Palladio: a multi-media spectacle
by Ben Neill and Bill Jones,
at Symphony Space, New York
by Joseph Nechvatal

The backlash against the logocentric apparatus and corporate globalization has set in by now. It is well known that we live in an era where image is nearly everything and where the proliferation of unbearably intrusive brand names defines so-called culture.

Palladio affirms this awareness through an infuriating and thus stimulating interactive movie / opera / rock concert / theatre spectacle by pioneer hybrid electro-acoustic composer Ben Neill (creator of fantastically meandering sounds, which could go on forever) and digital media artist Bill Jones that was performed at Symphony Space in New York City on March 4th and 5th. It is a multi-layered DJ / VJ culture jamming adaptation of Jonathan Dee's book *Palladio* that immerses us in the indistinct question: "In a world where the line between culture and commerce is increasingly blurred, can you really sell out anymore?"

The visual form here was created by Jones's interactive computer video component -- projected and mixed live onto a movie theater screen -- which included commercial samples seamlessly merging with live-action footage. The lead characters, played by Cort Garretson (a charismatic composer / performer who never buys into the notion that all is retrograde orthodoxy), the hauntingly beautiful and immensely intriguing Zoe Lister-Jones (her character makes many insightful points) and Mikel Rouse (who convincingly plays a jack-ass advertising creative director whose big idea is that corporate advertising can function with no solitary representational subject-matter and no central representational focus) are transported into a digital environment created from the ads portrayed in the story and abstract visual noise. The problem is this transportation feels like a total subordination to the logocentric order.

Indeed, *Palladio* presents a good description of how much of a presence multinational corporations have become in our lives. As you can imagine, this logocentric theme raises some interesting questions. Is everything artistic already colonized in an age when Sergei Eisenstein's dialectic montage has become the dominant mode of advertising and a tool of media industry? If so, what have we sacrificed in becoming a society of consumers? Why have we allowed it to happen? Is pop culture our only culture? If not, just what is the alternative? What, for example, ever happened to Jonas Mekas's high-art concept of "absolute cinema," which was designed to oppose such colonization of the psyche? Is it enough to say that corporate branding pervades our lives and is encroaching on our public institutions -- so there are less and less places free from the noise of advertising and logos?

Honestly, we do not find any state-of-the-art answers to these problems (nor any liberational politics or even hermeneutical interrogation) until the final text messages that romantically close the show (yes, you can still sell out, young art-star, by ignoring citizen-centered alternatives to the international rule of the logo). But up to that point we merely watch art and commercialism collide in mutual exploitation without ever turning into a glorious nihilism via an excess of signifier -- as Jones fluidly mixes video action with sampled commercials. But is this mixing alone a work of cultural criticism or even an invitation to

flights of anti-logo-centric thought? Is this part of the anti-corporate movement or just a hip recycling of the logo -- and thus strengthening corporate logo-mania? In other words, can you stop drinking by drinking even more?

Sure, *Palladio* employs technical savvy and personal testaments to love in order to detail the insidious practices and far-reaching effects of corporate marketing. But all of this is seen from the capitalist consumer perspective. Where is the emerging global worker solidarity here? The culture-jamming hacktivist approach displayed here was frustratingly Warholian ambivalent, as logo fighters display the corporate logo. The visual result was reminiscent of classic Nam June Paik video manipulation (aesthetically-informationally intense), but is this a service to the interests of a provocative Naomi Klein-ish *No-Logo* morality? I was not convinced of that.

I know the idea is that a new techno-empowered generation has begun to battle consumerism with its own best weapons via computer-hacking acumen. But where is the opposition here? Where is the innovative strategy for the active ruining of logo representation (an ideal objective first articulated in feminist practice by Michele Montrelay back in 1978)? [1] What is portrayed is the particular set of cultural and economic conditions that make the emergence of opposition inevitable. This is really a question of form rather than content then.

Antonin Artaud's theoretical work could be reviewed in this respect. Perhaps a deeper examination of his proposals found in *Le Théâtre et Son Double* (*The Theatre and its Double*) would be beneficial to the ruin of representation that Palladio seems to strive for, as Artaud proposes that art (in his case, drama) must become a means of influencing the human organism and directly altering consciousness by engaging the audience in a ritual-like activity involving excess. Even though Jacques Derrida -- in his essay "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" -- argues that Artaud's theory may be seen as impossible in terms of the established structure of Western thought [2], this is precisely why *Palladio* (with its vital connections to the representational excess) can be placed in parallel position to Artaud's hypothesis. Georges Bataille confirms this assertion of excess as ruin in his essay "Baudelaire," particularly by linking Baudelaire's imagination with notions of the impossible. [3]

Of course the superimpositional layering found in *Palladio* has been tried successfully in the 60s / 70s: one could think here of the expanded theatre ideal of Milton Cohn's late-60s *Space Theatre*, the essence of which was a rotating assembly of mirrors and prisms mounted on a flywheel around which were arranged a battery of light, film, and slide projectors. Essentially, it was an expanded version of László Moholy-Nagy's famous *Space-Light Modulator* into which one may enter. But is the art world today ready to make substantial use of multi-layering with its inherent loss of coherence and representational ruin today? I doubt it (the opposite seems to be in fashion), but one would hope so, for such ruin is a challenge to find new ,expanded boundaries of self-representation.

Undoubtedly, we need ruined representations to live fully now, and such ruined representational shifts are far easier to present to the public in the form of artistic expression free from corporate influence. Effectively, such an artistic and perceptual shift in our self-representational ontology (a shift that involves fundamental changes in aesthetic perception) can be expected to engender extraordinarily deep artistic conflicts. This will entail a review of past and present approaches towards both non-representational and representational aesthetics -- which *Palladio* almost advances -- since our imagined logo-free future depends on the kinds of discriminating questions we seek to construct in our artistic practices now. In that regard, read McKenzie Wark's new book, *A Hacker Manifesto*.

All in all, *Palladio* is a beautiful and comprehensive account of what corporate logo economy has wrought but lacks a persuasive proposal for destructive / creative actions to thwart it. In spite of these reservations, I can only applaud *Palladio* for stirring up the pot of these issues, which provoke thought and encourage exploration. Even by cultural conservatives, I hope.

References:

[1] Michele Montrelay, "Inquiry into Femininity" in *m/f* I (1978), pp. 83-101

[2] Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" in *Writing and Difference* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1978), pp. 232-250

[3] Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Completes: Lascaux: La Naissance de l'Art* (Gallimard: Paris, 1978), pp. 200-202