

curated by:
Heather Felty

April 10 - May 11, 2002

Michael Bevilacqua
Claude Closky
Jenny Holzer
Kristin Lucas
Ester Partegàs
Juergen Teller
Carey Young

Discussion on **Thursday, April 25**, with:
Mark Crispin Miller, media analyst and Professor of Communications at New York University;
Aldo Mosca, Professor of Philosophy at The New School for Social Research, New York City; and artist **Ester Partegàs**.

apexart curatorial program

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Cover image: Ester Partegàs
Detours (I Just Need Some Time For Myself), 2001
Pencil on paper 21 x 9 inches

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The Passions of the Good Citizen



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Passions can be driven by political or emotional forces, but they are increasingly influenced by commercial and outside persuasions. The apparent need to represent ourselves with certain identifying material objects and to categorize ourselves via the individuals with whom we associate often comes directly from suggestions in advertisements. Often we don't even know what we want until we see it on TV, in a magazine, in the window of a store, in people's homes or even on their body. We continually turn to advertising, the very source of the production of desire, to discover and determine our passions. The "good citizen" buys the right things to represent himself or herself – whether a radical with a unique vision or another wannabe who looks the same as everyone else. In a consumer culture, citizens are obligated to assist the economy; any shortage of consumption is equated with bad citizenship. *The Passions of the Good Citizen* considers the desires implicit in consumer choices and how media and advertising drive those desires. The artists in the exhibition subvert, challenge, and in some cases succumb to advertising's successful marketing methods.

Sometimes we go shopping to buy mere necessities, other times we are looking to fulfill a deficiency or to reward ourselves for our hard labor. When shopping, we get pleasure in the many stages of consumption beyond ownership: the anticipation, the browsing, and the purchase itself are all gratifying. Ester Partegàs references the things we say to ourselves while the register is printing the receipt. Her phrases are often excuses we use to justify our purchase: "I am worth it." "I should motivate myself." "I need a break." "Sacrifices start tomorrow." Advertisers know our weaknesses. They have scouted us out and know how

to direct our impulses. Successful advertising and marketing executives look past what we think we want now and start selling us what we will inevitably want in the future. When we don't know exactly what we need, but have that desire to consume, we look outward to discover what to buy. Consumption presents a cyclical phenomenon: the more we consume, the more we crave consumption – we are always searching for what's missing. We are never quite satisfied. This increase in consumption can become an addiction. Corporations, brand names, and images become equivalent to drugs, creating rituals, diversions, and in some cases a sense of community. Using an LCD screen in Times Square to project her classic plea "Protect me from what I want," Jenny Holzer exposed masses of people to a phrase using a method of dissemination typical of advertising. Holzer warns onlookers of the dangers of consumption and to use caution when feeling the urge to buy; perhaps suggesting that, like many things in life, accumulation of commodities should be taken in moderation.



Jenny Holzer *Protect Me From What I Want*, 1985
Photograph of projection in Times Square

As modern-day good citizens we give back to our community by swiping our credit cards through the machine at the checkout. Consumption is made easy. The more familiar chain stores are, the easier it is to purchase products. In *Hello and Welcome*, Claude Closky shows how we look for friendly familiarity when shopping – the welcoming gesture provides a comfortable state in which to consume.



Claude Closky *Hello and Welcome*, 2000
Color monitor, silent DVD loop

Focusing on the stereotypes we see in advertising and the repetitive nature of many commercials, Closky points out our dulled awareness of how we unconsciously try to fit into the models our society produces.

In the early 1990s, Sprite, a soft drink division of the Coca-Cola Company, began an anti-marketing campaign aimed at teenagers who were hip to the marketing “enemy.” As years progressed, these youngsters became skeptical of such promotion. This resulted in a great deal of market research and Sprite’s transition from selling their product to selling the fact that they understood the culture and, further, to selling a part of a lifestyle. Sprite now promotes the hip-hop lifestyle, where in order to fit in one needs baggy pants as much as a Sprite in hand to complete the hip-hop identity.* Large corporations have found more success persuading consumers to make purchases towards an identity than buying an actual product. In her video *Everything You’ve Heard is Wrong*, Carey Young challenges the notions of what makes a successful marketing campaign, as she stages a skills workshop on corporate communication at Speaker’s Corner in London. In front of a background of other speakers with large

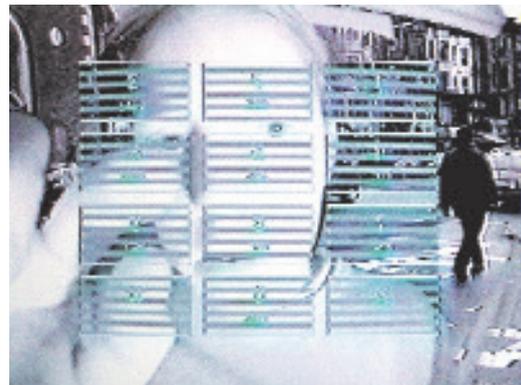


Carey Young *Everything You’ve Heard is Wrong*, 1999
Color, sound, single channel DVD, 6 min. 35 sec.

audiences, Young captures the interest of a small crowd of onlookers who listen for short periods as she reveals how to hold an audience’s attention. Her action parodies

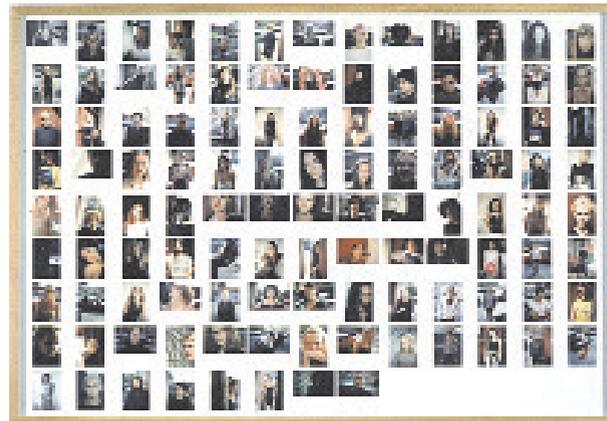
the model of corporate advertising where marketing departments are only as successful as the numbers of people they convince.

Kristin Lucas portrays both sides of the ever-watchful eye of the media in her on-line therapy session mixing day-time TV with surveillance camera footage. The character in *Host* looks to the media to be reprogrammed in order to become more “standard.” The voice of the kiosk announces many options for advice, overwhelming the character with choices. Marketing departments often pay consumers to reveal what they desire through questionnaires, yet we look outward for a sign that what we are doing is “right,” or at least similar to the way others do things. Advertising looks to us and we constantly look back, maintaining the cyclical structure. We form our personal identities in many ways, including what we buy, use and wear. In the fashion world, a



Kristin Lucas *Host*, 1997
Color, sound, single channel DVD, 7min. 36sec.

“go-see” is when a potential model visits a photographer in hopes of assuring a contract. Juergen Teller invited young women to his studio for such visits, and over the course of twelve months he documented the many who came. These young women appear to be something between sophisticated model and innocent girl. They clearly look to the media to get an idea of how they should look. They allow themselves to become commodities of desire, using their beauty to mirror the very ideal they seek to attain.



Juergen Teller *Go-Sees: September*, 1998
C-prints mounted on board 42 1/4 x 58 3/4 inches

Consumers – good citizens – create their identity based on what they buy. We’re not simply a passive audience aimlessly buying what is handed to us, although it might often appear to be the case. It is precisely that we know what the store and its products signify that we patronize specific places. We put our money where our mouths are and gain our identity and, in the meantime, ascertain our power over specific corporations. Michael Bevilacqua embraces consumer culture

Michael Bevilacqua *Tripp without a Suitcase*, 2001
Acrylic on canvas
28 x 78 inches



and paints layered landscapes filled with icons that define him as an individual. In *GABBA GABBA HEY*, 2002, we gain a sense of who he is by his cultural influences: the designer Steven Sprouse, the chain store Target, the actress Nicole Kidman, the band Liquid Sky, his sons’ scribble drawings, and Japanese candy. Even if we don’t know the exact references, we recognize the signs of mass culture.

In our consumer oriented society, we are progressively bombarded with ideas and perceptions of what we want from the mass media. We create our identities using symbols from advertisements and rely on media to complete our personal statements. Always slightly ahead of the game, marketers will continue to do all they can to make us buy what it is they have to sell, using whatever method it takes – from extremes of realism or fantasy to the glorification of the simple pleasures of life.

Heather Felty
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*See transcript of PBS’s “The Merchants of Cool: A Report on the Creators and Marketers of Popular Culture for Teenagers” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/>

The exhibition title comes with permission from an essay by Aldo Mosca, whose article discusses Aristotle’s concepts of emotions. “In Aristotle’s vision, the emotions are integral to a flourishing mind.”