FRED W. McDARRAH

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Art That Intervenes

By Kim Levin

Rhetorical Image
The New Museum of
Contemporary Art
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We've seen it all before, say the bored Sohoites who think everything worth seeing has already been shown in the world circumscribed by Canal and Houston, West Broadway and Broadway. What they find in "Rhetorical Image" at the New Museum is work by artists they think they already know: Dennis Adams, Lothar Baumgarten, On Kawara, Lawrence Weiner, the abstruse collective Art & (yawn) Language, and—spare us—old Guggenheim favorite Jiří Kolář. Besides, they complain, the words on the walls aren't visual enough.

I may be the only one around who likes this thoughtful and unwieldy show of politicized art that deals not just with issues, but with circumstances. "Rhetorical Image" is less concerned with being comprehensive, coherent, or correct than with provoking debate about the effects persuasive art can have. Tracing the legacy of Conceptualism, it singles out works made to counter a politicized environment, works created under the pressure of events. Czechoslovakian-born, London-bred curator Milena Kalinovska shows us that Hans Haacke isn't alone in making art that intervenes. She quotes Robert Smithson: "Sooner or later the artist is implicated or devoured by politics without even trying."

This isn't an inclusive show by any means. I missed Adrian Piper, I missed the point of Thomas Huber's window piece, and I'd rather have seen Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds's fierce street signs reclaiming Native American names on the wall than Baumgarten's double dispossession of tribal names appropriated by railroad companies along with the land. And yes, some of the works are familiar. But never has their visual rhetoric—countering various official rhetorics of power—been made so clear.

The slide retrospective of Krzysztof Wodiczko's transitory projections on monuments reveals a cumulative coherence. Judith Barry's talking video heads from the 1987 Whitney Biennial seem more focused now on a closet door. Art & Language's radical corporate axioms make conceptual sense, and Ian Hamilton Finlay's problematic garden flirtation with revolution makes sudden visual sense as a statement about the terror that sprouts from power. Félix González-Torres's sweet generosity outweighs the minimalism of his reams of stacked paper. "I never have much to lose so I might as well just give it away," says the artist of his unlimited editions, which are also sculptural objects.

Braco Dimitrijevic's photo banners of anonymous passersby have hung from Soho buildings like Maos or Lenins waiting for a parade, but who knew that he first displayed them in 1969 in Yugoslavia, mocking the totalitarian cult of personality? And who here could guess that Ilya Kabakov's accordioned albums, first displayed in private Moscow performances, mocked a 1971 Soviet directive to psychiatric clinics about how to display medical textbooks as psychiatric tools?

This show reminds us that On Kawara's date paintings have, since 1966, been wrapped up in the daily news (*July 21, 1969*, the day Apollo astronauts claimed the moon, expands the rhetoric of conquest), and that Jiří Kolář's collages have been more than decorative: Kolář's *Diary: 1968* bore witness to global events and protested the Soviet invasion of Prague. The show also reminds us that Cildo Meireles—whose money rug questions devaluation and intrinsic value—began sending messages on money and on recyclable Coca-Cola bottles (here they're installed on a shelf like the elder brothers of Louise Lawler's tumblers) in Brazil in 1970. Most of the show's 20 artists say they believe art has absolutely no effect on politics, but by slipping crucial information into mass circulation, Meireles helped to start an opposition movement against his country's repressive military regime. The newest of his *Insertion Into Ideological Circuits*: $0 bills bearing Uncle Sam's image, stamped "Jesse Helms No!"

"Rhetorical Image" even makes a case for Tatsuo Miyajima's ceaseless digital numbers (they lurk on the columns) as a quintessential statement of reductive identity. But it's artists who are even newer to New York who really spark this show. In a society that methodically stripped people of individuality, Yugoslavian performance artist Tomislav Gotovac, who looks like a burly commissar, began walking naked through the streets 20 years ago, countering collectivity with an individualistic revolution. Mimicking the processes of totalitarian bureaucracy, the 150 fragments of his *Dokumenta* (1956–90) on the wall—photos and documents of his life, work, and run-ins with authority (he's been charged with disciplinary offenses and tried for a misdemeanor "for an infraction of Art")—also mock the patriotic display mode of recently dismantled museums of the People's Revolution.

In Poland in 1982, after martial law was declared and most artists went on strike, Conceptualist Jaroslaw Kozlowski built a monolithic green wall, called it *Gray Wall*, and put it in a public space. Updated at the New Museum, *Gray Wall* is gray, with paradoxical red, blue, and yellow parts and contradictory texts ("gray picture of the gray wall out of any political context e.g. museum but blue"). Explains Kozlowski, who was director of an official art academy at the time, "Each government or each dictatorship needs to keep artists silent, so I doubled my activities."

London artist Rose Finn-Kelcey has recreated her labor-intensive 1987 floor piece, *Bureau de Change*, a glittering simulation of van Gogh's $48 million *Sunflowers* in the English tradition of shell-encrusted follies. But she uses the coin of the realm—copper pence, sterling pounds, golden yen—and provides surveillance camera, security guard, and viewing platform to question art's collusion with economics. Montreal artist Barbara Steinman uses salt (500 pounds of it) and video in *Borrowed Scenery* to explore crucial distinctions between types of travel: immigrant, tourist, and refugee. Antonio Muntadas's black stretch limo expands the exhibition territory, cruising the city nightly with projected words and images of New York sites of economic power on its windows. The dispatcher's desk is in the museum lobby.

Maybe this multinational, multigenerational show makes people nervous because, of the 20 artists, only six (of whom just three are American-born) work in New York. Or maybe it's because curator Kalinovska, with her broad perspective and mistrust of ideologies, offers neither simple didacticism nor easy entertainment. She demands viewer initiative, and the Resource Room, an interactive artwork in itself, provides all the source material anyone needs, plus a burgeoning supply of viewers' postcard comments. "Rhetorical Image" also demands hard thought about what the role of art in this country will be in the 1990s. Will it do more than play with the issues? Can and should it function as investigation and intervention, part of the political process, not the gross national product?

American artists are novices at the attempt to navigate between the Scylla of ethics and Charybdis of aesthetics—between art for art's sake and art for the state's sake. They could become increasingly peripheral or completely irrelevant in a global art world expanding at the speed of light. They could be left out of American art survey courses by the year 2000—revisionist Helmsian ones hailing Norman Rockwell rather than Pollock, Andrew Wyeth instead of Johns, and LeRoy Neiman instead of Warhol as the seminal artists of the American century. ■