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The Anti-War Show: The Price of Intervention from Korea to Iraq

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Posted by James Scarborough on February 25, 19103 at 15:41:09:

"He (Aureliano Buendia)...began to decipher the instant he was living, deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, as if he were looking into a speaking mirror."
(Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "One Hundred Years of Solitude.")

i

The Center for the Study of Political Graphics organized this show after the imperial King George I, as Carol Wells called him, invaded Iraq. It offered to educate people about the political, moral and economic costs of the US's imperialist wars. The C.S.P.G. updated the show to similarly educate and mobilize me, you, us with respect to George II's similarly excursionary folly into Iraq. To enter Trak 16's spacious galleries is to recoil at the directness, the immediacy, the severity of the collaboration of word and image as each plucks a heart string. Many, many posters- hundreds – litter the wall. Just as they must have littered walls and telephone poles at the time of their creation and guerilla placement. These posters work on all levels. There are posters that invoke nostalgia: the "War is not healthy for people and other living things" and I now have as a screen saver that I saw plastered around Berkeley at the historical junction of Joan Baez and Sorority Row. The horrific image of people, mostly kids, massacred on a road, with the famous Q & A that describes the military mentality so well: "Q. And babies? A. Babies, too." These posters sprung up in response to each foreign military intervention America undertook since World War II. Their original context defined them. Born of indignation, provocation, disquiet, startlers of the status quo, they thumb their nose at middle class complacency. The show demonstrates with clarity, force, and brio that art can be about something other than itself. That a group show or a biennial or an art fair doesn't have to occasion a Jonathan Swift belly laugh. I used to think how hard it would be to do a large group show like this because it would be filled with so much belabored subjectivity of individual universes. It would be akin to the television commercial aired one Super Bowl of he-men cowboys herding a prairie full of skittish cats, each doing their own cat-thing. The he-man turns to the camera and says, "It's harder than you think."

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I have a working hypothesis that says that the sum of modern art takes place in the white cube of a laboratory. That it is characterized by experimentation of method and material, diagnosis and definition. As such, sometimes it's sterile, clinical, formulaic, at other times it's homeopathic, organic, poetic. I refer not to the form that art for the better part of the twentieth century took. No, I refer to an impulse to question everything. To check for symptoms. As if art became a body of knowledge and experience every bit as dissectible as the human body. To question whether art creates consciousness or consciousness creates art; whether it expresses something or nothing (which is still a something); whether it is a discrete object that takes its place among other created objects or it is embedded in a cultural web that called spirit or zeitgeist;

whether it's a noun, a subject, a commodity, a doorstep, a panacea (it's a verb, by the way, of which more later). All this occurs in a climate of anything-goes. Not just in a libertine way, not just in a First Amendment way, but in an empirical way, as a manner of research into articulation as to what art is. As this inquisition takes place within the work itself, it's as odd (to me) as the mind trying to figure out what the brain is up to.

Me thinks the clinical metaphor has run its course. Sometimes, like now, the question of what art can be simply waxes irrelevant. Extended bouts of pierced navel-gazing. Attention focused on such intrinsic matters clamors like Muzak against a chorus of larger, more pressing issues. Like war, for example, or its kissing cousin, terrorism. To pay attention to art at the level of clinical interest and not to see how it communicates something essential is akin to fretting over minute-by-minute fluctuations in the stock market and losing sight of the fact that the stock market as a whole will rise in value over the long run. I think it's time to-cast the metaphor. How about the art world as a bullring, a session of Parliament, a skate board park? To begin, I make a rhetorical distinction between "art that is" and "art that should do." As it pertains to art, "art that is" refers to assumptions, to implications, to issues of ontology, self-reference, definition, clarification, classification, in short, to art's taxonomical concerns. At the vanguard level of art, "art that is" occasioned a big fat interrogation fest. Duchamp questioned essence that really questioned style that really questioned material, Picasso questioned, Darwin-like, the regeneration of style, Pop questioned commodification, Minimalism questioned "what-you-see-is-what-you-get-ness," the Surrealists questioned inspiration and the imagination.

But just as the stock market and the continental plates beneath the earth undergo slow to develop but monumental as they occur shifts – shifts that offset the contours things, a bear or bull market, an earthquake – things that seem sudden but were decades if not tens of millions of years in the making – I feel that a similar seismic shift has begun with art. While it will not overturn careers and affect auction prices or disrupt exhibition policies, it will be strongly felt. (End of prognostication). It's an enchanting tsunami. I call it the "should be art." It's not born of the same impulse that ran from Hegel to Marx to Greenberg to artists like Stella, et al, but I do believe that it's more functional, more practical, more accessible. More appropriate for now.

Instead of art that talks about itself in terms of what it is, I sense a re-turn to the production – or at least to the taking notice of, because I feel a lot of art simply doesn't get written about, for whatever reason – of art that refracts attention to what should be. Art that leads to thought and action toward something that isn't art but something more akin to prayer. I think art had to go through a period (the twentieth century) of crisis: introspection, self-examination, even self-abnegation. There was a lot to be incorporated, consolidated, assimilated, detritus from the nineteenth century, data from the scientific twentieth century. This crisis was useful. But now the crisis is over. Could art continue to exclusively about itself? No. At an elementary level, yes; but art has work to do.

Where does that leave us? With the political. With action, not interrogation and passivity. With what should be not what is: not a choice between material or spiritual, adorned or stark, vague or mathematical, legible or dense. But in terms of life. As Andre Breton refrains in a poem, *plutot la vie*. What else would tie together all the eddies that art followed the past century: explorations of historicism, of style, of inspiration, of psyche, or brand names, of linguistics, of philosophy, of synthesis/analysis? It is high time for that rapacious Humpty Dumpty (in my private nursery rhyme of modern art, Humpty Dumpty is Marcel Duchamp and his distinction between retinal and non-retinal art) to re-morph, for all the pieces of art (the experiments, the –isms, the schisms) to once again become whole. For art to speak with a full voice, to utilize all its formidable tools at the service of something else besides itself. To not be so self-consciously aware of and consumed by itself, however precocious it may be.

This not even in any concerted way. Think what would happen if art put itself at the service of something other than itself...and people responded. Mobilized. Took action. Art at the service of revolution is good. But this is America. No sans coulottes here. Art at the service of war is even better. Art the service of anti-war in the form of posters is excellent. Because they are not hung in tony galleries and plaza suites, anti-war posters reconcile dart players and taxi drivers and masseuses as well as well-heeled contributors to National Public Radio. As an allegory they function on as many levels as Sir Edmund Spencer's poem, *The*

Faerie Queen. They are art, at least, they're graphic, created by artists (at least designers; they are literary (one by Corita Kent, Love Justice, ca. 1970, quotes Camus: "I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice."); direct, immediate. They reference an event or a situation on a broad level. They are coherent, legible; they are meant to be taken in in a moment's glance, but their impact, their call-to-arms, resonates long after that that glance.

iii

The show pounds home the persistence of memory. Persistence of memory through the most elementary means: a political poster, paper on ink. One poster on a pole is a moment in time; hundreds of posters on a gallery wall constitute a universal manifesto (this is how art becomes absolute, not in some reductivist form but in a ubiquitous message). A timeless manifesto comprised of rectangles of inked paper that refracts spirit like the panes of a stained glass window. All directed, in word and image, to America with malice and ill-judgment not speaking softly yet still carrying a big stick. George II mauled Teddy Roosevelt's bull pulpit and changed it so that just the bully remains. The posters do not pose, they are not ironic, they are not tongue-in-cheek. They offer instead a cavalcade of images that we've seen somewhere, in some other context, images that haunt and beguile and rile...images that arouse our indignation, that incite us to what is happening at this moment beyond the walls of the gallery. The art in this show works like a Trojan Horse: it floats in like a butterfly legible, clear, into our desultory domiciles and then stings, arouses, agitates like a bee. Bravo.

Persistence of memory? The show convenes all these posters you have seen before but perhaps never fully digested because you were driving, on the phone, the sun was too bright. To show how images do persist. How they lead to human events, episodes, circumstances, not all good. To remind us because we don't expect to see them there, on that wall, of that gallery, that art is a political act. So is to view it, to share in the benign conspiracy. Legitimate defense?