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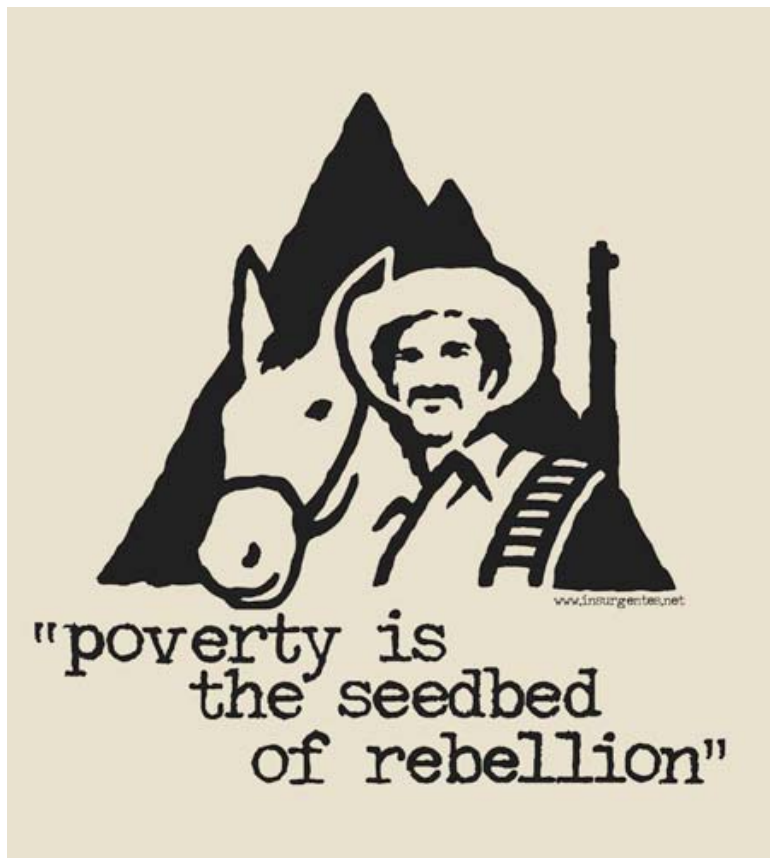
STREETSIGNISM

The new, weird counterculture

BY DOUG HARVEY

Wednesday, November 15, 2006 - 12:00 pm

Maybe it's just some kind of spillover from the recent periodic upsurge of faith in the American electoral system, but has anybody else noticed the sheer number of politically tinged social/relational art shows in L.A. over the last few months? At 1301PE, Rirkrit Tiravanija — whose Thai cooking for the gallery public previously put "relational aesthetics" on the art map — just exhibited a strangely fetishistic accumulation of more than 100 drawings (rendered by Tiravanija's former Thai art students) of news photos depicting various protest demonstrations around the world, resulting in a Sam Durant-esque incursion of cognitive dissonance into the carefully manicured and gated community of the Art World.



Votan, *Poverty Is the Seedbed of Rebellion* (silkscreen on T-shirt)

Guerrilla posterer (and frequent Weekly contributor) Robbie Conal has achieved a new plateau of giddily grotesque caricature at Track 16 with a series of outsize works — again, drawings — depicting the current executive branch as dancing, costumed skeletons just in time for Halloween and midterm elections. The current international group exhibit at Cal State

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S	M	T	W	T	F	S
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23

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Long Beach's University Art Museum is "Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art," and the Japanese American National Museum features the surprising retro-activist documentary photos of Manzanar concentration camp by Ansel Adams.

The "Too Much Freedom?"—themed 10th biennial version of (formerly LA) Freewaves' video and new media festival has screenings and installations at the Hammer, LACE and Pomona College, but their main presence is online at www.freewaves.org. In fact, most of the interesting activist art has been cropping up outside the conventional gallery strata. Take the recent guerrilla projections of Think Again's "The NAFTA Effect," the free "Haircuts by Children" at Odette's New Styles in Highland Park, or the inaugural "Rose Bowl Flea Market Biennale" (in which I participated with a collapsed geodesic dome made from cigarettes).

All of these, alongside several other projects including Irene Tsatsos' ambitious "Fair Exchange" — which intermingled a contemporary interventionist-themed art exhibit with the 2006 L.A. County Fair — were presented by Outpost for Contemporary Art as the program series "Fair Trade." In addition to the requisite Canadian and Mexican talent to give it that post-national zing, the "Fair" contingent drew on a sprawling, loose-knit base of collectives and individual artists and activists based in L.A. — like the "mobile and site-specific interpretive force" Los Angeles Urban Rangers, the hyperbolic model-crocheting Institute for Figuring, broadside sweater designer Lisa Anne Auerbach, and urban gleaning and jam-jarring collective Fallen Fruit. Outpost's two-day open invitation "Post-Postcard 2006" — featuring bargain-priced cratefuls of small-format artworks — will conclude a two-year cycle focusing on North American artists before the nonprofit shifts its attention to Eastern Europe.

Characterized by a kind of shaggy-dog rhetoric, a hands-on DIY workshop aesthetic, and a post-Seattle sense of political theater married to a post-9/11 sense of urgency, these groups have taken on the unthinkable task of forging a crazy-quilt sense of community from the disparate and physically isolated pockets of disenfranchised creative types that riddle L.A.'s cultural infrastructure. And by sheer persistence, they seem to be doing just that. Centered around Echo Park's cutting-edge gallery Machine Project, the movement overlaps academia and the gallery/museum nexus but seems committed to keeping it in the streets. Or L.A.'s Craft and Folk Art Museum.

In "Street Signs and Solar Ovens," a ramshackle exhibit spilling over from the third floor of the Craft, the editors of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*— the movement's organ of record — have assembled a primer of artists as activists, radicals as inventors, and theorists as gardeners.

Alongside such plausible art *objets* as Oscar Sanchez's skateboard-mounted *Cardboard Tank*, Evan Holloway's droll minimalist steel parking-meter boot (editioned for LACE in 2000), Forkscrew Graphics' kickass Abu Ghraib detournement of the generic iPod-silhouette ad campaign, or Sam Durant's blown-up "Tell It Like It Is" vinyl-on-light-box protest sign, we are asked to consider the art of pirate-radio broadcasts, weekly apple-pie-baking klatches, a site-specific intercom, a makeshift take-something-leave-something thrift store, a functional still, a hand-powered washing machine, a bicycle-powered blender, a solar oven made from a discarded pizza box, and dozens of other quixotic erasures of the border between creative disturbances and disturbed creativity.

"Disturbed" primarily in the sense of "uncomfortable," although obviously the crackpot factor runs pretty high. Fallen Fruit is here, with a map of public fruit trees in Silver Lake, jam made from those trees, and God's eyes made from objects found during the mapmaking expedition and used for identifying qualifying trees during a public jam-fest residency at Machine. Here too is Christopher Nyerges' *Collection of Items That Can Be Made From a Beer Can*, alongside the wild-food educator's aforementioned pizza-box oven and an array of other makeshift form-follows-function survivalist appliances.

While it may be a stretch for some of us to incorporate custom bicycle modification and the hang-drying of laundry as artistic practices, "Street Signs and Solar Ovens" may be even more of a challenge to the public's definition of political action. Giant puppets used to protest the bulldozing of the South Central Farm are one thing, but a still, a beer-can stove, an intercom? Where's the mob? The "Street Signs" version of collectivity hinges on idiosyncratic self-sufficient creativity emerging from individual alienation. It's a tenuous, heterogeneous, constantly renegotiated unity, and a tremendous amount of the show's vitality — as with the movement as a whole — lies in the electricity generated by this uncertainty and constant reinvention. While the movement may lose a little steam as the consumer base nods off in the wake of the glorious victory of the Tweedledees, its nonhierarchical shiftiness bodes well for survival.

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Karl Erickson, *Counter-Revolutionary Honkies Must See the Lights* (acrylic yarn and collage on latch-hook canvas, 2006)

Another project that encompasses many of these oddball extremes into one messy parcel involves a romance between a video professor and a sycamore tree. For the last year or so, Joel Tauber has been keeping a record of his infatuation with — and actions on behalf of — a single undernourished *Platanus racemosa* in the Rose Bowl parking lot. Teetering on (and often careening over) the brink of foolishness, Tauber's obsessive, absurdist reduction of think-global-act-local has nonetheless progressed from the vigilante civic pranksterism of installing guardrailing to prevent car-bashing to the point where the city of Pasadena, Rose Bowl officials and numerous art-world institutions have joined in to correct the imbalance between nature and culture — at least in the 400 square feet surrounding the lonesome sycamore.

While Tauber's postmodern multimedia translation of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* also incorporates the decoration of the tree with giant earrings (in emulation of the ancient Persian monarch Xerxes, no less) and a tree-shaped multichannel video installation scheduled for Susanne Vielmetter's in the spring, it is the steadfast, visionary stewardship of his initially solitary creative engagement with the tree — and the story of how it blossomed and flourished — that gives the project its metaphorical political wallop. It's the art and politics of the alienated and funny, earnest and mystified individual, who cries, "I may not know art, but I know what I want and I know how to get it."

STREET SIGNS AND SOLAR OVENS: Socialcraft in Los Angeles | Craft and Folk Art Museum, 5814 Wilshire Blvd., L.A. | Through December 31 | (323) 937-4230

APOCALYPSO FACTO: New Works by Robbie Conal | Track 16, 2525 Bergamot Station, Santa Monica | Through November 18 | (310) 264-4678

POST-POSTCARD 2006 | Outpost for Contemporary Art, 6375 N. Figueroa St., Highland Park | December 8–10 | (323) 982-9461

BEYOND GREEN: Toward a Sustainable Art | University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Blvd., Long Beach | Through December 17 | (562) 985-5761

ANSEL ADAMS AT MANZANAR | Japanese American National Museum, 369 E. First St., Los Angeles | Through February 18 | (213) 625-0414

TOO MUCH FREEDOM?: Freewaves' 10th Biennial Festival of Film, Video and Experimental New Media | Various venues | Through November and December |

www.freewaves.org

JOEL TAUBER: Sick-Amour | www.joeltauber.com

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MELON HEAD

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A CHILD'S GARDEN OF MODERNISM

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ALSO BY DOUG HARVEY

A CHILD'S GARDEN OF MODERNISM

Wednesday, October 25, 2006 - 3:00 pm

REVERB AND RENOWN

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PANTER'S PLAYHOUSE

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