Do I Have To Spell It Out?

or,

Personal Activism and How It Has Influenced My Art

by

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B.F.A., Memphis College of Art, 1998

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Approved:

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Date
As an artist, I see myself as being an enlightened individual. I feel that an artist has a responsibility to teach and to show the things that are important to them, to document their world. My connection to the land has bound my art into being an expression of our culture's wastefulness and the problems I see in my local surroundings. The culture in which we live is increasingly becoming wasteful and gluttonous. We ignore the negative things that go on around us and stick our heads further in our Big Gulps and televisions. We live in a state of blindness. Thusly, the intention of my work is to subvert our blindness through provoking reaction and thought in the viewer.

I grew up on a small cattle farm in South Carolina. I was only child, and to further isolate me, I lived off a lonely state highway mostly traveled by truckers from the nearby granite quarries. My only contact with children my age was at school, where I was uneasy and never fit in. My afternoons and weekends were spent wandering in the woods or listening to my grandmother reciting Tribulation prophecy from the Bible and citing indications from the newspaper. Thus began my current outlook on the world.

In 1988 I moved with my mother to Tennessee. Almost immediately, I was enrolled in a new type of public school based on the book Paideia Program by Mortimer J. Adler. This book recommended that students be taught mainly by coached projects that require skills in multiple disciplines, and the remained of their time should be spent in discussion groups. This philosophy seemed to attract troublemakers, albeit very talented and bright troublemakers. For this school, the local board of education selected its most promising educators from around the country. Either by design or divine providence, the majority of the new faculty were young and idealistic, or were ex-hippies from the 1960s. Either way, they were dedicated to producing students who grasped what was going on around them.
In this new liberal setting, I discovered the history of the social revolutions of the 1960s. I read books by Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman recounting the struggles of the antiwar movement, I read the Autobiography of Malcolm X and I read the sermons and speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr. I read The Stranger by Albert Camus, I read The Catcher in the Rye, which became one of my favorite books. After reading this motley assortment, I began to question everything around me. I had become aware.

Within a year at this new school I had discovered punk rock, notably the British protest band Crass. The songs of Crass spoke to me, since barely a few years before they had dealt with the same shit in the UK that the U.S. was currently involved in. They weren't apologetic, they weren't nice, all they wanted to do was bring down the fascistic government in place at the time. It was also a sad way to become aware of what was happening in other countries, but I felt better knowing that the seeds of revolution were still being sown somewhere.

Between the rhetoric of punk rock and the influence of Abbie Hoffman, I had become distrustful of almost any kind of authority. Tennessee, at the time, had a fairly liberal state government, but the local government in Chattanooga was the most conservative in the state. The police were distrustful of anyone with had long hair or weren't white. I saw this as a problem.

In 1994, I moved to Memphis to start my college career. In some ways, Memphis was the exact opposite of where I'd been in many ways. It was dirty, crime ridden and generally unsafe. The government was liberal but ineffective. However, the police harassed everybody equally. Memphis was wonderful, although it's history weighs heavily on its citizens' shoulders. Racial animosity often turned to violence. Crime and apathy were widespread, even in the suburbs. Living in Memphis, I felt alive, if only because I had to always look over my shoulder for muggers most of the time.
After a couple of years in Memphis, I began working with a few friends who were part of larger networks, doing protests and actions. They were mostly small scale in size, but it felt good to be doing something in such an apathetic place. At the time, doing actions didn’t influence my working process, which dealt with personal issues I was experiencing.

In late 1997, word spread that the Ku Klux Klan was planning a march and demonstration on the courthouse steps for Martin Luther King Day in January 1998. I had protested a few Klan rallies before, and the Klan were always peaceful, some were even genteel. (Andres Serrano experienced the same odd duality when he photographed Klan members in 1990) They did their speech, we protested, the police stood between us, and we all went home without a scratch. Nobody wanted to fight. But, with Memphis’s history of racial tension, it was doubtful this was going to be peaceful.

Hundreds of people surrounded the dozen of so Klan members that day. The yells of the crowd drowned out the Klan’s bullhorns, and the crowd became a mass of emotion. The news media never called it a riot (CNN preferred “scuffle”), but an event where the police are tear gassing and beating people to disperse them has got to be a riot. The events of that day and the feeling of civil disobedience left a taste in my mouth that I struggle to taste again. This had changed my outlook and art making process for good, although I didn’t realize it at the time.

Moving to Athens was almost a homecoming for me. After having been away from the landscape I grew up in for so long, I immediately began to explore the landscape again, this time photographically. I almost instantly picked up on the urban sprawl that is rapidly expanding out of Atlanta. My first work that dealt with sprawl juxtaposed modern, manmade implements, such as airplanes and highways, against the backdrop of nature. I continued using this methodology to make work for nearly two
years, moving from book forms, to film, to large-scale prints, to video, and then back to the book form.

In the fall of 2001, I began placing commercially made signs along highways and roads surrounding Athens. These signs contained messages directed at the viewer such as "what do you owe?". "did you see that?" and "see". These messages were designed to be ambiguous to the viewer, so that they could make their own associations with the messages. When this work was displayed in a gallery setting, images of the signs in place along with maps downloaded from maps.yahoo.com were shown. This work became important to me since I was interacting once again with the public, even though I had no way to gauge it's influence or their reactions. Artistically, this work functions on three levels: one was the installation aspect, the signs being placed in an environment, the second was the performance aspect of me placing the signs (which was duly recorded onto video) and the third was the maps linking the images in the gallery to a place that exists in physical life.

From Signage, I began exploring moving up in scale to billboards. However, the costs associated with a billboard are better suited to inflated advertising budgets than the budget of a private citizen. There was only one real way to do it: image manipulation via Adobe Photoshop. Manipulating images brings a different aspect to this work, one of simulation. The viewers aren't aware that these images are simulated. They assume that they are or were really there, that these images are documents of an act. I am able to integrate performance into this when viewers question me about the work and it's authenticity. Once the viewer accepts these images are being "real", they are able to look beyond the veneer of digital imaging and begin to explore the messages contained in the images. As with the signage, the viewer has the potential to view the messages as being related to their personal life, current events, or maybe a secret in their life. The
association the viewer makes is not important to me. What is important is that viewer makes an association, even if for a brief moment.

The billboard is important to me since it a vernacular mode of advertising. Even though billboards exist all over our nation, the south is still seen as billboard laden, probably due to our lax zoning laws. I also consider the billboard to be the pinnacle of advertising; a method that requires the ability to capture a viewer’s attention for a split second, deliver the message, and allow the viewer to continue unimpeded on their journey.

I find it much more gratifying as an artist to subvert the culture through modifying existing notions, existing methods and existing objects. Modifying an object into a new and potentially unusual item(s) could serve to bewilder my intended audience, but with bewilderment comes curiosity, which will often strike up an interaction. I find a great deal of value in using “off the shelf” items in pursuing my work. Using an existing format serves to create a dialogue between it’s old form and it’s new form, and between complacency and the desire to make change.

My work has always been influenced by feminist art. The message was not the important thing to me, but what the art and artist was doing was. I am deeply moved and influenced by the way culture is subverted through art to achieve the feminist message of equality. In my work I am doing the same thing, I am taking pieces of our culture and modifying them to attack and critique our culture as a whole. My end is not feminist, but something more akin to humanism.

I also owe a debt to the earth artists of the 60s and 70s, particularly Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark. Smithson’s use of the site / non-site dialectic first began to surface in my work with the series Signage, where I displayed documents of an area where the signs were placed. The non-site work in the gallery has become an
abstraction of reality. *Billboards* starts to move the above notions into a Post-Modernist arena. The site aspect of this work does not really exist, only the non-site exists in physical form. While Matta-Clark uses much of the same conceptual thinking as Smithson (he was a contemporary and friend of Smithson), he throws a new idea into his work: social change and commentary. His work was highly socialist; *Splitting* was done to protest urban renewal, *Office Baroque* was a critique against office culture and society. Matta-Clark's work also has another influence on my work: his aesthetic does not necessarily match his social views and the meaning of the work. His cuts into buildings were designed to create and manipulate space. He appreciated the form as form, but the work still maintained his social desires and conceptual concerns.

Even though I an identified as a photographer, I do not feel much allegiance with photography. My working process is too broad, and my use of photography is normally limited to one aspect of the work. I feel most attached to photographers like Les Krims and Cindy Sherman, who create fictions in their photography. I also feel a kinship to artists championing a social cause, like Goya or Lewis Hine. I feel that in my work I am taking the socialist aspect of social-based art and making something new, using the power of a believable fiction.
Selected Bibliography:


9534 #1 from the series "Billboards"
Giclee Print
23" x 23"
2002
9535 #1 from the series "Billboards"
Giclee Print
23" x 23"
2002
9536 #4 from the series "Billboards"
Giclee Print
23" x 23"
2002
9532 #1 from the series "Billboards"
Giclee Print
23" x 23"
2002
9531 #4 from the series "Billboards"
Giclee Print
23" x 23"
2002