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“COMMERCIAL BREAK”

By *William S. Smith*  April 24, 2017 5:47pm



View of Meriem Bennani's video *Your Year by Fardous Funjab*, 2017, at Barclays Center, Brooklyn. Courtesy Public Art Fund, New York.

The huge digital billboards wrapping the architecture of Times Square form what marketing experts call a “brandscape.” Here, the conventional logic of advertising is flipped. Commercial messages aren’t something to be tolerated in exchange for desirable content or experiences. The ads themselves are the attraction, and what pleasure there is to be found in Times Square derives from witnessing a no-holds-barred competition for attention between the biggest names in consumer capitalism.

The nonprofit Public Art Fund marked its fortieth anniversary by commissioning twenty-three artists and collectives to enter the fray with short video clips, digital animations, or still images that appeared between normal advertisements running on various screens in Times Square as well as on other public video displays around the city. The latter included the screen installed in the oculus of Barclays Center in Brooklyn, a group of indoor video arrays at a shopping mall at the World Trade Center, and the now ubiquitous LinkNYC information kiosks that have popped up on street corners in all five boroughs.

The title of the initiative, “Commercial Break,” implies an oppositional stance toward the context in which the artworks appeared. At the very least, the works—each under thirty seconds long—had to be noticeably different from the advertisements that preceded and followed them. To achieve this, some artists turned the visual rhetoric of commercial imagery against itself, producing pseudo-ads that drew attention to cultural fissures that are often suppressed in ad campaigns aimed at the widest possible audience. At Barclays Center, Meriem Bennani produced video clips advertising the work of a fictional “avant-garde hijab designer.” Women modeled various Islamic head coverings decorated with imagery associated with the Fourth of July and other United States holidays, challenging viewers to consider why such glossy patriotism should seem unusual. Other artists rejected the blunt legibility and rapid pace of branded messages in favor of lyrical, opaque imagery. In Times Square, Korakrit Arunanondchai presented a meditative video of an elderly couple subtitled with musings on existence and transcendence. Martine Syms showed a striking image of a black woman who appeared to be crying milky white tears that ran down her face and chest.

“Commercial Break” revisited Public Art Fund’s presentation of artworks on the city’s first digital billboard in the late 1980s. The relatively primitive technology of that era was limited to displaying text and simple line graphics. This context favored Conceptual artists, and many of the most memorable works offered overtly critical messages in the form of slogans. Alfredo Jaar’s contribution included the phrase THIS IS NOT AMERICA partially covering a map of the US. Jenny Holzer used the screen in the heart of the country’s commercial (and murder) capital to offer the “truism” PRIVATE PROPERTY CREATED CRIME.

What “Commercial Break” has in common with the earlier project is the underlying assumption that artistic interruptions in advertising spaces are a public good, provoking thought and enriching the experience of the city. Yet the effective vocabulary for communicating any sort of “critique” has evolved and become more nuanced. Sue de Beer’s montage of historical protests on a Times Square billboard was blunted by echoes of ad campaigns for Apple or Levi’s that have co-opted activist aesthetics for decades. Some of the most intriguing works in “Commercial Break” succeeded not by rejecting spectacle capitalism but by maximizing the visual pleasures that cutting-edge high-resolution screens can provide. Tabor Robak’s overloaded field of colorful 3D blobs and Jacolby Satterwhite’s baroque universe populated by voguing dancers—both at Barclays Center—made the surrounding ads feel limited and impoverished by their adherence to branding conventions.

Still, there’s only so much of a break that a fleeting artwork can provide. While pausing the normal flow of advertisements, “Commercial Break” effectively offered a different sort of promotional platform, for the artists themselves. It was easy to miss the works in situ, but dramatic still images of them standing out against their contexts circulated on social media, tapping into the mythic indicator of success: having one’s name in lights.