
IMAGES, POLITICS AND POWER: ART THAT AIMS FOR CHANGE; "RHETORICAL IMAGE," AT A NEW YORK MUSEUM;; INADVERTENTLY REFLECTS ON ART'S IMPOTENCE.

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REVIEW

Western art has long been an instrument of religious and moral indoctrination, but rarely has it functioned as an instrument of power - that is, as a tool for effecting social and political change. The conjunction of visual art and power is so unlikely, especially in an era of mass-media proliferation, that even considering the two in the same context requires a stretch of the imagination.

Compared with a medium such as television, or even popular music, visual art has ceased to count for much in the social-political arena. It stimulates public discourse only rarely, when artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe or Andres Serrano flagrantly violate taboos. Institutions such as museums and corporations do use art to manipulate public opinion and attitudes, but primarily for their own aggrandizement - and in these instances the power derives not from the art itself but from the way it's used to propagandize or to entertain.

"Rhetorical Image," the current exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo, attempts to demonstrate that some artists continue to use art as a social and political instrument. Not all of the 20 artists involved use it that way, though; some, such as Rose Finn-Kelcey, comment on the ways in which art has come to represent power in the society at large.

Consequently, "Rhetorical Image," which runs through Feb. 3, doesn't prove that art is powerful, only that some artists apparently believe it still can be. In the process of presenting their various strategies, the exhibition raises a number of intriguing questions about art and power. None is answered, but all stimulate one's thinking about how art is presented and perceived, and about power relationships within the art world.

Some of these questions are raised within the context of a "resource room" at the rear of the exhibition. Here visitors can find background information on the artists and on issues raised by their work. They also are invited to respond in writing to questions such as these:

- * In what ways do you see art connected to social and political reality?
- * What kind of effect, if any, do you think art can have on politics?
- * Does your gender, sexuality, ethnicity or nationality inform your relationship with art?

Several questions examine the role of the art museum as a kind of broker between the artist and his audience, a topic that isn't addressed in the exhibition. Guest curator Milena Kalinovska is more interested in asking whether art can actually change society.

Most of the artists she has included, many of them Europeans, work conceptually; performance and action are intrinsic to their methods, so the full flavor of their work isn't conveyed. Yet that doesn't matter, for it's clear even from this small sampling that art today, even at its most imaginative, has become impotent as a social-political force.

This is true even for art that mimics those media that are powerful, such as advertising. Why? Because, as "Rhetorical Image" inadvertently demonstrates, contemporary art is too elitist and insular to compete with a medium such as television. Art can and does comment on the power of contemporary mass media by imitating their formats, but it can't begin to match their appeal or their influence.

Society has become so saturated with visual information that only the most ubiquitous images - that is, those generated by the mass media - register in the public consciousness. Consider the case of Krzysztof Wodiczko, a Pole living in New York, who projects images onto buildings and monuments as a way of commenting on the structures' symbolic meaning.

In 1985, he projected a swastika onto the facade of South Africa House in Trafalgar Square in London. But, as he observed, "they didn't notice it for a long time. I think because it looked like it was always there; it looked very natural."

Wodiczko is one of several artists in the show who use art polemically in public contexts. Cildo Meireles, a Brazilian, is another; his *Insertions Into Ideological Circuits* is the most subversive and potentially the most efficacious work in the exhibition. Meireles printed political slogans such as "Yankees Go Home" on empty Coca-Cola bottles and returned them to circulation in Rio de Janeiro. He did the same with currency - transforming dollar bills, for instance, into protests against Sen. Jesse Helms.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a Cuban who lives in New York, and German artist Thomas Huber have used billboards to disseminate their ideas. Gonzales-Torres is a social activist who tries to bring simple messages about issues such as health care to the broadest possible audience; Huber tries to persuade politicians to take cues about society's needs from artists, although he doesn't believe that art should campaign directly for social reform.

Both artists are represented in the exhibition by studio works, not billboards. The exhibition's only foray into public space is *The Limousine Project* by Antonio

Muntadas, a Spaniard who also lives here. He has fitted out a limousine to function as a rolling symbol of power and the media in American society.

Five hours a night, six nights a week, the limousine cruises around Manhattan, displaying on its tinted passenger windows words that symbolize economic, social and political power - words such as gentrified, consumer, deal and status. The words are displayed on the windows by four slide projectors inside the passenger compartment.

The Limousine Project, which is sponsored by the Public Art Fund, is a devilishly clever concept, but ironically it would probably have more impact in a small provincial city than in Manhattan, where limos and eccentrics are a dime a dozen and a limo with slogans on its windows probably doesn't attract any more attention than the reincarnation of Lady Godiva would.

Such attempts by artists to exercise power may be well-intentioned and even heroic. But they're also futile, because people no longer look to art for moral and ethical guidance. Artists such as Tomislav Gotovac, who challenges state-mandated conformity by parading naked through the streets of Zagreb, Yugoslavia, are more likely to be dismissed as crackpots, leftists or provocateurs than hailed as champions of human rights.

Besides, most artists aren't so much interested in power or reform as in critical acclaim and financial success.

Art's impact on contemporary society isn't related to specific images or ideas propounded by artists, but to the general idea of art as a collective phenomenon, a phenomenon used by individuals to enhance social status, by corporations to enhance image, and by museums to generate audiences and revenue.

This sort of power doesn't accrue to art because artists seek it or because content compels it, but because society at large assigns it. It is what British artist Rose Finn-Kelcey is talking about in *Bureau de Change*, a re-creation on the museum floor of a van Gogh *Sunflowers* painting in coins - American pennies, British pence and Japanese yen.

Through its satirical title, overhead surveillance camera and hovering security guard, *Bureau de Change* literally transforms a work of art into cold, hard cash. Van Gogh's message has become irrelevant now that society, like the medieval alchemists, has discovered a way to transmute oil and canvas into gold.

The only real power that art has achieved in contemporary society is the power to entertain and to aggrandize. Particularly instructive in this regard is the role of museums in shaping public perception of art's purpose - and worth - and in using art to stage elaborate public spectacles.

It's not uncommon for a museum's institutional agendas for an exhibition to overwhelm the show's ostensible content, which comes to serve as a kind of backdrop. The motives of museums in mounting and promoting exhibitions aren't always pure; indeed, it's not uncommon for a museum to use exhibitions to curry favor with potential benefactors, foundations and other public funders, artists, and targeted segments of its constituency.

Even under ideal conditions, when a museum doesn't have an ax to grind or an ulterior motive to pursue, the viewer receives a selective view of an artist, a period, a movement or a collection. It is a view inevitably colored by the availability of key works, the curator's biases, the exhibition designer's fancies, and even by the size of the crowd on the day one visits. These factors combine to put a spin on one's viewing experience, and perhaps even to corrupt it.

To its credit, "Rhetorical Image" recognizes this probability and asks visitors to take it into account - even to leave behind comments to be read by other visitors.

The next time you visit a museum exhibition, you might consider how the museum environment influences your perception of the art, and how that environment is, or could be, contrived to nudge you in a particular direction. This manipulative kind of art power is much more subtle and pervasive than the variety sampled by "Rhetorical Image," and it spares no one.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

"Rhetorical Image" is at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway, between Prince and Houston Streets, SoHo. Hours: noon to 6 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Sundays; noon to 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Through Feb. 3. Telephone: 212-219-1222 or 212-219-1355 (recorded information).

Credit: Edward J. Sozanski, *Inquirer* Art Critic