

statement
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From an early age I felt oppressed by a conspiracy of silences, silences about things in the wider world most of which were perpetually present, unspoken but forming the unmarked boundaries of the possible. I felt the passivity and fatalism that went along with this silence. I was also moved by my private responses to images, responses apparently shared by no one, to look deeply into images and to mine what was unspoken and unacknowledged there.

In my teens I was deeply influenced by contemporary poetry, which addressed in direct and angry words the betrayal of people by “society” and by public figures. The poet’s universe was marginal, but it was part of the New York bohemian world, which included musicians, performers and artists, makers of Happenings and events outside the ordinary art-world venues of slick dealerships and highbrow museums. It wasn’t even the world of John Ashbery, Denise Levertov, already of an older generation—though it did draw in Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, some Black Mountain figures—but of Jackson MacLowe and Leroi Jones, Diane Wakoski and Diane DiPrima, Paul Blackburn, Meg Randall, and the people to whom I was closest, David Antin and Jerome Rothenberg. (Sometimes referred to as Deep Image poets. This is not negligible.) They led me to Jess and Ray Johnson, and also to Pop, Warhol, Allan D’Arcangelo, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono and Fluxus, to Carolee Schneeman, and of course

to Duchamp. It brought me an infusion of rationalism and calculation. Before this, seeing de Chirico, Delvaux, Cornell, and Magritte, I thought I might relinquish Abstract Expressionism for surrealism. I made boxes and little peep shows. I learned to ground this surrealism in a materialist analysis and therefore a rationalized space.

By the mid-60s I was drawing sustenance from the political movements. I felt impelled to reject the pseudo-scientific “experimental” approach to making art, roughly derived from physics but focused on aesthetic problem solving and individual perception. I soon realized that the work that had the most meaning for

me, that drew deep, was engaged with the imagery of the “other” world of power, control, and ideological articulation. I found myself drifting away from the tight-knit community of poets, their parallel world of disengagement and rejection only occasionally ruptured by organized expressions of anger and protest over the violence directed against the black movement and against the Vietnam War. I was unconcernedly alienated from the high art world, like so many other people making art at the time.

I moved to California and was in the right place at the right time to become part of the powerfully intertwined women’s and antiwar movements. Still, the left remained overly suspicious of artists for their unreliability and individualism, maddening traits that I continue to value, though I might name them somewhat differently, since artists’ experience with commissars hasn’t been particularly productive in the long run. I was making work both at the margins of a community and from within it. I was making photo montages that I didn’t call “art,” though I didn’t doubt they were, and I had no intention of placing them in the art world—that was the point. Instead, I wanted them to be agitational arguments meant to persuade.

These works themselves engaged with the notion of looking deep “inside the visible,” for in looking at the imagery of the polite world of mainstream magazines, of newspapers and television, I saw worlds of power and wealth on some pages and on other pages, or in other slots, a world of victimized or dispossessed people. I saw men in suits and women in lingerie. I thought of this as the mythologies of everyday life, which kept mental images segregated from one another, serving to shore up ideological absurdities that kept life on an even keel in one neighborhood while around the corner the world was erupting. I kept thinking that if we could imagine Mrs. Jones as the woman machine-gunned with her kids in Vietnamese thatch, we would understand why it was a moral and political outrage. (Especially after Yugoslavia I realize that I misunderstood the nature and conditions of empathy.)

I put my photomontages in underground newspapers and on flyers. When they were appropriated by other publications I was pleased by the anonymity of it. Those I didn’t use publicly I showed to my friends. At present, the ones that were made in convenient sizes

continue to exist, though some are damaged, while those made on, say, 8-foot sheets of masonite I abandoned.

The triumph of postwar modernism had been so complete that its notions of art had been naturalized and essentialized, unnamed. Even through the early seventies, the words modernism and postmodernism went unmentioned in art schools. There was no framework there for helping me articulate my responses to public events; when I applied to graduate school in Southern California in the early 1970s, a friend suggested I apply on the grounds of wanting to make political photomontage respectable; her partner, a senior faculty member, emphatically suggested I apply with paintings and writing. I entered as a painter. However, I felt isolated in the studio in a way I did not when I worked with photography, video, performance, and installation. I continued making antiwar

photomontages that I still refused to put in the art world on the grounds of the obscenity of such a move, though I had showed other works in museums and “alternative spaces.”

Because of our rejection of art world institutions and our determination to change the art system, a few of us felt we should write. In effect we became designated writers for the group. Writing seemed a natural and ordinary move for artists, since few critics were friendly, and even favorable reviews were primarily rewritten press releases. Writing about art was part of our art practice—and there were often words in my work—but I didn’t intend to hypo- statize my writing as “theory.” (The ad hoc nature of all of this is the ineradicable stamp of origins.) This was before high theory was industrialized and institutionalized within the university, before the conviction that art ought to be theory-driven, a conviction that now prevails in much of the discontinuous academy constituting professional art training. If we were proselytizing, we were doing so by making and showing work, by giving talks, and by teaching, teaching, teaching. The search for fame, fortune, and security was the last things on our covertly, quietly apocalyptic minds.

My interest in alternative methods of engagement led me to make videotapes for distribution outside the art world and to produce postcards—following Ray Johnson and Ellie Antin. Although I didn’t know of anyone else using a narrative postcard form without images, lots of people were interested in doing video in the way that I was. The 60s alternative art movement was born of the artist’s desire for autonomy, energized by social activism and drawing inspiration from the counter-cultural Zeitgeist. But the way that this has been written into art history is skewed toward precisely those institutions on which huge numbers of artists turned their backs. For example, the artists who showed their videotapes in one or two New York galleries instead of making them for distribution, the artists whose work was destined

from its inception for New York art galleries, the photographers who made coffee-table books and showed their images of poverty, carnage, or emptiness in the Museum of Modern Art, appear as central figures in a history of art production that in no sense depended upon them or even saw them as central to the discourse or the praxis. This is a problem for art historians. But it is why I became persuaded to put these “non Art works” into a museum, a gallery, a dealership, and at least for now into art history. As Allan Kaprow observed pungently long ago, there is no art more Art than Non Art.

II

My son the comix artist has recently interviewed me for a 'zine, called Maxine, “a literate companion for churlish girls and rakish women.” Here’s part of their call for submissions for an issue focusing on Μνῆνονόφ: “Do you have it? . . . What, did it fly out the window the last time you weren’t called on in math class? Or do you think the whole concept was concocted by the forces of consumer capitalism

and keeps us chained to deadening cycles of production, consumption and display? Are you actually propelled through the spiral of life by something much cooler?" He added, "What has the word 'ambition' meant in your life? Have you found it important to be ambitious regarding your art and career?" My answer, unstated as such, was that everything that had organized my work precisely precluded answering a question posed in those terms, to us repressed and repressive. Now I recognize the words but don't know the answer.

III

This is an odd moment for the system of art. Through most of the 80s the demands of capital shaped and reshaped this system, but the recession in the industrial powers after the '87 crash brought the eventual withdrawal of big capital. But the art system has not effectively reshaped itself. Artists entered the 80s with an inflated sense of control over their production, supported by a bustling field of artist-founded or artist-run centers, a fair number of grant-giving organizations respecting artists' ideas of what art was, and a sufficient critical establishment writing in trade journals. Dealers were held in some disdain, since few enough showed interest in what artists thought was hot. But the boom of the 80s tipped that world over. By the end of the decade there were plenty of dealers but almost no more critics, and most major art journals had become homes for academic adjuncts while cultural-studies journals, staffed by echt academics,

proliferated. By the mid-90s many galleries had closed. If in the 70s the art world still spoke the language of bohemian avant gardism, in the 80s it was driven by a kind of bravura cynicism and by the end of the 80s, a necessary though quasi-balkanized politics of identity had taken hold. (The New York Times this week suggested that as the education of potential art audiences is curtailed, politics becomes the subject of art because it is easier to understand. I suppose this is a version of the socialist realism apologia—pose familiar arguments in recognizable terms.) For artists, what is the new paradigm?

In 1981, Russell Jacoby, in a symposium on intellectuals in the 80s, wrote that "in the long march through the institutions, the institutions won." He was writing about the decline of a transformative intellectual discourse and practice that he traced to left intellectuals' having found refuge in the academy—and the academy exacted its own price, namely, careerism and therefore caution. He comments, "Bankers guard the escape routes. Universities not only monopolize intellectual life, they bankrupt independent producers. In an economy of \$3 trillion, the means of support for nonacademic intellectuals relentlessly shrinks.... Today even painters, dancers and novelists are usually affiliated with academic institutions." Following his caution that "a blind anti-academicism feeds and is fed by anti-intellectualism; there is no excuse for promoting either," he went on to observe that "as the world speeds towards renewed class antagonisms, decay and perhaps catastrophe, academics may be busily browsing through the department stores of knowledge, eyeing the goods and each other."

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