

BLAZO KOVACEVIC'S PROBE:

Anthony Brunelli Fine Arts

August - September 2015

It is an irony of our time that we house some of our most expensive, technologically advanced imaging technologies within our blandest, most banal institutional spaces. Consider the airport security checkpoint, a non-place lled with cheap plastic furniture and lurid lighting—along with multiple full-body millimeter-wave scanners sold at \$150,000 per machine.¹ Or, even more improbably, think of today's gray-walled, drably functional hospital technician's room, the centerpiece of which is inevitably the famously overused CT scanner.² (Prices at the time of this writing range from \$300,000 for a basic machine to \$3 million for the Cadillac version capable of capturing 128 million "slices," or cross-sections, of a given human organ.) Every day, in these monotonously identical spaces across the globe, literally countless images are produced, glanced at, and discarded, like hothouse flowers blooming and dying in the span of an afternoon. These images capture and expose to human eyes information so dense and replete it is tantamount to magic; yet their ubiquity has rendered them unremarkable, as indicated by their devalued institutional settings. It is as if the more expensive and elaborate the technological process, the more that process must be effaced—or perhaps more accurately, concealed.

Ironies related to exposure and concealment lie at the heart of the series of interrelated gallery exhibitions from the past decade that Blazo Kovacevic has collectively titled *Probe*. For the series, the artist not only inserts himself into the above-mentioned institutions—the airport security station, the hospital tech room—but also intervenes directly in the very mechanisms by which their technological apparatuses process and classify the people and things that pass through them, day after day, with unrelenting efficiency.³ He employs a limited set of techniques to explore these mechanisms, to great aesthetic and conceptual effect. His chief tool is the institutional x-ray machine. Most typically, *Probe* involves the artist running purses, backpacks, and briefcases through the machine and then printing the resulting images on a substrate of translucent polycarbonate. He uses a variety of brightly colored inks to render his images on the substrate, but leaves them otherwise largely unmodified.

It is with the gesture of arresting the normally uninterrupted flow of these nondescript images that *Probe*'s complexities start to multiply. By fixing and putting on view what is ordinarily ephemeral, Kovacevic invites the viewer to contemplate what is usually lost nearly instantaneously (as when, for example, images steadily replace each other on the security checkpoint screen). The artist has suggested this has a redemptive dimension for him: his gallery work allows a rare opportunity for viewers to reclaim the images of their bodies and belongings, which they are not normally allowed to see.⁴ Yet something more insidious lurks here as well.

After all, photography, regardless of process, is at its core a technology dependent on light. And light, as the philosopher Paul Virilio has written, is dual-edged: while often a source of illumination and clarity, it is also a tool of illusion, propaganda, and social control.⁵ For Virilio, light is an effective instrument for those in power precisely because it does not reveal reality but rather creates its own

"reality effect." He writes eloquently of the way very early photography captured not so much a thing, but rather the light that hits the thing: "When you look closely at [early photographs], what you notice is not so much the scarcely discernible, colorless objects as you do a source of luminance, the conduction surface of a luminous intensity."⁶ What Virilio writes of early-nineteenth-century "heliographs" [literally, "solar writings"] one could easily write of the images the modern x-ray machine produces, and which Kovacevic uses in his work. In neither case are we shown objects "as they are," but instead given impossible views; not reality, but reality-effect. For Virilio, modernity is a period in which the reality-effect of photography comes to dictate to an ever greater degree our mode of being in the world. In fact, according to Virilio, our ability to see "naturally" is displaced by the photographic point of view, such that our very memories come to be supplanted with an archive of photographic images. The ubiquity of photographs, along with their disposability (the fleeting x-ray on the airport scanner's screen; the CT scan the doctor throws away after consultation) tends to hide this truth from us. A salutary effect of *Probe* is that it prompts us to ponder exactly how little we notice the degree to which photographic imaging patterns our lives, from the way we care for our bodies to the way we conduct our wars.⁷

Which is partly why looking at Kovacevic's images can be such macabre fun. By removing the x-ray image from its usual circuit of disposability and affixing it to the art gallery wall, Kovacevic allows it to open up and become strange. The use of jewel-tone colors amplifies this innate strangeness, as does the lenticular-lens substrate, which gives each print a seductive dimensionality. The colors Kovacevic uses are playfully bright, and the sense of play extends to the aleatory nature of every print: until it is scanned, the artist often remains unaware of the contents of any given bag or purse, which he keeps dutifully hidden from himself. The use of chance operations is partly what makes the images so absorbing for the audience, as well: we struggle to identify the at outlines of monochrome objects held within the confines of a given bag, straining for some way to identify them and, by extension, their owner. Inevitably, given the context, we look for weapons—the dread thrill of discovering what should not be there. In some cases, Kovacevic indulges this fantasy; in *Blue Violin Case* (2010), for example, he updates the classic gangster-movie cliché of a Tommy Gun in a violin case with a wicked looking hunting knife of more modern vintage (fig. 1). In such cases, the hints of menace present throughout the project become explicit.

Yet as Kovacevic is well aware, in our unendingly "post-9/11" world any danger posed by surreptitious contraband is dwarfed by much more profound threats to our personal liberties. With this in mind, the bags on view in *Probe* begin to look almost painfully vulnerable, their intimate contents made violently visible. The bags all too easily become surrogates for our bodies, with both subject to invasive imaging processes that, in their unfeeling inescapability, can sometimes feel tantamount to assault. Every time I pass through a millimeter-wave body scanner at a major airport, I am struck by the supplicating position I am forced to take—the classic "hands-up" pose of the cornered criminal. I always involuntarily inch. Whether bags or people, we are all always already

suspects when this type of technology is employed. Here, the title of the project, Probe, takes on its deepest and perhaps most sinister connotation.

In a recent interview, Kovacevic has noted he is less interested in simplistic social critique—naming “culprits,” as he puts it—than he is in exploring the visual culture of invasive imaging: “Usually we know very well who and why, but sometimes it is necessary to see how, too.”⁸ By removing x-ray images from their ordinary, mundane flows, Probe invites its audience to ruminate on the “how”—and thus participate in the artist’s trenchant rejection of the forces laboring to conceal such extraordinary images from us, letting us instead see them for the uncanny, unsettling, and beautiful photographs that they are.

KEVIN HATCH

Assistant Professor of Art History at Binghamton University in New York. He is the author of the book *Looking for Bruce Conner* (MIT Press, 2012), and has published essays on the artists Ed Ruscha and Roy Lichtenstein, among others.

1. The now-classic text on “non-places” is Marc Augé’s *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995). There, Augé defines non-places as those roads, airports, supermarkets, and other spaces of the present “formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure),” and within which individuals are directed, through text and image, toward specific functions—for example, signage that aids the processing of thousands of air passengers a day at even a small airport (94). The idea of the white-cube gallery—once endemic to only a few Western capitals, now fully globalized—as a new category of “non-space” is an intriguing proposition, and one that Kovacevic’s work has at times suggested (note the insertion of a checkpoint with x-ray scanner at the entrance of his 2010 Probe 2 show National Bank of Serbia, SUTRA Festival of Science, Belgrade, Serbia).
2. On the overuse of the CT scan in American healthcare, see Atal Guwande, “Overkill,” *New Yorker*, May 11, 2015.
3. Efficiency should not be confused with effectiveness, however. A 2015 TSA internal investigation revealed a 95% fail-rate in detecting contraband in bags passed through machines at major American airports, resulting in an ongoing scandal and the reassignment of the acting head of the department. Justin Fishel, Pierre Thomas, Mike Levine and Jack Date, “Undercover DHS Tests Find Security Failures at US Airports,” June 1, 2015, ABC News, accessed July 22, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/exclusive-undercover-dhs-tests-and-widespread-security-failures/story>.
4. Blazo Kovacevic, interview in *Art Habens: Contemporary Art Review* (Summer 2015), p. 1.
5. For Virilio, the long history of light’s use as a mechanism for social control spans from eighteenth-century street lighting in Paris through Nazi light-architecture to the targeting technology of drones. See Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Indiana University Press, 1994). The linkage of vision and social

control is also present in Michel Foucault's texts on the Panopticon, texts which have been discussed in relation to Kovacevic's work by Jovana Stokic; see her essay "Discipline and Punish: Blazo Kovacevic's Probe," in Blazo Kovacevic, *Probe*, 2009-2015.

6. Ibid, p. 19. Virilio's specific point of reference here are the proto-photographs of Nicéphore Niépce.

7. On the nexus of photography, cinema, and war, see Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 2009).

8. Kovacevic, interview in *Art Habens*, p. 6.

Discipline and Punish: Blazo Kovacevic's Probe

The installation titled *Probe* metaphorically speaks about the contemporary culture of fear that permeates the perpetual war on terror. Kovacevic is implying crucial moral questions regarding the renunciation of personal freedoms for the sake of collective safety. In order to open a discussion on the implications of monitoring people, the artist sets the stage within the only space he can assert control - the gallery. In it, he invites the audience to participate in his orchestrated action. In order to make his viewer aware of the discomforts of being controlled Kovacevic is clearly delineating movement within the gallery space. One can go only the direction prescribed by the artist. By limiting the freedom of movement within the gallery, Kovacevic is playing with the notion of power and control. This deliberate artistic strategy reminds me of French philosopher Michel Foucault's farsighted insights about the nature of Western modern civilization... One of the techniques/regulatory modes of power/knowledge Foucault cited was the Panopticon, an architectural structure designed by Jeremy Bentham in the mid-19th century for prisons, insane asylums, schools, hospitals, and factories. The Panopticon offered a powerful and sophisticated internalized coercion through the constant observation of prisoners, each separated from the other and allowed no interaction. The modern structure would allow guards to continually monitor each cell from their vantage point in a high central tower without being seen by the prisoners. The constant observation was seen to act as a control mechanism, a consciousness of constant surveillance is internalized. This powerful metaphor was further deployed by contemporary social critics who assert that technology today has allowed for the often unnoticed (or invisible) deployment of panoptic structures throughout society. Surveillance and closed-circuit television (CCTV) in public spaces is an example of a technology that brings the gaze of a superior into the daily lives of the populace. For Foucault, the metaphor of the Panopticon opened the possibility of exploring the relationship between systems of social control as a disciplinary tool and the power-knowledge concept, since, in his view power and knowledge come from observing others. The result of this surveillance is acceptance of regulations and docility - a normalization of sorts - stemming from

the threat of discipline. Suitable behavior is achieved not through total surveillance, but by panoptic discipline and inducing a population to internalize that surveillance: "The actions of the observer are based upon this monitoring and the behaviors he sees exhibited; the more one observes, the more powerful one becomes. The power comes from the knowledge the observer has accumulated from his observations of actions in a circular fashion, with knowledge and power reinforcing each other." (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1975). Further development of this idea leads to the definition of oppression as a controlled situation in which only a certain group of people controls knowledge. The artist seems to be invested here in the possibility of redeeming action: what is to be done once we are aware of mechanisms through which the power/knowledge is acquired?

Following these lines of reasoning, it is necessary to ask the following questions - what are the processes of mobilizing counter-power to "form a resistance against the pervasiveness of the increasingly intrusive electronic society that is trying to manage all of the information that it is tracking and collecting? Where can we draw the line between security and freedom, especially when modern surveillance techniques are increasingly found in urban open spaces to track individuals who are mobile and to control or modify behavior?" (Moya K. Mason, "Foucault and His Panopticon")

Some theorists offer ways to acquire so-called counter-power and re-define personal freedoms in creating smart mobs, for example. The artist is interested here in problematizing the mechanisms of control in contemporary society by enacting its rituals and, possibly offering a personal place of freedom from control. Kovacevic is problematizing the notion of power even more by letting the viewers observe the contents of their belongings. This, in its very nature is a voyeuristic action and at first glance has a redeeming value. It should not be read only as a simple pay-off. We as viewers accept to be guided, examined, and scanned, so we can finally see what lies beneath. The representations of personal belongings displayed by Kovacevic are ambivalent. They speak about the public desire to know, to possess and to grasp the hidden (knowledge). At the same time, by rendering the x-rayed objects in pretty colors, the artist recuperates their dignified status as personal objects. The representations are made even more ambivalent once we realize that among personal belongings there are so many weapons. More problematic, Kovacevic shows us that even weapons can be represented as beauty (desire). Once the viewer has voluntarily participated in Kovacevic's action, he is left to contemplate the possibility of acquiring freedom from control, at his/her own risk.

"Probe": Work by Blazo Kovacevic

Connect Savannah, February 17, 2009

by Bertha Husband

MODERN technologies often have their origins in scientists' philosophical or even playful experiments. They are almost immediately taken over by State institutions - for example, photography became very quickly in the 19th century used for police records and military reconnaissance. The airplane, growing out of a human obsession with flight, became almost immediately a useful weapon to be used against civilian populations. Similarly, X-ray scanners began with their use in medical applications; in our surveillance society, they have advanced to top position as security devices.

For the last few years, the old-fashioned metal detectors that passengers had to walk through have been replaced in airports throughout the world with X-ray scanners. It is actually an electronic strip search, as these photographs record all the details of the body under investigation. And there have been some complaints by passengers who feel humiliated and are worried about the later use of these photographic images.

But many people remain supportive, believing that anything the government does to protect them from whatever threat the government tells them they are under, is well taken. But perhaps we should consider that a security threat is not the true reason for these precautions. Their value may lie in the harassment and resulting sheep-like compliance of the citizenry, which is infinitely useful to the State in managing all other aspects of the social structure.

These are the questions that are raised by Blazo Kovacevic's exhibition. He uses irony and wit in these mixed media works on canvas. All take as their theme the question of the use of scanners as security measures.

In "Lady Bag," "SKB Case," and "Violin Case", we are shown the x-ray view, which presents the outline of the case with various little metal items: hair pins, keys, etc., along with a large knife (perhaps in a sheath). In other words, every passenger is carrying a knife.

In "Radiation Detected," two X-ray images of different views of the cab of a truck are shown in a split screen; the top is a monochrome yellow and the bottom is a monochrome blue. Perhaps this references the OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) color codes, as both yellow and blue are the colors of "caution."

The bottom view of the diptych shows a computer screen presumably scanning the truck image. A message on the screen reads:

"Alert! Radiation Detected." -- which is not surprising since it has just been X-rayed.

But the most startling images in the show are the body scans. They show how people are asked to stand - one with arms raised, one with hands by the side while holding onto rails and one simply facing forward. They also vary in the detail shown: a simple outline of the body, a detailed nude figure and a deep X-ray version showing skeleton and organs.

In defense of the use of these body scans at airports, it has been widely reported that the X-ray is basically harmless as it uses such a low level of radium. However, we should be wary of the assurances given to the general public now by businesses and government agencies.

Nikola Tesla (1856-1943), a scientist who worked on X-ray development, warned the scientific community about its biological hazards. And what would a "low level" of radium amount to for the "frequent flyer"?

For about 100 years, artists have been concerned with the social role of art. In other words, how do visual artists involve themselves in the debate on social issues? The difficulty lies in the use of the image. Because, it is clear that, unlike the writing of prose, an image can always be read in various ways. For instance, I can write a polemic against body scanning. However, a scanned image itself tells us nothing about the viewpoint of the artist concerning the issue of body scanning. The contemporary artist knows that any image is only representation. Thus, the artist who wants to make a statement finds he must resort to irony.

Kovacevic is a conceptual artist and he often does interactive installation or computer works. In line with this, his original concept on this theme was to have an exhibition in which there would be an empty gallery and a body scanning machine. Those visitors who gave their permission would then have their bodies scanned and these images would immediately be adhered to the wall, creating the show.

So far, due to the problems of renting such a machine, he has not yet been able to realize this. In a gallery setting, without coercion, body scanning would become a playful game. The context does matter greatly.

Kovacevic is, in fact, taking back the X-ray from its repressive use by the State, to a more playful and experimental context.

Probe

Mixed media by Blazo Kovacevic

When: Through March 2

Where: Gallery Espresso, 234 Bull St.

PROBE 2009 exhibition - Interview

Savannah, February, 2009

by Bertha Husband, artist and art critic

I met with Blazo to discuss his recent exhibition, 'Probe', at Gallery Espresso, (February 2009).

BERTHA HUSBAND: Before we discuss the works in your exhibition, Blazo, could you say a little bit about your background? I know you were born in Montenegro.

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Yes. I was born in 1973 in Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro. At that time it was called, 'Titograd.' After Tito's death, it reverted to its original name. I went to art school in Cetinje, which is a very ancient and very quiet city, with few distractions.

BERTHA HUSBAND: And you studied painting there?

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Yes. And it was very tough to get into the painting program. They generally only accept five painters a year. We had to draw and paint for a week just to pass the entrance exam. It is so tough, that when you pass and get admitted, it is such an achievement that it feels as if you have already finished school and graduated!

BERTHA HUSBAND: I'm curious. With that sort of background, how did you develop from traditional painting to working more conceptually, with computers? I mean, you don't really paint much any more, do you?

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Well, I do paint. But I consider it important to have all the tools available, and the computer is a very powerful tool. But this technology came to me in the US, because back then, in Montenegro, we couldn't afford computers. In 1998, I applied and was accepted into the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) MFA program, at the same time as I was drafted, and if I hadn't been accepted at PAFA, I would have ended up fighting Americans and Albanians in the Kosovo conflict. Instead, I watched it on CNN. It was at PAFA that I started doing more conceptual things, when I was exposed to the work of my professor, Osvaldo Romberg. He helped me liberate myself and to realize that everything is possible. That is very important, because you can get isolated if you are not exposed to other things - or don't seek new exposures because you believe in the notion that you are what you are, and you can't be anything else.

BERTHA HUSBAND: But sometimes, it seems to me that art schools set out to destroy the student's unique way of looking and try to remake them...

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: ...in compliance.

BERTHA HUSBAND: Yes. In compliance with the current art world fashion. It can be a destructive process for some people.

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: I don't know. I think artists have to be open to all other influences. Not to accept them, per se, but to be open. Openness is very important for my work because I get provoked by events - and then I do some work based on that.

BERTHA HUSBAND: What would you say provoked you into working with the security x-ray images that have resulted in the Probe works?

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: It was just life, I guess. I was traveling more than I would have believed possible - mostly to go back home and see family, and for some residencies in Paris. This was more than I like, because I am afraid of planes. The security restrictions that were introduced after 9/11 hit us particularly hard because as foreigners from a country still perceived as a war-zone, you can imagine how carefully they were searching us. For example, I would always be put on one side for 'random' security checks. At first, I felt, 'How lucky am I, to be 'randomized' so often!' Then, I noticed that there was nothing 'random' about it. The only thing random is the word, 'random.' I have always been attracted and terrified by the crossing of a line, even the entrance to a theatre. By crossing a borderline, you become at the mercy of someone or some other force. I was never upset about how I was treated. What was really a problem was, 'Why me?' And once you are on their 'List,' whatever you do, you cannot get yourself removed from it. And my infant son, although an American citizen, was immediately subjected to the search because he was with me. The blindness of this action led me to the imagery of the x-ray machines.

BERTHA HUSBAND: So you've actually been through those body x-ray machines?

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Actually, no. Because they haven't had them at the checkpoints where I've been. But the baggage x-rays are everywhere, and I was first attracted to those images and then, just by researching, I came across this body scanner pilot program. It's quite new and not widespread yet in the US, though now it is beginning to spread really fast.

BERTHA HUSBAND: So, basically, you found the body scanner images on the Internet?

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Yes, I found them on the Internet and the images are amazing. They show the body stripped of everything. You don't even see the body as male or female. You just see the body. You

don't see bones and organs and you don't see features and you don't see the hair. They're almost like manikins. For me it was a really interesting form of figurative art. They're not naked in a sexy way, but in a stripped down way, where everything not necessary is removed. It is, I think, in the artist's nature to be a little voyeuristic. Artists are always interested in probing to see what is beneath the surface.

BERTHA HUSBAND: Perhaps you could say something about how these works were made, and the use of color.

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: The photographic images have been applied to canvas using an acrylic transfer technique. The colors are used straight from the tube. I don't mix any paint. I don't believe in color theory. I don't know, it's just ...

BERTHA HUSBAND: Color used as codes perhaps?

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Yes. An x-ray is black and white or a scale of grey, and with this baggage x-ray machine, the different values of grey are coded with different colors. Because the operator needs to see - very quickly - if there is something suspicious there.

BERTHA HUSBAND: So the machine actually shows certain objects in a color?

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Yes. First it captures grey, and then different densities of material - metals, cloth, liquids, for example - translate into separate values of grey. And then there is a software program in the machine that assigns a color code to those values of grey that may indicate a danger. It is coded, as everything military is coded. And for my purpose, the color must stand out and I like to use new colors - the paint manufacturers have come out with a new oxide.

BERTHA HUSBAND: Oh, yes. They now have all these metallic colors.

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Like iridescent or stainless steel. I mean if a paint is called 'stainless steel', that is something I will buy, rather than an ages old color like burnt umber. Thank God we have this paint industry, otherwise we would have to produce our own paints.

BERTHA HUSBAND: We would be grinding colors extracted from the earth.

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: It is interesting because now you can have a traditional painter who is using paint made by a new technology that would not be possible without computers. On the other hand, I really don't think there is any merit in deciding, 'I'm just going to be a painter' or 'I'm just going to be a conceptual artist.' I think the only smart way is to be all that is possible.

BERTHA HUSBAND: In fact your 'Probe' project is in two parts: the painted images that we see here and the conceptual part that is not yet realized.

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: I first made a few of these works on canvas because I wanted to get peoples reaction to the images. I showed them to Stuart Horodner, curator at The Atlanta Contemporary Arts Center and he liked the idea and encouraged me to work more in that direction. It was then that I came up with a simple concept. I wanted to rent one of these body scanning machines and to place it at the entrance of the gallery. I wanted people to enter the show - that at that point wouldn't exist - by passing through the machine as if they were at the airport. And if they gave permission, they would have their bodies scanned and we would print the images on magnetized paper and put them on the walls immediately. In this way the exhibition is generated by the audience. I can't actually get my hands on one of these machines easily, but I haven't given up the idea.

BERTHA HUSBAND: It occurs to me that in order to work in this way, you would need to have a lot of money.

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Or just accept failure. Which is my situation so far. Some projects, of course, become realized, but there are key projects like this that I can't do because either the technology isn't ready, or I'm not ready, or I don't have funding for it.

BERTHA HUSBAND: You have mentioned another idea involving baggage scans.

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: If you start with a grandiose idea like the one I just mentioned, you soon have to compromise. Right now, I'm working on the compromise version. I'm thinking of attaching the baggage scanning machines at the airport to the Internet and having a live feed to the gallery. In this way, I would have a clear picture of peoples' belongings and a moment when the passengers' stress is transferred to pleasure.

BERTHA HUSBAND: Yes. That's what I like about these ideas - a technology that is used for security and defense is converted into something playful.

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: It's one event, but differently perceived. And that is a contradiction that I like, and seems always to be present in my work. It is actually possible to do this project in Montenegro, because it is a small country and everybody knows everybody. The President lives on my street and the Chief of Airport Security is my neighbor. So everything is possible, not for money, but just as a favor. And favor is a currency that never loses value. I like that about Montenegro.

BERTHA HUSBAND: Would you prefer to live there?

BLAZO KOVACEVIC: Yes, but also I like to live here. Actually I live there and here - but most of the time it is in the airplane between the two I feel most like myself. When you leave home you are frozen in the time when you left. People and things back there are changing, but you remain disconnected; and over here you are always a newcomer. So, however much I might fear flying, I think the plane is actually the perfect place for me.

BERTHA HUSBAND: Well then we will leave you there, Blazo. Thanks for talking to me.

Further information on the work of Blazo Kovacevic can be found at www.blazokovacevic.com

Ingest

Curated By Beth Sale Jacquet with Jacob Cawthon, Assistant Curator

Ingest explores the role of food in our personal lives as well as the impact of food choices and production methods on our environment. Many of the approximately 30 artworks--which the curators culled from over 75 submissions-- employ humor and wit to address the serious issues along the road food travels to get from field to mouth.

The works--which range from installation, video, new media, painting, photography and sculpture-- quickly get into politicized territory. For instance Megan Cronin's site-specific installation, *Soft Crack Creeper*, made of marshmallows and white frosting, highlights the overuse of corn syrup in our diet. Utilizing the forms of creeping kudzu, Cronin cleverly compares the introduction of high fructose corn syrup in the American diet to the government program that brought kudzu to the southeastern United States. Sculptor Suzanne Proulx has created modified food forms--such as baby chicks hatching from oranges--to comment on genetically modified foods. Arthur Huang, Christopher Jennings, and Rachel Jobe each present detailed records of all the food they personally consumed over specific periods of time, each using quite different, yet equally visually compelling, approaches. Edible artworks are also featured, such as sheets of self-referential nutritional facts by Savannah artist Blazo Kovacevic and a DIY toast station by local artist John English, whose work links the Bush Administration to cheap white bread. Both foodies and general audiences are sure to come away with a bounty of food for thought to warm their imaginations during the coldest season.

By Beth Sale Jacquet

Food is a constant necessity, essential to our survival. Yet it means so much more to society than simple sustenance. Rarely is there a gathering without food; each holiday has a traditional accompanying cuisine. We express ourselves through food. We connect with others through food. And through food, we engage with the environment around us in a very intimate way. The old adage, "you are what you eat," is a true one indeed. By ingesting food "from the earth, ripened by the sun" (to quote my daughter's Montessori school observance) we are inviting the outside world to literally become part of us.

Along with breath, food is placed at the foundation of the Hierarchy of Needs, developed by the psychologist Maslow in the 1940's. It is evidence of our conscientiousness that this essential foundation finds expression in that final crown in Maslow's hierarchy, the creative outlet.

In selecting works for *Ingest*, I revisited the question Suzi Gablik raised in *Conversations Before the End of Time*, "Was it possible to have an embodied stance, then, and not be exclusionary?" Can *Ingest* exist as a dialogue, honoring the food choices of everyone? It is my hope that this exhibition will increase each viewer's appreciation of the personal benefits received from food, the energy from the sun that packs each mouthful, and the rain that falls on every morsel. Awareness of these benefits is motivation to interact with the environment with the care of a steward..

Abstract Nutrition

Savannah artist Blazo Kovacevic also provides cleverly conceived take-away edible art with *Continental Break(fast) Nutrition Facts* (see image left), in which he has printed nutritional fact information on confectioner's sheets used for creating decorative icing for cakes. As Kovacevic observes, the nutritional fact label is often used to select food, replacing the intuitive "smell, taste, or look of the food." Kovacevic has offered the label as the final product for consumption. (The piece was installed in September 2004 at Gallery Chaos, in Belgrade, Serbia, and Gallery Karver, in Podgorica, Montenegro in September 2006. Kovacevic earned his M.F.A. from Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and a B.F.A. from the University of Fine Arts, Cetinje, Montenegro.)

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Culinary Art

Food is the Inspiration at ATHICA's "Ingest" Exhibit

by Melissa Link

Eating is among the most intimate and natural activities a living creature can undertake. Yet, humans have evolved to a place in which the production, preparation and consumption of food is increasingly divorced from the cycles of nature. "Ingest," the current exhibit at the Athens Institute for Contemporary Art (ATHICA), offers artwork from over 30 artists from Athens and beyond who explore a myriad of food-related issues. The exhibit is curated by local artist Beth Sale Jacquet (known to *Flagpole* readers as resident Art Notes columnist), with Jacob Cawthon.

From the obsessive-compulsive data installations of Arthur Huang, Christopher Jennings and Rachel Jobe (who creatively document every bit of food each has consumed over the course of a year) to Melissa Harshman and Billy Renkle's lush and vividly colored images of '50s domestic idealism (featuring fashionably correct divas and perfectly presented platters of gastronomic wonders), the exhibit emphasizes the omnipresent place of food in our everyday lives.

The show includes a slew of often not-so-appetizing images that address inter-related issues: genetic modification (in work by Claudia Drake, Severn Eaton, Bobbie Moore, Cheri Wranosky and Suzanne

Proulx); animal abuse (in work by Jaime Bull, Jocelyn Coulter, Judith Berk King and Daniel Kariko); nutritional vapidness (in work by Nicolette Westfall, Blazo Kovacevic, Natalie Gazaway and James Kubie and Megan Cronin); and the harrowing ecological consequences of rampant meat-based diets and industrialized farming on an overpopulated Earth (in work by Krysia Haag, Anna Velkoff Freeman and Irene Chan).

Several artists turn to food as a metaphor for sociopolitical commentary. Eaton's breast-milk cheese and Zolof-infused bread are imbued with ironic connotations in opposing forms of sustenance, while David Burns' "Patriotic" video alights on ideas of an American public that is openly force-fed regurgitated propaganda. John English's "Foretoaster" is more blatant in its reference to current politics: the viewer is invited to make slices of Texas toast branded with "W," offering a tongue-in-cheek reinterpretation of the concept of "white bread America."

Of course, our diets are directly linked to our overall identity, a concept addressed by Jaime Raybin's notebook, "Can you Find the Vegetarians?" Mike Calway-Fagen's "Homogenization" subtly references the rampant whitewashing of culture and individualism in the modern industrialized world with a life-sized, street-side photo of a globe-like collection of single-serving coffee creamers. The construction calls to mind the form of the Earth itself, as well as a wayward soccer ball carelessly kicked into the gutter.

And no analysis of food issues is complete without a look at the rituals in which so many edibles play a central role. Irina Arnaut's absurdist video portrays a junk-food-infused courtship between a drag queen and a narcoleptic, while Summer Zickefoose's "The Setting" is a sad and surreal video statement on the disappearing family dinner table and traditional feminine roles. Fiona Kinsella's gorgeously decorated and meticulously presented miniature wedding cakes are bedecked with found objects, including antique flatware, dental tools, teeth and jewels - offering allusions to the sterile formality of rite-of-passage rituals.

Since it plays such an important role in traditions and special events, food is steeped in nostalgia, a concept touched upon in Renkle and Harshman's aforementioned works and reiterated in Harshman's recipe scrapbook, "Aunt Billie's Jello." And Margaret DeLima's cookie-and-candy-bedecked puppet dolls serve as self-portrait flashbacks to significant childhood events.

But despite the pervasiveness of allusions to a human diet tainted by technology and sociopolitical connotations, a few of the artists offer us reminders of the natural and cultural origins of our food. Zickefoose's "Posey Country Breakfast" video is a simple reminder of the flourishing fields of grain that are the progenitors of our morning bowl of cereal, while the Serve and Project team's bright and intricately composed large-scale digital images offer geographical, historical, cultural and personal elaborations on particular recipes. And Stephen Humphreys' in-progress documentary video "Transformations of Flesh" offers a local perspective, providing an intimate glimpse into the workings of Athens' Full Moon Farms and Farm 255 restaurant as ingredients travel from field and barnyard to dinner plate- a course of action so frequently forgotten in today's fast-food supermarket society.

Blazo Kovacevic

Reviews of Maps and Cuts exhibition

philadelphia weekly, Nov. 16, 2005

Tear It Up

Blazo Kovacevic's perforated paintings are sometimes stronger in pieces

by Roberta Fallon

Blazo Kovacevic's exhibit at Hurong Lou Gallery grabs you with its graphic crispness, beautiful appropriated imagery and hint of threat. Beauty and threat? Consider the whole experience of the show a personal Rorschach test.

Kovacevic uses appropriated images-ancient maps, architectural drawings and repeat patterns of flowers and fleurs-de-lis. He prints, draws or paints the imagery on his canvas, vinyl or mesh supports, and then superimposes ominous and militaristic images of metal tools. With their open jaws, pincers, sawtooth edges, wings and bayonet-like protrusions, the tools evoke instruments of torture or a swarm of killer robot insects. They're bigger than life, and they cast long shadows over the appropriated imagery.

"Mimi, Bertha and the rest of the gang," are what the Montenegro-born artist calls the tools, displayed taxonomy-style in a large mixed-media piece by that name.

Their presence is threatening, but here's the question: Are the tools enemies at the gate or sentinels guarding the precious beauty? Either way, they evoke conflict.

Here's another test: The gallery floor is untidy with crumpled newspaper, Styrofoam chips and a random plastic utility bucket. What gives? Kovacevic, whose work also deals with the value and commodification of art, left the byproducts of the show's installation as a reminder that art's backstage is messy. "It's the aesthetics of junk," the artist says.

"It gives you details you can use on the origin of the work. I also like it because you question, 'Are we done?' And I don't believe we can be." Artists are never really done with their art. They just let it go.

Test three: Many works have line perforations dividing them vertically or horizontally, like longitude or latitude markers. A viewer can decide they'd like a piece of one and not the whole, and the artist will cut or tear along the perforated line. Sundering a piece of art is transgressive. But Kovacevic has played capitalist god here, enabling the viewer's transgression.

In some cases the works are worth dividing. *Duel*, a large work with a medieval walled town in the background and two hulking tools in the foreground, can be split into two asymmetrical pieces (with asymmetrical pricing). The two pieces are stronger separated. Like those "friends forever" heart necklaces, two art lovers could split a Kovacevic work and create an instant bond between them. Maybe dividing a whole, whether it's art or a country, can be something done amicably-to create friendship, not war. That's my thought after seeing this show.

Kovacevic, who now lives in Savannah, Ga., is a computer whiz, having founded the International Digital Art Festival (see www.blazokovacevic.com). While in Philadelphia he worked with gallerist Hurong Lou as an art director.

"Blazo Kovacevic: Maps and ... "

Through Dec. Hurong Lou Gallery, 320 Race St. 215.238.8860. www.huronglou.com

SINK Magazine Hits First Friday

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Friday, November 4, 2005

Hurong Lou Gallery

320 Race Street

"Maps & Cuts..."

Blazo Kovacevic

This show gives us a peak into a world of machines, compasses, and maps that borders on abstract. More like an installation than anything else, Kovacevic's unique and captivating works fuse antique blueprints and treasure maps with clever stripes of red on the black and white etchings. [AC]
roberta fallon and libby rosof's artblog
http://www.fallonandrososof.com/archives/2005_11_06_archive.html

Conflict and industry

by Gabi Matouk

The exhibition titled "Maps and Scissors" offered me no explanation as I first walked into the Hurong Lou Gallery. I saw the maps, and I guess they were cut apart by scissors; but I couldn't help focus on the rolls of brown paper, pieces of plastic tarp, and buckets scattered around the floor, and I was confused –what is part of the exhibition and what is not (*image, detail from "Maps and Scissors" installation*)?

Then, I heard someone explaining to a lady that it was all part of the installation. As I stepped around the 'trash' on the floor I began to notice the images on canvas [on the wall]—images of old black and white maps torn away at the bottom and then juxtaposed with a bright red wallpaper-like pattern. The canvases were large and hanging by a metal pole..

The industrial theme of the exhibition continued as I walked downstairs—this theme provided somewhat of an explanation.

The voice of the artist, **Blazo Kovacevic**, resonated from his artwork as all his work seemed to have one theme and one concern—industrial progress and social conflict. Even as his medium changes—from acrylic on canvas to glass tables—the black and white antique maps were still Kovacevic’s main concern. Through these maps he explores conflict by confronting “contradicting visual elements.” The old is displayed among the new; delicate drawings of lighthouses are displayed with a harsh red paint with a modern flair; art is formed into a useful table.

People were enjoying the opening of this exhibition as it offered plenty to think about. The messy construction-look of the gallery suggested that Kovacevic intended his works not to cease when the canvas ceased. As I exited the gallery I noticed a woman reach for a piece of paper sticking out of a wood circular shelf, and as her hand touched the paper I heard a voice stop her, explaining that the paper was part of the installation. This just reaffirmed my confusion of boundaries—where does the art start, and where does it stop?

Liquidation exhibition - Reviews

Podgorica, Montenegro

December 2002

by Dragan Radovanović

The least we can say about the project of authors Natalija Mijatovic and Blazo Kovacevic, named "Liquidation" is that, besides the purity the project radiates with, in the conceptual and functional sense of the word, it has extremely complex semantic tissue in its structural and content base. In the most concise sense of the word: the artists approached and worked out the project in a natural way, from separate positions. Those positions are essentially connected in a unique nucleus of the initial idea and dispersing system of its complex decomposition, the traces of which we can find out in the reach spectrum of messages.

Natalija starts from the sphere of subconscious, existential-spiritual strata of her own Balkan (tradition), preserved through centuries, where positions of heaven and earth are constantly being changing and permeating each other. In the sense of idea and its performance, her works suggest historical memory. In the same context, however, she insists on the constant presence of the "classical" painting-drawing experience, with a monumental tone. It strengthens the position of her participation in the project which can be defined as the presence of a model of the passive principle, transformed into expectation, fear and prayer for revelation of modes of salvation. Her associative decoding of the project's name is completely directed towards human sufferings and a short rest between the two fascinating dances of death.

Traces of classical disciplines - painting and drawing, are undoubtedly present in Blazo's explanation of the "Liquidation". The segment of his participation in the project "sobers up" the sublime feeling of art like emanation of the spirit and, with a refined dose of irony, talks about creativity as an accompanying part of potentials of consumption mentality. Actually, he applies the principle of social-critical engagement in arts. From such a system of contemplating, logically comes up the process of incorporation of industrial elements in the tissue of language of classical materials, orchestration, and sometimes bitter polyphony of their complex expression. Blazo's answer to the challenge of "Liquidation" is an active principle of this project, the content of which is full of inside and outside phases.

Different language, offered by the rich contents of this project, opens up pages of experience of different meanings and multisided communications with the past and the present. Due to expert use of purified language of sufficiency, flowing from the whole towards details, and the other way round, the

two young artists in their mutual project have opened and exposed to us complex spaces of spiritual and secular culture: spaces of silence and polemics, humility and restrained anger.

Pobjeda Daily Newspaper, December 7, 2002

Project of Blazo Kovacevic and Natalija Mijatovic in Center Gallery, Podgorica, Montenegro

by Nataša Nikčević

The word "liquidation" has the two-fold meaning of clearance, sale, and disposal; or destruction, murder and death. Interpretations of this concept and the artistic means of its deciphering are the arbitrating factors of this project - an exhibition by Blazo Kovacevic and Natalija Mijatovic currently on view at Centar Gallery, as part of the "December days of culture" in Podgorica. (Recently the French art world in Paris had the opportunity to see this project created by named artists educated at the College of Fine Arts in Cetinje with graduate degrees from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in the United States.) In the world of consumers and spending fetishists, sales hold a definite strength and power of attraction where purchases are made, both necessary and unnecessary. In a way, they are the product of illusion and deception of mass spending, a world in which the ruling principle is you are what you have. In that kind of economic machinery and system, the question is what is the place, role and meaning of art and can we speak of it with a capital A; what is its value and is it compromised by the rules of the marketplace. Blazo Kovacevic confronts this issue with explicit drawings which simulate a sale display. The drawers are suspended from hangers, and upon them the original price, reduced price, bar-code, size/ dimensions, all in place of the artist's signature. The viewing public is inducted to search and choose, though finding drawings instead of wares. A true artist inverts, distorts and combines various languages and symbols in the enactment of a "proper sale." Both the plastic-compositional and the structural-semantic layers here share causal relationships. Toward manifesting this, he uses the classical techniques of pen and ink or feather and ink drawing, in addition to paint. The iconography of these virtuoso drawings is no less open to interpretation, in which lines nevertheless predominate. In an empty space, the equivalent of a blank sheet of paper, appears a hybrid of animals, specifically toads, lizards, transcendental outwardly birds, all of which refer to the calm before the storm or creation of the world. In addition to these coded messages which he presents toward the detective work of problem solving, messages regarding identity and the history of civilization also appear. How to find and recognize one's identity in a society which pulverizes us with its economic rules of supply and demand, and how are those rules valid in the system of art. Does it drive toward a masking of the artist, with simulacra through history and civilization such as the Virgin Mary and Christ, the self portrait, a painting like "Bloody Betsy Rose," breasts. What is the role and relationship of icons - today's images like these which Kovacevic impresses upon wire mesh with pipes and acrylic paint. In a civilization which exists within "the monitor paradigm," it is yet more possible to speak about the spectacle of culture, which the artist addresses with emphasis. The crux of that culture

involves relationship toward the body, particularly female, as seen in the examples of actresses and singers with ideal bodies, who become representatives of modern cults and myths. Still today, as in all past history, a woman's breasts evoke a web of associations and symbols, the first of which is erotica and sexuality. As such it is possible to decipher the symbolic codes of the piece, "Tit" (acrylic on vinyl). It metamorphoses into a balloon, a pinkish blur disintegrating from corrosion and death. The base is vinyl, an industrial material, believed to be cancerous. In the piece "Bloody Betsy Rose," he exhibits an exceptional mastery of varied techniques while combining nonconventional materials, the uses of which have their own history. This is homage to one of the first educated American artists to whom the academy at one time was inaccessible, though later representative American museums would exhibit her work. The ironic discourse of artists toward the art system is apparent here. The drawing is made by a technique of collating shaped in the body of the picture on a plastic base and secured to a curtain, which the viewer can move and change much as one does with the dressing room curtain in a shopping mall store. Kovacevic delivers absurdities and paradoxes. This cynical rumination on alienation is one link in the long chain of unraveling the interpretive layers of this complex body of work.

Liquidation is also destruction, murder and death. Those are the initial roots in the work of Natalija Mijatovic. She executes these exceptional drawings by expressive painterly means, most often with charcoal on paper. Traumatic experiences caused by the bombing of Yugoslavia, distance from her family, compelled her to produce these monumental pieces in which we recognize existential fear, suffering of the human condition, chaos and a heightened sense of death's presence. Death is projected through the "portraits" of her family, the likenesses of her father and grandfather (charcoal on paper) predominating. She portrays their essences with strongly rendered nuances of psychological qualities that evoke the effect of death's poison. These vertical formats are structured so as to refer to the "Transcendence of Lazarus," types of mummies that are pressed with sheets, "discovered here in the horror of their slow decay, they confront us, in their catacombs, abruptly...these mummies of ourselves and the detritus of our lives" (Tom Ryan). Liquidation is coded too within the portraits of artist with sister, "At the Feast," "With the Girl," and "Confession," the latter combining very inventive use of metal mesh in which she hides the face of the depicted. This element is one of many connections to her earlier paintings and drawings, the iconography of which included disposed, metal parts of universal utility. That metal graveyard, those psychological skeletons (published in the prestigious edition of "New American Paintings") are remnants of civilization as much as her "portraits" are remnants of our lives, chambers of an archetypal fear.

The project, "Liquidation," by Blazo Kovacevic and Natalija Mijatovic is one not to be missed.

Vijesti Daily Newspaper, December 17, 2002

FINE ARTS: Art Project "Liquidation & Clearance" by Natalija Mijatovic and Blazo Kovacevic in the gallery, "Centar"

TRACES OF WAR HORRORS AND THE CONSUMER MINDSET

by Slobodan Slovincić

One of the highlights of this year's "December Days of Culture" series at the Podgorica Centar Gallery was the visual arts project, "Liquidation and Clearance," by Natalija Mijatovic and Blazo Kovacevic, Montenegrin artists who for the last few years have resided and established themselves in the United States. Mijatovic and Kovacevic graduated in 1997 from the College of Fine Arts in Cetinje under the study of Nikola Gvozdenovic, and completed graduate studies in 2000 at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. In our country and abroad, they have enjoyed several solo exhibitions and participated in a great number of group shows thus far. Though relatively young artists, they have already won a great many national and international awards and honors for their creative and prolific work. An informative photo catalogue with concise and valuable commentary by Tom Ryan accompanies this exhibition.

In this oft-visited yet non-functional exhibition space, Natalija Mijatovic presents nine large format drawings of varied techniques on paper. Significantly, her family witnessed war and postwar sufferings which occurred during the final decade of the last century. Their experiences, akin to apocalyptic horrors, evoked in Mijatovic primal fears and anxieties over the welfare of loved ones, inevitably resulting in her production of these poignantly strong and expressive drawings. Specifically, her subjects (grandfather, father, brother, sister) are ones of deep suffering, treated like mummified or frozen figures, which in the final outcome await the great beatitude of transcendence. This decidedly virtual sacredness leaves as great a lingering mental impression as it does strike visual immediacy, while overall leading toward a secret millennial safekeeping of the bodies and eternal lives of saints. With pressed charcoal on prepared Canson paper, she makes lengthy line-exploratory gestures from which surface shapes and carpal bone-like constructions. These are intensely martyred bodies with petrified extremities and exposed skulls in painful howls. All of these immortal hominoids are carefully wrapped in translucent white shrouds that will eternally protect them from further persecutions and ruptures. Furthermore, she has gingerly enrobed each of her exhibition placards in transparent polyvinyl, undoubtedly adding to the significance and layered complexity of her work.

At first glance contradictory, yet in essence quite compatible, Blazo Kovacevic has in parallel presented twelve recent creations displayed both as two-dimensional plates and a three-dimensional spatial installation. He ties himself to the phenomenology of the most widespread "religion," the modern consumer mindset. With this ironic and cynical campaign, he has made everything to appear

exaggeratedly accessible and explicitly buyable. With the supernatural strength of currency, it is possible to obtain anything: leisure and contentment, love and happiness, health and immortality. Eventually these are all for sale and purchase - the picture, the icon, the relic and the divinity - simply free of taboos. The wish to consume becomes passionate as the sea, a fatamorgana, an unquenchable thirst. In order to bring this project to a climax, Kovacevic has taken his entire series of substantial sketches and drawings and simply hung them with clothespins to hangers, like the most basic, utilitarian, ready-made clothing. Upon each piece hangs a ticket with bar-code, price, dimensions, description of material and maintenance. The installation altogether evokes certain mall-store sterility due to the lifeless system of sorting and hanging, though executed as a highly suggestive, blatantly sarcastic and above all exceptionally rendered artwork.

On rather conventional, flat placards, executed on polyvinyl or saturated canvas, essentially practical materials, Kovacevic offers the contradiction of painting in oils a biotic-zoomorphic winged insects and other tiny Kafkaesque creatures, in enlarged form but as classical illustrations, beside which miniscule text is impressed. As part of his visual vocabulary, Kovacevic also uses industrial materials such as fine wire mesh, aluminum tubing and foils, from which he cleverly and effectively builds conglomerate structures over which he paints with acrylic. He delivers this with the same, proven system of commercial tagging. Here is the price, description of materials, maintenance and use.

The diapason of exploratory possibilities in the artistic expressions of Natalija Mijatovic and Blazo Kovacevic is truly rich. Here is a wide range of work, from drawings and graphics, to paintings and installation placards. Finally, one must take note of the exceptional creative energy which strongly radiates from each of these exponential creations.

by Tom Ryan

Blazo Kovacevic

Images d'occasion

Everything must go to make room for tomorrow's deliveries. No reasonable offer refused. We stand now and forever in the storeroom of our daily lives, where we set our prices and hawk our lines. Where our memories and desires compete for the attention that is their life...and where we all make the transactions that fit or create us. Browsing now the fantastic, now the banal. Moving easily between icon and price tag, foreground and background wandering in and out of focus.

Philadelphia Weekly, June 5, 2005

GONE TO BLAZO'S

by Roberta Fallon

Blazo Kovacevic's "Clearance" at Gallery Siano attempts to knock art off its pedestal and bring it down to the level of retail merchandising. Kovacevic's department-store installation (drawings clipped to metal clothing hangers dot the room, their price-tags dangling) is a little blunt in the message department, but the artist says he's trying to make art accessible to ordinary people. In any event, underneath the hangers there's a solid drawing show. The Montenegro native and recent Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts MFA draws with fresh, calligraphic style alluding broadly to science fiction, war and malevolent, hybrid life forms. The imagery may not come from growing up in the war-torn Balkans (the artist says not), but by evoking everything from airplanes and insects to jellyfish and aquatic depths, the work conveys real and imagined battlegrounds. Best in the large show are 16 medallion drawings, framed by industrial steel plates, which conjure up the wheels of war.

CLEARANCE

by Tom Ryan

So, in simple terms, a "department-store installation" raises the question of what you're "selling". We have standardization, degradation of quality (the tradeoff for widespread and lowered cost), intrusion of advertising (secular propaganda), consumer materialism, obsession with (heavenly) imaged surfaces, price measurements, cynical manipulation of memory and desire, loss of soul. You name it -- the modern industrial, post-industrial world. From the futurists, to the atavists, to Andy Warhol to a slew of others. Artists raising the cry. But this is -- now -- almost banal. And, of course, materialism and consumer culture have, for the moment, won worldwide. Struggling against them merely tightens their grip, since raising a hue and cry lets the materialists define the field of battle.

If the message has something to do with accessibility or connection between art and everyday life, then you have to deal with the fact that merchandising is, on the whole, an alienating and dehumanizing experience...like matching parts on some kind of assembly line. Industrialized and optimized distribution. Certainly valuable in a certain light, but as certainly without soul. So this kind of accessibility (accessibility of art, too) would come at a very very high price. To force people to see the world they live in? Well maybe. But I would say most people are aware of what you present...and the vast majority either like it, or can see no alternatives. Holding a mirror up to the aesthetics of a culture does not, of itself, do anything to change that culture.