

## Review/Art



Fred Scruton/New Museum of Contemporary Art

Detail of "Dokumenta," a work by Yugoslav Conceptual artist Tomislav Gotovac, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

## Questions of Rhetoric, Empty and Otherwise

By ROBERTA SMITH

"Rhetorical Image," at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo, is an exhibition paved with good intentions but remarkably devoid of visually complex, fully realized works of art. This doesn't make it a failed show, but it does create, at many points, a medicinal, good-for-you zealotness that is tiring.

In keeping with today's trend toward political subjects, the works on view tackle important social problems, from economic inequity to political oppression. (In the show's catalogue, the artists don't just make artworks; they execute "interventions" in the social fabric.)

Good intentions are equally prominent in the structure of the show itself. Organized by Milena Kalinovska, an independent curator, this exhibition of the work of 20 artists is narrowly focused on Conceptual art, the art of wall texts, photographs and projected slide images. Even so, it has an almost admirable breadth. It samples several generations of Conceptual and related art from all over

the world, including artists from not only the United States, Canada and Western Europe, but also Japan, Brazil, Poland, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. One of its main achievements is to bring together artists from both sides of the recently raised Iron Curtain. Thus it invites the viewer to appreciate both the continuing flexibility of Conceptual art and the way artists in different parts of the world have adapted it to the problems of their own cultures.

The show's theme is rhetoric. In the catalogue, Ms. Kalinovska cites the word's traditional definition as "the art of using language effectively and with passion to communicate ideas — political, metaphysical or moral — which could influence and persuade others." But she also acknowledges that the word's current rating is quite low, as in "empty rhetoric." Her mission is to examine the way artists use good rhetoric against the bad kind, reviving this maligned "art of persuasion" to expose the empty rhetoric handed down by governments and politicians, newscasters and advertisers around the world.

Certain artists seek to reveal the machinations of political rhetoric by mimicking it. Tomislav Gotovac, a Yugoslav Conceptual artist, has documented his life with the kind of idealizing photographs that are usually ordered up by the heads of totalitarian states. Braco Dimitrijevic, another Yugoslav artist now living in London, takes photographs of the faces of anonymous passers-by, enlarges them to a size usually reserved for political rallies and hangs them on public buildings. The suggestion that the symbolic authority of such images is more a case of size and presentation than actual identity is neatly made.

Some work exudes real visual sharpness and originality in its battle against rhetoric. Krzysztof Wodiczko, a Polish-born artist who lives in New York City, projects images on government buildings, museums and monuments, criticizing what might be called architectural rhetoric with a combination of wit, efficiency and eerie visual power. In recent years, Mr. Wodiczko's projections have momentarily affixed huge guns to the gun turret-like form of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, and nuclear missiles to the arch at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn. The slide-show retrospective of his efforts is one of the exhibition's most convincing visual moments.

Cildo Meireles is a Brazilian artist whose work seems even more genuinely interventionist. Since the early 1970's, Mr. Meireles has printed political slogans on paper money and Coke bottles and put them back in circulation. He is credited with helping to stir up the political opposition that led to his country's return to democracy in 1985.

Working more consistently within a museum context, Lothar Baumgarten and Lawrence Weiner both deploy words in large type across walls in elegant and provocative ways. Mr. Weiner combines one of his characteristically open-ended phrases (in this case "pushed out in front of each other") with the more dramatic term "to the barricades" in German; thus he cryptically conjures scenes of proud defiance, and even more specifically last year's opening of the Berlin wall. In "Semaphore," Mr. Baumgarten simply contrasts the names of American railroad companies, states and cities with the names of American Indian tribes; the frequent overlaps between these words tell a story of stolen names, stolen lands and cultures destroyed.

The show is also strong where it illuminates the political concerns of artists not widely known for them, especially in the case of Jiri Kolar. A Czechoslovak artist known in the United States primarily for sweetly benign collages and assemblages, Mr. Kolar is represented here by "Diary 1968," a series of quietly denunciatory collages made in response to the Soviet occupation of Prague that year.

But too often the art on view skims the surface, treating complex issues with either glib simplicity or frustrating opacity. Rose Finn-Kelcey, an English artist, comments on art's monetary allure by creating a replica of van Gogh's "Sunflowers" in a combination of Japanese, American and British coins. A visual one-liner that combines cleverness and trompe l'oeil accuracy, it's great to look at for about three seconds. At the other

extreme, it's hard to decipher Dennis Adams's "Translation." It consists of two big, illuminated images of a statement about peace, printed in English and Japanese, that seem to be part of a war memorial in Hiroshima.

And at many points the show could stand a little more rhetoric — or any other device, for that matter — used "effectively and with passion." Judith Barry's "First and Third" consists of several short videotaped monologues about racism, poverty and terrorism, but the actors telling the stories are not very convincing. The projection screen, an open door of a jumbled storage room in the museum, is a sophomoric allusion to the difficulty of lives lived at the edges of society.

In contrast, the incessant counting of Tatsuo Miyajima's illuminated digital numbers seem to fight rhetoric with effective understatement, although the political import is unclear. The catalogue suggests they are measuring time and money and are thus subtle symbols of the fin de siècle.

Sometimes the show's main point seems to be that difficult times like these, afflicted with myriad political, social and economic problems, demand difficult, visually dull and even unintelligible art. As if aware of this paradox, Ms. Kalinowska and her colleagues conclude the show with a "resource room," a kind of walk-in catalogue that includes statements and documentation of additional work by the artists in the show, catalogues of other exhibitions of their work and even cards so that viewers can write down their responses to "Rhetorical Image." It is good to have the artists step out from behind their work and talk about their intentions, but this room also gives the exhibition a smug, self-congratulatory end.

The actual catalogue is better. Granted, its main essay, written by Nena Dimitrijevic, sticks close to an orthodox Conceptual-political reading of postwar art, connecting the work in this show to a very short list of politically involved artists. But in other ways this exceptionally well-designed publication bends over backward to avoid being polemical or "rhetorical" — even questioning the very possibility of making politically effective art.

It includes a wonderful string of 55 interconnected aphorisms about the relationship between art and reality by the late Swiss philosopher and playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt, originally published in 1977 and translated into English for the first time. And it is peppered with notable quotes from all kinds of writers (Voltaire, Karl Marx, W. H. Auden). Their words "intervene" at random throughout the catalogue's texts, arguing the relative merits of art for art's sake and art for the sake of society in ways that often suggest that the two are not so easily separated. In this way, the catalogue delivers a message only hinted at in the show itself, that there is no single correct way to make art, political or otherwise.

"Rhetorical Image" remains at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway, near Prince Street, through Feb. 3.