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“This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s”

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO

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View of “This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s,” 2012. From left: David Hammons, *How Ya Like Me Now?*, 1988; Hans Haacke, *Ölgemälde, Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers* (Oil Painting, Homage to Marcel Broodthaers), 1982. Photo: Nathan Keay.

IN SEPTEMBER 1983, Lorraine O’Grady made good on a decades-old avant-garde bromide and brought art to the street. Or rather, she reframed the street as art—literally. For her work *Art Is . . .*, O’Grady mounted an elaborately oversize golden frame atop a float set to proceed along Harlem’s Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard in the annual African American Day Parade. The caption *ART IS . . .*, handwritten on the skirt that wrapped around the base of the float, confirmed that the ever-shifting vistas of urban life and public spectatorship isolated by the frame were indeed “art.” Dancing around and alongside the float, a team of what O’Grady would later refer to as fifteen “gorgeous young black actors” redoubled this declarative gesture by holding similarly gilded frames up to the parade’s spectators, making them “art” too. In its original conception and execution, this was “art” for—and of—an emphatically non-art-world audience. Twenty-six years later, O’Grady reprised the work in a far more institutional context, assembling photographs of the various views that had issued from the 1983 parade and mounting them in a grid on the white wall of an art fair booth. This was how the piece appeared recently at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago’s “This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s,” where it brilliantly, and perhaps inadvertently, encapsulated both the promises and the problems of the 1980s art collected in the show.

Although *Art Is . . .* was hung in the section dedicated to the theme of “Democracy,” it might have been equally effective in any of the exhibition’s other sections: “Gender Trouble,” “Desire and Longing,” or “The End Is Near.” Indeed, curator Helen Molesworth’s gambit was to propose that the hundred-plus artists in the show were united by their collective debt to 1970s feminism, and in choosing these four themes as her points of entry into the ’80s, she sought to highlight feminism’s diverse and interconnected legacies as they were parlayed into broader discourses about public belonging, identity, desire, and representation. In this fashion, one artist’s engagement with the ever-shifting problem of who, exactly, constitutes a democratic public, or how those bodies otherwise excluded from such formulations might be properly imaged, were made to echo feminist claims regarding hierarchical inequality and inherited privilege.

The greatest strength of this curatorial strategy was its ability to build on and exceed the limits of individual works while also expanding the purview of what gets remembered in the historicist ambitions of periodization. For instance, the issues remarkably mobilized in O’Grady’s work were also shown to be present in Krzysztof Wodiczko’s game-changing *Homeless Vehicle, Version 3*, 1988, and Adrian Piper’s seminal *My Calling (Cards) #1 & #2*, 1986–90, thereby sketching out a strikingly complex intertwining of seemingly disparate themes as they emerged throughout the decade. The effects of this contrapuntal setup were subtle but significant. Celebrated works were pried from the deadened shells of their usual reception and made to ask questions in new, often more multivalent ways than previously allowed. Arguments mounted in one section or on one wall reverberated with, complicated, and sometimes even undid arguments mounted elsewhere through a complex relay of transversal glances—both metaphoric and literal.

An excellent case in point was Molesworth’s pairing of Candy Jernigan’s grimly museological assemblages of salvaged crack vials in *Found Dope: Part II*, 1986, with Raymond Pettibon’s darkly cartoonish indictment

of the fate of countercultural resistance in the age of appropriation; the positioning of these works on a wall transformed by General Idea's viral *AIDS Wallpaper*, 1989; and the kaleidoscoping of the whole ensemble off the reflective, bulbous cheeks of Jeff Koons's *Rabbit*, 1986, itself flanked by photographs of equally shiny bodies by Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Robert Mapplethorpe. Here Molesworth brilliantly demonstrated that there is still much to be learned from the tried-and-true emblems of all that was bad about the '80s, even such totems as Koons's perpetually perky bunny. The pairings suggested that the political consequences of holding separate from one another the narratives that animate these works and their reception—narratives that alternatively valorize and denounce drug use and addiction, deride and uphold counterculture, and ambivalently gloss both commodity and racial fetishism—may outweigh the accomplishments we think we have made when we denounce one kind of production as complicit and exalt another as critical.

Molesworth's pairings also highlighted problematic tensions arising from many of the works' preoccupation with the media and means of their own distribution. For example, Hans Haacke's celebrated *Ölgemälde, Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers* (Oil Painting, Homage to Marcel Broodthaers), 1982, links a painted portrait of Ronald Reagan's pinched and pecunious countenance not just to a photograph of the 500,000 people who assembled at a 1982 no-nukes rally in New York, but, importantly, to a blown-up representation of the black-and-white celluloid frame that constituted Eva Cockcroft's photographic capture of this crowd. Here, Haacke was not only playing an autocratic president against the masses who opposed him, but also jockeying one medium against another. The concern with photography's capacity to substitute—and even occlude—the bodies it means to capture was underscored by Molesworth's placement of Haacke's work between Gretchen Bender's prescient *T.V. Text and Image*, 1986–91, and Dara Birnbaum's *PM Magazine*, 1982. Two galleries later, the sublimated erotics of material desire presented in Judith Barry's video *Casual Shopper*, 1980–81, recalled the aesthetic preoccupations of the Bender and Birnbaum works, creating an instructive lattice of themes in which "Desire and Longing" collided with the consumptive pleasures that undergird the project of liberal democracy and its attendant public spheres.

Such groupings fell short, however, when their range was insufficiently expanded, as in the exhibition's most explicit thematization of the '80s discourse on gender as "troubled." Here, in two crowded yet monotonous galleries, feminism and feminist art emerged as having enabled not just the new social, psychological, and aesthetic explorations addressed in the other galleries but a host of anxieties regarding masculinity as well. While it is possible (and actually probable) that the larger ambitions of feminism's challenge to gender constructed as *such* are served by the probing of masculinity's precarity, this section veered dangerously close to reinscribing the authority of a certain male privilege by prioritizing the appropriation of feminism's achievements by somewhat less-than-feminist artists. Eric Fischl's pathetic self-portrait as an old man, for example, may have been characteristic of specific disruptions engendered by feminism, and Julian Schnabel's black velvet homage to Warhol indicative of the desire that feminism enabled, but what might such rehearsals of masculine subjectivity have simultaneously suppressed?



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is . . . (Troup with Mlle Bourgeoise Noire)*, 1983/2009, color photograph, 16 x 20". From the suite *Art Is . . .*, 1983/2009.

To this end, it would have been helpful to have seen (or heard) more of what one might call the decade of Grandmaster Flash than that of grand-master painting. Indeed, the exhibition ultimately hewed very closely to the "high" end of the famed '80s high/low face-off, eschewing actual incorporation of the popular and idiomatic forms referenced repeatedly by most of the artists who were included in the exhibition. Ultimately, the show did not so much explore the three categories—art, love, and politics—that constitute its subtitle as it interrogated art's response to the increasing pressures mounted by other two. The danger continually posed by many of the works on view was art's tendency to become more preoccupied with its own inner workings as mediating device than with the issues it ostensibly sets out to frame. This focus on art's entrenchment in its own borders became paramount by the exhibition's closing section, which charted parallels between mounting despair in the face of the AIDS crisis and a quiet return to art for art's sake or, really, to art about art, as demonstrated by the rhymed couplet of Gerhard Richter's garishly rendered *Said*, 1983, and David Salle's *Autopsy*, 1981. Set between the two, Martin Puryear's gorgeously rendered (and uncannily premonitory) *Reliquary*, 1980, provided a fitting tomb.

In restaging this retreat, "This Will Have Been" risked duplicating the elisions of the decade it depicted and repeating the tendency for cultural hegemony to privilege certain subjectivities. To be sure, the '80s presented here were the decade as lived by a particular group. The desires that it mobilized remain those of a certain crowd: mostly white, mostly New York–based or exhibited by New York galleries, and with mostly liberal politics born from a deep faith in the recuperability of the public sphere. There is no doubt that the problem of historicizing one's *own* recent past was a motivating concern here, and Molesworth handled the challenge with integrity and ingenuity. But how can the specific "desires" and "longings" that root the show's

project as feminist and queer themselves be productively queried, given that they, too, construct their own restrictive frames? If the exhibition's catalogue provides any indication, multiple desires animate this recuperative view to the past. Indeed, each essay places careful emphasis on the repeated toggling between first person and third person, giving individual authority and voice as much attention as distanced historical accounting.

As underscored by the companion presentation "MCA in the 1980s," organized by Lynne Warren and Karsten Lund to highlight the MCA's role in showing many of the artists on display (Lorna Simpson, Alfredo Jaar, and Keith Haring, for example), this art might have been "political," but its politics were always already inscribed within the sphere of the art institution. As such (and here I would be remiss not to toggle my own "I" switch), the exhibition's pleasures felt at times regrettably narcissistic: the pleasures of recognition, not of displacement or disruption. What might those other affects have told us about, for example, the connective tissue that links the myopic preoccupations of the New York-centered art world of the '80s with the allegedly more global one we occupy today, or about the continued correspondence between cultural and imperial hegemony? One wonders too why the focus on "democracy" appeared primarily as a problem of content or subject matter, and why in near-exclusive relationship to the US support of Latin American dictatorships, without reference to such heated contests for belonging as those that prompted antiapartheid protests or fueled the Palestinian intifada of 1987, for example.

In laying claim to the representation of "politics" in something so vast as a decade, the charge must be to enable those "who have known the cruelties of political becoming" to better "bear witness to the process by which the living transform the dead into partners in struggle," as intoned by the hauntingly elegiac voice-over to another of the "Democracy" section's powerful surprises, the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs*, 1986. This witnessing must allow such struggles to unfold and expand, rather than sublimate them as something just beyond our reach and always almost gone.

"This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s" travels to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, June 30–Sept. 30; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Oct. 26, 2012–Jan. 27, 2013.

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