

Art

Belaboring the Obvious

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precision of
military strategy.



by Hunter
Drohojowska

The current resurgence of representational painting may have found fans among artists and art dealers, but to a lot of people it's a reactionary tendency, a return to past traditions and unoriginal themes. One question continues to recur in contemporary art journals: what happened to the avant-garde? Where are those artists who were dealing with the political and social responsibilities of art in a conceptual vein?

Connie Fitzsimmons, assistant curator at the Long Beach Museum of Art, has brought together a few such figures in the exhibition *Comment*, on view at LBMA through August 14. The exhibition includes photographs, videos, and texts in sundry combinations by Cecile Abish, Dara Birnbaum, Victor Burgin, Vernon Fisher, Douglas Huebler, Barbara Krugg and Muntadas.

As Fitzsimmons notes in the catalogue, this work is explicit and literal to the point of contempt for appearance. "Its content is its power," she writes, calling this a welcome contrast to the sensual appeal of painting, and she asks, "Is explicit content [in art] rejected on the grounds that it necessarily becomes authoritative and didactic?" Unfortunately, based on the selection in her exhibition, the answer is yes. In spite of her laudable intentions, about half of the work is not only didactic, but is also dull, dated, and not a little pretentious.

Politically oriented conceptual art emerged during the late 1960s in the naive ambiance of a Vietnam-transfixed America. The intention of such art, along with much of the music and writing of the time, was to raise political consciousness. A 1983 audience may not be any more politically active, but it is certainly more

Kira Perov

aware. Polls regularly indicate that a majority of Americans distrust the government. They understand that capitalism reinforces class oppression, that the media manipulates our perceptions of reality. This is no longer an America of mass political innocence. Thus, several artists in this exhibition operate from a methodology that no longer seems appropriate to the times. Their visual harangues seem atavistic, a throw-back to days of Yippies burning money in the New York Stock Exchange.

For example, British artist Victor Burgin superimposed the news copy describing Yves St. Laurent's latest fashion trends on the enlarged photograph of a woman at work in a factory. The disparity in image and text tells us that the rich enjoy luxury at the expense of a labor class. It's a sad but quite familiar story, so Burgin is telling us what we already know, and nothing more.

Cecile Abish is also guilty of obviousness. She took black and white photographs documenting the interior and exterior of the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, and attached them to cardboard boxes arranged as a floor installation. A steel sign with the word "age" is illuminated by a red bulb. Abish is telling us that the museum as context alters the work of art, confers the status of prestige and posterity, and insures that art may transcend its own time. Again, she is belaboring the evident with a concept explored repeatedly since Duchamp.

Muntadas' installation *La Television* features slides projected over a "dead" television set. Advertising slogans, newspaper clippings and photographs create a montage of messages familiar to all of us, a discourse on pervasive themes of oppression and an appeal to a common yearning for security. Accompanying the stories is a blues instrumental dubbed with a diatribe against right wing tendencies. The whole satirizes the collective fear and fatigue that maintains the status quo.

In an adjacent gallery, Dara Birnbaum's video installation, *PM Magazine*, is just that. Excerpts from that TV show are edited to a punk rendition of The Doors' "L.A. Woman." The monitors are housed behind a pair of enlarged black-and-white photo-images, drawn from the tape, of a girl eating an ice cream cone. Stereotypical and eroticized images of women in work, leisure and consumer activities are meant to reveal the way in which television both views and molds its audience. Birnbaum uses TV's own techniques of seduction, but both she and Muntadas are back to the problem of preaching to the knowing with the fervor of the born-again. The theory that our society is acculturated by television, rather than reality, is about 20 years old.

There is a sanctimonious, parental tone to the work of these artists who are so busy telling us what is "good" for us. This is art of high moral purpose. Rationalizing itself as "critical," employing strategies of recontextualization and deconstruction, the work draws upon a position of authority to denounce fascism. It begs an analogy to those *coups d'état* where the rebels seize control of the government only to instate their own form of totalitarian control.

The limitations of this position are clarified by other artists in the exhibition. Douglas Huebler's photos and texts evolved from a 1971 proposal "to photographically document the existence of everyone alive." From the series *Global Crocodile Tears II*, the triptych titled *Howard* includes a humorous sequential fiction that recounts the career of an artist rejected when young for being an expressionist, only to remain an outcast until the resurgence of neo-expressionism, when he's again rejected, this time for being too old. Above the two end texts are photographs unrelated to the story, of random people unconcerned with the artist's plight. In the center is a "detail" photograph of the artist's painting. The detail reads as an abstraction, ironically avoiding allusion to the very reason for the artist's initial failure.

Huebler's work refers to political and social systems but it engages the empathy of an audience through linguistic strategies. In addition, as Fitzsimmons notes in the catalogue, "An existentialist philosophy of life informs many of the melodramatic vignettes in which the fate of the subject is determined by events outside the subject's control. This is absurdity as described by Camus. Admitting that the state of American contemporary culture is absurd is more complex, and essentially more accurate, I think, than the political perspective of "us" versus "them."

Barbara Kruger, too, has opened to question the debate of polarized politics and social concerns. At first glance, *Your Moments of Joy Have the Precision of Military Strategy*, shown here, might seem to be a flat declaration. However, it has the "look" of authority without being a definitive message. The heart refers to the moments of joy, the muscular arm and torch implies an athletic or military victory. The combined images also allude to

sexuality and romance as contradicted by the cold, controlled words in block type. The key is the word "Your." Whose moments of joy? The responses of men rather than women? Or a reference to everybody, a societal condition, one caused by the very duality expressed in the photograph? Or the military discipline that contemporary emotional survival requires and a sensual joy that frequently has been reduced to mere moments? Kruger's work succeeds by expressing the "look" of authority, of accusation, while calling that very authority questionable, confounding and, to go back to Huebler, absurd.

Vernon Fisher scarcely seems to belong in the exhibition, though his piece, *Show and Tell*, is a handsome enough exception. Over the enlarged newspaper photo of a pair of men "showing off" a catch of fish, a printed text tells the sad tale of Dori, who never brought anything to school for "Showing Time." When she finally announces that she has something to show, she holds out her arm and lets fall a handful of shredded Kleenex. She describes it as snow. A blackboard next to this piece is painted with blobs of white and the word "snow." An adjacent figure of a woman refers to the subject of the tale. Fisher's narrative is presented in diverse ways, creating multiple artificial realities. In the catalogue, Fisher is quoted as saying, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live."

If I had to draw any conclusion to all of this, it might be to challenge Fitzsimmons' and the artists' interests in an art that "confronts the questions of content and function" in order to educate and to improve its audience. Why bother unless they can truly tell us something that we don't already know, an activity that real art does exceptionally well. ■