

The art of making protest art

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Art Against War: An exhibition of posters and multimedia, *June 13-27, 2003. Macy Gallery, Columbia University/Teachers College, New York City, and NY Arts Space*

Organized and Curated by Frank Shifreen, with the Drinkink Collective. Multimedia Architect and Director: Mark Grimm

The exhibit *Art Against War* brings together posters and multimedia by over 40 artists from across the United States and 13 other countries protesting the US government's recent war against Iraq.

Curator Frank Shifreen called on artists to submit posters because, as a form, they traditionally have used images and text to organize social action. He points out that little posters were first printed by Gutenberg (1454) to sell indulgences financing the rescue of Constantinople from the Turks, thus "implicating" them in war from the beginning. (Although in that case, of course, they were being used to promote war by the Church.) The ability to mass reproduce and disseminate these images is a legacy that likewise appealed to the curators. Making best use of our present technology, many of the images in the show were created on-line and submitted digitally over the Internet. The exhibit also includes three web sites that function as "virtual galleries" where viewers can see the work, even after the gallery show closes.

There is much that is encouraging in the conception and execution of this show. The involvement of artists in current social and political movements, both as participants and in their work, reflects an objective change in conditions for artists. For some, an oppositional stance may have predated this particular show. For others, the September 11 attacks and their aftermath, the invasion of Afghanistan, the attacks on civil liberties in the US and most recently the preemptive occupation of Iraq—on the basis of lies about WMD and links to terrorism—represent events of a different and more serious order. Like many of the millions who participated in the protest demonstrations in the months leading up to the US invasion, artists came out, some for the first time, because they felt they had to do "something." This show is considered an ongoing extension of that activity.

Artist Barnaby Ruhe, who was in the same class at the US Naval Academy as Iran-contra conspirator Oliver North, commented to this reviewer, "I am honored to show because I am scared, as an ex-sailor, for the first time in my life, scared of my own government. There is no doubt this is war enacted by our government all over the place and now. I am in the show because I have never seen our government engage in preemptive unilateral strikes. It was never done."

Although Ruhe overestimates the degree to which the U.S. has been the "good guy" in the past, his indignation has been a

powerful motivation. Unlike the majority of the work in the show, his are handmade collages of torn children's drawings with cartoonish figures engaged in warfare, smears of read poster paint, and somewhat obscure black and white photographs. In their original context, these materials may have been unremarkable, but they take on more sinister connotations here. His work has a tactile and evocative quality that stands out in the show.

The message of most posters in the exhibit is easier to read. The link between the interests of multinational corporations and the drive to war is powerfully made by Mark Cooley's poster in which the corporate logos of General Electric, ExxonMobil, Halliburton, Bechtel and others are interspersed in a grid of neat squares with news images of the physical devastation of the country and wounded Iraqis, particularly children.

The hypocrisy of the government's propaganda forms the basis for many of the posters: "Liberating Iraq or Feeding Corporate Greed" (Brandon Bauer); "Chalk Bombs: No Child Left Behind" (again Mark Cooley). Also exposed are the economic motivations for the war, not only in terms of the US grab for oil, but for those who became soldiers ("Mendoza is a girl who went to fight a war in order to get her green card" by Adalberto Adame.) The pernicious role of the mass media is the subject of Charon Luebbers' posters.

An additional level on which the exhibit works successfully is as a record and representation of the actual antiwar demonstrations. The posters of screaMachine juxtapose black and white images of demonstrators in various compositions. Several of the posters by Amelie Krales are straightforward photographs of demonstrators; as such they capture the character and mood of the events. Others show kids affecting the counterculture "look" of the Vietnam-era protesters in their grungy tie dyed clothes and peace signs. The posters present this uncritically.

Essential to the documentary aspect of the show is the larger-than-life-size projection on multiple walls of videos from demonstrations primarily in New York. Artists Amy Cheatle, Mark Grimm, Jacob Roesch and Frank Shifreen all recorded their experiences at these events and their footage is projected unedited. The videos significantly augment the posters by injecting the sounds and sights of the marches into the gallery—the chanting and shouting, the waving of banners, the crowds of people, the confrontations with the police.

One final strength of the show is its use of technology. Much of the work was assembled online, enabling collaborations between artists as far apart from one another as the US and South Korea, and it can be viewed on the web by those who would otherwise be unable to see it in a New York gallery. Although it is still difficult

to get much artistic satisfaction from viewing little jpegs, the advantages of creating an artistic community that transcends physical boundaries and dispenses with the middleman of galleries outweigh the disadvantages. The problems, we may hope, will prove surmountable as the technology is further developed.

That said, the show has several weaknesses that should not be glossed over. To do so would be a disservice to those artists seeking to play an active and potent role in creating art that genuinely challenges the power structures under attack in this exhibit. While these artists no doubt felt appalled, angry, outraged and aggrieved by what they saw of the war waged on Iraq, too little of this emotion actually finds expression in the work on display here.

The obvious question is to what extent these posters, just because they are by artists, are any different than those carried at the demonstrations. Perhaps more sophisticated and better executed in some cases, something feels undeniably tame about them. They lack the sense of passion and urgency, or even, on the lowest level, the vitriol of the demonstration posters themselves.

The self-conscious formulation of these artists' response to the war *as posters* feels academic and limiting. Even if some of them were actually created by artists to be carried at the demonstrations, these posters are not being plastered on every street corner and subway platform to provoke a storm of protest by passersby. Posters have a revolutionary heritage, but that doesn't make them inherently revolutionary in all instances. Having limited themselves to this form, these artists may have felt constrained more than enabled by its conventions.

Timidity has crept into this work, and speaks to the fact that after decades of being marginalized in terms of social struggle, artists are still insecure about taking a boldly oppositional stance, either in content or in form. They don't seem confident, at least not here, or not yet, to express the horror that this war has inspired in them on a grand scale, with the artistic risks that are involved in such a piece. Instead artists "quote" such works done by others. For instance, Adam Nieman's poster literally lifts one of the figures from Picasso's *Guernica*, merely adding the flaccid line "Bombing Iraq Won't Help."

The show further hedges its bets in being not just a protest in and of itself, but also being about the protests which actually took place. Similarly, the video artists chose not to edit their footage, justifying their choice in terms of the potent legacy of cinema verité, but in fact there is more of the minimalist approach at work here.

Mark Grimm, who curated and contributed to the video footage in the show, considers himself a minimalist. He commented that he and the other video artists discussed what to do with the footage, and decided to do nothing. He thought the protests were "interesting spaces" and wanted to bring that into the gallery space. This is accomplished, but there is a tendency for the videos to become merely background. The assumption that raw footage is inherently more powerful than edited footage goes unexamined.

It is to be hoped that in acknowledging the limitations of this exhibit, artists will accept the challenge to go farther. A political perspective, as with any human development, begins in embryo, and that stage is not to be discounted. As sensitive and perceptive

individuals, and coming together in collaborative groups, such as Drinkink, artists have a tremendous ability (and responsibility) to give voice to the intensifying contradictions and explosive conflicts which are affecting countless people in Iraq and throughout the world at the present time.

Artists do not exist isolated from these developments. Mark Grimm also spoke of his and his wife Amy Cheatele's struggle to make a living for themselves and three small children in New York City. They have both had to give up painting in favor of video, which is more lucrative. They are not alone among artists, many of whom are quite able to see the incompatibility of their endeavors with the profit system that views art as an investment or mere decoration. Some of them will be able to draw conclusions from this extending beyond the boundaries of their specific situations to encompass the problems confronting society as a whole.

It is not the case, of course, that an artist who consciously considers the developments of his or her time is by virtue of that alone a profound artist. Art surely draws on the unconscious and functions according to laws that are not in exact correspondence to those of political consciousness. However, the alternative to pat, predictable political art is not unmediated, "raw" efforts, but rather an honest attempt by the artist, working on both the conscious and unconscious levels, to lay bare the nature of existing reality.

The fact that artists in this show have begun to do this is a positive development. They will not lack for additional opportunities.

There are three linked web sites as a continuing part of the exhibition:

www.drinkink.org (directed by Cynthia Lawson and Mark Grimm)

www.thedigitalmuseum.org (directed Frank Shifreen and David Channon)

http://retiform.ath.cx/modules.php?set_albumName=album21&op=modload&name=gallery&file=index&include=view_album.php (directed by Jason Murphy)



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