

OTAVIO SCHIPPER

POSTAL EMPIRE

All science is either physics or stamp collecting.
Ernest Rutherford.

For the images in his new series *Postal Empire*, the artist proposes a taxonomy or systematics, the two principal classifications of which may be broadly described as 'graphic' and/or 'political' – the former category being, to all intents and purposes, a running commentary of sorts on the history of painting; and the latter being self-explanatory, although closer scrutiny may reveal how both categories are actually overtly political.

Schipper is interested in the relationships between various ways of using stamps and postmarks as tools for manipulating identity (in the political samples) and (in the graphic samples) pulls focus onto their uncanny, quicksilver ability to transmit to the spectator divers instantly recognizable signs – miniaturist serrated edge 'canvases' in shapes ranging from rectangular to triangular to circular to square to pentagonal or even to other, extremely unusual animal forms. The 'graphic' group acknowledges Pop's revolutionary aesthetic propositions and political implications while addressing some of the movement's most widely disseminated tropes and strategies. Almost from the beginning, Jasper Johns (along with a sly, Duchampian *modus operandi*) has represented a powerful influence upon much of Schipper's work. Spectacles (as dramatizations of sight and of the consequences of looking), along



with flags, countries, political events, comic strips, and the ubiquitous contemporary artistic practices of organization, reproduction, collection, arrangement in sheets, rows, and booklets and the inversion of the image, along with more classical forms of artistic expression such as engraving, Pointillism, and Ben-Day dots permeate both series.

In conversation about the works in question, Schipper is apt to steer his listener's attention to the manifold implications of the overprint (provisional surcharges, colonial overprints, and wartime and transitional government overprints).

Because government-issued postage stamps and their mailing systems have always reflected the history of nations, Postal Empire's philatelic operations are shot through with historical examination and reference. Indeed, the mid-nineteenth century mark coincides with the emergence of the modern nation state. The succession of conquests, revolutions, occupations and annexations during this period provides the postage stamp with such iconographic staples as portraits of rulers and heroes and scenes depicted after the manner of historical paintings. The approximate middle of the century also coincides with the issuing of the earliest postage stamps – the Penny Blacks of 1840, a time in which the United Kingdom was in disarray and its corruption scandals ubiquitous. No trope could be more apposite to Brazil today.

It was Rowland Hill's pamphlet proposing "Post Office Reform; Its Importance and Practicability" (initial publication dated 13 February 1837, marked private and confidential and reissued to the general public in a second edition on 22 February) that brought about the creation of the stamp, along with the engraved imagery that initially made it desirable as a collectible item.

Curiously enough, postmarks and cancellations are also known as 'killers'. The overprint represents murder by effigy; it is an expression of the *damnatio memoriae* in which the image – the figurative representation – must not be remembered because it must be denied in favor of a new order. Within the scope of historical periods covered in the series, the artist has declared a particular interest in the end of the Ottoman Empire – the event that made way for the phenomenal ascension of Arab nationalism. The multicultural world of the Levant was buried by the Arab world's overwhelming self-identification with Islam. Coincidentally, as this series was being prepared – during yet another boiling point in the Syrian Civil War – the Russian ambassador to Turkey was assassinated at the opening of an exhibition called 'Russia in the Eyes of Turks' in an art gallery in Ankara in plain sight and extreme physical proximity of all those present at the venue.

Geographically, it is here that the political and graphic aspects become most prominently fused: "I feel that the oriental stamps possess a very interesting feature, the Turkish ones especially. There is a use of the overprint as an instrument for cancellation – a graphic element with an identity of its own. In this regard, I would draw attention to the Japanese stamp, in which cancellation is expressed by something very much akin to painting with a brush in the traditional, circular form of Zen painting."

The machinery of desiring-production that characterizes previous work such as *Mechanical Unconscious* (2010); the cognitive dissonance produced by the sculptural pieces in the *Empty Voices* series (2011); tropes for communication such as elevators, utility poles or vision itself made concrete through impossible spectacles that Schipper repeatedly sculpts and draws – all of these have involved collecting.



1st anniversary of the Sultan Mohammed VI's accession in 1919.

In submitting the artist's exegesis of philately to close scrutiny, the spectator's awareness slowly reveals a nightmarish logic that our initial enchantment at the profusion of magnificently crafted, colored and illustrated details of the lessons that history teaches us would repress, overwhelmed by our realization of stark representations of alteration and cancellation in primitive, tinted black symbols.

In terms of the letters that bear the stamps, a fictional scenario comes to mind: Following his disturbing disappearance from the screened off corner inside a law office to which his employer has consigned him, the antihero of the most famous short story penned by the greatest of American writers – published less than fifteen years after the issue of the Penny Black – is rumored to have been working in the dead letter office. The scrivener suffers from “an innate and incurable disorder” of the soul, a *Verleugnung* that belongs to the order of the psychoses.

There can be no doubt that the process identified by Schipper's political series is a psychotic one: masks covering masks, signs such as crosses, animal shapes, symbols, words, numbers and values that vehemently deny existence or modify it so radically as to call for re-identification. Its colorful (even accessible) appearance to the contrary, belying the artist's glorious use of color, this is shape-shifting art for dark times. Whether as metaphor or metonymy, Otavio Schipper's new work calls up myriad perspectives of historical circumstance as violent terminus.

Stephen Berg.



Postal Empire #1, 2016

Inkjet on paper

Unique edition

101 x 90 x 5 cm



Postal Empire #2, 2016

Inkjet on paper
Unique edition

101 x 120 x 5 cm



Postal Empire #3, 2016

Inkjet on paper
Unique edition

101 x 90 x 5 cm



Postal Empire #4, 2016

Inkjet on paper

Unique edition

101 x 90 x 5 cm



Postal Empire #5, 2016

Inkjet on paper

Unique edition

63 x 82 x 5 cm

