

LOS ANGELES

Signs of the times: The artist as a double agent

by Hunter Drohojowska

With all I've heard about A-bombs that'll destroy a city and H-bombs that'll destroy a state and chain-reactions that'll destroy the world...you know I just don't have any incentive to buy a two-pants suit.

From an untitled painting—lime green text on aqua background—by Richard Prince.

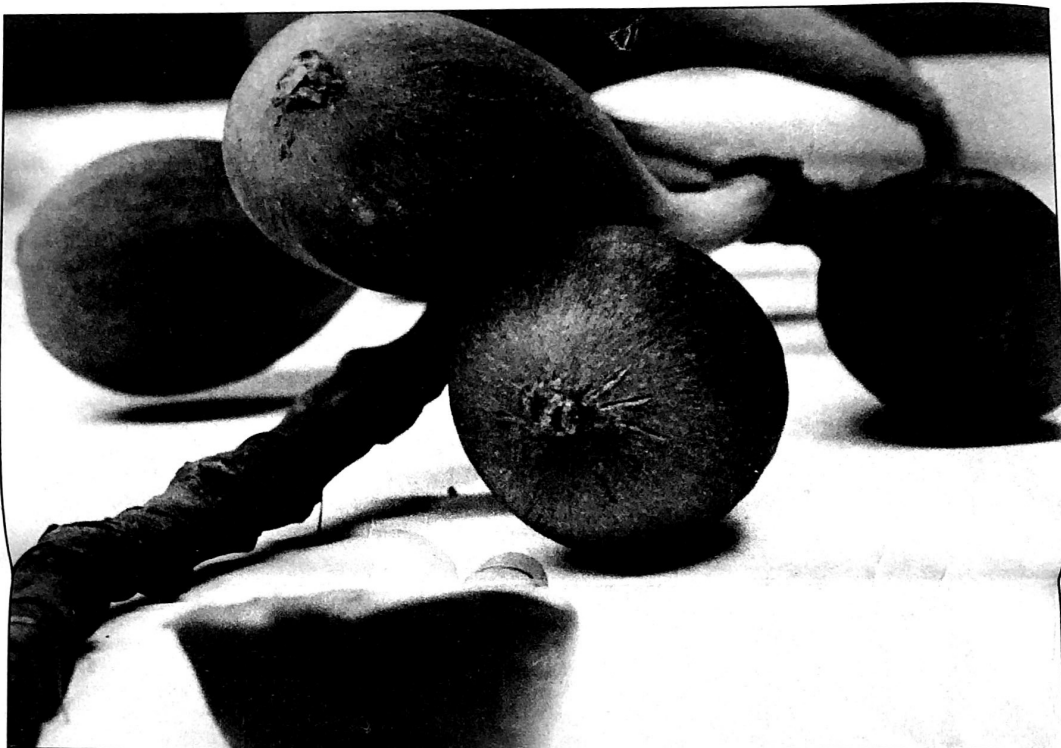
The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's fin-de-decade exhibition *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation* is a landscape of denial. It is a reflection of the world beamed into your home by a media trying desperately to look the other way; and reported by artists who feel they've lost the right to be smug. A repressed rage seeps through the show's precious veneer like corrosive glue, a shadowy bruise, evidence of the sado-masochistic dance of death that the art world—like so many other worlds—has become.

"It's the end of the world as we know it," goes the R.E.M. song—an admission less apocalyptic than resigned. These artists embrace the ferocious gambits of their progenitors, the Dadaists and Surrealists, who looked around at the superabundance and starvation of their own sick times and despaired of finding relevance in the traditions of painting and sculpture. Then, as now, conservatives hoped that we might return to a kinder, gentler time when a brushstroke of cerulean blue, placed just so, could brighten your day. Don't worry, be happy.

A Forest of Signs is titled after a poem by Charles Baudelaire from his book *Les Fleurs des Mals*. (*Flowers of Evil*)—the words evoke the images of beautiful decay common to the thirty artists in the show. (You can guess who they are, with a few surprises). Much of the imagery is derived from media i.e. photography, T.V. or film. This not the neutral "truthful" photography of the Conceptual Seventies. In the Eighties, it is assumed that photographs lie, the media lies; manipulation through presentation is all. The Museum of Contemporary Art's curator Mary Jane Jacob allows for this assumption in the title to her introductory essay: *Art in the Age of Reagan*, and the theme is reinforced by curator Ann Goldstein in her capsule summaries of each artist's career.

This generation of artists shouts *mea culpa* and pockets the check. Conservatives call this mercenary. I call it honest. It's a declaration of complicity. The crown prince of this strategy, Jeff Koons, is represented at the entrance to the Museum of Contemporary Art galleries by one of this year's enlarged polychromed wood sculptures *Ushering in Banality*—a pair of angels guiding a beribboned sow, a little boy following with lips pressed to its adorable hairy derriere. This grandiose *tchatchke* stands like a portentous metaphor, open to interpretation of a grim/Grimm nature. Mustn't that reading be that artists, those blithe spirits, protect and coddle the porky, smelly beast that art has become? Dressing it up to attract the affection of collectors and critics bringing up the rear?

It's a passive/aggressive position to which Louise Lawler offers a cautionary footnote. Her color photograph of the Koons sculptures as they are being unpacked is presented in miniature as a paperweight on a pedestal; on the wall, the enlarged photograph is paired with a pinkish menu



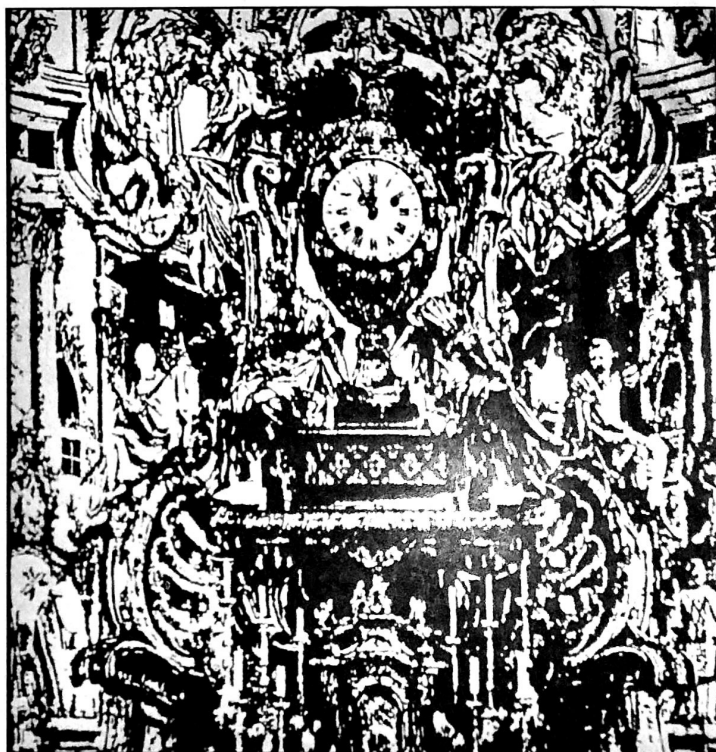
Christopher Williams, *Angola to Vietnam*, 1989, gelatin silver print, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art.

of delicacies—poached leeks with pink peppercorn mayonnaise—from the famed caterers *Silver Palette*. (A reference to the artist's tool and the "silver spoon" of a propertied class.) This piece is titled *Between Reagan and Bush* nominally referring to the months between election and inauguration when Koons had a trio of solo shows. Yet, it also touches upon elite priorities and shifting standards.

And so goes the dialogue within the exhibition, each artist admitting his or her own collusion with varying degrees of self-criticism.

This is the era of artist as double-agent. Beneath the cibachrome gloss, the immaculate, stylish surfaces, you sense the grime of loss and despair. Discussing this at dinner one night, artist Alexis Smith—who is not in the show—remarked that most of the work struck her as cynical. She was referring to Bertrand Russell's remark: "cynicism...results from the combination of comfort with powerlessness. Powerlessness makes people feel that nothing is worth doing and comfort makes the painfulness of this feeling just endurable."

Power is of enduring fascination to artists, underscored by their traditionally disenfranchised position in society. This exhibition is charged with the elemental dread of those who feel powerless in an abusive and incomprehensible world. As Christopher Knight has written, the issue of power and control has been forced to the surface by feminist theory and women artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine and



Peter Nagy, *L'Age d'Or*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, collection of Elynn and Saul Dennison, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art.



Robert Longo, *Untitled*, 1987, charcoal, graphite, ink on paper, collection of the artist, courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.

Jenny Holzer, all of whom are in the exhibition. Yet the marks of victimization and marginalization are ubiquitous. The "look" is cool; but behind that two-way mirror ricochet the muffled screams. It is this icy current of controlled hysteria that ultimately lends relevance to the enterprise, the plasma forcing blood through the hardened arteries of the aesthetic system. This relevance should not be confused with the topical or the newsworthy. The common assumption of all the artists in this show is that the news is not worthy. It is corrupted by power—the power of the press—and populated by liberals who extol the virtues of free speech but are salaried, therefore muzzled, by a power company.

Richard Prince letters second-banana one-liners, the jokes found on Catskills cocktail napkins, in seductive colors with hostile punch-liners. ("If I refuse to go to bed with you" she whispered, "will you really commit suicide?") "That's been my usual procedure." Magenta text on ochre background). The dry wit of Pop and the factory fresh geometry of Minimalism are hijacked from history and put to service in the less optimistic present. Prince implicitly reiterates the premise that inspired his "re-photography" of the early Eighties, that "making it new" is as nostalgic today as other ideals of the "Great Society."

Drawing from similar sources, Sherrie

Levine presents a couple of frames from *Krazy Kat*—painted in black on mahogany panels—Ignatz mouse throws a brick, hitting the lovesick puss in the head. The diptych of this toss is repeated three times, a cycle of insanity resulting only in the cat's unrequited affection for the abusive rodent.

"Reality, what a concept!" raved Robin Williams in the mid-Seventies. That's Baudrillard in a nutshell. Art associated with "simulation" and "appropriation" may be based on a creative misreading of the French philosopher's complicated texts. But that overlooks the more salient point—the chasm between what is said and what is meant, the disinformation that seems to pass for communication throughout the society. From this yawning gap flows the pervasive undercurrent of yearning and desire, the reach for the unattainable. This generation of artists—talking 'bout my g-g-generation—is lost in space, in a twilight zone of irresponsibility, frustrated in their longing to connect cause to effect, language to meaning, action to consequence.

This is the art of disfunction, spawned from the void, the trough between role and reality. This black hole of manipulation and duplicity is the content of much of the work in the show. Mitchell Syrop's photographs are matched with authoritative yet ironically misconnected texts. Larry Johnson's multi-colored photographs of uniden-

tified texts float without context, nearly impossible to read or absorb, as either content or composition. Chris Williams' black and white photographs seem at first to be harmless pictures of flowers, but each is a glass model from a botanical museum, selected because the country of its origin practices the terrorist tactic of "disappearance."

Mike Kelley's "Pay for your Pleasure" corridor is lined with the portraits and quotations of famous intellectuals and artists—André Breton saying "The simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly...into the crowd." At one end of the corridor is a drawing by William Bonin a.k.a. Los Angeles's Freeway Killer; at the other, plexiglass boxes collect donations for victims' rights organizations. The installation questions the role of the artist—romantically envisioned as mad and outside the law—when the rest of society is anarchic and self-destructive. In the glass-covered drawings of Third Reich imagery by Troy Brauntuch or the out of focus photographs of Richard Baim, the view is blurred. You see your reflection in the darkened glass: it is the rare viewer who doesn't adjust his or her own appearance before attending to the work itself. A society in denial must be implicitly introspective and narcissistic. Self-absorption is the content of Barbara Bloom's amusing installation *The Reign of Narcissism*—an octagonal museum "period room" where cameos in cases, the silk fabric on Queen Anne chairs, and the plaster busts on pedestals all bear the profile of the artist.

This seems to be a period of a history, a rerun, where the news isn't new and even the resourceful entertainment industries cannibalize the past for ideas: Lassie and Batman, your time has come, again. Yes, this is art from the black hole of extended adolescence, a trickle of substance squeezed from the moment between that which is dying and that which has not been born. But it's honest and the truth hurts even when it cannot set you free.

