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Pictographic Urbanism

Joost Meuwissen

In the beginning, since pictograms were images, things that did not represent themselves but represented something else, they were considered that in order to be true - which was supposed to be the only criterion at the time of their coming into being - they had to be generic or universal which they per definition weren't. Per definition: since they were representations they could not be true. The same thing might be represented in another way. One representation could not possibly represent all of the representations of one single thing. A representation, in order to be so, would never be general, even preferably not so. As late as in the eighties of the last century, a possible general application of pictographs was for that reason thought by graphic designers to be impossible[1].

A token, if there, would not be able to function for everyone. It was considered to be necessarily elitist. Since representation might be considered to be always elitist, in that case, the better question would be that it still would represent something which was in itself not elitistic at all, though. Which would not have become political, and just would have stayed outside the debate, if it would not have been somehow represented. It might be interesting in that respect to review Rem Koolhaas's deconstructivist idea that modernist hedonism was not only hidden but actually put forward through its rigorous and severe appearance which seemed to hide the very same hedonism which was its motive[2], and his preference for pictogrammatical presentations of urbanistic schemes.

Representation as such might imply a political valuation of demands that without such a representation never would have become an agenda point. That was the value of pictograms - or works of art for that matter. They would put on the agenda something which otherwise might be lost[3].

But is this true? This was always considered to be the importance of pictographs after Otto Neurath's "Viennese method" of making abstract statistics understandable to the people, things which had to do with capitalistic development, and which for most people would be too abstract to understand. They could be understood by everyone of course but it was supposed that people were not able to understand them that easily. I would guess, and that would be the better approach today, that they did not want to understand them that easily. The meaning of such an image was not hidden. It was refused[4].

In a lecture in Dusseldorf, January 1927, Otto Neurath freely admitted that his pictographs depended on tradition, not on the universe. They came from cartography[5]. As such, they might be seen and used as urbanism, and be analyzed on the basis of their contours rather than being either black shapes on a white surface or white shapes on a black surface.

[1] Wim Crouwel told me so in 1984.

[2] Rem Koolhaas-OMA, 'Milan Triennale: "Progetto domestico: Casa Palestra"', A+U Architecture and Urbanism 88:10, October 1988 No. 217 (Tokyo: A+U Publishing Co., 1988), 80.

[3] Louis Althusser, 'Lettre à André Daspre', La nouvelle Critique, April, 1966.

[4] The long European tradition of people's mistrust towards images is beautifully described by Horst Bredekamp, 'Autonomie und Askese', Autonomie der Kunst. Zur Genese und Kritik einer

bürgerlichen Kategorie (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 88-171.

[5] Kees Broos, 'Bildstatistik: Wien-Moskau-Den Haag 1928-1965'. [Translated by Marie-Louise Flammersfeld], Gerd Arntz. Kritische Grafik und Bildstatistik. Haags Gemeentemuseum 1976. Zusammenstellung Katalog Flip Bool, Kees Broos (Nijmegen: SUN Socialistische Uitgeverij Nijmegen, [1976]), 47-48.