

# PRACTICE OF APPLYING VISUAL ADVERTISING TO LITHUANIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

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**Abstract.** Visual advertising has become common part of our daily life in the past few decades. It is not only used for commercial, political or social purposes, but also for the implementation of artistic strategies. Specific constructed artworks, exhibitions and art projects situated in a special/unconventional public spaces (context or semiosphere) are used as a tool to seek more spectators and spread different messages with critical, ironical, social connotations which leads to the deeper communication with spectators. They cannot avoid them because the messages interrupt their minds accidentally passing by the streets and so involve in the active interaction process. Art full of advertising strategies criticises the consumerist society created by advertising, and provokes the subject to take on an active position with respect to raised problems, i.e., it acts in the ideological field of contemporary/postmodern art.

**Key words:** *contemporary/postmodern art, visual advertising, visual communication, semiosphere, spectator.*

## Introduction

The modern-day world is inconceivable without advertising which is becoming inseparable from our lives: it is a political mechanism weapon as well as social and cultural construct, and contemporary form of visual arts that plays a role in all areas of life and has impact on all of them. Art is not an exception. Due to this relevance of advertising as a phenomenon in the modern-day world, this article will analyse the phenomenon of visual advertising whose dispersion has had impact on art. The postmodern art theory states that reality represented in art is constructed by social conventions. Therefore, it may be stated that postmodern art eliminates the line between art and daily life and thus is socially or politically engaged because in a certain context (culture) it often “cites” (discusses, criticises) events of the social life.

**Relevance of the topic. Over** the past decade, the discussion of this topic has only been fragmentary, in separate publicist reviews and articles. Meanwhile, the practice of applying advertising strategies to contemporary art practices has become quite a frequent phenomenon which demands separate investigations and insights.

**Scientific problem.** To reveal the intertwined phenomenon of visual advertising and contemporary art practice and answer the questions how the visual advertising strategies are being used in contemporary art practices and why **Object of the article** – applying of visual advertising to Lithuanian contemporary art practice.

**Aim of the article** – to analyse the practice of applying advertising to contemporary art at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**The tasks of this article are:**

1. To distinguish the purposes of advertising and determine its differences with contemporary art practices.
2. To identify the Lithuanian contemporary art practices, where practice of applying visual advertising were used.
3. To determine the purposes of applying advertising used in Lithuanian contemporary art practices.

**Methods of the article:** The article uses scientific literature analysis and semiotic analysis tools to reveal the meanings and aims of the presented artworks.

**Level of problem investigation and theoretical insights.** Undoubtedly, there is a great scientific interest in advertising phenomenon and its impact in shaping not only consumers’ behaviour, but also arts, culture, the view of cities (i.e. urban spaces) and everyday life in general. In foreign scientific

literature books, articles and researches on advertising as a form of art and a specific field of culture and marketing studies can be found; to be more precise – investigations of the visual design tools impact on consumers' perception towards advertising (Negm, Tantawi 2015; Estes, Brotto, Bussaca 2018), interaction of advertising and art and how the following (i.e. high culture pieces) are used and reflected in advertising (Hetsroni 2005; Hagtvedt, Patrick 2008) or art / creative tools (e.g. street art, performance, installation etc.) usage in outdoors advertising production with purposes to create commercial value (Borghini, Visconti, Anderson, Sherry 2010). However, there is no research about the practice of applying specific usage of advertising to contemporary art..

As Köksal stated, advertisements usually illustrate lifestyle, relationships, personality, values, and cultural norms. <...> Visual imagery is constructive in capturing attention, stimulating curiosity, indicating product features and benefits, and establishing identity. Visual imagery springs personalities or spiritual essence to the promoted subject, allowing differentiation from competitors (Köksal 2013). However, quite different tools and purposes when we are speaking about the practice of applying advertising to contemporary art is being used as it will be analyzed in the further chapters.

### **Brief history of advertising in Lithuania and the context**

In the Western world traditionally perceived advertising has existed for over a hundred years. In Lithuania, the roots of traditional advertising can be seen during the interwar period (1920-1940). According to Čereška, the Western type of advertising began forming since the first years of independence of Lithuania and it developed based on the consistent patterns of the free market of the U.S. and Western Europe. <...> Visual advertising was quick to spread: signboards, showcases, advertising screens that were not that different in their form and content from advanced U.S. and Western European advertising of that time (Čereška 2004).

World War II and subsequent Soviet occupation ended the development of the traditional U.S. and Western European advertising. All advertising strategies were directed towards spreading and developing the Soviet ideological mechanism (Čereška 2004). Thus, due to these reasons, it may be noted that the ideology of consumerism (consumerism creating/claiming satisfaction as the phenomenon ensuring self-worth and social status) is based on or perceived as Western advertising, and its forms in Lithuania, of course, could only start having importance and developing in the post-Soviet period. However, despite non-flourished roots of advertising practices, the construct of advertising itself in Lithuania is widely used and applied to not only political or commercial goals but also social and art projects.

Notably, the boom of technologies and the communication aspect are becoming important when speaking of the interaction between contemporary fine art and other contemporary areas of the visual culture. The aforementioned interactions in contemporary art have become especially strong since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when practices started to include visual advertising strategies. This defining feature of Lithuanian contemporary art – interdisciplinarity – allows us to compare artwork and visual advertising/communication as well as the impact these areas have on one another. Discussing specific exhibitions and separate artwork closely related to the practice of applying of advertising strategies, other chapters aim at revealing the aspects and tendencies of applying advertising principles to contemporary artwork.

### **Contemporary art exhibition in advertising stands in Vilnius and Kaunas (2001)**

The study of the topic in question in the context of Lithuania begins with this project that is probably the first significant sign which reflects the practice of applying visual advertising strategies to contemporary art practice in Lithuania.

Organisers of the exhibition – the Lithuanian Interdisciplinary Artists' Association (hereinafter – LTMKS) – invited by means of tender 32 artists that represented various areas of visual arts to create projects on advertising stands. The works of art were displayed in various streets in Vilnius and Kaunas from 13 August 2001 to 26 August 2001.

As the curator Algis Lankelis stated in the abstract of the exhibition, the exhibition was inspired by contemplations on the diminishing limits in the modern-day world between advertising and non-

commercial fine arts: creators of the latter use contemporary fine art expression means more and more often, whereas artists employ strategies and particular images to advertising (Lankelis 2001).

The analysis of the works will be based on the definition of semiosphere by Lotman that describes the importance of context. Here “context” is defined not as a country’s cultural environment generally, but rather as certain spaces that have some distinguishing features dueto which images existing in a respective semiosphere acquire certain connotations (Lotman 2004). Since all the works in the exhibition are displayed in public spaces, the latter works can also be described as location markers that correspond to site-specific art features.

The meaning of Jonas Valatkevičius’ advertising stand is formed by means of text that represents a clear, socially engaged idea. The text of the advertising stand comprises of criminal chronicle messages that the artist took from newspapers. Eliminating certain specific details, the artist made the situations abstract and typical (Lankelis 2010).

By means of these socially engaging texts, the artist reflects the problems of one of the most complex age groups – teenagers and youngsters, i.e., clan-sect, violence, drug problems, which are widespread in today’s society and are relevant to this day. By publicising reduced and impersonal newspaper chronicles in the advertising volume, Valatkevičius hyperbolises events in order to attract the society’s attention and create a serious social discussion.

Vilma Šileikienė’s stand *Liga taisyklių nežino* (*En. Illness Knows No Rules*) could be found in the background of the Antakalnis health centre in Vilnius; therefore, the context of the environment and meanings juxtaposed by the message are closely related. One of the posters pictures women of various ages, while another – respectively – pictures men. All the six photos in the posters picture people who are smiling and seem happy; however, the text at the bottom of the posters states the following: “Illness knows no boundaries”, and it is slightly confusing. The last poster makes the meaning of the message clear. It consistently includes the so-called life rules/truths: *Rule One. You are healthy as long as you are young; Rule Two. Women live longer than men; Rule Three. A strong personality can always remain independent;* the three rules are followed by the fourth one, i.e., a question and immediate answer: *Rule Four: Organ transplantation? I have heard about it but I will not need it.* The message intends to state that health depends neither on the gender, nor which person is a potential patient waiting in the line for a donor. V. Šileikienė’s advertising stand is consciously presented in a certain *semiosphere* where the meanings of the message are strengthened within the environment.

The political/historical aspects and aspects of the modern-day (consumerist) society was analysed in the artwork by Juozas Laivys. The image create by the artist is a message without a code (text) with two meaningful objects. It shows a map of Lithuania back in Vytautas the Great times, when the territory of Lithuaniaextended from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea framed in a product barcode (an identification sign of the 21<sup>st</sup> century consumerist society). According to Tumpytė and Krikštopaitytė, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania of the 15<sup>th</sup> century began sharing land with neighbours and it did not take long to submit to them, i.e., peace treaties and their violation, looking up to the Polish nobility, polonisation, three divisions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Russification and Tsarist government, a short respite, Lithuania in the USSR, and now independent Lithuania (Krikštopaitytė, Tumpytė 2001). It should be emphasised that the exhibition under discussion took place in 2001 when Lithuania was not a member of NATO (it became a member on 29 March 2004) or the European Union (it became a member on 1 May 2004) yet. Therefore, when speaking about the current “freedom” of Lithuania, one should think about it in more detail; however, this is a topic that requires a separate discussion.

Thus, the review of the exhibition under discussion and the analyses of several specific works can be concluded as follows: the works of the exhibition include different means of expression (photography, text, graphic crossword puzzle, map), ideas (stating the advertising identity, socially problematic knowledge in textual hyperbole, iconographic and iconophilic exploitation of the state territory “infinity”, secret reference and provocation of interactivity) as well as interaction with the environment (direct – specific places/spaces; indirect – based on the country’s sociocultural context). However, the works had in common their form of representation and format, i.e., an advertising stand,

publicity that created an opportunity for a wider dialogue than between visitors of a gallery, conceptual breakdown of the advertising construct/anti-advertising nature of images and texts, active questioning of social issues.

### **A few more examples must be mentioned**

Algis Lankelis' work displayed in the exhibition *Double Game* (curator Laima Kreivytė, gallery "Vartai", 2006) should be emphasised as an especially interesting case in the context of the problem field of the topic of discussion (Krikštopaitytė 2006). The work under discussion fits the problem field of the article due to its form of portrayal, i.e., it is a textual game worded in advertising stands on walls of buildings. However, only after the discussion with the artist did it become clear that image was only digital graphic poster that had never been exhibited in public spaces. It seems ?? were supposed to become only a hint to actual advertising images in public spaces, yet they remained only hints. The following hypothetical question can be raised: is the advertising clothing in these consumerist times too expensive for the art that does not promote consuming anything tangible? Or is the phenomenon of public consumerist advertising in this work ignored so much that it is transformed into a "photoshopped" simulacrum?

Another work is Vladas Oržekauskas' tapestry *Cosmopolitan: Dama be vienaragio* (*En. Cosmopolitan: The Lady without a Unicorn*). This work is related to the format of the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine; therefore, it is important to firstly note that the magazine is traditionally understood as a periodical, illustrated, stitched up publication which is not only a great medium for various types of advertisements aimed at promoting consumption, but also an important ideological weapon that has a great impact on shaping the society.

The work by Oržekauskas under discussion is a tapestry that is visually identical to the structure of a *Cosmopolitan* cover. *Cosmopolitan* is an urban taste magazine for female audience. Even without a deeper analysis of the deep constituents of the work, it includes clear criticism of the popular/kitsch culture.

The medieval type of font was chosen on purpose because the "cover girl" looked as if she came from the Middle Ages. What does this Gothic-looking girl that is in so much contrast with the textual codes tell us about the work? The narrative of the work is closely related to the textile theory because magnificent canopies with secretive plot were made titled *The Lady and the Unicorn* in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Brussels. A unicorn is a medieval mythological symbol that could only be attracted by a virgin girl using regale and music. [...] Knowing the type and lifestyle stereotypes that *Cosmopolitan* shapes about women and its flashy covers with vocal headlines, there are no questions why the author called his work *The Lady without a Unicorn* (Lasytė 2008).

Including a historical quote into a work of art, i.e., a Gothic plot, and presenting it in a modern-day context, this historical quote sounds slightly ironic. The artist is raising questions about doubtful values of the modern-day mass culture, dominance of the kitsch/consumerist/superficial society whose superficial layer can be relatively compared to a face of any other woman in a traditional makeup ad in *Cosmopolitan*.

### **Conclusions**

1. Advertising promotes consuming goods/services or accepting certain ideas/positions presented as images, whereas art that employs advertising impact means manifests as an excuse to raise problematic questions related to social issues and the relevance of art/kitsch/value-related issues in the society. Art full of advertising strategies criticises the consumerist society created by advertising, and provokes the subject to take on an active position with respect to raised problems, i.e., it acts in the ideological field of contemporary/postmodern art.
2. Having analysed the contemporary Lithuanian art practices that fit the problem field of the topic, it may be concluded that the first prominent use of visual advertising strategies in Lithuanian contemporary art occurred in 2001 when artists' works were displayed on advertising stands in Vilnius and Kaunas. Works were displayed in this type of form on purpose but the conception of

the exhibition itself signified the issue of the connections between advertising and contemporary art.

3. The aforementioned images were constructed by applying visual advertising means and employing its strategies by “enforcing” a certain sight practice that requires a certain way to read the image. Creators of images vary visual impact means to achieve different aims. Works displayed in both public spaces and exhibition environment that were created consciously employing visual advertising clichés had a very clear anti-advertising conceptual construct. Employing the principle of visual advertising through direct use and processing (translation) of advertising codes into an anti-advertising “text”, the aim was to criticise the consumerist society and the images formed by it.

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