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DAVID JOSELIT ON JENNY HOLZER AND "CONSIDER THIS . . ."

IF INFORMATION is supposed to be "public" property, Jenny Holzer's redaction paintings, on view last spring at the Cheim & Read gallery in New York, offer a spectacle of its foreclosure. These works reproduce documents related to the persecution of war in Iraq—ranging from government memos to the sworn statements of soldiers—that are just as shocking for their copious deletion of names, phrases, and passages as they are for recounting atrocities in the bland idiom of bureaucratic forms. It is not surprising that a government that arrogates the right to review "private" streams of information, culled from phone calls or credit card records, should also make liberal use of this time-honored form of censorship. But to see these pockmarked pages rendered as contemporary history paintings is a powerful reminder that a major front in any modern war must be informational. For me, Holzer's most interesting works in this series are those whose deletions are so uncompromising that entire canvases are covered in blocks of black. Here information meets the monochrome (in the guise of a bastardized Rothko or Reinhardt) in a provocative dialectic of abstraction and discourse: Should this shrewd exposure of the becoming-painting of the Bush administration's acts of censorship be understood as a condemnation of the pictorial, or is Holzer's rendering of obscure and harrowing documents as works of art a way of restoring their status as public speech?

This question and the more general problem of how images participate in constituting worlds—or publics—are now of the utmost urgency. In a media-saturated environment, streams of pictures (including television, film, newspaper, and magazine illustrations as well as visual art) not only are fundamental to establishing a sense of group or national belonging but also deliver the information necessary for challenging such collective identities when they become oppressive. Pictures are essential both in establishing ideology and in assailing it. Consequently it is the responsibility of every citizen to evaluate the properties of the information to which she has access, while she still has access, since information is always threatened with further "enclosure" as either government or *private* property. Under these conditions of a withering or embattled public sphere, what role should art play? In Holzer's redaction paintings, art is a site where hidden knowledge may be recovered and reinvigorated rhetorically—it was striking how many visitors to the gallery seemed to be reading the paintings *as content*. But a complementary tack is taken

up in the recent exhibition "Consider This . . .," at LACMA Lab of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in which artists explore *how* information circulates in public and then reorient the place of individual viewer-citizens within it. It seems more than coincidental that Barbara Kruger—an artist often linked with Holzer during the 1980s through their shared "postmodern" analysis and redeployment of discourse—was engaged to design "Consider This . . .," or that the exhibition took place at LACMA Lab, which is devoted to amending the passive relationship of museumgoers to works of art by offering facilities for artmaking and providing friendly and interactive docent/guards. But in my view the artists in the exhibition—Mark Bradford, Dorit Cypis, Margaret Honda, Philip Rantzer, Mario Ybarra Jr., and Bruce Yonemoto—press the problem further by taking the "public" as their aesthetic object. None of these artists shies away from the kinds of opacities that Holzer's redaction paintings dramatize. Indeed, one could say that the artworks they produce are the obdurate precipitates of an inoperative public. To some extent they, like the textual quotations that Kruger inserted in the exhibition space almost like captions, shatter the uncomplicated transparency of public space that is implied by LACMA Lab's interactive facilities and staff. When, for instance, Kruger quotes Frantz Fanon's declaration "Blind idealism is reactionary," she offers not only a general caution regarding the consumption of culture but one that is relevant to her own exhibition.

Kruger's most dramatic device is an enormous sign imprinted with the title's proposition, CONSIDER THIS . . . , which is punctured by an entry through which, like a provisional response to the exhibition's exhortation, one sees Bruce Yonemoto's *Birthday Party*, 2006, a video projection showing the roiling celebration of a vibrantly diverse group of teenagers listening to reggaeton music while sporting childish party hats and engaging in spirited antics with cake



View of "Consider This . . .," LACMA Lab, Los Angeles, 2006. Foreground: Wall text designed by Barbara Kruger over entrance of "Consider This . . .," 2006. Background: Bruce Yonemoto, *Birthday Party*, 2006.

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frosting. Yonemoto's deceptively simple piece signals the exhibition's unorthodox approach to what might be called, in a rather discredited term, its "multiculturalism." Though small, the show includes artists from a wide variety of backgrounds, but as in last year's prescient if painful film *Crash*, where circuits of racism (and desire) in a fictional Los Angeles greatly exceeded the simplistic black/white axis that disproportionately structures American attitudes toward difference, the permutations of ethnicity in this exhibition are multiple and often unstable. Identity is deployed without being determined or determining.

Dorit Cypis's work *Sightlines*, 2003–2006, exemplifies a two-tier structure characteristic of every work in "Consider This . . .": the emplacement of face-to-face contact in a discursive (or informational) environment whose capacity to produce an actual public is always under threat from private interests and/or government intervention. While the work engages with cultural difference, it nonetheless short-circuits the reassuring ecumenism of multiculturalism by insisting on the difficulty of mutual recognition. In a truly astute allegory of contemporary media (and politics), Cypis demonstrates that the production of images may be an index of civic blockage rather than of social connection. To produce *Sightlines* Cypis asked Irma Rodriguez, a forensic sculptor whom she had read about in the *New York Times*, to create busts of two women—the first female Palestinian suicide bomber and an Israeli victim of the blast—using



Dorit Cypis, *Sightlines* (detail), 2003–2006, photographs, mirrors, LCD monitors, DVD players, single-channel video, 30-minute DVD loop, 12-minute DVD loop, wall paint, and wall graphics, dimensions variable.

as reference only their jointly published photographs drawn from a *Newsweek* magazine cover of 2002. On this cover, which was included in a time line of *Sightlines*' conceptual genealogy that wrapped around the installation's outer wall, the women's "family" resemblance was accentuated while the cultural gulf between them was inscribed graphically as a torn edge, as though their side-by-side pose were composed of two half sheets ripped out of different contexts. The uncanny effect of this cover was to establish physical proximity across an unbridgeable social divide, generating a traumatic intimacy where either woman, depending on one's political position, could occupy the role of victim or aggressor. In this source photograph, Palestinian and Israeli gaze toward the viewer, but neither can look directly at the other. In *Sightlines* Cypis attempts to engineer a post facto glance between the two women rather than simply leaving the audience to gaze at them as the objects of morbid voyeurism. The conditions for such an interaction are established by photographing Rodriguez's earth-toned busts against a blank white background. Each of the photographs is in the same format—a smallish rectangle resembling a prison window—but some include only one of the women, while others picture them together. Interspersed with the photos, which were installed in a rough circle within an intimate arena-like space, angled mirrors of the same dimensions as the photos extended the relay of blank looks within the room into the deep

space of infinite regress. The individual photos were themselves haunting, but even more chilling is the crystallization of an impossible—literally *dead*—face-to-face contact. Cypis's (and perhaps the audience's) desire for a look of sympathy between these women is left unfulfilled. The endless cycles of reproduction that generated this work—from *Newsweek* to forensic artist to Cypis—in which the mass media's circulation of information is grafted onto the artist's own efforts at reconstruction, established an impotent spinning circle that is manifested literally in the gallery through the inclusion of a perpetually moving 360-degree video pan of Death Valley: an homage to the film *Zabriskie Point* that seemed to signify the political barrenness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as *Sightlines*' own incapacity to generate a compensatory public sphere.

I dwell on *Sightlines* at such length because it dramatizes the incapacitation of public identification that results from the failure of mutual recognition. Without acknowledging one another, how can we possibly build communities? Margaret Honda's *Hideout*, 2005–2006, and Philip Rantznier's *5 Continents*, 2005–2006, enact such failure by emphasizing the absolute otherness of person-to-person or person-to-creature interaction. *Hideout* consists of a makeshift enclosure cobbled together in the gallery like a shanty to house an array of taxidermic animals. While there is no physical access to this space, viewers can peer through several discreetly placed holes, each of which channels a close-up view of an animal's eye on the other side of the wall. This eye-to-eye encounter is both startling and poignant in its establishment of excessive intimacy without hope of rational communication. Rantznier's work similarly includes an imagined multitude—five fantastic figures, each uncannily rendered at the scale of large dolls who seem half fairy-tale character, half vagrant, and each of whom represents a continent. Enclosed in individual vitrines, these figures were grouped on a large "stage" composed of wooden platforms and walls that viewers were invited to cover with graffiti, either in response to the whimsical questions Rantznier indexed to each figure on a wall adjacent (and which were also written somewhere on the sculptures themselves), or on any topic of their choice. Through their reference to a global public (in representing each continent), these effigies seem to promise a worldwide community, but all that approximates such an entity are the random statements contributed by viewers.

In Rantznier's work discourse becomes a kind of stage, functioning as the ground of sociality upon which both his fictional figures and actual museumgoers might interact. But other artists in "Consider This . . ." such as Mario Ybarra Jr. and Mark Bradford, place greater emphasis on the practical and ethical questions

that attend the construction of an arena for discourse. Like Rantznier, Ybarra's *Belmont Ruins*, 2004–2006, fashions an environment from surfaces of text—in his case an open cylinder covered with graffiti inside and out that functions as a museum monument to the Belmont Tunnel, an abandoned trolley tunnel and adjacent yard in downtown Los Angeles that became famous as a "workshop" for West Coast graffiti artists as well as a kind of public park for the surrounding Latino neighborhood. Ybarra inserts vitrines into the curved walls of his commemorative "tunnel" that, as in an ethnographic museum, document different aspects of this rich site, including displays of aerosol paints, train history, and pelota, a ball game that originated in Mexico and is played in the abandoned train yard.

It is hard to know whether Ybarra views such museumification as a politically efficacious or merely melancholy response to the threat posed to the Belmont Tunnel by encroaching commercial development (as described in the installation's videotape). A museum is certainly one response to the discursive "enclosure" accomplished by large-scale development, but as Bradford's installation *Market>Place*, 2006, demonstrates, it is not the only one. In this work the *market* is aligned with discourse as represented by a wall of those signs one sees alongside major arteries in LA that stridently ask, GOT TAX PROBLEMS? or exhort, GET PAID! while *place* is established through vibrant street life, conveyed in two opposing video projections, one filmed in Cairo and the other in LA. As if to make this opposition as piquant as possible, the projections are adjacent to a wall covered by the kind of closed security gate that protects storefronts at night. The market, Bradford suggests, cannot make a place—only people can.

But are we up to the task? Holzer's redaction paintings flaunt their status as artworks in order to give new rhetorical life to the banal horrors from which they are drawn. These canvases seem confident that they will find an audience, but, for me, the poignancy of the art in "Consider This . . ." lies in its acknowledgment that, in the end, presenting information may not be enough to summon a public. In different ways, each work exhibited at LACMA Lab demonstrates the failure to ensure community through the failure to establish a gaze of recognition *between people*. An emblem of this problem might be the television viewer who almost always watches alone. "Consider This . . ." brooks few illusions regarding the transformation of such individual consumers into a genuine public characterized by group identity and open debate. If art will participate in establishing such a world, it must show us new ways of looking—not just at objects, but at each other. □

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