

DISSENT, DIFFERENCE AND THE BODY POLITIC

AN ESSAY BY SIMON WATSON

We live in a time complicated by world wide recession; a time in which immediate access to information about international events seems to only increase both personal and collective anxiety levels; a time in which the spectrum from wealth to impoverishment cannot be escaped because it is beamed internationally by television. One cannot help but be struck by the heightening of tensions between peoples in all countries: Germany, faced with a small yet forceful anti-foreigner skinhead movement; Marseilles, France, facing racial tensions stirred up by LePen creates fear in Algerian-French communities; England confronting its own skinhead hooliganism and riven by both ethnic and racial strife. Here in the United States in the past year we have witnessed Los Angeles where racial tension erupted into devastating rioting and where, on live television, President Bush's own political party conducted a virulently mean and divisive political

convention. As I read and hear about these escalating hatreds it seems as though we face a spiralling down of our humanity. A downward spiral driven by a nihilist philosophy that states: "If I don't feel good about myself, one thing that I can do to make myself feel better, even if only for a minute, is to make someone else feel worse." It is an evil level of competition that reverses the Golden Rule.

Art doesn't exist in a vacuum for the maker of the work or for the viewer; some of the most powerful art being made in the U.S. today is being made by artists who by revealing their personal narrative are making public works that have a social and political presence as well as an aesthetic one. In effect, by revealing themselves, their humanity, they breakdown the barrier between us and them, the barrier between me and you, between stereotype and reality.

"The white separatist movement will not be stopped in the puny town of Portland.... We're in your colleges, we're in your armies we're in your police forces, we're in your technical areas. We've planted the seeds."

Tom Metzger, founder of the White Aryan Resistance

These words were spoken to the jury in response to their historic \$12.5 million judgement against white supremacist Tom Metzger and his skinhead movement. The jury found them responsible for instigating the brutal beating death of a black college student in Portland Oregon.

When The Portland Art Museum's Curator of Contemporary Art, John Weber, invited me to propose an exhibition for the Museum it was with the knowledge that the show would coincide with an Anne Frank commemorative project and the city-wide installation of a series of site-specific billboard projects by Barbara Kruger. For me, the two most symbolic and meaningful images made for this generation are the street activist poster *Your Body Is A Battle ground* by Barbara Kruger concerning reproductive rights and women's health care and the SILENCE=DEATH project for the AIDS activist movement. Both are present in *Dissent, Difference and the Body Politic* because they represent the challenge we face in our daily lives. Taking the statement in her poster as the premise

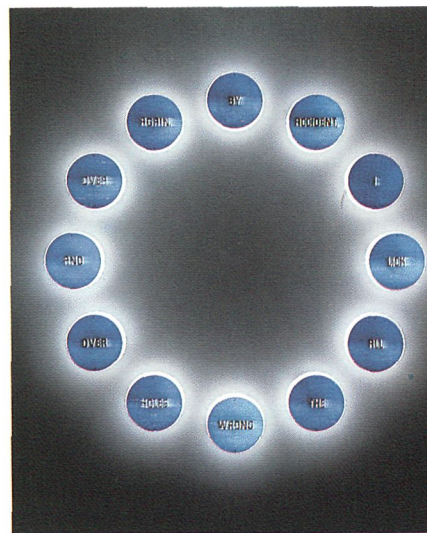
for the show, I proposed making a concise survey of some of the contemporary art practitioners who have metaphorically taken Kruger's injunction and explored their body-battlegrounds with a personal voice.

Dissent, Difference and the Body Politic is a traveling exhibition originated at The Portland Art Museum in Oregon where it opened in the Fall of 1992. It was a time when the American Presidential election was in full swing, as was a proposal in the state of Oregon to decide whether to remove civil rights from gay and lesbian people. As a gay man the concerns raised by this virulently homophobic piece of legislation, and the outcome of a separate bill being voted into law in Colorado are of real import both to me as a person and to me as a member of the art community.

I first became aware of ACT UP, like many other New Yorkers, when I saw a poster appear on lower Broadway with the equation: SILENCE=DEATH. Accompanying these words, sited on a black background, was a pink triangle - the symbol of homosexual persecution during the Nazi period and, since the 1960s, the emblem of gay liberation. For anyone conversant with this iconography, there was no question that this was a poster designed to provoke and heighten awareness of the AIDS crisis. To me, it was more than that. It was among the most significant works of

art that had been done which was inspired and produced within the arms of the crisis". Bill Olander. "The Windows on Broadway by ACT UP". The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC (1987)

My personal transformation from an apolitical gay man to an AIDS and health care activist was propelled by personal loss, experienced almost every week of my life since 1984. Every week for over eight years a friend or acquaintance dies or tests positive for the HIV virus. Every week I face my own inadequate response to their deaths, the mute response by the art community and my government's silent or wholly inadequate and belated response to this massive crisis in health care.



Donald Moffett. *By accident, I lick all the wrong holes over and over again, 1990.* © M. Salmen.

The Names Project, a memorial quilt made from individually hand sewn panels as a tribute to people who have died of AIDS, was shown on the Great

Mall in Washington, D.C. in October of 1987. It was there that I first came in contact with and shortly thereafter joined, ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power.

My first ACT-UP meeting in February of 1988, was a real surprise. A room of well over a hundred people from many communities in the New York area... a diverse, non-partisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.... talking about their battle against AIDS and the neglect by all of the social and political structures that we had naively assumed were there to help and intervene....furiously debating, New England town meeting style, at weekly Monday night meetings....taking collective action through coalition building, with no elected leader or president....where decisions to make protests and actions are made ad hoc with whatever energy, money and enthusiasm can be mustered.



Félix González-Torres. *Untitled (throat), 1991.*

Untitled (Throat) quietly invokes the memory of two lives lost. The sculpture consists of a handkerchief, given to the artist by his father on his deathbed, and a few handfuls of Luden's honey and menthol cough drops, the kind used by the artist's longtime companion Ross as he tried to keep his mouth from getting parched. Both died weeks apart, one of cancer, the other of AIDS.

In October of 1989, in the company of several hundred activists, I was arrested for civil disobedience in a huge demonstration at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) headquarters just outside Washington, D.C. The FDA, through years of endless study, counter-study and paper pushing, had been delaying release of AZT, the only known drug that responds to AIDS. Within four months of this massive civil disobedience -in which several thousand participated generating hundreds of arrests in front of national media glare- the FDA was finally forced to release AZT from the red-tape of their bureaucracy.

Picture a coalition of people refusing to be victims.

Picture a coalition of people distributing condoms and clean works....

Picture a coalition of people chanting "Money for AIDS, not for war" as they surround and quarantine the Pentagon.

The government and the medical establishment denounce as "immoral" the people who get sick and the people they hope will get sick.

They worry about themselves, their children, and the "innocent victims."

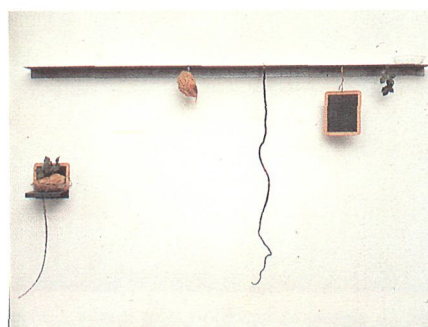
They predict the kinds of people who get AIDS, the numbers of people infected, the numbers of deaths that will occur.

But they are doing next to nothing to cure the sick and prevent the spread of AIDS. People are asking "If they won't do anything now, when will they?" "If they won't do anything for those who are sick now, for whom will they?"

Getting no answers, people are mobilizing. Getting no answers, a movement is emerging. Picture a coalition of people who will end this epidemic.

Gregg Bordowitz. "Picture a Coalition" (1987).

The AIDS activist movement has transformed me with the same force that I have witnessed in others involved in the women's health and women's right movement. My participation in health activism has opened my eyes and changed my behavior as a person and as a politically aware citizen. In my professional life, activism has expanded my conception of what art and culture can and should be. I have found myself naturally gravitating to people who, inside or outside of various political movements, are defying the cultural lethargy of the Eighties and are making artworks that explore and examine their lives and their life experiences.



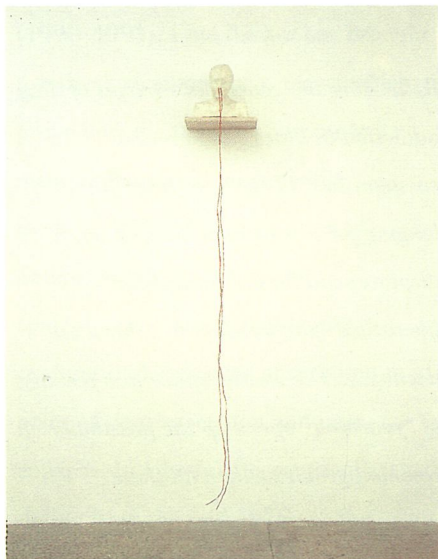
Nayland Blake. *Exploded View*, 1991.

Nayland Blake's playful Restraint Device made from a metal trolley seemingly rigged for S&M pleasures, fills the air and suggests that perhaps by acknowledging the fears and pain of human contact and the twin tugs of love and lust, we bridge the gap between the erotophobic and the sex positive.

As I have learnt about feminism from women artists, I have begun to learn from non-art world women activists. By volunteering in clinic defense, by adding my body to a variety of protests organized by Women's Health Action Coalition (WHAM) and Women's Action Coalition (WAC) - I have begun learning about the history and theory behind many years of womens rights activism. On several occasions I have been asked why a man, and much more pointedly a gay man, would be concerned with and involved in "pro-choice." My response has always been that some of the most important and powerful support the AIDS activist movement has received, has come from straight women and from lesbians; and, that I consequently felt that I had a responsibility to return the support - that in fact it is every persons linked struggle.. It wasn't until I opened the newspaper the other day that the issues were thrown in my face and that the need to build coalitions for self-protection became starkly clear.

On July 10, 1992 The New York Times reported that, Randall Terry, the leader of Operation Rescue, in preparation for his organization's disruption of the Democratic National Convention in New York, stated that the group's focus, which has always been narrowly centered on the abortion-rights issue, will include protests against homosexuality. "We are coming to be a witness against the Democratic Party's brazen embrace of child killing and

homosexuality,” he said. “We want to expose the Democrats. The average American does not realize how involved in the infrastructure of the Democratic Party the sodomist movement is. The Democratic leadership has told the Catholics to go to hell”. “Protesters On Abortion...”. The New York Times, July 10, 1992.



Kiki Smith. *Untitled (Nosebleed)*, 1990. Courtesy Fairbush Gallery, New York. Photo Credit: Tom Warren.

Kiki Smith's poignant sculptures and works on paper representing a dismembered arm, a female bust bleeding from the nose, a cascade of wafer-thin sheets of paper all printed with her hair, a wall of twelve printed images that seem to be oozing milk, sweat and saliva is but the most graphically arresting series of images of a moment that can best be described as "the crisis of the body".

The right to control our own bodies and the right to privacy are concepts at the core of our democracy. They are core concepts that insure the protection of the marginalized, minorities of all kinds, from the momentary whim of the majority. They are the core concepts that allow us to have the pride, and sometimes the courage, necessary to

sustain democracy when it is threatened and to be vigilant in maintaining the social contract that binds this democracy.

The responsibility of representing the body, the arena of that discourse, is therefore an imperative for contemporary art practice. The intensifying urgency with which artists have been examining and representing the “crisis of the body” has been met by an attack on personal and artistic liberty at legislative and judicial levels across the country. This is a republic. The preservation of every person’s right to privacy and the preservation of the rights of the individual are paramount.

“For what’s at stake is our fundamental right to control our own bodies and sexuality”. Helen Zia, “Body Politicking: the choice you save may be your own” (1992).

The tactics of many of the current grass roots political movements as well as the art making practice of this moment grow out of a broad consensus reached by the activist movement from the Sixties and Seventies. Ground breaking artists such as Adrian Piper, such as Adrian Piper, Yvonne Rainer, Martha Rosler and Nancy Spero were on the front line that first brought the visibility of women and minorities to the contemporary art scene. Their work is grounded in the development of a feminist theory that basically asks the questions: Where are

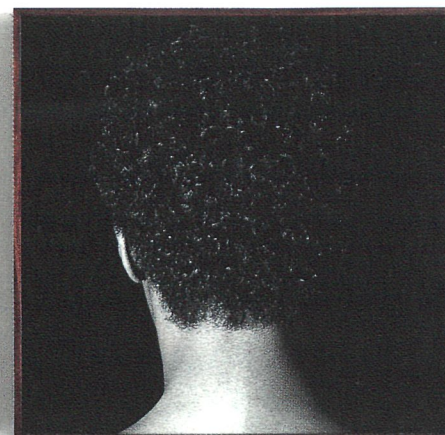
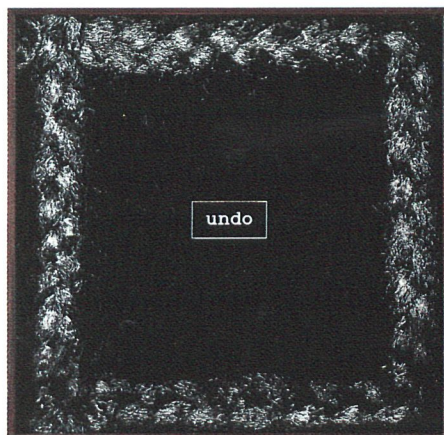
the women? Why and how have women been left out? How are women included? What roles do women wish to play and how?

During the mid-80’s I was professionally involved with the conceptual artist Sherrie Levine. One of the things that first attracted me to her work is her complicated and subtle investigation of male power as it is deployed in 20th century art history. Her art appropriations of male modern masters powerfully challenge authorship and originality. By always “taking” images made by male icons, she challenges their potency by questioning their point-of-view. Her work subversively asks where the “woman’s” voice is and what her voice can be.

“I believe that one of the most important advances that feminist artists and writers have made has been in establishing the possibility of difference, the possibility of a plurality of voices and gazes. It’s important to me that my work be situated in the totality of contemporary artmaking. I’m not trying to supplant anything; my work is in addition. The idea is to broaden the discussion, not to narrow it”. Sherrie Levine, interviewed by Jeanne Siegel in “After Sherrie Levine” (1985).

To paraphrase an ongoing conversation I have been having with cultural historian Maurice Berger and art critic Brian Wallis: the challenge for men in the

Lorna Simpson, *2 Frames*, 1990. Photo Credit: Ellen Page
 Wilson, 1990. Courtesy: Josh Baer Gallery, New York.



future, by this I mean straight men and gay men, men of all colors, is how we can explore issues of masculinity and masculinism without recourse to segregation and exclusion, unchallenged male dominance or abuse of power. To ask the questions: What is missing in our lives that a narrow definition of masculinity has forced out? As the sharing of opportunities with women continues, what happens for men? Why is nurturing in its many guises disallowed to the male? How can we work with women in constructing better relations personally and politically? How can men work with each other in non-competitive ways? What roles have racism and anti-semitism played in heightening feelings of power by individuals as well as communities?

"To speak of ourselves - while living in a country that considers us or our thoughts taboo- is to shake the boundaries of the illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. To keep silent is to deny the fact that there are millions of

separate tribes in this illusion called AMERICA. To keep silent even when our individual existence contradicts the illusory: ONE-TRIBE NATION is to lose our own identities." David Wojnarowicz. *Living Close to the Knives* (1988).

This past year the U.S. celebrated the centenary of the death of "Americas Poet" Walt Whitman whose hopes - that we, this nation's people should celebrate the richness of our diversity, remains just that - a hope. He believed that by hearing and sharing the stories of each others lives, the essential act of making community is begun.

Lastly, I gathered this group of essays under the heading Yearning because as I looked for common passions, sentiments shared by folks across race, class, gender and sexual practice, I was struck by the depths of longing in many of us. Those without money long to find a way to get rid of the endless sense of deprivation. Those with money wonder why so much feels so meaningless and long to find the site of "meaning."

*Witnessing the genocidal ravages of drug addiction in black families and communities, I began to "hear" that longing for a substance as, in part, a displacement for the longed-for liberation - the freedom to control one's destiny.... The shared space and feeling of "yearning" opens up the possibility of common ground where all these differences might meet and engage one another. It seemed appropriate then to speak this yearning. Bell Hooks, *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics* (1990).*

By the seemingly simple act of sharing histories, by revealing ourselves to each other, the artists - in this essay, in this exhibition, and in ourselves - touch society's deepest wound: the concept of "them." The concept of those other people. The "other" that we don't know and consequently, and all too frequently, fear and hate.

Democracy's many poets teach us ways to reveal and to heal ourselves.