

# contemporary

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### special issue on digital art

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*Bird Flu/Vogelgrippe: badges, 2006. Opposite: Bird Flu/Vogelgrippe: Berlin, Siegesaule, 2006. All images courtesy: the artist*

# STEFANO CAGOL

JUNE YAP

'OURS IS THE FIRST CENTURY WITHOUT TERRA INCOGNITA, WITHOUT A FRONTIER.' – HAKIM BEY'

IN March 2006 art took to a van. Stefano Cagol, an artist from Italy, presented his work *Bird Flu/Vogelgrippe* that began in Trento, travelling through to Berlin. Armed with badges proclaiming Star Flu, Pig Flu, Sex Flu, Politics Flu, Pussy Flu, Gun Flu, Art Flu, Money Flu, Religion Flu and War Flu, the project made appearances in the cities it passed, sharing its watchword with an unsuspecting public as the van emitted sounds of birds, erasing the difference between influenza and influence. While we may consciously acknowledge the power the media has in accentuating our fears of global-scale tragedies and outbreaks, even while we demand constant information updates, it still fails to mitigate the paralysing effects we experience. We are, after all, rabbits caught in the headlights of events that clamour for our attention – the relentless succession of news-breaking headlines. In this we find the essence of Stefano Cagol's nomadic response to the borders between the spaces we occupy and the ideas that occupy us. In *Bird Flu/Vogelgrippe* these fears and their hold over us are packaged as the art accessory, benignly transforming your jacket,

bag, shirt lapel and cap into something rather more interesting, while you may ponder for a second what it might really be trying to tell you.

In September of the same year, another similar white, antiseptic, mostly unmarked van took to the streets of Singapore, on this occasion pronouncing itself as the *Power Station*, and distributing badges asserting Sex Power, Media Power, Bomb Power, War Power, Belief Power, War Power, Politics Power, Art Power, Flag Power, Beauty Power and Techno Power. This time the van played the tunes of more than a dozen national anthems. Stopping at shopping malls and train stations, the project allowed passers-by to pick out badges of their own, an identity parade that the cheerfully departed adorned with their free lifestyle supplements, revealing the parameters of their own personal worlds: fears, imagined consequences, viruses, identities, nationalism, global economy and politics. In a time characterised by information broadcast and exchange, Stefano Cagol's works raise the question of what is and isn't part of the network. With globalisation and the world wide web, which is a misnomer in itself, he seeks out the reality of this assumed mapping and reach.

In another project entitled *White Flags* (2005-6), symbolising all nations and yet none, planted in unexpected spaces, the artist attempts to unpack the meanings found in the broad concepts often used in sweeping statements and gestures, creating a temporary autonomous zone of the mind where relationships



**BIRD FLU  
VOGELGRIPPE**



All images: *Power Station*, 2006

and interconnections are reset, before slipping back into the system of meanings. The tabula rasa of the white van and the white flag point to a juncture where a sleight of hand can occur, a conscious moment of escape and even wish-fulfilment. The itinerant van and unexpected locations of the flags are reflective of the fluid channels through which information, viruses and fear spreads, a dynamic contest of codification and neutralisation, where what appears as the everyday conditions of technological mediation and consumption is at stake. Using the unmarked van, recalling the getaway vehicle, the artist produces an invisible theatre of the mediated reality we live in, and an invitation to be transported to places unknown.



At the same time, it remains part of the connected and globalised world that it maps, but one that offers a gentle inoculation against irrational desires and fears.

JUNE YAP IS DEPUTY DIRECTOR AND CURATOR AT THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS SINGAPORE

(1) Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, Autonomedia Anti-copyright, New York, 2003





Above: *Past Time Heroes [Harajuku Influences]*, 2006. Below: *White Flag*, 2005

