revolution and the relationship between for-profit corporation and state in contemporary capitalist societies. The modern corporation as a legal entity has been a significant economic force for less than two centuries, and yet corporate capitalism has become the dominant cultural institution of our time. The signs and symbols that represent this system (i.e., logos, branding and the world of advertising) function in a way that is not dissimilar from religious iconography – they are intended to have a timeless power that can be transmitted to any culture anywhere and still retain the same meaning. By combining the visual vocabulary of these two superficially disparate worlds in my work in a way that references both past and present, I hope to make viewers reconsider their roles within this faith-based system.

4. References