artnet

Print Article

Left to right: Trevor Paglen's *Control Tower/Cactus Flat, NV/11:55 a.m./Distance ~20 miles* (2006), *Canyons and Unidentified Vehicle/Tonopah Test Range, NV/Distance ~18 miles/12:45 pm* (2006) and *Large Hangars and Fuel Storage/Tonopah Test Range, NV/Distance ~18 miles/10:44 pm* (2005), at Bellwether

Trevor Paglen
Tail Numbers/Gold Coast Terminal, Las Vegas, NV/Distance ~1 mile/5:27 pm
2005

Trevor Paglen
Morning Commute (Gold Coast Terminal)/Las Vegas, NV/Distance ~1 mile/6:26 am
2005
Bellwether

ESTHETIC POLITICS?
by Ben Davis

Of all the boondoggles of the current art-critical game, one of the biggest has got to be the idea of "esthetic politics." Every few weeks, it seems, in some publication, somewhere, another critic unveils some version of this idea as if it were the most revolutionary discovery since Marcel Duchamp put a toilet on a plinth.

The thought, such as it is, goes something like this: What we are in need of today, in our troubled political times, is a "new politics." And the values of art -- irony, ambiguity, refinement, an openness to more than one interpretation -- provide the model for this saving political ideology. It is a notion with considerable seductive power, for obvious reasons. Not only does it seem to provide a happy alternative to the three deadly "P"s one associates with political art -- propaganda, posters and puppets -- but it also grants new importance to art itself. Art becomes not just a pleasant pastime, but a form of superior wisdom.

1.

This trope pops up in a variety of places, veiled and not-so-veiled. A particularly full-throated example came in the Fall 2007 *Art Journal*, where U Penn prof Karen Beckman analyzes the photographs of Trevor Paglen. Paglen's photos document CIA "extraordinary renditions," and are taken using a telephoto lens at extreme distances, giving them a distorted, murky look. Starting from the esthetic quality of the disturbing images -- which have been compared, by the artist himself, to Impressionist paintings -- Beckman argues that the value of Paglen's project is that it illustrates "what activism would look like if it were founded on ambiguity, incomplete understanding, doubt, and obscurity, rather than slogans, unity, loyalty, and coherence."

Full disclosure: In the course of her argument, Beckman briefly uses my own review of Paglen's 2006 show at Bellwether [see "Black Site Specific," Dec. 7, 2006] as an example of a more ham-fisted political reading of art and politics. In my review, I call Paglen's photos "negative political art," meaning that in foregrounding their own esthetic character, the artist is calling attention to the uneasy, unstable relation between artistic and political activism. Beckman, on the other hand, turns estheticization into a political virtue in itself: "Paglen's photographs," she writes, "allow us to begin better to glimpse. . . what the aesthetics of photography can offer the sphere of ethics and politics *beyond* evidence, in a moment where ambiguity and otherness constitute two of the targets of the war on terror."

Except, last time I checked, the victims of the "war on terror" were not some undefined "ambiguity and otherness," but rather Arabs and Muslims, specifically, and political dissent, more generally. Is Beckman *really* saying that if you "unambiguously" denounce the Patriot Act, then Bush wins?

Her larger thought is that the way photographic "evidence" of government crimes like Abu Ghraib is wielded by activists somehow mirrors the crude way that the government uses "evidence" to

Trevor Paglen
Large Hangars and Fuel Storage/Tonopah Test Range, NV/Distance ~18 miles/10:44 am
2005
Bellwether

Trevor Paglen
Control Tower/Cactus Flat, NV/11:55 a.m./Distance ~ 20 miles
2005
Bellwether

Trevor Paglen
Chemical and Biological Weapons Proving Ground/Dugway, UT/Distance ~22 miles/11:17 am
2005
Bellwether

Kara Walker
The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven
1995
Collection Jeffrey Deitch
Photo courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

support its own claims, so that protestors run the risk of being drawn into the very system they are resisting. Yet the antiwar movement did just fine mobilizing doubt about the photographic evidence produced by the Bush administration prior to the Iraq War -- recall, the 2003 invasion was preceded by the largest coordinated demonstrations in human history, despite an unrelenting pro-war push in the mainstream media. The fact that this movement didn't sustain itself on this scale had much more to do with a lack of sustained political organization -- i.e. unity, loyalty and coherence -- than with the need for a metaphysical critique of the very possibility of bearing witness.

The "esthetic politics" angle that Beckman finds in Paglen's work is real, but it explains its political limitations, not its virtues. To every antiwar activist I have talked to about the subject, Paglen's decision to limit the reproduction of his photo of the "Salt Pit" -- the only known image of the CIA's secret prison in Afghanistan -- to an edition of one, priced at $20,000, is a total non-sequitur. Done as a nod to maintaining the unknowability of the subject matter, it seems a huge wasted opportunity to publicize the ugly underside of the U.S.'s "good war" in Afghanistan.

2.

For understandable reasons, the abstract "esthetic politics" trope is mainly the province of academia. Yet it does pop up in more coded ways in popular writing on art. Take a review in the *Village Voice* of the Kara Walker survey at the Whitney last year, by the formidable Christian Viveros-Faune (when he was still permitted to be a critic). As the crescendo of a glowing review, Viveros-Faune recalls the boycott of Walker's work organized by Civil Rights generation African-American artists like Beyte Saar and Howardena Pindell, declaring that this censorious climate gives Walker's free-floating historical horror show "the transgressive frisson of samizdat under Stalinism." He then approvingly quotes Walker saying that she wants to suck her viewers "into history, into fiction, into something totally demeaning and possibly very beautiful," and concludes that "Walker's capacious art addresses everyone -- young and old, black and white, guilty-feeling and not -- as ultimately sinning and sinned against."

The circle is thus closed. Walker's transformation of the brutality of slavery into a motif -- "a fiction," something "possibly very beautiful" -- is not just an esthetic choice, but in fact a form of political wisdom, even heroic resistance against more backwards types who insist that this imagery still has historical weight. Yet what kind of wisdom is the lesson that we are all equally "sinning and sinned against?" Is this really a way to reckon with racism at all? Isn't it a bit like the white suburban dad musing, "Sure, young Black men get hassled by the cops on my street -- but I bet I'd get some pretty dirty looks up in Harlem too!"

The "esthetic" move of insisting that the only problem is that we take racially charged images too seriously is pure ideology. It is so for the reason that racism remains a formidable material reality for millions of people. The problem is *not* that we are too politically correct, that if we could only just achieve the proper sense of cosmopolitan distance towards Walker's image of a "'negress'. . . and a Confederate rebel in a tit-sucking, drumstick-dropping embrace" (Viveros-Faune's description), then we could get along better. In everything from who is losing their homes in the subprime mortgage crisis to who is in prison, the disparities faced by people of color today remain terrifyingly real. (In fact, the protests in Jena, La., were exploding around the time Viveros-Faune penned his review -- protests that can be traced back to the appearance of a very unironic symbol of the segregationist South, a noose in a tree.)

Kara Walker
Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart (detail)
1994
Installation view at the Walker Art Center, Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.
Photo by Gene Pittman

Kara Walker
Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart (detail)
1994
Installation view at the Walker Art Center, Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.
Photo by Gene Pittman

Kara Walker
Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart (detail)
1994
Installation view at the Walker Art Center, Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.
Photo by Gene Pittman

Kara Walker
Slavery! Slavery!. . . (detail)
1997

It is worth noting too that Saar is not necessarily the Stalinist puritan that Viveros-Faune insinuates. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, her excellent 1972 piece recently seen in the "Wack!" show of feminist art at P.S.1 openly appropriates the racist figure of Aunt Jemima. A Jemima figurine is framed like a saint in a sort of faux reliquary, and holding a portrait of herself as a Virgin Mary, except the child she is holding is the white baby of the master, while she stands atop clouds that are made of cotton (a historically charged substance, if ever there was one). But most importantly, Saar's Aunt Jemima is toting a shotgun -- a prop which gives the caricatured smile on her face a new significance, to say the least! Here is a real example of "taking back" a stereotype, proving that the political issue is not whether or not you should use this kind of imagery. Just whether, politically, it is important to say something about it.

3.

Why is this "esthetic politics" line of thinking so tempting to the art world? The pages of *October* magazine's recent issue on art's response to the Iraq War provides some food for thought in this direction. Put together by grim neo-Marxist guru Benjamin Buchloh and disciple Rachel Churner, the book-length (240 pages) special edition of the once-prominent cultural theory magazine asks why more artists and artworks aren't achieving the popular impact of Vietnam-era protest art. It offers anti-war musings from a broad list of figures (albeit ones who don't stray too far beyond the list of usual suspects for *October*) like *Artforum* editor Tim Griffin and former Drawing Center curator Catherine de Zegher, or artists Liam Gillick, Hans Haacke and Yvonne Rainer.

The issue does hold some pretty clear-cut examples of "esthetic politics." Curator Christopher Bedford, for instance, holds out Julia Meltzer and David Thorne's art film *We will live to see these things* -- a beautiful, nonlinear, meditative look at life in Syria -- as a model of vital political rebellion specifically because "[i]ts observational neutrality -- studiously achieved -- is, in effect, a form of passive resistance that very quietly but incessantly proffers a documentary model that rejects the use of images as divisive, propagandistic weapons."

At the same time, the magazine also provides examples of the full available gamut of intellectual approaches to the question of art and politics, from Bedford on the one end all the way to Harvard prof Carrie Lambert-Beatty on the other. Lambert-Beatty improbably calls not just for an "art of protest," but for an "art of policy." That is, she doesn't just want political themes or analysis, she wants artists to actually solve the problems of Iraqis, in the form of "[c]ells of artist-wonks incubating ideas and launching experiments that inspire imaginative solutions while publicizing the needs of Iraqis and calling to conscience the U.S. and its allies." Her models are the Danish art collective Superflex's project of helping Brazilian farmers create their own commercial soda, and Dutch artist Rebecca Gomperts' Woman on Waves initiative to operate a boat that provides abortions. Good luck with that.

In fact, scanning the 42 assembled responses in this issue of *October*, what stands out is just how little consensus there is about even basic *factual* questions about art and the Iraq war. Depending on who is writing, either no political art is being produced, or there is political art aplenty; the art world is too sophisticated in its approach to political content, or too committed to "CNN realism." The impression one gets of the art world as a whole is that it is politically rudderless, without any coherent ideology besides a vague sense of shared outrage. No one bothers to make a clear case about the aims of the U.S. in the Middle East, or whether or not the U.S. should withdraw from the country, as if everyone agreed on these things. Instead, you get Kaja Silverman's ten pages of psychobabble about

Collections of Peter Norton and Eileen Harris Norton

Kara Walker
Untitled (The Oppressor/Oppressed Paradigm)
1994
Walker Art Center

Kara Walker
Before the Battle (Chickin' Dumplin')
1995

Betye Saar
The Liberation of Aunt Jemima
1972

how the war is explained by the Freudian myth of the primal horde, or artist Silvia Kolbowski, bafflingly, dedicating her space to reproducing the lyrics of Bob Dylan's *Ballad of a Thin Man* in the style of a cell phone text message.

Most telling, however, is Buchloh and Churner's own introduction. A scant one page into the issue, this dynamic duo drops the following gem: U.S. students today, they declare ominously, have "adopted, by and large, a pervasive *Untertan* mentality." In a footnote, they helpfully explain, "We are using this untranslatable German term because of its historical precision in identifying the authoritarian personality of the fully subjected subject and its servility to the authority of the State, as Heinrich Mann portrayed it in his 1914 novel of that title." An untranslatable German term? And they wonder why contemporary antiwar intellectuals fail to connect with popular sentiment.

The point is this: This is *October* magazine; these are the *politicos* of the art world. No wonder that against the background of this completely abstract political sentiment, some folks develop the notion that a completely abstract political statement might be just what the PhD dissertation advisor ordered. Returning to Bedford, behind his own "esthetic politics" is an outlandish explanation for the origins of the Iraq War (inherited from the neo-Situationist writings of the Retort collective): The war was waged as revenge for 9/11, Bedford tells us, "a literally genocidal search for righteous images of military retaliation iconic (and reproducible) enough to counter the looming shadow presence of the towers." Oh really? Nothing to do with the geostrategic importance of oil, then?

"Esthetic politics," at last, is not just the wrong answer to the right question. The question that it thinks it is answering -- the political vision that it is based upon -- is wrong at the start, removed from any clear-eyed material analysis of the forces that affect the world.

4.

Within contemporary academic circles, the king of this kind of thinking is crypto-anarchist French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who lends a certain Continental authority to the theme and features as a reference for more than one *October* contributor. Last year in *Artforum*, the man himself was interviewed and made the case for the relevance of his way of conceptualizing the "politics of the aesthetic" in relation to the recent photos of French New Wave filmmaker Chris Marker (among others). Let us then, finally, test out the political relevance of the idea with respect to these works, seen at Peter Blum gallery in New York last year.

This show consisted of black-and-white images, extracted from the breadth of Marker's film oeuvre, rendered with a distorted, pixilated character that gives them a distanced feeling, as if you were looking at the originals through water. Curator Bill Horrigan notes that the "seed" of the exhibition was a series of stills from recent protest footage, which Marker isolated while he was putting together his wry 2004 documentary, *The Case of the Grinning Cat*, a work which charts the appearance of a particular piece of surreal graffiti -- a grinning, yellow cat -- against the background of the political turbulence of recent anti-fascist and student protests in Paris. Yet despite this concrete starting point, it must be recognized that Rancière's notion about these stills -- that they are not about "a technique for identifying individuals" but rather "a tactic for blurring identities. . . to blur roles, to extricate characters from their documentary identity" -- has a real relevance to understanding what Marker is up to.

At Peter Blum, several walls were occupied by the protest stills, arranged chronologically. This sequence begins with pictures from a

October 123

Left to right: critic Benjamin Buchloh, dealer Marian Goodman and artist Gabriel Orozco

Julia Meltzer and David Thorne
We will live to see these things (still)
2007

Superflex's *Guarana Power* in Brazil

The Women on Waves boat at dock in Portugal

1961 demonstration against the French occupation of Algeria, followed by images that are recognizably from *The Sixth Side of the Pentagon*, Marker's righteous 1967 documentary about the march on the Pentagon in the U.S., a high point in the era's anti-war opposition. These images, like the film they come from, have the feeling of being in the thick of the action (this sense of immediacy is enforced by a rare, blurred pic that features Marker himself, a lean man being hustled away by the police.)

Referring to this work, Jason Simon, also in *Artforum*, opined that "Marker's archive calls to account the current age, seemingly robbed of its will to look back at power with the full force of history." Simon himself hasn't stared hard enough at the works. Following the Pentagon demonstration images, there are some picturesque frames of May '68 in Paris -- and then the images jump forward to the new millennium, and we are amid the protests from *The Case of the Grinning Cat* that inspired the project. A marked difference between the two eras is evident, however. In the '60s photos, a motif is cops, looming over the protagonists or coming at them, and hence the sense of challenging power. In the post-2001 photos, a single policeman is represented, and his back is turned to the camera. Marker's lens lingers instead on grizzled old leftists and, especially, attractive young women lit up by political ardor. Both the '60s and the '00s images are often blurred or obscured, in classic Marker fashion. But in the earlier ones, the blurring represents being engaged in the action; in the later, it represents distraction.

At the conclusion of Marker's *The Sixth Side of the Pentagon* -- a searing, artful piece of agitprop -- the narrator asserts of the student protestors who have spent the night in jail that the one certain thing for them is that "they had changed forever." Compare this to a wall-text Marker inserts in the Blum exhibition beside the May '68 photos: He quotes Abbie Hoffman, "We were young, we were reckless, arrogant, silly, headstrong -- and we were right." Then, clearly reflecting on the present Iraq War, Marker adds, "Yet [Hoffman] also said, 'We ended the idea that you can send a million soldiers ten thousand miles away to fight a war that people do not support.' How could he figure that one day those very people could support, at least for a while, the wrong war?" The esthetic "opening up" of his earlier images of militant protest, thus, does represent a political statement -- but it is not a rallying cry. It is a statement of disillusionment. The reemphasis on the earlier images' free-floating, decontextualized esthetic dimension flows from this.

"My main reason to be here has nothing to do with the intricacies of world politics," Marker narrates in *The Case of the Grinning Cat*, referring to his compulsion to film the various demonstrations. The reason he is present, of course, is to hunt for a detail in the crowd that has taken on an unexplained private significance for him -- the cartoon of a grinning cat. As a poetic notion, this has a certain pathos. As a strategy for social change, is it thin gruel. The demonstrators who carried signs that proclaimed "Make Cats, Not War" and sported grinning cat masks are no better nor worse than the Yippies Marker captured in 1967, who sought to end the Vietnam war by chanting "Out, Demons, Out" and levitating the Pentagon.

Other aspects of Marker's Blum show only reconfirm the overall effect. Alongside the montage of protest stills, another section features paired images drawn from various documentary works, mainly faces of people staring soulfully at the camera. The accompanying texts make it clear that the individual images have an often overwhelming historical weight for Marker, but are here paired according to abstract formal rhymes or personal associations. For instance, a figure identified by the text as a worker in an occupied factory in Allende's Chile, proudly brandishing a tool -- an image haunted by the fact that the man may well have been killed or

Jacques Rancière at a conference held in the Universidad Internacional de Andalucía, in Seville, Spain, in 2006

The Case of the Grinning Cat

Image from "Staring Back," by Chris Marker, seen at Peter Blum gallery

Chris Marker himself, captured in an image from *The Sixth Side of the Pentagon*, in "Staring Back," seen at Peter Blum gallery

tortured shortly after by Pinochet's goon squad -- is paired with a Korean archer, holding his bow, identified as having just won a contest. The nonlinear, free-associative installation strategy is thus a device serving as a pain-killer, dulling the trauma of actual historical knowledge.

A third and final element at Blum was a roomful of images of animals -- caged lions and monkeys, a playing seal, a cat sitting on a gravestone. That is, images of pure consciousness, touching on history but innocent of its significance.

Where, then, does all this leave advocates who want to stump for the *political* enlightenment of this kind of project? At the end of the day, Marker's own "esthetic politics" is *explicitly* world-weariness and withdrawal, not a cogent answer to the questions of his moment, as Rancière and many others imply.

I wanted to end with the Marker show because I like Marker, and his Peter Blum exhibition had a haunted, valedictory loveliness that is undeniable. Yet it is vital to disentangle what is esthetically affecting from what is politically effective. There is a huge temptation for art criticism -- and art-making, for that matter -- in its eternal quest for relevance, to exaggerate the significance of its own insights.

It is not out of the question that some esoteric stylistic tic might have political force -- abstraction really did have a subversive charge in the former USSR -- but not in itself. The political value of an esthetic choice is never *a priori*, but must always be tied back to an assessment of how the choice interacts with the actual forces at play in a live political situation.

Inasmuch as the proponents of the various brands of "esthetic politics" do this, in general, their assessment of the world is simply wrong. As a critical trope, "esthetic politics" is more an excuse not to be engaged in the difficult, ugly business of organizing than it is a way of contributing to it. One might add that, by proposing artistic refinement as a model for political relevance, it makes promises for esthetics that esthetics can't keep. In the end, "esthetic politics" is a disaster for both of the fields that it claims to bring together.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at bdavis@artnet.com

Image from "Staring Back," by Chris Marker, seen at Peter Blum gallery

Image from "Staring Back," by Chris Marker, seen at Peter Blum gallery

Image from "Staring Back," by Chris Marker, seen at Peter Blum gallery

The Sixth Side of the Pentagon / The Embassy

Image of a Chilean factory worker, from Chris Marker's "Staring Back," seen at Peter Blum gallery

Image of a Korean archer, from Chris Marker's "Staring Back," seen at Peter Blum gallery

Image from "Staring Back," by Chris Marker, seen at Peter Blum gallery