

OLA KOLEHMAINEN IS NOT A BUILDING

Ola Kolehmainen
A Building is not a Building

In 2006 and 2007 Peter Granser traveled extensively through Texas. While he was there he documented the cultural, political, and economic climate of the United States. In these pictures, collectively called Signs, Granser focuses on visual symptoms of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, extreme religion, conservative politics, immigration tensions, zealous patriotism, and big oil interests. In images such as a "Welcome Home" banner flanked by two women with children and strollers, the façade of a "Creation Evidence Museum," and two men standing at the southern US border, one of them curiously waving an American flag toward an empty hillside in Mexico, Granser creates a photo essay that is in many ways a condemnation of American society. In the process he raises compelling questions about national identity, the role of photography in shaping that identity, and what it means to collect photographic documentation of pre-existing biases. In this work Granser provides us with evidence of some of the most unflattering, stereotypical aspects of American identity. Provocatively, this direct strategy illuminates the fact that stereotypes, like photographs, are based in truth, but both also are exaggerated and by their very nature ambiguous and incomplete.

Karen Irvine
Curator
Museum of Contemporary Photography at
Columbia College Chicago

The Impossible Un-Ambiguity of Signs

Like some of the world's most revered thinkers and philosophers, Granser is a suspect of patriotism. Eighteenth-century English writer Samuel Johnson once said, "Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel," and in the nineteenth century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson exclaimed, "When a whole nation is losing Patriotism at the top of its voice, I am fain to explore the cleanness of its hands and the purity of its heart." In the current US presidential election year, all of the polarizing issues that Granser's

While many artists today are afraid to make a statement for or against current political points of view, Granser challenges the ambiguity of photography to be unambiguous, all the while seeming to know it will fail. Photographs, like symbols, operate on their power to be read and to communicate, but they can always be translated into the service of particular interests. The symbols Granser photographs are obvious, but to photograph them and isolate them and put them into a book complicates them and suggests many different readings and connections. Granser clearly suspects of knee-jerk patriotism, ultimately asks how patriotism colors religion, politics, and economics, and how these three forces affect each other. By sticking to such loaded, polarizing signs, Granser pushes photography to be more clear and opinionated. In doing so he disallows the neutral position a viewer might take and asks us to consider what these symbols represent—or ultimately responsibility as citizens not only of our own country but the world at large.

Most of Granser's pictures are of actual signs,

advertisements, and other political and religious placards that contain either language or an iconic symbol such as the American flag or a cross. In this way Granser's photographs update the work of Walker Evans, who in the nineteen-thirties and forties also recorded various indicators of popular culture in the United States. In Evans's work, images of gleaming automobiles, advertisements for Coca-Cola, movie posters, and other symbols of The American Dream contrast his famous FSA pictures of poor migrant farmers and his photographs of text fragments found in public spaces containing negative words such as "damage," as well as images that unsettle the idealistic notion of the melting-pot, like his picture of four Italian-American women riding in a parade car with a banner reading "Leave or Love America." Like Evans, Granser has a forceful body of work that reveals the tension between what the patriotic, religious, and commercial signs promote and American social realities.

Similarly, while photographer Robert Frank traveled through the United States in 1955 and 1956 on a Guggenheim Fellowship, he looked to deflate what he felt was an overly upbeat, optimistic image of the country that had been promoted by publications such as Life magazine following World War II. Frank, who grew up in Switzerland, was, like Granser, a foreigner reacting to the overwrought myth of endless American splendor. The pictures Frank took were eventually published as *The Americans*, a book that was groundbreaking in its biting critique and unvarnished depiction of American life. In 1958 Frank wrote, "I do not anticipate that the onlooker will share my viewpoint. However, I feel that if my photograph leaves an image on his mind—something has been accomplished."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journal, December 10, 1824. From *The Yale Book of Quotations*, edited by Fred R. Shapiro (New Haven and London, 2006), p. 242.

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