

The Earth is Inhabitable Like the Moon

On 23 February 1945, the American photographer Joseph John Rosenthal¹ took a picture that would not only make him world famous but would also become one of the most frequently reproduced images of World War II and an icon of war photography. On that day, the later Pulitzer Prize winner accompanied six American soldiers to the top of Mount Suribachi, located in the northwest Pacific, to document the raising of a U.S. flag there during the battle over the Japanese island of Iwo Jima.² No sooner had Rosenthal descended the mountain than the photos were flown to the Pacific island of Guam and transmitted from there to the U.S. Within hours, the motif appeared on the front page of nearly every major American newspaper; later it was also disseminated several millionfold as a postage stamp.

Seventy-one years later, the artist Knut Eckstein adopted the image once again. He formed the outline of the flag with simple cable lights and planted this materialized light drawing in the display window of the Giessen Kunsthalle. He proceeded in very similar manner on the building's façade, except that there he reproduced the torch of the Statue of Liberty – the colossal sculpture that, since its erection at the mouth of the Hudson River in 1886, has become a symbol of New York as a refuge for new arrivals from the Old World.

Anyone familiar with Knut Eckstein's installations and interventions in the public space will immediately recognize the formal language. The images he chooses are always iconographically charged ones, usually circulated globally – well-known company logos or fragments of no less symbolic monuments or photographs. Unlike the originals, which are usually made from extremely valuable materials or with the aid of elaborate technology, his works are fashioned from simple materials such as different-coloured cable lights. The deliberately makeshift construction of the installations and the integration of bamboo scaffolding of the kind found on Asian construction sites reinforce the unfinished, temporary, process-oriented quality. This very idiosyncratic formal approach is already evident on the building of the Goethe-Institut in Budapest, where Eckstein imitated the dynamic spherical logo – along with the company name in its typical lettering – of TOTAL, the world's fourth largest oil and gas multinational, based in France; a star, likewise made of cable lights, lights up behind the logo. Other examples of this type of work are found in his red cable-light reproduction of the name of what is presumably the world's most well-known soft-drink on the roof of a garden shed at the *1st Biennale for International Light Art – open light in private spaces* in 2010, or the work *BURNING THE OLYMPIC FLAME* at Kewenig Gallery in Palma de Mallorca.

Symbols, to begin with, are very simple signs. They represent something they themselves are not, they “affect in us that which they represent, ... are patterns for remembering the images, experiences and sensations they represent”.³ And “[i]n the process of symbol formation, ... something [is] distilled from the stream of events, is given shape and ascribed meaning. This process is always also an experience with the other: the subject initially experiences the outer world as a foreign other, but it appropriates parts of the foreign outer world as its own through symbolic representation”.⁴

Knut Eckstein does not leave it at this act of appropriation. His artistic strategy also involves reshaping and supplementation that can even go to the extent of developing new symbolic signs. He operates with a pictorial vocabulary that quotes his own works just as much as it interweaves traditional – but also contemporary – pictorial formulae. His works infiltrate the indoor and outdoor public space, have crept their way into the products of urban planning – the streets and squares – as “foreign bodies” to broaden the spectrum of political and economic logos and marks, at first sight innocently and decoratively. On closer examination, however, Knut Eckstein’s re-formations point to social and political circumstances that initially remain concealed in these sign systems. With the word TOTAL and the flashing star on the façade of the Goethe-Institut, for example, the artist reflects on the relationship between experience and consciousness within various cultural contexts; globally circulating signs encounter local or national peculiarities: in Hungary the use of a red star was prohibited at the time by criminal law. And the letters forming the name Coca Cola on a wooden shed in a garden belonging to a family in Bergkamen, North Rhine-Westphalia is part of an intervention woven into a “foray through the architectural theory discourses of John Rauch, Robert Venturi and his wife Denise Scott Brown”, who, after all, “not only spoke out in favour of the functionality of trivial forms of building ... but also advocated the retention of billboards as a special form of urban communication”.⁵ In *BURNING THE OLYMPIC FLAME*, Eckstein likewise offers various levels of reading, while also making deliberate use of ambiguities to open the door to other, new interpretations, and for example to question the Olympics and their impact on the world’s political panorama.

In and with these works, local references and global topics, social concerns and economic-political impacts find their way, visibly and perceivably, into the public space. Yet there is a further aspect that can hardly be overemphasized: Knut Eckstein is thus to be counted among those artists who render the light medium an integral part of, and vehicle for, complex issues related to the omnipresent processes of society.

His exhibition *ontheway* at the Kunsthalle in Giessen features the above-described light works, which draw attention to themselves primarily in the evening and night hours. If visitors venture through the

building's doors, however, they will also discover an interior designed by the artist. Our gaze is immediately drawn to a moving (light) picture of teenagers playing ball at what is easily recognized as a New York playground. A plastic bag knotted to a steel rope in the foreground swings back and forth like a flag in a breeze. We hear voices. To approach this projection, however, we must walk across plastic foil strewn with car tyres, a leather jacket, cardboard rolls. Here and there, the empty shell of a package for New Year's Eve fireworks, journals, an LP show through the foil; parts of splintered fluorescent tubes and other technical relics are visible between the shimmering different-coloured plastic layers.

This scene has an ambiguous quality; it lends itself to widely differing interpretations depending on the visitor's mood. For some it is perhaps a wasteland, a place of stagnation. The refuse dump of a world in which a last remaining power plant sacrifices its last remaining energy reserves to the softly humming projector until it also breathes out its projective promise into the course of a time in which the objects are all that still bear witness to onetime life in this place, its onetime inhabitants *ontheway*. The day after. The end of ...? An apocalyptic mood. But only for some! For those familiar with northern landscapes, the setting might spark memories of a lake, frozen over night in a sudden cold spell, the fish entrapped in its thin ice cover discernible like mounted gemstones. A pulsating surface on which every movement becomes an act of groping, on which every careful advancement of the left foot or the right is accompanied by the question as to whether this delicate membrane is really already strong enough to bear one's weight, whether it will keep one from breaking through into the abyss to end like the Bay snook caught in the ice, its eyes still shining brightly, its jagged dorsal fin splayed.

Both visions are equally possible. And yes, "the experience of art feeds on experience outside art – and particularly on aesthetic experiences in the spaces of the city and nature, in which the coordinates of urbanity and confidence in the world get confused."⁶

Matthias Wagner K

¹ Rosenthal was born in Washington D.C. on 9 October 1911 and died in Novato, California on 20 August 2006.

² Four days after 30,000 marines had landed on the island, the Americans succeeded in capturing Mount Suribachi at the southern tip of Iwo Jima. Already several hours before the scene captured by Rosenthal, a group of soldiers had raised a flag under the command of Lieutenant Harold Schriers; the commander of the battalion, however, deemed that flag too small. The first flag-raising was documented by the war photographer Lou Lowery.

³ Sven Grampp, "Das Medium des neuzeitlichen Lichts – Gutenberg und die Lichtsymbolik", in *Avinus Magazin – Europäisches Online-Magazin für Medien, Kultur und Politik*, 6 August 2009 (accessed on 1 May 2016; this passage translated into English by JR).

⁴ Lothar Knatz, "Symbolische Repräsentation. Ernst Cassirer und C. D. Friedrich", in Lothar Knatz and Tenehisa Otabe (eds.), *Ästhetische Subjektivität, Romantik & Moderne* (Würzburg, 2005), p. 254 (this passage translated into English by JR).

⁵ See Matthias Wagner K in *open light in private spaces – ein Parcours* (Berlin, 2010), p. 49 (this passage translated into English by JR).

⁶ Martin Seel, “Über die Reichweite ästhetischer Erfahrung. Fünf Thesen”, in Gert Mattenklott (ed.), *Ästhetische Erfahrung im Zeichen der Entgrenzung der Künste. Epistemische, ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrungen im Vergleich* (Hamburg, 2004), pp. 73–81, here p. 81 (this passage translated into English by JR).