Third Text
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713448411

Protest and survive

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Online Publication Date: 01 December 2001

To cite this Article Phoca, Sophia(2001)'Protest and survive',Third Text,14:53,100 — 103
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09528820108576891
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576891

child into the world was seen as an unparalleled act of creation, and by analogy, the very process of weaving was seen as a metaphor for creation.

And here the Matrixial model begins to take form within the exhibition narrative. For rather than dwelling on existing psycho-analytic models of the relation between symbol formation (ie substitution) and creativity which are based on lack, absence, and separation or complete assimilation, the emphasis instead is on acceptance of the individual nature of the Other, and '...an *ethics* of exchange, acceptance and connection.' This model suggests a prenatal relation of reciprocal contact, 'the most intimate and the most unknown meeting in a profound alliance of difference' in the borderline zone of the psycho-corporeal. Rather than 'reading' motifs as a symbols, or the carpets and cloths simply as artefacts or objects, they become 'events in weaving', narratives of (inter)subjectivity and creativity: 'at the borderline,' of consciousness, codifying a pre-linguistic knowledge and *ethics* drawn from female experience.

Again, in metaphorical terms, weaving is seen as analogous to the 'ceaseless interweaving of relationships', one thread crossing another, a constant exchange between Self and Other.

1 See Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *Artworkings 1985-1999*, Palais Des Beaux-Arts, Brussels & Ludion Ghent, Amsterdam.

2 quotation taken from the press pack.

3 Paul Vandenbroeck, *AZETTA, L'art des femmes berbers*, Ludion Gand, Amsterdam/Flammarion & Societe de Exposition, Palais Des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 2000.

4 Jennifer Robinson, 'White Women Researching/Representing 'Others: From Anti-Apartheid to Postcolonialism', in *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Post Colonial Geographies*, eds Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose, Guildford Press. NY and London, 1994.

5 Oriental carpets are, for the most part, a courtly and urban tradition, commodified early on, and designed by male specialists to order, then woven by others.

6 See Pennina Barnett, Rugs R Us (and Them), *Third Text* no 30, Spring 1995.

7 Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, RKP, London 1981, in the chapter 'Crafty Women'.

8 Quotation from the information panels.

Borderline: L'art des femmes berberes was at the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, 25th February - 21st May 2000

Protest and Survive

Sophia Phoca

The Whitechapel gallery exhibition *Protest and Survive* has succeeded in one thing and that is to be ubiquitously offensive. Although this has become a sought after accolade in the arts when associated with shock tactics, provocation and irreverence; it is not a desirable stigma when answering to charges of narcissism, ignorance or worse.

Everyone has asked, what is this exhibition about? Including the show's curators, Matthew Higgs and Paul Noble (albeit rhetorically). Sarah Kent wisely suggests that 'perhaps they should have answered the question before selecting the show'. *Protest and Survive*, the title of the exhibition, was once a CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) call to arms. Appropriated for the purpose of this show, it nostalgically aims to represent political art from the sixties and in doing so, it falls hostage to all the criticisms made against it by the arts establishment. The show's extravagant claims that the list of forty works included 'deal, variously, with gender, race, class, identity, sexuality, idealism, passion, resistance, boredom, frustration and pleasure' do not help. The large amount of work on show inevitably draws attention to issues of inclusion/exclusion.

Viewing is dull and no sense of coherence or rigour emerges in terms of how the work is positioned in relation to each other. As each work stands alone, out of context, it becomes fragmented and lacking in meaning. The show is un-energising, without vigour, something which is not usually associated with political art. A lasting impression is a shopping list of who's who. At best it is reminiscent of early/mid eighties first year Cultural Studies programmes in British Art Colleges (Jo Spence, Gilbert & George, Richard Hamilton, Paul Graham, Cosey Fanni Tutti etc). At worse this show can be gimmicky and twee (Rob Pruitt's Evian fountain or Wolfgang Tillmans' photographic collaboration with The Big Issue). But in all cases the show tends to invite charges of exclusion. In fact, Protest and Survive seems to be more about the politics of exclusion than anything else. Sarah Kent disdainfully offers two eloquent lists of leading female and male artists who are conspicuously absent: 'Carolee Schneeman, Catherine Elwes, Alexis Hunter, Margaret Harrison, Rose Garrard, Susan Hiller, Martha Rosler, Barbara Kruger, Judy Chicago, Karen Finlay, Orlans,

speaks about the curators. Thompson's text reads 'one day son, all this will be art galleries', the cartoon is of a man and a boy looking over an industrial city. Is this the art world offering these curators their inheritance?

Similarly Bank's Lowry-like painting of matchstick men is self-referential, with the caption 'Would you be worried if one of these Northerners ceased to exist? In the process of mapping their identity, Higgs and Noble seem to have conveniently forgotten, like many others of their age, race and gender, that politics in Britain has extended beyond the nostalgia of a worthy Mike Leigh script on the so-called working-classes up North in the seventies.

Protest and Survive is not an exhibition of political art since the sixties. This is a show, which

talogue cover: CND March, Chorley, Lancashire,
te Seventies, image courtesy Chorley Guardian

maps the work that informed Matthew Higgs and Tim Noble in shaping their artistic/political psycho-geography. Their curator mate was right. This is a show about work they like because it speaks of their own history and their culture. It is a show, which defines them. Seen in this context the work curated makes sense, the random and seemingly unrigorous selection begins to take shape. It is vision of political art from a specific point of view. We have seen it all before.

What makes this show so problematic and offensive is not just that the mapping of political art has once again been assigned to the usual suspects but that this subject positioning is disavowed. Instead, *Protest and Survive* colonises the notion of political art, erases its key discourses on gender and race and then re-proposes political art, by silencing and assimilating the voices of the 'other'. What is strange however is that this does not seem to be a deliberate or strategic effort to sabotage 'other' political agendas. If this were the case Higgs and Noble would not have gone to considerable efforts to include the homoerotic work of Tom of Finland. This work has never before been shown in a public gallery in Britain and apparently caused some controversy with regard to the sponsor's (the financial company Bloomberg's) approval.

Despite the curator's ignorance of postcolonial art or confusion over gender/sexual politics, it is difficult to understand how anybody can stage a show of political art at the Whitechapel and ignore that the gallery is located in one of the most radical sites of political racial contestation in London?

Instead Thomas Hirschhorn, whose bridge links the Whitechapel's café with the anarchist Freedom bookshop, offers the only acknowledgement to the local area outside the gallery and clearly this has nothing to do with issues of race or the local Bengali community. Yet Higgs seems to be particularly proud of this piece. He confirms his desperate desire to be thought of as an anarchist as he states that Hirschhorn's work is 'a gentle reminder of anarchy's core values'. You get the feeling that he missed out on being a punk in the late seventies (punks didn't go on CND marches) and is now making up for this humiliating oversight, by trying to hold on to some dated concept of anarchy.

But the real issue here is why were Matthew Higgs and Paul Noble invited to curate such a show at the Whitechapel in the first place? Has the role of curator as author been given such celebrity status, that even galleries like the Whitechapel and curators like Judith Nesbitt, are under pressure to court the likes of celebrity curators

Paul Graham, *Baby, DHSS office, Birmingham 1984*, 1985, vintage ectacolour print, 76 x 101cm, courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery

Linda Benglis, Mary Kelly, Margaret Harrison, Yoko Ono, Gina Pane, Cynthia Plastercaster, and the Gorilla Girls' and 'Stuart Brisley, Conrad Atkinson, Hans Haacke, Chris Burden, Douglas Huebler, Vito Acconci, Peter Kennard, Victor Burgin and Rasheed Araeen'. Let alone the huge impact that black experimental filmmaking has had in Britain in the 1980's! What about the Black Audio Film Collective and Sankofa and all the other black artists/filmmakers who been excluded? The list is endless. But maybe this is not the right approach to understanding the show.

In defence of *Protest and Survive*, an East End gallery curator and a friend of Higgs' claimed that they only included work they like. So the reason that they have not sufficiently included work which deals with gender issues (apart from a token gesture towards Jo Spence, Valie Export, Cosey Fanni Tutti and the Hackney Flashers;) or work that has taken issues of race as its subject, is due to the fact that they do not like it. So maybe we should question what is it that they do like?

If anybody is in any doubt, look at the exhibition catalogue, it reveals all. What it seems they like rather a lot, given its prominent positioning, is the solipsistic image on the cover of the catalogue. This is a blown up photograph of Matthew Higgs, in Chorley, Lancashire, in the late seventies, on a CND March. Matthew Higgs, as a working class, 'shy, Northern boy', as he likes to define himself. So if you are in any doubt, it is quite clear, the show is about the curators and more specifically about Matthew Higgs.

If you're still unsure the *Observer* critic, Laura Cumming, offers further insight to this exhibition. Like Kent, Cummings dedicated her review of the exhibition to the notion of exclusion, in this case that of the cartoonist Steve Bell. She cannot explain why a cartoon by Robert Thompson has been included and not any by Bell. The reason is simple. The show is not about the artists included. It is about the work and specifically work which

like Matthew Higgs for the sake of publicity, no matter what they show? Given the local community's accusations that there has been little acknowledgement of its Bengali residents, this is surely another embarrassment for the gallery's compromised track record on race relations. Two years ago the gallery settled out of court after a job applicant accused the Whitechapel of race discrimination. Not much seems to have improved since, as the only black/Asian employees (except for a member of the 'ethnic minorities' in education – whatever that means) from the local community continue to be the cleaners. More significantly, the only show to exhibit Asian arts in the last couple of years, was hastily put together, lasted only three weeks and was curated by a couple of students. Surely this exhibition was a great opportunity to re-address such problems.

But at least this time the local community got a look-in at the lavish mostly-white (apart from the waiters), opening party which was rumoured to have cost in the region of £27,000, as local kids were allowed in for a Dickensian portion of strawberries and ice-cream.

Protest and Survive was at the Whitechapel, 15 September – 12 November 2000.

Dak'Art 2000

The Millennium Biennale?

Bisi Silva

The 5th of May 2000 witnessed the opening in Africa of the first biennnal of the new millennium. With the demise of the short-lived Johannesburg Biennale expectations were high and the onus on *Dak'Art 2000* to deliver was all the more acute. If the opening was anything to go by, the importance attached to the event resulted in no less than the presence of the newly elected President, Abdoulaye Wade, and other political heavyweights such as the Minister of Culture and Leader of the Senate gracing the ceremony. Following the warm reception for the Biennale's General Secretary, Remi Sagna, the president's speech seemed to be the climax of the event. Apart from the inevitable political diatribe, Wade's speech was peppered with choice promises that included the building of an art academy and a gallery of international standing. This obviously received a standing ovation. Only time will tell.

Dak'Art 2000 was divided into three sections: A group exhibition, a design and textile exhibition and individual artists' exhibition. The main exhibition at IFAN presented the work of 21 artists from ten countries. An international jury led by David Elliot, director of the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, made this selection from over 200 entries. South Africa was not only well represented through the works of Andries Botha and Tracey Rose, but it is Bernadette Searle's imposing digital photographic installation that won the Revelation (Newcomer) Prize. Whilst

Fatma M'seddi Charfi, *Installation Verticale*, plastic, plexiglass, tissue paper, 220 x 38 x 14cm, 1999.