

Klaus Staeck

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Klaus Staeck interviewed by Reinhardt Stumm

What is agitation?

To me agitation is educational advertising. For a long time the word agitation didn't have a good taste because people took it for propaganda. Agitation, propaganda, negative words for many people, especially in Germany...

Goebbels, the unforgotten Minister of Propaganda...

Sure, he was famous for it. But beyond everything agitation was an instrument of political education in the German Democratic Republic. Agitation was of eminent importance in public life. Posters with slogans "do this!", "don't do that!"

It was officially called so?

It was indeed. My agitation material however is no direct handling instruction. It has always been enlightenment. There are always more questions than answers. By all means questions, that should provoke answers.

Are there any recognizable effects? What kind of energy does agitation stimulate in the life of a society? Would it be worse if there was no agitation? Could agitation be understood as a kind of anti-energy which might at least brake down a disastrous trend if it couldn't stop it at all or even turn it around?

This is difficult to judge. For me the rows about my posters, postcards and stickers are the best way to find out about the effect. There are well over a hundred conflicts which have become public; let alone the 41 times when organisations, companies, private persons and parties have taken legal action against me. Fortunately, I have won all cases. This might certainly be regarded as an effect.

I have always understood my agitation material to be a kind of working material. If Green Peace, environmental groupings or Amnesty International want to raise attention by using my posters for their street actions, they may achieve, I think, a recognizable effect. Attention is of important value for many people. The question is simple: how do you draw people's attention to a difficult and maybe unpopular subject? The answer is equally simple: you need pictures, most of all satirical pictures.

Staeck's very proper handwriting...

Yes indeed. Satire openly plays with evident errors which to observe are left to the viewer. He enjoys to discover the punch line. The discovery of the punch line – pleasure or not – then forces him to see the truth, and that is the trick about it.

Yes, I can well imagine that

Sometimes I give a different explanation, I say that my products work like a kind of two-components-glue, you have the picture, you have the text, you put together what does not match at first sight - it sticks together in a matter of seconds and doesn't let you go anymore. The viewer himself develops the final picture. Sometimes, it does not stick properly because something was wrong here or there, so you have something to think about. Apart from all that you have to learn that there is nothing that is understood in the same way by everybody. I have to go along with that. I do not like to believe in a fast and glossy slogan, I prefer to believe in the complicated procedure of becoming aware.

Let me go back half a step. What about the broad effect? I find it increasingly difficult to believe in the effect of agitation. You talk about the effect as if it was a matter of natural law. Just imagine a company's headquarters, do you think they care whether you stick five posters or five greeting cards on their factory gate? They could laugh about it but they don't, why not? Apparently, the company's headquarters also reckons what you reckon will happen if the action should have consequences. What is it? Could the action have a broad effect which cannot be ignored by the company and which could be harmful in the end? Is that the reason why they fight back? Or is it their being extremely delicate that makes them feel offended and treated unfairly?

Offended, yes, but above all they feel disturbed. What has Staeck got to do with this? Who is interfering? Then they call their legal department – what can we do about it? The legal department becomes active – like lawyers do – and they are sure to find a pretext to file a charge and submit it to the court.

The problem is that – the older you get – the more desperate you become about the growing public stupidity. I believe that for the time being the anti-educational advertising is stronger than the educational advertising. There is a marvellous and dreadful example in medical science: Only a doctor can help if an exogenous depression turns into an endogenous one. If you suffer from an exogenous depression you can get out of it yourself, but not with an endogenous depression. At the time being, we are in a difficult endogenous phase. The spiral of going gaga has turned so far that it is impossible to transmit definite and simple facts.

It is unbelievable that not long ago everybody believed that a local flight within Germany does not make any sense whatsoever, neither concerning time nor ecologically. It is absolutely absurd to fly from Hannover to Hamburg.

Nevertheless we are offered cheap flights at prices no other means of transportation could beat - except walking. But even intelligent people think that I am hopelessly old-fashioned if I pick up the subject.

At the same time we learn that the climate disaster is reality and not only fear-mongering of some highly sensitive scientists. We also read in the papers that polar bears devour each other because the growing distances between their hunting grounds make it impossible for them to reach them by swimming. Regardless of all that race-driver Schumacher is elected one of the five most important persons of the year.

You sit there and you don't understand anything. The Rally Paris–Dakar – one of the most absurd environmental events - is being broadcasted and highly praised by ARD (and not a private television station) in their morning magazine. Directly afterwards, without any link at all, they report on the environmental meeting in Nairobi and later ask the spectator: "What is your contribution to environmental protection, do you walk to work, do you separate your garbage?"

There is (still) no sufficient revolutionary mass to make a revolution, even if some people like to talk about it. All you can do is to think about how we could effectively point at the mischiefs. They are no illusions. And my problems are not only my personal problems, they are the problems of other people too.

Clear enough – but what effect do you think your work could have after all?

In a first place, my work is directed at those people who feel responsible one way or other, and who have not yet forgotten that we are a part of nature.

You can forget about those who regard themselves as sort of, say, artificial beings, cyber-existences or something like that. Nature does not need the human being, on the contrary, it is the human being that destroys nature. I apply to those who are gifted with reason and possibly old-fashioned, who are open for educational advertising and could be multipliers themselves.

Anyway, I have long ago stopped to believe in crowds. I believe in the few who are still open and in the very few who are ready to do something instead of wailing and lamenting. I have made the experience that even with a few people you can win a whole lot, provided you do not want to change the whole world at once.

Do you think, the trick would be to reach those people who are capable and have the energy for public control, and to tear the others from their being indifferent and make them realise what is going on? So that two different fields of energy could develop that might possibly complement one another? Here are the ones with influence, there are the others who like them to have influence, even on themselves?

This would be great, but I do no longer quite believe in it. The famous rank and file – which in socialism played one of the most important roles – obviously is no longer willing to look behind the pictures. Also these people are in a way helplessly dependent on publicity. Because they never learnt to really grasp publicity. Whereas publicity has very well learnt to deal with the rank and file. Cunning psychologists wage their battles of publicity like wars were waged in former times.

All this is no longer funny and sometimes reason enough for desparation or resignation. Still, I do hope that I will not turn cynic.

You are being quite resolute about this and are still hanging right in the middle of it all...

Yes, of course, a reasonable person is bound to see what happens! This is what made my election for president of the Academy of Arts so important to me. Accepting this position means I would no longer have enough time to work on my posters. But then again I thought that this position would possibly make my voting more important – since we are all somehow focussed on authority - than the production of another 30 posters on any subject. Being in the media, you have at least a chance to be heard and now that I am President of the Academy of Arts, the chance is even better.

I think it is my duty to make the Academy more popular, which is not easy because not all of my colleagues are passionate fighters for educational advertising. I am really trying to recover authority for there is one thing I realize: people are in urgent need of orientation. There is plenty of, let's call it "straying consciousness", looking for a harbour or a berth that no political party is able to provide. The system of political parties has, at present, a

rather disillusioning effect on people. Moreover, I am a passionate fighter for democracy because only democracy tolerates people like me and what they do.

Do you still feel like going on with this work?

In the first place I do it for myself. It feels somehow like a goldsmith's work: first he sees the stone and then he thinks about its setting. If I have an idea, I always want to turn it into something and this does not mean that I want to write a whole book. How can I turn something that bothers me, agonises or worries me into an image? If I succeed, it is very satisfactory. I have often been asked whether I like what I do. Liking ist the wrong category. It deeply satisfies me to get something into a picture that helps others recognise their own personality. Pictures are my tools of communication. Pictures are always stronger than words, we know that.

Let's talk about this job here, why do you participate?

I have been attracted by the contradiction. Ever since I have produced posters, environment has been a crucial point of my work. Trucks not so much. The freight it transports, belongs on rails or boats. It was a real provocation for me to draw attention to this contradiction. To say "everything that is being carried around on roads should be carried on rails", was not striking enough. Meanwhile the subject climatic catastrophe brings forth absurdities like this, that President George Bush has enacted a law to protect polar bears without even talking about the reasons of this environmental disaster. This is the subject: find out about the consequences but do not ask for the reasons.

The counterplay of cynicism and hope. Insight is useless. Ratio turns into nonsense, benefit into menace – says Goethe's Faust.

Still, poor is who gives up, and I do not want to be poor. As long as I myself can determine my state of mind, I prefer to now and again rather take refuge into helpless activity than to suffer from the bad state of my mind. I think that complaints use more of my energy than my trials of self-defence.

Failures may happen. My goodness, the list of my crashes is long enough. But there would be no excuse for not having tried.

The journey is the reward, is that correct?

That is too generally speaking; I always reach out for something but I can cope with it if I fail. Previous generations did many things which they knew would only be successful one or two generations later. We run about and have no more faith in the future. How should we? We are already burning our forthcoming harvest!

There is one other question - besides all the worries concerning all the others and the future, do I have a right to consider my own existence more important, to only care about myself and not about the rest of the world?

Well, I think that if you stop being curious, you are getting old. I am still a very curious person and I think that is the reason why I am still in the act. This is why I support everyone who tries to do something in his field. I never saw myself as a lonely fighter, even if I was often enough called so.

Thus, I do not feel alone at all. I meet many people who tell me that my work helped them to become politically aware. The fact that FAZ (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) is annoyed that Staeck is still working gives me deep satisfaction. I maintain that my work is a lot more important than the work of somebody who wants to be malicious.