Death Can Wait

Images of Old Age and Dying in Austrian Hospice Campaigns

It can be highly disconcerting to come across information about death or people close to death while pursuing one´s everyday life. In the case of the campaigns that will be the subject of my analysis, the people in Vienna stumbled on these kinds of messages daily on their way to work, in the newspapers or on billboards viewed from their car. For me, the haunting images of the campaigns created a feeling of the incompatibility and asynchrony of certain aspects of life, and infiltrated the daily routine with a sense of disruption and deep-seated irritation. At the same time, the images caught the viewers off guard because they were not designed along the lines of the classical "memento mori" rhetoric. They were mundane and explicit, and relatable.

For this project, I chose to work with the PR campaigns of two Austrian institutions which are professionally engaged with old age and dying and to concentrate on the period between 2002 and 2012. One of the institutions is a hospice in Vienna, called "CS Hospiz Rennweg;" the other is the so-called „Haus der Barmherzigkeit" (House of Mercy). Both institutions launched powerful campaigns to draw the public´s attention to alternative models of old age and dying. Both wanted to initiate a public discourse on what old age and dying in post-industrial societies could be like. The images appeared not only on billboards, as already mentioned, but on rolling boards and in the print media as well. The two institutions continually compete for money and available resources, and therefore try to efficiently promote their cause. In the case of *CS Hospiz*, 40 percent of the institution´s operating budget comes from private sponsors who, of course, want to be able to identify with the institution´s profile in the public eye.

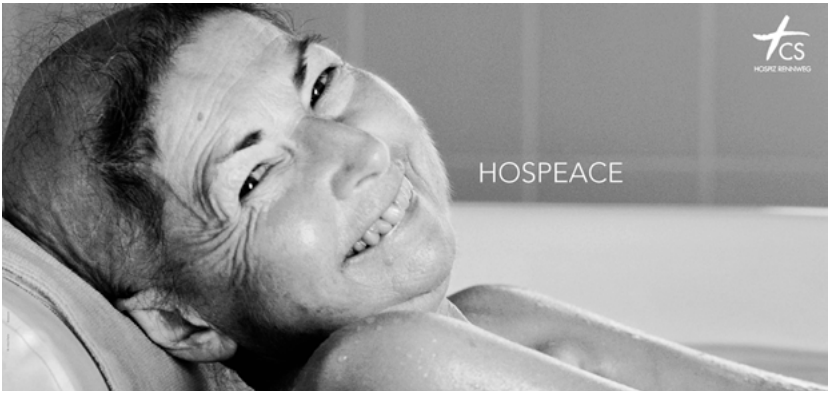
In Austria, the hospice idea emerged from a community of socially engaged citizens, mostly women, who wanted to introduce new ways of dying in "dignity and character." In 1989, the first mobile hospice was created. In the beginning, the movement strongly depended on the work and engagement of volunteers. Today, *CS Hospiz* is fully institutionalized and has its own building which also houses a nursing home and social center. The "warmth of the open fire of the beginnings has been replaced by a centrally steered heating system" (Heller, 2012, p. 147), as one of the founders puts it. Still, to this day, the institution relies heavily on donations and financial support from sponsors and backers. As the represen-

tatives of *CS Hospiz* emphasize, it is their aim to stay true to the original ambition of the founding group and carry on their strong social and societal mission. They want to play an active role in social politics and the decision- making processes involved. Therefore, the campaigns they have been conducting over the past years also represented an attempt to infiltrate public life and society with powerful and controversial images of old age and life close to death. "Haus der Barmherzigkeit" is an institution with a slightly different profile. The wide-spread organization is run by the "Erzdiözese Wien," a Catholic organization that operates homes in various locations throughout Lower Austria. Their residents are patients with long-term, chronic, or terminal diseases, mostly old people but also young coma patients, etc. As a huge organization that is dedicated to high-level care and care-intensive treatment, they too rely on money from sponsors.

Both of these institutions worked mostly with *Lowe GGK*, a nationally and internationally acclaimed Austrian advertising agency, and in particular with Walther Salvenmoser. He developed most of the ideas and designs for the campaigns, but also helped to secure the necessary advertising space, including air time for the short films produced for *CS Hospiz*. Due to the commitment of agencies like *GGK*, *CS Hospiz* receives publicity worth about one million Euro a year. The agreement is that the institution should not interfere with the agency´s creative freedom. As Mag. Dirnberger, the marketing person of *CS Hospiz*, admits, this arrangement is not frictionless and has caused a lot of internal debates. Some relatives of patients who act as models in the campaigns take offense, and sponsors may find the more provocative solutions inappropriate. A lot of ethical issues have to be taken into account. But in general, their trust in Salvenmoser´s creative decisions has paid off. Several of the campaigns earned prizes and considerable public recognition. Walther Salvenmoser was also the mastermind behind most of the *House of Mercy* campaigns addressed in this paper.

The Blunt Language of Social Advertising

In the U.S., a lot of money flows into public-service ads. These are campaigns financed by public or government agencies with the objective of influencing public opinion and behavior in matters of, for instance, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, domestic violence, AIDS, etc. By addressing a range of social issues, these ads are meant to stir discussions, create awareness, and eventually change behaviors. There has been a lot of debate whether matters of such grave importance should be left to advertising people and "undertaken by the same people who peddle cornflakes" (Berger, 2001, p. 295) or dog food. But billions of dollars are spent on these public



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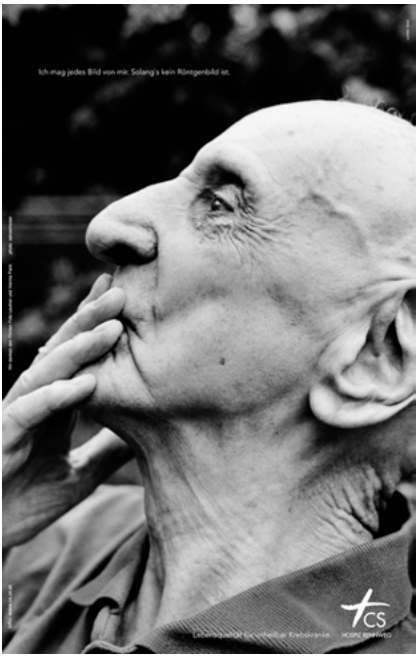
CS Hospiz Campaign 2011, Lowe GGK



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CS Hospiz Campaign 2006, Lowe GGK

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Nicholas Nixon, *C.C., Boston,* 1983

awareness campaigns created by some of the ad industry´s most innovative minds. The point is that such benevolent advertising, apart from doing a lot of good, can bring considerable public acclaim and is ideally suited for winning creative awards.

Following the analysis of Warren Berger (2001), "these socially conscious ads turned conventional advertising on its head – they dealt in brutal honesty, not upbeat fantasy" (p. 299). From the 80s on, the images became even harsher, and although these ads vary from one cultural context to the next, the more successful social-issue ads around the world have, according to Berger (2001), one thing in common, namely, "a reliance on disturbing and blunt imagery" (p. 302). They work with shock and drama, and, in a lot of cases, confront the viewer with physical matters like bruised and battered faces, dying and emaciated bodies, blood and injuries.

Zooming in on Old Faces and Bodies

The Viennese campaigns were comparable to other public service ads in that they too did not necessarily want to spare the viewer. Certainly, neither *CS Hospiz* nor *House of Mercy,* both run by a Catholic organization, had an official mandate from the socialist city government of Vienna to promote images of old age and terminally ill people in public. But due to their history, the two institutions have a strong social agenda – and both have to raise money. So they work with disturbing images and test the boundaries of what is acceptable in society. Most disconcerting for us are, of course, plain images of bodily decay and the physical aspects of old age. One such image that actually won an award in 2011 is of a woman in the bath tub. At first, one is drawn to her cheerful smile, but then realizes the traces of chemo therapy on her body. This comes as a shock. There seems to be nothing special about a woman enjoying her bath, but then the devastating effect of cancer becomes obvious. The word "Hospeace" added to the image speaks of a world where death is a reality. (Fig. 1)

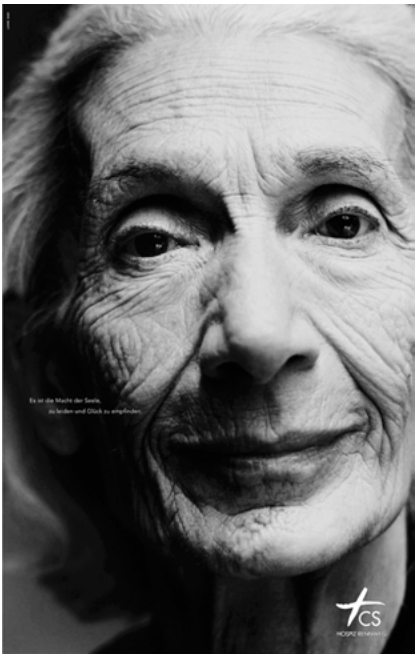
"Ich mag jedes Bild von mir. Solange es kein Röntgenbild ist" (I like every image of myself as long as it is not an X-ray) (2006), provides another close-up of a terminally ill person. In this case, the viewer is confronted with the old man´s wrinkles, the specks on his skin, his haggard mouth, the loose skin of his neck, and the skull-like outlines of his head. Due to the close-up technique of the photo, all these details are mercilessly brought to the attention of the viewer. It is a type of photo that one will not find in product advertising, but references can be found in photographs by artists. Richard Avedon´s photos of his father Jacob come to mind, or Nicholas Nixon´s renditions of terminally ill patients in hospitals and elderly residents at nursing homes in the U.S. In comparison to these photographs,

the hospice images clearly remain within certain limits of the acceptable. Despite their directness, they are deeply indebted to a humanist tradition in portraiture, meant to promote an empowered and autonomous version of the human being. The aged man in the hospice photo is presented as someone who retained his qualities as a human subject. His smile is intentional and directed. He is fully engaged in blowing someone a kiss, and seems to be conscious and aware of his environment. Nixon´s photographs taken in the nursing homes (1983 – 85) display a radically different approach. As a daring documentarian, he merely recorded what he encountered at these homes. "The photos neither flatter the residents nor disdain them" (press release Zabriskie Gallery, 2003). There is no intent to provide a model of meaningful aging. The resident of the nursing home is depicted as deeply withdrawn in his bodily shell. One cannot tell which degree of consciousness dwells in this body that presents a numb and sealed façade to the environment. The photograph renders the old person as mere physical fact and matter. In comparison, the hospice image provides the viewers with a mitigated version of the decay and the disintegration caused by disease and old age. Although I know from my own experience how disturbing the campaign photos were and how well they functioned in a PR context, they are clearly informed by a particular pictorial tradition and the Christian ideology of the institutions promoting them. (Fig. 2/3)

The humanist roots of the type of portraiture promoted in the hospice photos become even more evident in the close-up of the face of an old woman from a 2003 campaign. The text insert reads: "It is the power of the soul to suffer and to experience happiness." And indeed, the old lady is presented as an empowered and dignified being. She is calmly looking at the viewer with the proverbial eyes that have seen a lot. The crumpled landscape of her face is animated and powered by spirituality. (Fig. 4)

A corresponding image by Nicholas Nixon conveys a totally different impression of old age. The person, probably a woman, seems no longer herself. For lack of a cognitive model of herself, she physically clings to herself with her claw-like fingers. This wide-eyed, hairy being with signs of panic and fear cannot perform any mirroring function. The camera caught her as an alien who has very little in common with the self-contained, mildly smiling old lady of the *CS Hospiz* photo. Her physiognomy cannot be read and old age and disease has left anarchic marks on her body. (Fig. 5)

In this connection, a "Little Brothers´" ad (1998) proves particularly interesting. It presents age lines as "roadmaps of the soul," lines which are supposed to be read and deciphered. The furrowed brow of the man talks about "Worrying if I´d ever return from Ivo Jima alive." According to the underlying psycho-physiognomic model, his first encounter with his future wife had to leave a lasting impression on this face. And there are also subversive traits which hint



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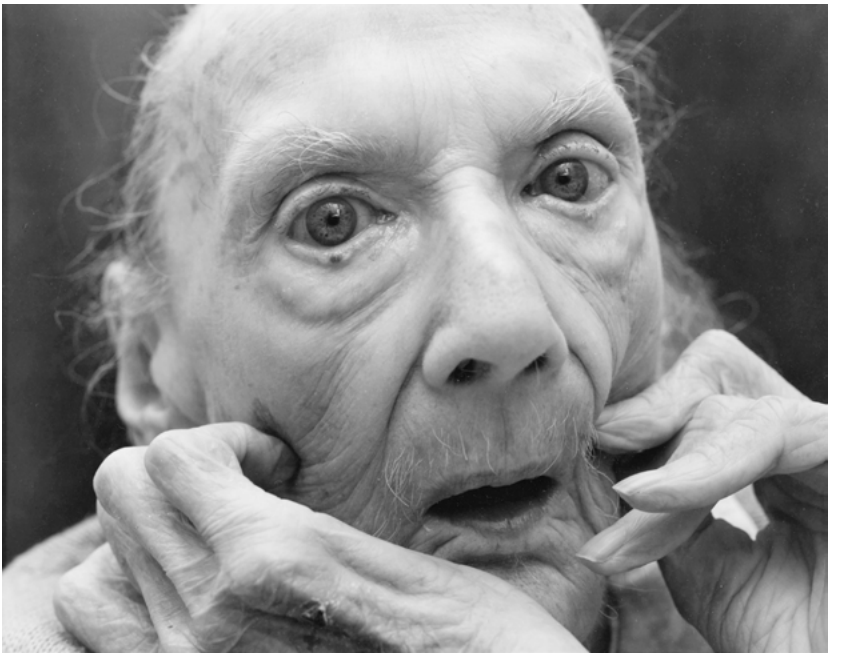
CS Hospiz Campaign 2006, Lowe GGK



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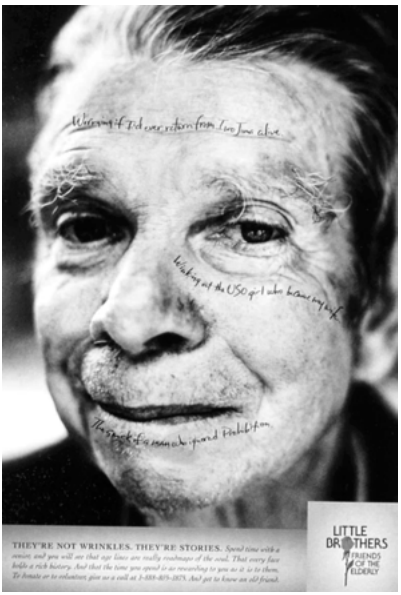
Nicholas Nixon, *M.A.E., Boston*, 1985

at "The smirk of a man who ignored prohibition." As viewers, faced with the landscape of these old faces, we are supposed to know which events deserve to be read back into the faces of aged people and to construct a meaningful facial cartography. Nixon´s photographs, in turn, seem to be random records of wrinkles, bruises, age spots and the disfigurement of the approaching death. (Fig. 6)

Close-Up Views as a Powerful Pictorial Strategy

When it comes to depicting the reality at nursing homes and hospices, there seems to be one main type of pictorial rhetoric. Everyone knows the corresponding images of an old and weak person being taken care of by a nurse, or some other friendly staff. This highly standardized version can be found in many brochures and promotional materials of institutions like *CS Hospiz* or *House of Mercy*. The images emphasize the degree of attention and the dialogical character of the relationship depicted. In this obviously close relationship, one party needs help and care while the other most willingly provides what is needed and seems to derive pleasure from this engagement. Interestingly, *CS Hospiz* and *House of Mercy* do not argue along these lines in their public campaigns. With a few exceptions, they avoid such imagery. Instead, they work with close-ups of single faces of their patients. From the 148 images circulated by the *House of Mercy* in the above-mentioned period, 69 of the photos are close-ups. They are used in various versions framed by various text messages.

In light of Emmanuel Levinas´ humanist philosophy, this pictorial strategy can take on a particular meaning. By confronting the public with these blown-up, frame-filling human faces that look directly at the viewer, the designer of the campaign manages to tune the public into a fundamental ethical dimension, as Levinas (1998) understands it. For him, any ethical relationship is grounded in this face-to-face experience of another human being. When looking into someone else´s eyes, I am confronted with an ultimate, inaccessible otherness that will always withdraw from me. We may share a particular language, temporality, and subject status, but, ultimately, the other is out of reach for me. His/her defenseless eyes make me hold my invasive gaze and by pulling back, in a kind of contraction, self-awareness, and an understanding of my limitations and boundaries are created. At the same time, any responsibility for the other emerges from this deeply affecting encounter, capable of transforming the subject. In a kind of pre-lingual experience mediated by the epiphany of the human face, a primary insight into the irreducible difference at the heart of everything is gained. For Judith Butler (2005), it is also this face-to-face experience through which human beings are confronted with the heteronomy of existence, and ultimately have to acknowledge their inadequacy and vulnerability.



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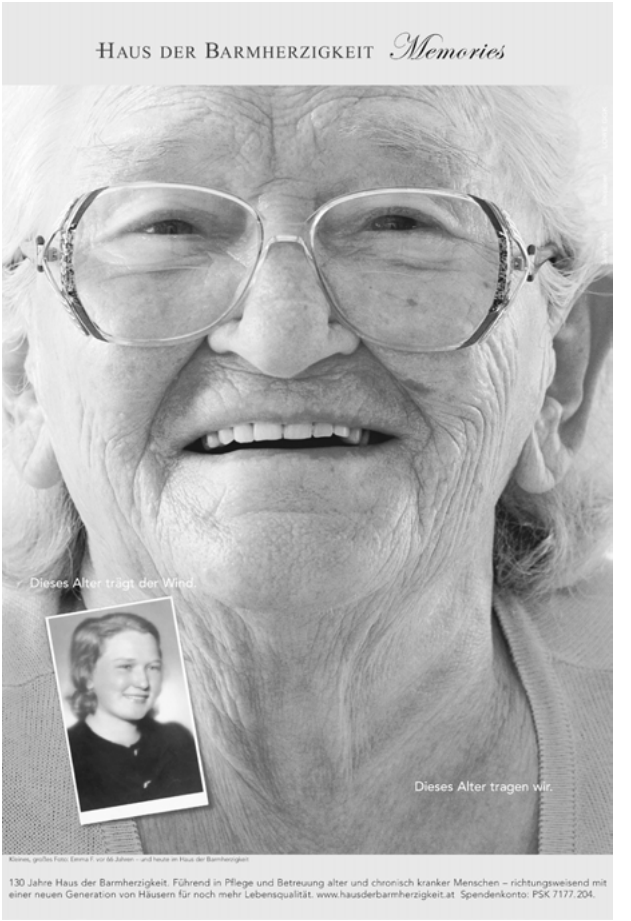
Little Brothers, Odiorne Wilde Narraway + Partners, San Francisco, 1998



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House of Mercy Campaign 2005, Lowe GGK

But coming back to the campaigns: From Levinas´ perspective, the close-ups of old faces mainly introduced by the *House of Mercy* allow for a reenactment of this original experience of otherness that disrupts any certainty and challenges the viewer as an ethical being. Due to the close-up technique of these photos, one is overwhelmed and instantly drawn into a relationship that triggers pre-lingual bonds and redefines the classical I – you relation. The unsolvable mystery of these faces generates a type of respect that has very little to do with the common attempts to picture the old person as the receiver of professional care and personal kindness. Presenting the patient as an object of help and good will would mean to automatically reinforce the kind of subject – object hierarchy questioned by the humanist philosopher.

The Old Person and His / Her Youthful Other

A second pictorial strategy I would like to single out concerns the irretrievable passing of time and the scourge of aging. How to address these issues in a PR campaign? Again, the point seems to be to draw everyone in and work with the fact that everyone is subjected to these processes. Everyone will be old one day and a heightened awareness of this heart-rending issue will eventually create solidarity and result in support for the institutions. Consequently, several of the *House of Mercy* campaigns deal with the irreducible gap between the former youthful and now old self of their patients. The corresponding images introduce their protagonists as people who have come a long way. In the past, they were all young and attractive, which seems to guarantee them a certain bonus factor in a society that is obsessed with youthfulness. The fact that they all started out fresh, proper, and handsome is supposed to make their current state less alienating. In the following, I would like to present some of the campaigns which approach the topic in variations.

In one of the 2005 campaigns of the *House of Mercy*, a close-up of a current view of an old face is juxtaposed with a photo of the person when she was young. The snap-shot quality of the current image stands in strong contrast to the framed, staged, and well-composed old photo presenting an authorized version of the former self. The eye wanders between the two photos trying to gain orientation by pinpointing some of the similarities. The task set in this physiognomic puzzle is to create likeness and to detect features unaltered by time. XY proudly presents her former self yet untouched by the signs of aging. The close-up of the old face creates a feeling of unmediated presence, whereas the small framed photograph seems to have emerged from the past as a single, precious, charged item. The accompanying two sentences further support the antagonistic structure between past and present. It says: "This age is carried by the wind. This age is car-

ried (supported) by us." (Fig. 7) "Heute bin ich 79" (Today, I am 79) represents an even more radical, plain, and unsentimental version of the above-mentioned concept. An old photograph of a man is presented in front of a wooden background which blocks the sight, allows for no perspective, and has something highly factual about it. As text and image do not correspond, there is no possibility to verify the statement accompanying the image. It is simply the authority of the handwritten note and its shaky appearance that evokes an aged version of the person shown in the photo. Or is it the person´s imaginary voice, verbalizing this message that makes up for the lacking image? The corresponding visual proof is missing, but we all know what time and life do to faces and bodies. He is still alive, but it does not say how old he was when the photo was taken. He was in his best years then and that is apparently no more the case now, which is sad and hard to accept, but will eventually generate empathy and solidarity. (Fig. 8)

A comparable strategy is deployed in a *House of Mercy* campaign of fall 2006. It is about two representations of one person in the same picture frame. The image features two cropped versions of the same person. The person on the right is set back in space and is therefore smaller in size. The accompanying text reads: "18 or 80 – so what. To be old has its advantages. At least here" (meaning in the nursing home). The text mentions an age difference, but the faces are identical and of the same age. The difference is generated by the different positions in space and by the conjunction "or" which creates difference and speaks of alternatives. On the other hand, the image plays with the mechanisms of perception. 18 or 80 does not make much of a difference for those who still feel "the same." Apart from biological matters, it is the gaze of the others and their mapping of the person on a time line which determines his/her age. (Fig. 9)

Images of Desire and Fun Against the Bleakness of Old Age

Another main strategy of these campaigns seems to aim at a revision of old age as a sad, unpleasant, and austere phase of life. This makes sense in light of the overall goal of the two institutions to question preconceptions and stereotypes of old age and to work against its stigmatization in society. The still life arrangement presented in a *CS Hospiz* campaign of 2006 wants to demonstrate that terminal illness (the text mentions an incurable cancer disease) and temporary pleasure are compatible. In the arrangement of a Campari and candles on a tray, the little red bottle stands out and signifies worldly temptations and pleasures. The person absent from the photo asked for a Campari because he/she felt that this could provide comfort or delight. (Fig. 10)

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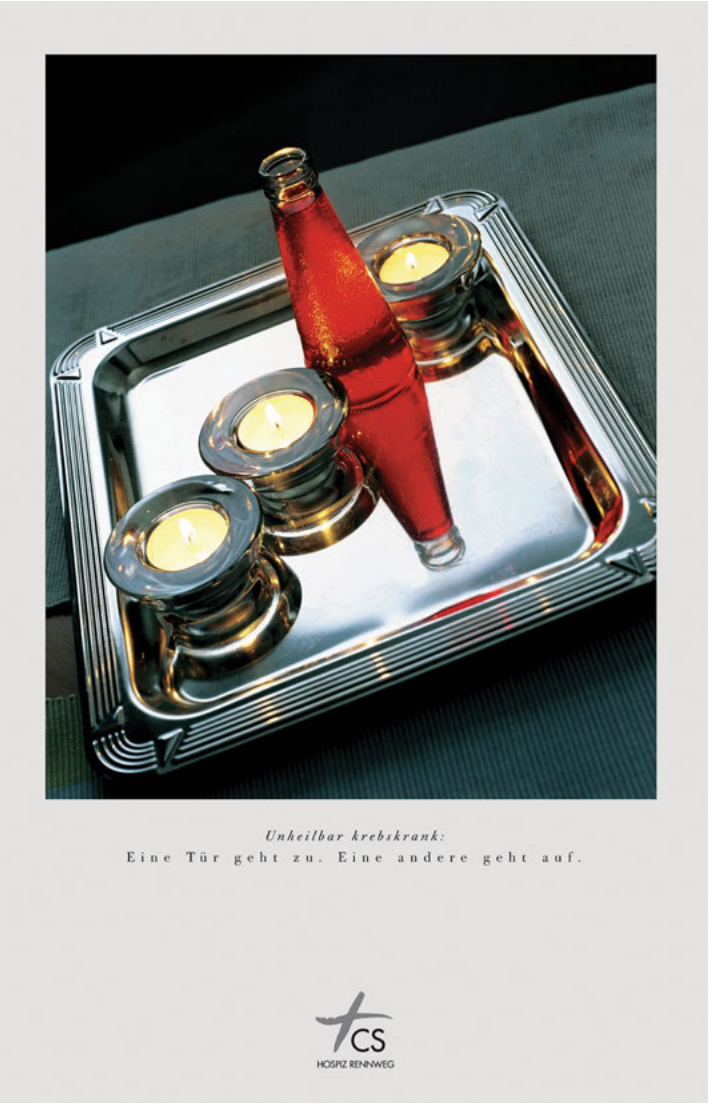
House of Mercy Campaign 2006, Lowe GGK



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CS Hospiz Campaign 2006, Lowe GGK

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House of Mercy Campaign 2004, Lowe GGK

© CS Hospiz Rennweg

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Wiener Städtische Campaign 2013, Demner, Merlicek & Bergmann

© Wiener Städtische

Next, I would like to deal with a variety of campaigns that try, in one way or the other, to link old age with joy or even "fun," to use one of the key terms of our consumer society. In a *House of Mercy* campaign of Spring 2004, old people present their hobbies as (former) sources of pleasure. In the case of a man in an outdoor scenario, it says: "81 is divisible, social responsibility too." He is presented with a motorcycle, but from his stiff and immobile body posture one can tell that the times of his wild rides are long gone. He seems strangely removed from the vehicle. The man has tucked a helmet under his arm and is obviously dressed to perform as a biker, but there is no indication of action. He is just glancing at the camera, somehow hoping for approval as a biker. The Kawasaki seems to have been added to the scenario as a signifier of the man´s desires, or as an attribute that once formed a part of his identity. Everything is well arranged; he is even wearing a leather jacket, but all this attention to details cannot deny the fact that there is a tremendous and unbridgeable gap between him and his former passion. (Fig. 11)

Classical advertising strategies do not allow for such gaps and the sadness that resides in them, but would rather go for the story of the aged biker who preserved his vitality and remained full-fledged member of our fun society. As Mag. Stipits, the PR person of the *House of Mercy*, mentioned in conversation, they frequently find the concepts and motifs of their campaigns emulated by commercial advertising, which is a considerable source of frustration to them. He added: "They usually can afford the better photographers and will always try to top our images." And indeed, an Austrian insurance company seems to have appropriated the motif of the biker. In this case, it is a female who is riding a bike. She is shown in action, wearing a helmet, goggles, gloves, and a sporty red jacket. There is more of everything: more power, more dynamics, more denial of the restrictions of old age, and, of course, more promises. The ad argues for financial security which will make this kind of fun possible. The message is that with the right choice of a retirement savings plan, the pursuit of your passions will be guaranteed. In terms of the photograph, the action shot featured in the insurance advertisement is definitely more ambitious and exciting than the other more static picture, but it lacks the moving quality of the latter. Both charity institutions have, so far, recruited their models mostly from among their patients, and that makes all the difference in the world. The Kawasaki man may have maintained an imaginary connection with his machine, but his active time is irretrievably over. One can feel the inadequacy and lack at the heart of this identity construct, which is not covered up by false promises. (Fig. 12)

Another interesting example of promoting a positive image of old age and at the same time reflecting upon the conditions of such well-being is the image of the "Faschingspaar" (carnival couple). The image is cropped and snap shot like. The protagonists are nicely dressed, as for a ball or a party. She has a nice orchid

pinned to her dress. Everything seems to be slightly outdated. The party horn she is teasing him with is dated and does not really explain the fun they are obviously having. They are fully absorbed in their action, but the hand written inscriptions superimposed on their bodies seem to identify the potential trouble makers that could abruptly put an end to their enjoyment. It is a precious, carefree moment; for the time being, thyroid, bladder, prostate, lymph nodes, colon, all collaborate and function in a way that no major disturbances are to be expected. It is a precarious equilibrium which could be thrown off balance in the next moment. Images like this stand in strong contrast to the familiar depictions of super-fit old people and vital couples who seem to enjoy a kind of well-being that is a given. Unlike the *CS Hospiz* campaign, these ads leave out the subversive inscriptions or a kind of accompanying subtext that would add a realistic note to the idea of well-deserved and therefore unrestricted joy in the advanced phases of life. (Fig. 13)

The question is what to make of the *House of Mercy* campaign "Live your freedom. We live our responsibility" of spring 2011? When these images appeared in the news media, I clipped all of them because they seemed so irritating. In the headline featured on the photos, freedom and responsibility are juxtaposed. The imperative "Live your freedom" seems to provide the patients with kind of a jester´s license for unrestricted behavior while doctors and staff maintain their sense of responsibility. What could this freedom be about: to do forbidden things, to ridicule expectations and norms? To mock the role of the elderly, chronically sick person in the last phase of his/her life? Is it about the freedom to cause indignation in the viewers? Or is it just about the freedom of being oneself, a right explicitly supported by the institution? How does all this go together with the dignity these institutions want to ensure for their residents?

"Edna" has dressed up for the photo opportunity. She has put on her fancy pink glasses, picked her golden gloves and her fan, and carefully arranged a pink scarf. She is back on stage reviving a former version of herself. As Mag. Stipits points out, that several of their patients enjoy these kinds of photo sessions a lot and collaborate most willingly. They get excited and draw great pleasure from being part of an advertising campaign. In Edna´s case, she first enjoyed her prominence in the community, but soon enough grew tired of her newly achieved glamour and withdrew more and more afterwards. (Fig. 14) Another protagonist performs as the well- dressed gentleman he probably was in the past. In an ironical and almost defiant act, he created a big chewing gum bubble, a speech bubble talking nonsense, blown right in the face of the camera. Like all the other models from the same series, he is presented in front of wallpaper reminiscent of the 70s, which seems to contextualize the tame joys of the models in a bygone framework. And there is the man with the pinwheels in motion. Will the pinwheels let him forget

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CS Hospiz Campaign 2004, Lowe GGK

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House of Mercy Campaign 2011, Lowe GGK

his wheelchair? The fun object is adorned with dots and flowers, but the most disconcerting dot can be found above the man´s left eye. No one took the pains to retouch this marker of mortality. He looks into the camera in a skeptical way and seems to wonder about the effect of his performance on the viewer. Considering the fact that the man is no professional model, he plays his part reasonably well and somehow manages to communicate that he is still fit for fun. (Fig. 15/16)

No doubt, the liberating effect of these images is tremendous. These views contradict any conception of a stale and mournful last phase of life, and question moralizing and restrictive notions of dignity, maturity, and the so-called wisdom of old age. On the other hand, this choreography of fun seems to say more about the director of this show and certain conceptions prevailing in our society than about those depicted. The ad refers to "responsibility", but who exactly was responsible for providing these requisites of fun which the patients seem to hold in front of themselves as if they wanted to hide behind them? In addition, the "freedom" that this campaign promotes seems to be mostly about dressing up, performing, masquerading, and pretending to be unburdened and unconcerned. The question is whether this so-called freedom can be sustained and extended beyond the confines of a photo shoot.

In spring 2013, the *House of Mercy* completely remodeled its campaigns and currently uses comic-like drawings to promote its message. *CS Hospiz* has refrained more and more from working with their "guests." Instead, they try to develop powerful metaphors and signifiers of the special conditions of living close to death. The time of encountering the photographs of hospice residents in public space seems to be over.

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House of Mercy Campaign 2011, Lowe GGK

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Photo Shoot at the *House of Mercy*, 2011