

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Vulture

The Art World Needs a Jolt. The Electricity Is Coming from Some Surprising Places

Jerry Saltz

29 June 2017

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Image: A piece in Ai Weiwei's multipart project "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors." Photo: Ai Weiwei Studio/Ai Weiwei

We're living through a political paradigm shift, which means that the real world feels excruciatingly alive, with everything at stake and in spin. And yet the more I look for signs of similar vitality in the big-picture art world, where I always look for signs of new life, the more frustrated I've become. I think of Marianne Moore's poem on her beloved subject, "Poetry," which begins, "I, too, dislike it."

I've been thinking this way at least since I visited "Wrong Side of History" last month, an edgy group show addressing Trump's America, its rising white nationalism, nativism, and Republican cruelty. It's all politics, but there

was enough good art and optical agency in "Wrong Side of History" to recommend the show: In addition to well-knowns — including Martha Rosler, Shirin Neshat, Raymond Pettibon, Sue Coe, Lady Pink, Lee Quinones, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, and David Wojnarowicz — there's Robert Upham, of the Dakota Sioux, whose new ledger drawing was made at the recent Standing Rock protests; Australian Colleen O'Reilly's knotty drawing of a woman raising her leg to pee on a tubby Donald Trump; and a beautiful painting by gallerist Andrew Castrucci's mother, Dolores, of a recent American air raid in the Middle East. And yet I left dejected — not about the show, but about the state of the art world. Perhaps "feeling this way" is more accurate.

Let me begin with the gallery. Bullet Space is located on the ground floor of a six-story tenement that Castrucci and others began occupying illegally in 1986; it's named for the type of heroin then sold here. Castrucci and others lived here for years with just one working bathroom for the whole building, jerry-rigged illegal electricity, wood-burning stoves for heat, and an entrance knocked out at the building's rear. (The building was legalized in 2009.)

The newspaper catalogue accompanying the show had three outstanding essays. Castrucci's begins, "It's hard to image that we are here again." He's referring to a 1985 Bullet Space show "critiquing Reaganland's homophobic ignorance of the AIDS crisis," and the most powerful effect of the show, in the end, is its reminder that we are here again — angry in many of the same ways, including at each other, however new and grotesque everything since the election has seemed. Castrucci calls Trump "a mad king obsessed with shiny gold objects." This reminded me that a madman who thinks he's king is only king if others believe him. Artist Tom McGlynn — who was on the September 1991 cover of Artforum with an image that broke the heart in the classic "I [heart] NY" logo

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— writes how “tactical aesthetics and the systematic symbolization of the real are now employed by the radical right.” He traces this to the Bush spokesmen who dismissed “the reality-based community” and said “we create our own reality.” Indeed, I believe that Trump’s red MAGA hat — which I see as an American swastika — is the most powerfully branded object made in my lifetime. It should be placed on display at MoMA until he is out of office, as recognition that this hat is on all of us. “It’s hard to be sure where the wrong side of history is,” the great critic Carlo McCormick writes in the third essay. “But you can always tell when you’re there, or very close.” The problem is, he goes on, “even when we win the culture wars we end up losers.” Like Clinton and Gore getting more votes but still losing.

But it was a line in Castrucci’s essay that most stuck with me: “I hate political art.” When I asked him what that meant, he said, “There has to be a third layer to the work. It can’t just be the politics and the image.” I asked, “What’s the third layer?” He said, “Art and matter.” Amen.

Like Castrucci, I don’t see much out there in the larger art world — at the big biennials and international windings that are supposedly almost all activist art these days — that seems to offer much more than the text and obvious image; and the politics are always the same: “I went to this political hot spot and I’m concerned.” The “Wrong Side of History” made me think about LARGE art-world systems, institutions, how we define “the culture war,” and radicality.

I love the art world; great art is getting made and shown. Art will live, as always. But we all have to admit that the art world isn’t the definition of radical right now. There’s still too much inbred art about itself or otherwise so specialized that it takes reams of explaining in almost unreadable texts just to say why it’s relevant at all — and those things that might feel relevant, or radical, in another context often get so buffered and wrapped in the wealth of the system — fancy museums, big biennials — that they cease to offer anything truly new-seeming. That is more a problem for the art world than art and artists, it’s true. And yet there are artists and subjects so hip right now that people are afraid to even criticize them, and whose concerns are so high that only a dog might know what’s going on. The art world often seems to consist mainly of an enormous, semidetached, comped “in” crowd that are always together — traveling the world, reinforcing their own norms, telling themselves and us that this is the definition of the avant-garde and that they’re concerned.

If you are thinking to yourself, “It’s hard to imagine that we are here again” — I admit it, I have felt this way before about the glitzy art world. And I’ve even written about it before, too, probably every couple of years since this brave new world was forged in the 1990s. But however stale and stultifying I may have found these forces in, say, 2010, they feel many times more so now — when the culture is crying out for attention, when politics is trying to shake us all awake, and when the narrow-minded cosmopolitanism of the global art world looks less like a go-with-the-flow complacency than a willful zombie procession. I don’t even yearn for new political art — like Castrucci, I often find work that is explicitly political to be fairly simple and unsatisfying. What I do think we need is some sign of new energy, new activity — political or not, I want to know that the art world is capable of agitating itself again. What makes this seem such a far-fetched hope is that art and its institutions have been able to commodify and incorporate so many acts of resistance and criticism. Over the last 20 years, art critiqued colonialism, capitalism, sexism, racism, and itself, even as it was involved with these things. Growing ever larger, busier, and more efficient, this world even survived Osama bin Laden, the Iraq War, and an international economic collapse. Almost unaffected. I hope the same isn’t true of Trump and Brexit. But it’s possible.

Just look at the big shows: In June, much of this art world went en masse to big exhibitions like Documenta and the Venice Biennale before decamping to the tony Art Basel. Every artist account confirmed that that two shows were packed with the by-now absolutely generic, increasingly irrelevant, international curatorial aesthetic of the day. Former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis condemned Documenta as “crisis tourism.” He means all the late-late neo-conceptual art taught in schools and adored by curators everywhere that consists of endless

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documents, books, snipped pictures, and videos in vitrines and on tables and floors, in piles or neatly arranged with other leaning or placed objects often with photos and films of refugees or put-upon nations. It's like artists have become news anchorpeople showing up everywhere. The problem is not their concern (we are all as concerned as one another), the subject matter of these works, or their "seriousness." No one thinks that art should only be soft, silly, pretty, easily accessible, or beautiful. Or that serious subjects cannot be served by art. And labels are great. The problem is how unoriginal, imitative, obvious, and bathos-filled they are. How they all look more or less the same.

This is true, unfortunately, with Ai Weiwei's vacuous Armory installation, Hansel and Gretel, done with starchitects Herzog and de Meuron. It was curated by two members of the international curatorial elite, Tom Eccles (a genius I adore and who should have known better) and Hans Ulrich Obrist (who probably doesn't). The 55,000-square-foot main hall is dark except for hovering buzzing objects and nets overhead. The curators say this is "a menacing dystopian forest of projected light and visitors tracked by infrared cameras and drones." People pay \$15 to wander aimlessly looking at their own images on the floor below them. This folly is the world's largest selfie machine — art world "fake news." If we're demanding Republicans call out their own it's time the art world did this to itself, too: quickly, clearly, and with passion.

Of course, there are signs of life. Fortnight Institute is run by two young women who support the gallery with full-time jobs: Jane Harmon runs Richard Prince's studio; Fabiola Alondra is director of 303 in Print, publisher of limited-edition books and ephemera by 303 gallery artists. The East Village storefront space is 290 square feet. This kind of density is something we've lost in many of our overly big showrooms. Since opening last year the two have been on fire. Last season saw "Dicks," a group show of mainly women depicting said subject. Recently there were the self-love/self-hate/self-taught nudes of Stacy Leigh. Both shows were too weird to ever be written about in official organs like Artforum. Now come the small geometric abstractions of Peter Shear who combines personal geometries, Andrew Masullo and Raoul De Keyser. Bookmark this artist.

A few blocks away on East Second Street, don't miss Karma. Since it opened in 2011 as a West Village book shop (where artist Rob Pruitt once sat naked for book signings), and then while occupying a beautiful Great Jones Street space that now houses excellent Zurich powerhouse Presenhuber gallery, Karma has been plain great. In addition to working with many under-knowns, Karma has done stunning shows of major artists. Brice Marden's 1960s Suicide Notes was one of the best shows of 2015; Julian Schnabel's exhibition here was the first non-blue-chip outing to signal it's okay to like this mega-artist again. Currently Karma has one of the strangest works of art I've ever seen. Robert Grosvenor's Three Car Unit is three highly modified old motor vehicles, none identifiable to me, all familiar from films, photos, other people's memories. The subtly altered forms become a sculptural proposition cloaking itself as a utilitarian object that should be placed in a salt mine until the year 2300 to see what people make of it.

Gordon Robichaux opened last year and is run by two excellent artists. Located near the Union Square building where Warhol was shot, the space exudes bohemian New York. Take the old elevator up to the ninth floor, wind through corridors into a space covered in ravishing Moroccan rugs (for sale cheap) that wild-child painter Katherine Bernhardt has made so well-known. The gallery is souk and secret garden. The first show was a library of beautiful Babel by one of the best underknown New York artists and teachers of the last 40 years, Ken Tisa. Right now don't miss two of the best artists I've seen this year: Uganda-born Leilah Babirye and 71-year-old self-taught New York collagist Frederick Weston.

Finally, there's 56 Henry run by super-knowledgeable spark plug Ellie Rines. Since relocating from Gansevoort Street to this teeny-tiny Chinatown storefront, this gallery has shown excellent young artists Richard Tinkler, Ryan Wallace, and Cynthia Talmadge. Longtime savant Kate Shepherd is coming in the fall. Right now she has Sam Moyer's paradoxical stained-glass brick window over the gallery window, a perfect art metaphor for seeing

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in but being blocked out, and shades of Trump's wall. Last week Rines took me around to a few brand-newish spaces buried in Chinatown. Wee-teeny shops inside big bustling Chinatown markets happily rented by Chinese landlords where I saw interior cubicles of glass with amazing one- and two-work shows. I felt the beat of change beating strong here. Enough to at least confirm there's energy in the trenches.

But is that enough combined with what others are doing? In "Poetry," Moore goes on to write, "Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in it after all, a place for the genuine." We need to embrace this "contempt" for the parts of the system that aren't working. Being outside a system isn't automatically better than being inside one; we're not all supposed to quit our jobs or blow up art schools. Or turn against our galleries! Galleries are where most art comes from. But we don't have the luxury of just going along with things as they are. Resistance takes many forms. I don't think the global-social technocratic art world as it now is can remain relevant much longer except as trading floor and employment agency for ineffective, well-budgeted do-gooders. This has been coming for a long time. It's urgent now. But if the art world is broken that means that all of us get to fix it and make something. What? It almost doesn't matter, so long as it's new.