



IN “THE TIMES,” ARTISTS MAKE THE MEDIA THEIR MESSAGE

BY OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN 7/21/2017

With politically conscious art on the rise, a notable number of artists have turned to *The New York Times* as a vessel to convey social and political turmoil. The Gray Lady recently featured in solo exhibitions of Wade Guyton and A.K. Burns, and this year’s Whitney Biennial introduced Julien Nguyen’s depictions of the paper’s front pages as allegorical tableaux and Aliza Nisenbaum’s soothing paintings of domestic life, including a vignette of a couple reading their copy of the *Times*.

The FLAG Art Foundation’s group exhibition *The Times* takes this surging trend up a notch, investigating mainstream media, and particularly the Paper of Record’s role and responsibility in understanding “the times.” Given *these* times we’re living in, you’d be forgiven for assuming the show centers on the emergence of “fake news” and the vitriol directed toward reporters and media outlets since the 2016 presidential campaign (indeed, the exhibition kicked off with an [open call](#) for *NYTimes*-related artwork back in February). In fact, many of the show’s centerpiece artworks predate this political moment, or even the very notion that Donald Trump might ever run for president.



We wrote the book on

The Danger of Blurring
Fact and Fantasy

Lorraine O'Grady, *Cutting Out the New York Times, You Can Succeed In Your Own Business*, 1977, Toner Ink on adhesive paper

In an ambitiously intergenerational roster featuring works by Ellsworth Kelly, Nancy Chunn, On Kawara, Felix Gonzales-Torres, and Leigh Ledare, a large portion of the checklist dates back to before the 2016 presidential election, reaching as early as 1977 with an artwork by Lorraine O'Grady. Nevertheless, each piece gains resonance in the current landscape: O'Grady's work, for example, reads, "We wrote the book on the danger of blurring fact and fantasy." Fostering a growing ideological divide within the nation, the Trump administration's rhetoric defames mainstream media, openly questioning its credibility. The New York Times has remained at the center of the president's belittlement with catchy slogans—most notoriously "fake news!"—and attempts to impede access to press briefings and factual records. As often as the Times reports the story, these

days it has frequently *become* the story: from Trump’s highly-discussed visit to its headquarters following the election to the paper’s most recent news revealing an email exchange between Russian authorities and Donald Trump Jr. For all the governmental pushback, the paper has been uncompromising in its promise to uphold free speech and report the facts. “No, Trump, We Can’t Just Get Along,” was the headline of an op-ed piece by Charles M. Blow in late November.



Dave McKenzie, *Yesterday’s Newspaper*, 2007, Walnut pedestal and day-old newspaper.

Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photo: Dan Kvitka

In an exhibition about social fragility and political unpredictability, no work could better serve as the opening piece than Dave McKenzie’s *Yesterday’s Newspaper* (2007), comprised of a wooden pedestal hosting yesterday’s *Times* whose headline during my visit read “A Moscow Insider Trusted With Winning Cases.” In contrast, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s large-scale wall piece, *untitled 2017 (tomorrow is the question, january 21, 2017)* (2017), inscribes the phrase “Tomorrow Is The Question” atop pages of the titular date’s paper.

Keeping the uncertainty, but offering an introspective escape from the hefty political tone is O’Grady’s *Cutting Out the New York Times, You Can Succeed in Your Own Business* (1977–2010), a series of poems the artist composed using headline cut-outs. In addition to the aforementioned “fact and fantasy” text, lines such as “A Flurry of Change on Fifth-Avenue” followed by “The Make-Believe World of City Blues” range from ambiguous to romantic, urging us to unscramble their source.



Sean Landers, *New York Times Cartoons*, 1994, Ink on newspaper, Dimensions variable.
Courtesy of Petzel Gallery

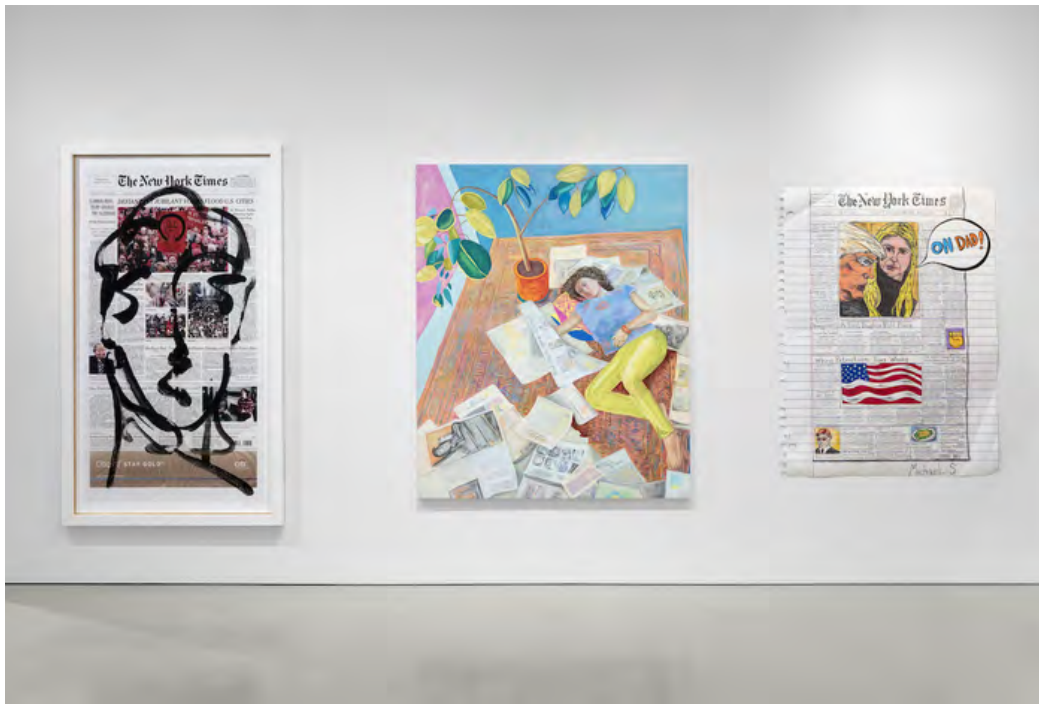
One room is reserved for artists referring to specific historical dates and events through the *Times*' coverage; captured within headlines and columns, collectively traumatic moments—the 2001 World Trade Center attack or the Long Island plane crash in 1996, for example—are filtered through the paper's perspective. In these works, the newspaper becomes shorthand for the event itself; history meets historiography. Sean Landers' wall-covering *New York Times Cartoons* (1994) installation transforms dozens of newspaper clippings into whimsical cartoons; images from political reportage and opera reviews are scribbled with comical dialogues. Similarly, the Zimbabwean-British artist Lubaina Himid's series of acrylic paintings substitutes newspaper pages for canvas. She colorfully accentuates each black-and-white articles' subject matter using color and form to offer a foreign interpretation of the paper's American agenda. In *Bringing a Fire* (2017), sports coverage showing images of black athletes is adorned with rising flames in yellow and orange; *Mephisto* (2017) pairs an article on a Bronx-based Jamaican baker with a painting echoing his hand gesture in his photo.



Installation view of *The Times* at The FLAG Art Foundation, 2017. Photo: Steven Probert

The second gallery hosts a salon-style presentation of 54 artworks ranging in size, context, and narrative. The works' unifying thread is their varied appropriation of *The New York Times*. Some artists employ the newspaper's materiality, creating elaborate patterns and forms from the printed media on the surface; others totally dismantle the paper's psychic essence utilizing techniques from painting or printmaking. Some of the room's strongest works expand their critical approach to center on advertising and its numbing juxtaposition with news, regardless of its content. Richard Prince's *Untitled (Tiffany)* (2006) is an inkjet print of political news coverage contrasted by a tone-deaf Tiffany jewelry advertisement announcing "Joy to the World." Robert Gober pairs up a photolithographic print of a faux bridal gown ad with a real article with the headline "Vatican Condoned Discrimination Against Homosexuals."

Two works from Laura Fields' *Front Pages with Pictures of Women* painting series cull subtle patterns from Times front pages showing women and girls in extreme agony due to war or famine: a curving breathing tube, a geometric head bandage. Challenging to grasp at first due to the artist's ability to strip these fragments from their original contexts, these abstract forms seem equally mundane and mathematical, catching the viewer off-guard with the way they contain human suffering.



Installation view of *The Times* at The FLAG Art Foundation, 2017. Photo: Steven Probert

Leaving the gallery, I opened my daily Times briefing—an online service I recently purchased upon realizing how crucial it is to remain updated and confident in journalism these days—to encounter headlines about Russian intervention and the struggling health care bill. When the newspaper becomes the news, when it symbolizes—deliberately or not—advocacy for free speech and transparency, it is no longer the mediator, but the agent of content. It's little wonder artists in growing numbers utilize The New York Times today, realizing the paper's political potential for simply doing its job at a time when civic unrest and hegemony prevail. Every book burning, website shutting down, and border closing prompts us to comprehend what we could be deprived of.

—Osman Can Yerebakan

Osman Can Yerebakan is a writer and curator based in New York.

(Image at top: Installation view of *The Times* at The FLAG Art Foundation, 2017. Photo: Steven Probert)