

**“Going to the Dogs: Man (dressed as dog) Bites an Art Critic!
Notes from the Front-line of the Struggle for Attention
New York, Spring 1997”**

Art Papers, November-December 1997, Vol 21, Issue 6, pp. 78-80

A weekend in New York. A gallery-tour in SoHo. The April gallery map pocked with Day-Glo pink. Height of the season. Hundreds of people pass me by, going up and down, in and out of elevators. Swept into this strange choreography of rushing art consumers who share a similar look and blank expression, I asked myself: of all this surplus, what will ultimately turn out to be significant? What will leave even a tiny impression in my mind? I could not help thinking about the power center of the artworld producing all this abundance. Is this what they call "the crisis in art"? Has contemporary visual language really exhausted itself? Countless installations and performances, an enormous variety of objects and video pieces, an assortment of eccentricities. New-old variations on worn out ideas and themes. A fixed match with changing players. And so few thrills.

And now, after the experiences of the Whitney Biennial and Venice sink in, the recognition surfaces that these are probably the death throes of plastic art in the fight for its ever shrinking place within culture. As we reach the end of the second millennium, perhaps it's time "to call a spade a spade." This is a war – a desperate struggle for the gaze, for the attention of the poor viewer, who is losing patience with the plastic arts in favor of technological and media stimuli gradually taking over the remaining leisure cells in his weary brain. And poor artists (I find it difficult to ignore the pathetic aspect of this state of affairs), they are the cannon fodder in this crucial battle. In the final rounds, they are supposed to fit in the well-oiled systems of capital and control, and thus conquer for themselves a small place under the sun. They are the ones who are forced to intensify the stimulus in order to get the attention of the long awaited gaze. What else can they do in order to win recognition, if only momentary, in order not to disappear within the affluence of shallow supply? And let us not forget the price, for *a la guerre comme la guerre*, there are casualties on either side.

I must stop at this point and address the fact that intensifying the stimulus is not new or negative in itself. Testing, undermining, and subverting the limits of "good taste" have been and still remain an immanent part of modern and postmodern practice throughout the current century. We also accept the shock value inherent in what is known as abject art and the seductive appeal of the taboo – those twilight zones of the base and despicable. In light of this, it's even more important to state that the current war is already a totally

different matter. (I addressed these issues in two exhibitions, *Antipathos* and *Meta-Sex*, which I curated in Israel in 1993 and 1994).

In the introduction to the catalogue of the recent Whitney Biennial, curators Lisa Phillips and Louise Neri pose such elementary questions as: "**What does it mean to be an artist at the end of the millennium?** Has the role of the artist changed? Have the conditions of making art changed? How does an artist build a cosmology or tell a story that is private and individual and yet resonates with a more public reality? And how can an exhibition [such as the Biennial] in turn, tell the stories of these private worlds?" One of the answers they offer is that, after fifteen years of deconstructive practice, there is now some attempt to understand the chaos and grapple with the paradox and turbulence in the world through creative practice. If you take a clock apart, they say, you may find out how the clock is made and what makes it tick, but you will no longer be able to tell the time. This, they assert, is where deconstruction fell short. "The process of taking apart and putting back together describes a mechanism, but it doesn't reveal the central metaphysical."

In the spirit of this analogy, they state, art is one of the endless intersecting loops between imagination and reality, fact and fiction. If you try to isolate the imagination from reality, you will be left with only a partial experience, which is less important than the whole. In their text, Phillips and Neri refer to the pleasure involved in the attempt to embrace the absurdity or uncanniness of the chaos in the world. They discuss the poetics of identity as a substitute for the politics of identity, and the rediscovery of the irrational and the surrealist adventure that currently substitute for the deconstructive act. Art, in their opinion, can still dazzle, bewilder, take one's breath away, as it should. The artistic practice in the past two years is characterized, they maintain, by narrativity, dramatization, alienation, and isolation of real-life situations. These strategies are most effectively realized by artists whose medium is video or film, which are convincing means for conveying "reality" and "truth" by transforming fiction into reality.

More important than the debate over whether it is essential to "tell the time" and to explore the nature of that "imagination", which can allegedly be distilled out of the "reality", is that Phillips and Neri speak to the boundaries of art and the roles played by the artist and the viewer. These boundaries were a favored challenge, if not the very core of modernism, but today we are no longer concerned with the innocent Dadaist ambition of the beginning of the century – i.e., eliciting discomfort or shaking up the bourgeois. This is no longer about violations of order intending to subvert the ruling system, or at least undermining its foundations. This is a different story altogether, one that is about power, about ambitions coupled with the interests of a well-oiled

system. It is the battle for the attention/eye/gut of the viewer – and everything goes.

The battlefield, the fighters, and the fight interpreters are the protagonists of this report, which presents first impressions rather than lasting overviews. All the following works are characterized by pushing the edge (**Oleg Kulik**), touching the threshold of stimulus (**Andres Serrano**), inducing the feeling of nausea (**Paul McCarthy**), and obsessive yearning, imbued with self-irony, to penetrate the artworld's veneer (**Sean Landers**, **Bill Scanga**).

Serrano Upping the Ante — Children are the Limit

Andres Serrano's series of photographs, *A History of Sex*, exhibited at the new Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea, may serve as a test case for unbridled seduction. After providing the art world with some juicy, well-covered scandals – presenting a crucifix immersed in urine (1987), the *Ku Klux Klan* series, wretched homeless, and, finally morgue manipulations (1992)—it seems like he had nowhere else to go but directly to the most sensitive nerve of human existence. What can possibly compete with death, religion, and secretions if not sex? And not mere sex –Serrano has focused on "exceptional" coupling : a naked 87 year old woman with her 20 year old lover; a female clown indulging in oral sex; a fuck with a female dwarf; a wide range of S&M activities; surprising variations of anal sex; a woman pissing straight into her lover's open mouth; and climaxing with a naked young woman (an animal-lover banker, so says the press release) gripping the erect penis of a stallion.

The project was commissioned by the Groninger Museum, and Serrano started the series in Rome and completing it in Amsterdam. Serrano isolated and photographed the varied couplings against a pastoral background, usually fields and blue skies – an act that totally sterilizes the implied sexuality of the posing protagonists. In his typical highly polished style, all the photographs are large and glossy, with sharp, clean colors – elegant cibachromes with perfect finish.

In the press release issued by the gallery, as well as in dozens of interviews given by Serrano shortly before the opening events, the artist asserted that in Amsterdam he found male and female models who agreed to demonstrate their favorite sexual act. They were carefully selected according to their "distinctiveness" – the bizarreness characterizing their sexual preference – and for being "ordinary people" who are not usually thought of as sexually active. People with unusual physical attributes, such as dwarfs and contortionists, or the elderly are not often associated with sexuality; and this, according to Serrano, is what makes the images so threatening and upsetting. As usual, he implores us to regard his protagonists with compassion and love. He expresses his desire to find beauty in that which is perceived as ugly or

deviant; to highlight the beauty of human intimacy by exposing the sexuality of the socially rejected.

In a superb example of a politically correct (and unintentionally humorous) text, the gallery declares that Serrano is "examining" the diversity of human lifestyles and sexual habits by referring to classical mythology and Christian iconography: "birth and death, bodily functions, social status, religion, and ethnicity." Despite great effort, I could not detect any of these, save for bodily functions, in the sensational collection of positions I encountered.

Where do you draw the line? According to Serrano, for the time being, children are his taboo. He won't photograph children in erotic scenes, "because it would be too confusing", and he won't even pose them innocently because "in the context of the sex pictures it would be too explosive." For the artworld, it's another story: on one hand, from the market perspective, the works sold like hot cakes; on the other, the critical viewpoints I hear in New York question the abject nature of the series, to the extent that its dubious qualities cast a heavy and embarrassing cloud on everything Serrano has previously done. *A History of Sex* bares the deep unresolved conflict in Serrano's work, securing his reputation as a sensational photographer who will stop at nothing to make headlines.

Kulik — The Russian Dog

Another radical plea for attention emerges from Jeffrey Deitch's gallery (Deitch Projects) at the heart of SoHo. The Russian installation artist Oleg Kulik is locked up for two weeks in a doghouse-like construction erected in the gallery space. Stark naked, with only a collar around his neck, he steps into the role of a dog. The work is entitled "I BITE AMERICA AND AMERICA BITES ME" (a variation on Joseph Beuys' well-known work from 1974, "I LIKE AMERICA AND AMERICA LIKES ME", in which the artist was locked up with a coyote in a small room at the Rene Block Gallery in New York for a period of three weeks). As with Beuys, Kulik's project begins at the airport as soon as his plane lands in America. Straight after the customs and passport control, Kulik is put in a car (in Beuys' case, an ambulance) and his clothes are replaced by a collar, a leash, and a muzzle. From that moment on, he begins barking at the world. After parking on SoHo's Grand Street, Kulik sniffs the area for a while and shortly thereafter is taken into his "custom-made" cage in the gallery – minimalist architecture at its best. According to press reports, Kulik is pretty exhausted – it is not easy walking on all fours and being dragged with a leash through SoHo –so, he immediately stretched out on the mattress and falls asleep. His wife, who is also his trainer on such occasions, devotedly takes care of him throughout these two weeks, serving his food in aluminum bowls, taking him out for short walks on nice days (with his backside covered), and collecting his excrement which piled up at the corner

of the cage. During all the days (and nights) Kulik conducts himself like a dog, demonstrating the entire range of doggy behavior. In fact, the potty at the corner of the cage is the only evidence that this, after all, was a human being with basic needs.

Visitors are allowed to enter the cage, one by one, and play with the human-dog, but not before putting on a protective gown just in case Kulik became violent and tried to bite. According to the press release, the transition to a dog's life makes Kulik violent, territorial, unpredictable, and threatening – which, of course, is a concern to the gallery— and they don't want to take any risks. It turns out, Kulik has a much publicized (at least in the art magazines) record of arrests and lawsuits for disorderly conduct. In Stockholm, during the Interpol exhibition, he bit an art critic who disregarded the warnings. Following the incident, the exhibition curator and Kulik's ardent patron, Victor Misiano, Kulik himself, and another Russian artist (Alexander Brener, who vandalized works by other artists in the same exhibition) were boycotted by the international art community. All this did not prevent Kulik from continuing his performances. In Zurich he once again spent a night in detention, and, in the Rotterdam Manifesta, he played the role of Pavlov's dog, living in a lab and demonstrating the scientific experiments he had to suffer through. Once more, he ended up behind bars.

The stacks of press releases sent to me by the gallery (including features in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*) proved that Kulik is definitely the hottest Spring hit in New York. For some strange reason, obviously focusing on the sensational dimension while ignoring all others, critics compared Kulik's work to Chris Burden's performances, to Vito Acconci's psycho-dramas, and to Matthew Barney's epic performances. They said it is a piece of theater worth experiencing and that one cannot understand how authentic it is until one sees it for oneself. Of course, there were many references to Beuys' *Coyote*, including untenable interpretations and groundless comparisons. German Beuys' linking to the wild Indian origins (the coyote) was interpreted, inter alia, as the attempt of the West to civilize and domesticate wild America; while in Kulik's case, where the functions of man and animal are totally switched around, Kulik the dog symbolized Russia. The sensations evoked in the viewers by this reversal are interpreted as part of America's growing fears of Russia regressing to a more primitive state (sic, Roberta Smith, *New York Times*).

It is quite amazing (but also amusing) to discover that this experimental theater is actually supported by a theory that receives sophistic interpretations and scholarly essays, such as "The animal is the ultimate big Other and by uniting with it you will find true enjoyment, the lost animality of human nature" (to quote Reneta Saleci in *Index 4*, 1996). Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari,

Lacan and Freud, not to mention St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals, are all harnessed for the benefit of supporting this pseudo-ecological discourse. It appears that the heart of Kulik's theory lies in the biological fact that a human being is first and foremost an animal and only equality among all living creatures might prevent the ecological disaster that threatens planet Earth. He demands an immediate termination of human superiority on the planet (in science, politics and art) and equal rights for animals. With not even a bit of cynicism, he presents his doctrine, preaching love of animals who represent for him the qualities of freedom, savagery, and bestiality – qualities lost to mankind forever. All these arguments could be credible, if it were not for the way in which this beautiful "ideology" is translated into practice. Kulik's latest work in Venice is a video piece that must be viewed by peeking into the butts of three large cows. In the video, as in the accompanying photographs, Kulik is seen indulging in fervent sexual activity with assorted farmyard animals; no doubt, a consensual act, a unfettered interpretation of animal love.

McCarthy's Chocolate Batter

Paul McCarthy's untitled video piece/installation/performance (1997) exhibited in the Whitney Biennial also grapples with the humiliation of the artist, who is hungry for attention and doomed to devise dreams. McCarthy's piece also incorporates crawling and secretions (even if this time it is chocolate syrup), people who behave like animals, and the use of spectacular, theatrical language, along with special effects. But in this case, unlike Kulik's theoretical justification for his actions, you cannot tell what came first, the signifier or the signified, the medium or the message. Within a labyrinthine, wooden house-or attic-like structure, McCarthy presented his vision of the artist as Santa Claus, the man of surprises and special effects, the chocolate-candyman. The structure is positioned at the center of the space, evidence of the activity which had previously taken place inside: frenetic physical actions that were perpetuated on video and screened on all three walls.

Initially, the piece bore the working title "Santa Chocolate Shop" or "Santa's Theater", and the viewers were supposed to put on animal costumes and participate in the work. Eventually, both the title and the interaction with the audience were shelved. Now the scenario is centered around a lustful, sticky race; a group of penis-exposed men dressed as a kind of donkey-goat-deer, chasing a group of women (the assistants?) who are wearing partial elf-costumes. The lower parts of their bodies are exposed and they all boast a pinkie snout and sharpened ears. The physical activity includes crawling on all fours, climbing ladders, mixing stuff, and tasting. There is no need to specify the variety of associations brought to mind by a wallowing of intimate organs in chocolate syrup. At the center of this sticky drama is the Santa artist, exposing his buttocks while indulging in an embarrassing anal activity with his

assistants and the chocolate concoction. Gradually, the bodily efforts of the group members become a decadent orgy where Santa completely loses control.

There is no doubt that McCarthy is one of the best performance artists operating in the last two decades, and perhaps it is unfair to pick on a single work and isolate it from the larger context of his work. Nevertheless, where his former works maintained a critical distance through poignant satirical humor, the Whitney work is no longer humorous, nor does it provoke critical meditation beyond the simplistic explanation that contemporary art reflects contemporary life – in this case, a filthy one. This brutal theater is so repellent that it obstructs the viewer from contemplating more subtle meanings and metaphors, effectively distracting the mind by gaining the viewer's gaze. Only after looking through the texts and the artist's statement did I comprehend that the work embeds McCarthy's own dirty, satirical interpretation of one of the sweetest American myths – that of Christmas familial bliss. Also, the anal pleasure could be interpreted as an expression of a child-like, counter response to social prohibitions and cultural conditioning. But all these thoughts are swallowed up by the fantastic mixture of bodies and chocolate.

Landers — Experiences from the Loser's World

Though their means were somewhat different, two more exhibitions showcased in New York relate the artist and his attempts to conquer a place for himself under the sun. Sean Landers, exhibiting at Andrea Rosen, offers another, much more subtle, model of a man-artist-animal. Following his previous show approximately a year ago, this exhibition contains paintings without texts, featuring the artist as a creative ape. The show is funny and non-provocative for a change. In one of the paintings, *Space Ape on Mars: A Self Portrait* (1997), the artist is depicted as an astronaut-chimp on Mars painting an oil on canvas. Another work, *Robot and Bunny (Me and Michelle)* (1997), features a robot and a bunny in a pose taken from the famous scene of Manet's *D'jeuner sur l'herbe*.

Landers is well known for the confessional nature of his work, his intense tragicomic sincerity, and his moving self-exposure. He touches upon the power relations within the art world, confessing to things that only a few are willing to admit. The artist, according to Landers, is the loser clown, whose narcissistic games are supposed to satisfy the viewer's voyeuristic tendencies. In a press release issued by the gallery, Landers wrote: "I stopped writing [in the works] after my last New York Show because I, like most of you, were sick to hell of my babbling. I'd wake up in the middle of the night to audible dreams of crowds of people screaming at me to shut-up... Anyway, in the middle of making a word painting called *Nothing New in Thirty-three Years*, I decided to hang it up. Cast from the literary garden of Eden, I've

terminated my multi-layered nakedness and donned a fig leaf.... I hope you like my new art work because if you don't, I'm fucked. Sincerely, Sean Landers. P.S. I love you very very much."

Scanga — Mice at the MET

Bill Scanga's installation *At The MET* on display at the TZ'ART Gallery, also sheds an ironic, amusing light on the interrelations between artist and audience, only this time the audience comprises taxidermic mice. Miniature replicas of nineteenth-century American landscapes hang on a crimson wall (an exact miniature replica of a particular room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in which each painting's height is no larger than three inches). Facing them are stuffed mice demonstrating typical viewer reactions: fear, suspicion, wonder, boredom, anger, and perplexity. Less than one-half inch in height, the familiar Metropolitan gift shop paper bags lay at their feet. Another work, *Livingroom (Tom & Jerry)* (1997), features a typical American living room centered around the TV, also scaled down to mouse size. A family of enthusiastic mice are seen nibbling away pleasurably, while watching Tom and Jerry cartoons on a tiny TV screen. The miniature room is designed like a period room, with embellished wallpaper, Persian rug, antique chairs, and a love seat, including magazines carelessly strewn on the corner table. A work entitled *Zoo* is installed in another corner of the gallery. Here, for a change, the taxidermic mice are sitting on a bench, watching a bunch of live mice who reside in a glass-covered hole in the wall.

In the same week Scanga's exhibition was highly recommended by both the *Village Voice* and the *Time Out* "Best-In-Town" lists. The role reversal and the questions it raises – who is the viewer and who is the artist? Who represents nature and who represents culture? Who is dead and who is alive? – render this show amusing and thought-provoking.

In a century paved with subversive trespassing, artistic provocations of every sort, and increasing retinal stimulations, it seems that in the 1980s and 90s, we can seldom speak of trespassing in terms of idealistic social revolution. Likewise, the explanation offered by the "mirror principle" – which locates current art as a reflection of a disintegrating reality without a center or signposts, as an expression of a crazy world descending into its own destruction – is no longer adequate. This basic assumption is now accompanied by a less attractive explanation, one that introduces the intensity of stimulus and the reinforcement of sensation as part of a violent battle between market forces and interests operating within the ever-shrinking cultural arena.

After all, nowadays it's all about screen time and popularity. The Nielson rating has even drilled its way into the elitist sphere of art. In this battle for

attention, it is hard to tell who wins and who loses, even more so since the definitions of "victory" and "defeat" are bound to be controversial. What will remain of all this, and what will be shoved into the corner of provocation and perversion within the history of twentieth-century art? Will the shock effect retain its power over the course of time? Is the sensational dimension enough? And if so, for what? To make headlines? To be a good sales pitch? To gain the artists entry into the history books? To oil the art market machine? Or, maybe to render new insights?

In my own mind, although this battle will be waged for years to come, one thing has already become clear: all this talk about the struggle to survive is, in itself, symptomatic of an era that is extremely stingy with regard to plastic art.