

Identity and Transformation. Myriam Thyès, work with flags, banners and world maps

Irene Müller

'People define their affiliation by using symbols. They do this both for themselves and in interaction.'

(quote translated from the original German of Arnold Groh, 'Identitätswandel. Globalisierung und kulturelle Induktionen' in Eva Kimminich (ed.), *Kulturelle Identität. Konstruktionen und Krisen*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003, p. 163)

They decorate government buildings, flutter in the wind at mass events, mark the capture of territories and affiliation to communities and are still used on today's battlefields. In the form of signals they communicate instructions, while as symbols they represent abstract ideas and concepts. Flags and banners can be found in public areas, and in a different materialisation they designate official documents and embellish tourist souvenirs. They are an integral component of the repertoire of identity-manifesting symbols and have a remarkable potential in the make-up of political, social, societal and cultural significance. And when it comes to the human 'appropriation of the world', be it in the long succession of belligerent occupations of countries and continents or in the formation of political parties, the use and design of cloth decorated with images and symbols has been linked with rituals and complex aspirations, mostly driven by power politics.

But what do national flags evoke today? What significance do these 'emblems of sovereignty' have in today's societies? The field is complex and many-layered, and there is no simple answer. On the one hand these symbols are tending to lose meaning in certain societal contexts – in that individual (political, national) affiliations are now largely expressed via other instruments and channels than the use of nationally loaded symbols; on the other hand, an ideological use of highly specific symbols and rituals can be observed in association with hegemonic assertions. Just when parts of society are explicitly expressing their identity in rejecting signs or tokens, most often where these are anchored firmly in tradition and some charged with reactionary significance, many people are expressing their attitude 'under the banner' of groupings of various colour. The left, the right and the centre, the politically correct and the obnoxious, parts of the establishment and the so-called fringe or minorities: all of them use different banners, flags or pennants as an expression of allegiance and affiliation, to highlight and illustrate their justification of a political claim and to lend their voices a visible form.

Myriam Thyès has been working with such elements of identity design for around ten years, focussing particularly on banners and flags as symbols and markers in public areas. This strand of her work explores the various aspects of the complex theatre of societal affiliation, collective use of symbols and the constitution of significance and identity. The flag as a species, this set of signs, of simple design, not infrequently enriched with heraldic symbolism and anchored in history forms the point of departure for the cooperative and web project, *Flag Metamorphoses*. From this, the host and the artists whom she invites to participate each develop visual research in which the historical and political origins of the constituent iconography of the respective flags are brought to light and in which, in cases, a utopian, yet politically topical view of the future is ventured. The individual biographies and personal, sometimes political concerns of the artists are integrated. At present, *Flag Metamorphoses* comprises twenty-five animations which abide by specific 'rules of play': the title to be provided by the selection of two national flags; these to be amalgamated visually and in meaning by means of animation; implementation as a digital animated Flash (TM) cartoon, and a duration of around a minute.

The whole conceptual set of the project betrays Thyès's eye for the unsaid voids, the meanings and tales hidden between the emblems and geometric forms, the colours and arrangements - hidden, or rather, distilled out of them visibly by the animations which are derived from them. In her 40-second animation, *Spain – Mexico* (2005), the artist creates virtually a mirror image of the two countries linked by their (colonial) history. While the elements of the Spanish flag move out of the frame like a blow-up drawing to the sound of baroque church music or are transformed into new image elements, the flag of Mexico is created from the same components in a centripetal movement. The 'heart' of the animation is a sequence which lasts just a few seconds during which a Maya pyramid, a pink-coloured skull with flashing eyes and the animals included in the Mexican flag, an eagle and a green snake, appear – accompanied by Mexican instrumental folk music. For a moment the image is frozen, then its transformation into the other flag begins. Using simple artistic devices (and technical precision), Thyès creates a pattern of relationship between attraction and rejection

by means of the choreography of the image elements, the distortions and transformation of the individual forms into new images, all corresponding to the political history and cultural development of the two nations. Historical and economic aspects, as well as topological and cultural issues, form the broad framework within which the artist relates two flags, i.e., two states to each other. In the case of *Congo – Belgium* (2005) the continuing exploitation of raw materials of the former colony by colonial rulers and/or global companies, as well as the transport routes still used today and the economic prosperity of the Belgian ports form the cornerstones for the visual transformation of signs and symbols continuously merging and separating out in flowing movements. In *Brazil – China* (2006) the issues at the core of her artistic review are trade relations, mass agricultural export and the resultant ecological consequences. Thyes portrays these in images of plants from primeval forests, soy beans and an armada of agricultural vehicles.

In her animations, Myriam Thyes develops a graphic language which while it clearly displays its derivation from the symbols and elements, also contains intrinsically artistic references. As such, her palette of distinct primary-based colours and the geometric composition of the image elements can be interpreted as an ironic cross-reference to concrete art, here as an ambiguous, critically questioning continuation of an artistic language based almost exclusively on geometric construction and the interplay of forms and clearly defined colouring.

By means of the moving image sequences, the vector graphics of Flash (TM) animations activated in certain rhythms of motion and time, the artist also poses questions concerning the interchangeability of these symbols. By developing new images from the existing, symbolic vocabulary of the flags, she distorts the meaning of these elements and at the same time generates new contents from them. In doing so, Myriam Thyes implicitly links on to the century-old handling of symbols of dominion and commemoration; she transfers the practice of cancellation and reshaping into a contemporary medium, but at the same time shifts focus within this action: flags are not replaced or exchanged, they are subjected to a transformation lasting a few minutes, during which the various facets and associations of these (formerly) identity-endowing symbols become visible in the form of intermediate images. And there is an indirect indication of the change in cultural identity and one of its consequences, namely the necessity for new (assimilated, transformed) symbols which in turn also provide identity and affiliation.

Thyes is versed in this strategy of reshaping and enhancement, which includes the development of new symbolic signs. In the mid 1990s in the group of works, *Wünsche und Warnungen im Wind* ('Wishes and warnings in the wind'), she infiltrated public areas of two European cities, Luxembourg and Düsseldorf, with her hand-painted flags. In between the sea of flags lining the streets and squares in urban, accentuated locations, 'foreign objects' had crept in which, at first glance, enhanced the political or economic 'marketing banners' in an innocent and decorative manner. However, when you looked again, the flags of Myriam Thyes had a clear message: they were manifestly allusions to that which had been factored out of the 'official' flags and fluttering symbols, to specific societal and political aspects that were simply absent from their repertoire. Thyes's flags provided an access to public places for myths and fairy-tales, local associations and global topics, social issues and economic effects by means of symbolic images. Again, the artist employed a clear image vocabulary in this project, citing not only her own work but received as well as current iconographic conventions.

Juxtaposed directly with the ready-made, standardized flags of nations and confederations, the flags of Myriam Thyes expose, on the one hand, their uniformity of design and content and show the gaps in the flags, and, on the other hand, mark the borders and limits of these 'blind spots' – on account of their formally similar language. In this as in her other work the artist is not proposing to replace existing flags and their semantics with her own, but to articulate collective tales and images in the form of new symbols which might also endow identity.

The group of works, *Mutable Worlds* (2004), which has been elaborated both as laser prints on aludibond and as animation, reveals an approach similar to that of the groups of work mentioned above. Again the point of departure for Thyes's work is images which are inscribed as conventions of representation in the collective stock of images – various world maps, ranging from Gerhard Mercator's area-accurate adaptations of Renaissance maps to the 'objective' projection models of Arno Peters in the twentieth century, which attempted to compensate the somewhat Eurocentric display of early maps in favour of a proportionally 'correct' display of the southern hemisphere. Myriam Thyes subjects these abstracted maps based on geometric principles to further transformation by way of shifting their north-south orientation, or by placing the Antarctic or Pacific as new centres of the maps. In bright, contrasting colours water and

land are separated, configured into associative sets and multifaceted shapes, which, at certain moments, oscillate between Rorschach tests and microscope recordings of bacterial cultures. Such deformed 'world images' clearly continue to reflect their origins, but normal orientation is sent completely haywire. The distorted, stretched or shrunken continents can only be identified when looking closer, and in some sequences of the four-minute animation the world falls apart.

But what is also shifted, together with the map projections, is common perceptions and images: from the individual's centre of the universe via the respective (geo-political) location through to world pictures in the widest sense. Despite present-day knowledge of the impossibility of determining an absolute centre of the universe, in everyday visual and thinking habits faith in a geocentric model is tenaciously sustained, almost without exception; even the rules of modern cartography are swept aside in people's individual, but socially widely held notions of geography. The North is at the top, Africa at the bottom and we are at the centre – European in word and thought.

Because they are genuinely global, Myriam Thyès's *Mutable Worlds* create contemporary counter-models, continuously changing views of the world, in which the North-South divide runs in different directions with regard to orientation, though not in reality; in which migration and the flow of tourism suddenly follow different tracks across the globe. At the same time, the artist is also commenting on the ongoing shifts in political and economic weighting: she visually displays that world-views, the geographical metaphors for political conflicts and the workings of economic contexts and ultimately the maps themselves are always a question of a person's viewpoint, the momentary position in a specific system, within which orientation can, at times, prove to be very difficult.