

"distanced" (or spaced out) to see racism, sexism and fascism not as content, but as harmless outlets for a kind of disco destructiveness that feeds the art world's voracious appetite for anything consumable.

Sometimes it's the ad that's retro. What, for example, was the "Talking Legs" exhibition? I'll never know because I refused to go and see; the announcement featured a pair of high-heel-booted, garter-belted female legs cut just above the crotch and standing over a toilet seat. Sometimes it's the title that's retro, as in the now notorious "Nigger Drawings" show in which the racist title was the only provocative aspect of a group of pleasant abstract drawings. And sometimes it's the art. The item that made me maddest last season was not "punk" but its suburban cousin: photorealism. The announcement showed a lovingly executed painting of a pretty upper-middle-class living room in which a work-clothed man is stabbing the lady of the house in the neck. Beautiful little drops of blood and all. It is called *The Sewing Room*, is dedicated "to Barbara," and was described in the press release as "color-coordinating an erotically charged narrative situation." (This has to come to you from the people who have not read the extraordinary letter in the *Village Voice*, October 22, 1979, which once and for all destroys the association of sex with rape, and by extension, with murder.) This painting, the blurb continued, was intended to "keep us cool by perfectly orchestrating layers of surface and narrative." It didn't keep *me* cool. Nor did a letter from the dealer, who was surprised by my lack of cool, denying the press release's neutral tone by insisting that this painting was a "pro-feminist statement"!

She did, however, ask two interesting questions. First, wouldn't I go see this kind of scene in the movies? (Absolutely not; while I don't always know ahead of time what I'm getting in the movies, I was forewarned here, and boycotted the show.) Second, would it be "more agreeable" to me if it had been painted by a woman? (I thought about this one before answering no again, and also wondered what woman would be able to stand the emotional trauma of working for three years on such an image, as the male artist did.)

The climate is so foggy nowadays that any artist whose work incorporates a newspaper headline, or even a photograph—especially a sleazy, grainy one—is immediately considered "political." But what politics? Speaking to whom and to what end? Mostly to nobody and to no end. Because it's not politics. It's art. And art is above it all . . . isn't it? If it's okay to use racist slurs and sexist violence, then why are esthetic taboos still exerted against "political" images taken past the artist's personalized cocoon and into arenas such as inflation, housing, starvation or rape? Because we all supposedly know about all that stuff already?

That "look of concern" communicated by rough typography, banal advertising images, and blurry, pseudoporn photographs is blatantly ambivalent as well as highly ambiguous. Which is where the audience comes in—the audience as everybody not making the work in question. Since audience and artist have no contact, no dialogue is possible, and we are left with that familiar question: What does it Mean? I happen to be personally attracted to the nonslick "look of concern." I look more closely. I see a guy in leather pointing a gun at me. I see Black people running down a street. I see a half-nude woman cringing in a corner. What am I seeing? Is this parody? Feminist satire? Gimmicky advertising? Cinéma vérité? Is the artist a fascist or a Marxist or nothing? Is s/he shrewdly wallowing in "politically incorrect" imagery while claiming to be "politically correct" in some subtle (read incomprehensible) way?

Since it's art—not photojournalism—there are usually no captions to such images, and sometimes there are titles that sound like rock groups or boutiques which either neutralize or are neutralized by the image. Compare the "Nigger Drawings" episode with the recent banning of a phototext work from a General Services Administration (GSA) exhibition in Washington, D.C. The photos were acceptable but the text ("a narrative indictment of military government, unequal distribution of wealth, violations of human rights and U.S. business involvement in South America") was unacceptable. When it was suggested that the photos be shown without text, Isabel Letelier, widow of the murdered Chilean diplomat, protested that "without the explanation, they are just lovely colorful pieces of work that have no point. That is exactly what Latin America is for the tourists who have no explanation."

And that is exactly what art is supposed to be. When art is not seen as communication on any level, when art becomes a blunt weapon with which to beat people on the head for no reason but one's own enjoyment (as in retrochic) rather than a sharp instrument of perception, analysis and "eye-opening" of one kind or another, then it becomes almost inevitable that art will be coopted by the status quo and become a neutralized symbol divorced from life, work and human need. In a period when everybody had better be thinking quick about what to do next about the world, art has been backed into a corner where artists are "allowed not to think" (as opposed to "not being allowed to think," which we condemn in other societies). This taboo effectively keeps artists out of the way and at the same time allows the present single-class buying art audience to mold it and its uses. The retrochic artist, thrashing around in the nursery like a spoiled child, is the latest version of the artist as divine idiot, neither respected nor paid, but kept docile on a daily dose of Ego.

I'm enough of an old-fashioned moralist to think art should offer a critique of the society it rides on and through, that part of its responsibility is to do so in collaboration with its audience. The critique can be done in as many ways as there are individual imaginations. But it does demand that the maker think about where an artwork goes next, to whom it is meant to mean what, and for what it is to be used. If artists won't take responsibility for art, who will? (Three guesses.) If your art incorporates an exploitative photograph of a woman being murdered, can you really get away with saying "I don't know why I chose that image it just *came* to me." (From where?) Or "I liked the diagonal her leg made. I liked the gesture. I was using the red of the blood to bring the illusionistic space up to the picture plane"? I know art speaks for itself. I know art says things you can't say in words. That's one of the things I like about art. On the other hand, I don't believe that visual language has hit such a poverty level no one is willing to admit it ever says *anything*. Even the most convinced formalist, Minimalist or post-whatsis should know what s/he really means on some fundamental level. And if what s/he means is fundamentally fascist, I'd like to see this recognized, questioned, and rejected by the art audience.

Martha Rosler, a West Coast Marxist feminist who makes narrative photo-text pieces, videos and performances—and is very clear about what they mean—sees them as "decoys" that "mimic some well-known cultural form so as to strip it of its mask of innocence." Ironically, this is the same esthetic ploy used by the retrochic artists whose work comes down on the far right. Sometimes the decoy is intentionally ineffective. Sometimes the decoy is too effective; the audience is