



RHETORICAL IMAGE



The New Museum
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

RHETORICAL IMAGE

To understand the use of rhetoric is to see how individuals try to persuade one another of their version of the story. This story might be a recounting of history a report on the evening news, or a casual conversation between friends. To understand rhetoric is to understand the ways in which language constitutes power.

The twenty artists in *Rhetorical Image* come from three generations and four continents. Their work has been chosen, in part, for the ways it reveals the subtle and not-so-subtle play of forces that conditions communication in a given society and, by extension, the distribution of power. Their art enables us to recognize the dimension of power in obviously persuasive forms, like advertising or political propaganda, and in forms whose aura of authority is more subtly woven into the fabric of everyday life – public architecture and the use of public space, mass media, monuments and symbols. Their works reveal the ways in which authoritative representations not only convince us of their versions of the story, but also convince us of their authority.

The most effective mechanisms of power are those which are so pervasive, so deeply ingrained, that we don't even realize they exist. They are narratives which have become internalized in the form of "common sense" beliefs. Many of the artists here aim to bring such beliefs to light. Braco Dimitrijevic's series *The Casual Passer-By*, begun in 1969 in Yugoslavia, consists of

1. Milena Kalinovska, *Rhetorical Image* exhibition catalogue (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990) p. 9.

large-scale portraits of anonymous people placed prominently in public spaces. The works create the impression that since these images command public space, they must be pictures of important people. As curator Milena Kalinovska has observed, the works make us realize "we still believe that only those in power can claim such a space for themselves."¹ Muntadas' mobile installation, *The Limousine Project*, consists of a limousine travelling around New York City with images associated with money, fame, and success projected from inside onto its windows and visible from the outside. The piece invites us to ask: "Who rides in limousines? Who are the insiders, who are the outsiders?"

Many of the artists in the show tell versions of history in contrast to those of the official or dominant culture, often purposefully employing imagery and materials from outside the traditional sphere of art. Jiří Kolář, born in Czechoslovakia in 1914, kept a narrative of the events in Prague in 1968 through a series of collages entitled *Diary 1968*, which poetically combines official reports like newspaper texts, with snapshots, letters, and personal ephemera.

Some of the artists decode the institutional frameworks of art. In contrast to the rhetoric of liberal humanism which casts art as transcendent of politics and representative of "universal" cultural values, artists such as Dennis Adams, Art & Language, Thomas Huber, and Rose Finn-Kelcey tell a different story. As

Adams has said, “to the degree that the museum or gallery represents the ultimate mask for the agents of authority...it sets itself up, perhaps even demands, its own undoing.”² The collaborative group Art & Language began publishing a magazine in 1969, *Art–Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art*, which presented philosophical and theoretical analyses of the state of art. The magazine, which examined the ability of art to be political, was also in and of itself a form of artistic practice. Finn-Kelcey’s *Bureau de Change*, a floor mosaic replica of Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* in Japanese yen, American pennies, and British pence, raises questions about the globalization of the art market and the value of art (in both senses). An untitled painting by Huber in The New Museum’s Window on Broadway depicts the Museum’s floor being cleaned. One of the many issues ignited by this provocative image is the role of the art industry in maintaining existing class structures.

Some of the artists use channels of communication outside traditional art settings. Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles began *Insertions Into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project* and *Insertions Into Ideological Circuits: Banknote Project* in 1970 during the height of Brazil’s military dictatorship. He added anti-regime statements to Coca-Cola bottles and banknotes, then sent them back into public circulation. Félix González-Torres has done several billboard projects, including a work which currently can

be seen around New York City. It reads: “Health care is a right. A government by the people for the people must provide adequate health care to the people. No excuses.”³

These artists create meaning not only through the manipulation of materials, but through the play of ideas. On Kawara’s date paintings, for example, produce a flood of associations when the viewer recognizes the historical event that is the key to the date’s significance. The anonymous beat of measured time becomes modulated by history and memory. The painting chosen for this exhibition, *July 21, 1969*, represents the period when the Apollo astronauts were en route to the moon. On Kawara saves the newspapers that correspond to the dates on his paintings, yet he does not view them as evidence of his artistic process. He does not believe that artistic process can be located in material artifacts. What physical object could possibly represent the process by which an idea or event becomes perceived as a significant event or is seen in a new light?

What are the conventions of power? If we are able to recognize these conventions, have we moved any closer to an intervention or resistance to that power? The artists in this exhibition amply demonstrate the ability of art to describe relations of power. The question remains, does it change them?

Susan Cahan, Curator of Education

ARTISTS' TALKS

A series of informal gallery talks will be held Saturdays at 2:00 p.m. These talks explore ways in which contemporary artists bring personal beliefs and aesthetic concerns into dialogue with historical and political events.

December 15

In and Out
Muntadas

December 22

The Rhetoric of Difference
Judith Barry and Jean Fisher

January 12

Public Image
Julie Ault

January 19

The Architecture of Amnesia
Dennis Adams

January 26

A Talk
Félix González-Torres

February 2

Projections and Projects
Krzysztof Wodiczko

Meet in the Museum Lobby.
Free with Museum admission.

RESOURCE ROOM

A special Resource Room co-organized by Julie Ault and Susan Cahan for *Rhetorical Image* provides documentation and information on the artists and issues in the show and invites visitors to consider questions about the roles of art today:

How do artists in different social and cultural environments respond to political and historical events?

Can art intervene in politics, or can it only record and describe? Is such description a political act?

What strategies or "rhetorical devices" have artists used to influence public perceptions of historical events? How effective have they been?

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Booklet: *Design writing research* Resource Room designer: Mark Kloth

RHETORICAL IMAGE

December 9, 1990 - February 3, 1991

Organized by guest curator Milena Kalinovska

Dennis Adams

Art & Language

Judith Barry

Lothar Baumgarten

Braco Dimitrijevic

Rose Finn-Kelcey

Félix González-Torres

Tomislav Gotovac

Ian Hamilton Finlay

Thomas Huber

Ilya Kabakov

On Kawara

Jiří Kolář

Jarosław Kozłowski

Cildo Meireles

Tatsuo Miyajima

Muntadas

Barbara Steinman

Lawrence Weiner

Krzysztof Wodiczko

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