

SUMMER 2005

art journal



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Art Journal
Vol. 64, no. 2
Summer 2005

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Art Journal (ISSN 0004-3249) is published quarterly by the College Art Association, 275 Seventh Ave., 18th floor, New York, NY 10001. 212.691.1051, ext. 214. E-mail: artjournal@collegeart.org. Web site: www.collegeart.org. Copyright © 2005 College Art Association, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of the contents may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher, the author(s), or other rights holders. The opinions expressed in this journal are those of the authors and not necessarily of the editors and the College Art Association.

Postmaster: Send address changes to *Art Journal*, College Art Association, 275 Seventh Ave., 18th floor, New York, NY 10001. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Printed by Science Press, Ephrata, PA. Printed in the U.S.A.

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Subscriptions and single issues: Send orders, address changes, and claims to Member Services, CAA, 275 Seventh Ave., 18th floor, New York, NY 10001. 212.691.1051, ext. 12. E-mail: memsvcs@collegeart.org. *Art Journal* is available as a benefit of membership in CAA. For information about membership, write to CAA. Subscriptions for nonmembers: individuals, \$50/yr; institutions, \$75/yr (add \$10 for foreign postage). For single- and back-issue purchases, contact Member Services.

Advertising: Send inquiries to Paul Skiff, c/o CAA; 212.691.1051, ext. 213; advertising@collegeart.org.

Submissions: *Art Journal* welcomes submission of essays, features, interviews, forums, and other projects concerning modern and contemporary art from authors and artists worldwide and at every career stage. Please include photocopies of images. It is not necessary to be a CAA member to contribute. For further details, visit www.collegeart.org.

Mail submissions, proposals, and letters to the editor to Patricia C. Phillips, Editor-in-Chief, *Art Journal*, SUNY New Paltz, Art Dept., FAB 225, New Paltz, NY 12561.

Cover: Fred Wilson. *Safe House II*, 2003. Ceramic pot containing bed, TV, lamp, and reading material. Courtesy of Pace Wildenstein. Photograph: R. Ransick/A. Cocchi. See p. 14.

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Patricia C. Phillips

In This Issue: Questions of Seeing

As a fortuitous circumstance, you will encounter brief but resonant references to the ideas of the late Edward W. Said in this issue of *Art Journal*. Peter Erickson begins his fascinating essay on Fred Wilson's critical engagement and enactment of Shakespeare's *Othello* with an epigraph from Said on the centrality of critique in contemporary humanism. Said saw critique as a process of vigilant inquiry that enables "democratic freedom." And in the second of a three-part conversation between artist Daniel Joseph Martinez and writer David Levi Strauss, Strauss cites Said's idea of an intellectual as someone engaged in the production of knowledge in the pursuit of freedom. Connecting Said's ideas to the work of Joseph Beuys, Strauss reminds us that "human liberty is the basic question of art." In these frequently dark and discouraging times, the liberating potential of different practices of art can help carry us through these uncertain summer months.

I believe it was John Ruskin who invoked that, while many can talk and some can write, it is the rare individual who can see. From different perspectives, the essays and texts in this issue summon us to see, to question, and to fortify the relation of these activities. Natalie Kosoi considers contrasting philosophical ideas of nothingness within and through the paintings of Mark Rothko. Her measured and moving meditation on visibility is followed by a spirited conversation, including five art historians and guided by Peggy Phelan, on the tenacious art history survey. Focusing more on pedagogy than content, the heart of this discussion is about seeing and criticality. How do ways of teaching an art history survey encourage critical understandings of art and images? As a companion to this round-table discussion, Amy Papaelias, editorial assistant of *Art Journal*, has assembled a "visual essay" of the work of some contemporary artists who find and represent critical content in art history.

If not nothingness, Huey Copeland examines another kind of imminent invisibility in the work of Lorna Simpson. He elegantly articulates and defends the artist's strategy as the figure is withdrawn, becoming more fugitive in recent work. Artist Sarah Kanouse adopts the role of tour guide as she takes readers on an intellectual, paradoxical journey through the eclectic, hybrid practice of the Center for Land Use Interpretation. In an essay that explores the unstable currency of images, Dora Apel looks at representations of torture from Abu Ghraib, early twentieth-century lynching photographs, and other sites of violence with particular insight into how these images frequently acquire both new intentions and different effects through the work of artists and political protestors.

Clifton Meador's stunning artist's book, enclosed with each copy of this issue, is the second of four NEA-supported artist interventions in *Art Journal*. *Tourist/Refugee* reflects on experiences of transience in Tbilisi at a former tourist hotel that became provisional housing for refugees from Abkhazia. Meador's dark, melancholic story literally and metaphorically challenges a process of seeing. Like being cast into abrupt darkness, it takes time to see clearly. The persistent experience of disquietude in the book returns us to Said's appeal for "unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism, and liberation" as the basis of a critical humanism—and art.



Daniel Joseph Martinez. *To Make a Blind Man Murder for the Things He's Seen, or Happiness Is Over-Rated, 2001–02.* Life-size, cloned, computer-controlled, animatronic cyborg sculpture in a room installation. Dimensions variable. Premiered at The Project, Los Angeles.

**Daniel Joseph Martinez and
David Levi Strauss**

After the End: A Modest Proposal

The conversations from which this article is excerpted took place in December 2004 in telephone calls between New York (Strauss) and Los Angeles (Martinez). This piece will conclude in the next issue of Art Journal.

David Levi Strauss: Well, Daniel, we are having this conversation on the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, when it seems like the light may never return. And I think that fits the mood after the November election of George W. Bush. Once again, the Democrats showed up for a gunfight with a knife. They never realized what they were up against, and they didn't represent a viable alternative. The Republicans won by marshalling the Right and manipulating and controlling words and images—really seizing the public imaginary. And I think it all started with those images of the Twin Towers ablaze on 9/11. As Kurt Vonnegut said, "Now we've had our Reichstag fire."¹ It made everything that happened after that possible. And Kerry and Edwards never seemed to recognize what was at stake. They still think that they just lost an election, but it was much more than that. They really lost the country. And cultural issues played a big part in this. In many ways, it was a continuation of the Culture Wars of the late 1980s and 1990s that you and I were involved in.

In our last conversation, we spoke about some of the premature conclusions being made about the disappearance of racism, ushering in a new "color-blind" society where affirmative action is no longer needed. And I think that the liberals in this country also jumped to some premature conclusions about the Culture Wars, thinking they'd won them for good. Conservatives, on the other hand, never stopped fighting. They kept organizing and agitating, and by making these cultural issues central, they won a decisive battle.

Daniel Joseph Martinez: I am not sure why the Left is never prepared. It seems that they lack previsualization. They seem to be unable to imagine how the electoral body in this country functions, who they are, what they think about, what's important to them. And they always seem to underestimate the capacity of the organizational skills of the Right to bring people together to vote on particular sets of issues. I am not sure if this is new or if this is just a cycle of the way that politics functions, but I wonder if it is possible that, in contrast to analyzing politics the way we normally do, that we could look at it in a more systemic way. Perhaps this could be traced back to the Greeks—the same cycles of issues, just dressed up differently for the contemporary state we are in. Do you think this is true?

Strauss: Socrates really laid it all out. He said the problem with democracy is that it is usually a prelude to tyranny. Democracy arises out of oligarchy, and tyranny arises out of democracy. He didn't put it exactly this way, but he meant that eventually (under democracy) people get greedy, and then they get what they deserve. For me, this election brought up some real questions about democracy—or at least what Bush & Co. call democracy. In this winner-take-all system, one point over 50 percent does it, and the majority rules. Minority views are suppressed. Even though I think there were irregularities in the election, it's clear that they got more people to vote for them than for the other side, so they won it all.

1. David Barsamian, "Interview with Kurt Vonnegut," *The Progressive* 67, no. 6 (June 2003).

Martinez: Getting back to this question of images and words, if you look at the red and blue states, there is a clear division between class and education that has a lot to do with habits of voting. Is the use of images and words pandering to a certain level of intelligence or understanding of how these images are being used? What I am asking is, how does that 51 percent of the population willing to vote for this president continue to be fooled by what has been proven to be and debunked as propaganda—the use of images and words as lies to produce the result that they want? How can we differentiate between the function of words and images in the world we exist in versus the function of words and images in a propagandized state?

Strauss: Unfortunately, I think that a slim majority of the U.S. electorate voted in this election as the consumers they are, which is to say they voted out of fear, inadequacy, and resentment. The majority voted for a product that was sold to them. The advertisements for this product told them that buying it would make their lives better—safer, more morally upright, more independent, and less inadequate—just like the ads for Coke tell you that your life will be happier and sexier if you buy their colored water. Who wouldn't want to believe this? Life is hard.

Martinez: If the announcement comes from the point of view of consumerism, it is strictly advertising. You can sell any kind of product you want in this country. But it is sold without taking the time to think deeply about the consequences for the governance of this country.

Strauss: George W. Bush was a better product than John Kerry. His ads were better, he had better slogans, the whole presentation was better. This was the script: *The terrorists attacked our homeland, so George Bush declared war on them. He knows that the terrorists are not like us: they are evildoers who hate us because they hate freedom. He sent our brave troops overseas to fight them there so that we will not have to fight them here. He will fight the terrorists until they are defeated and will never give up. He will spread democracy and freedom around the world because God wants all people to be free. And he will do all this while cutting your taxes and getting government regulators and bureaucrats off your back. That's a good product.*

Martinez: It is brilliant advertising, because it establishes good over evil in black and white terms. It becomes completely polarizing. There can never be other motivations, reasons, or complex conclusions to the questions being asked.

Strauss: No, because it's not a conversation, it's a message. It's manifest destiny taken to the next level, where we're going to spread democracy and freedom all around the world. What did the Democrats have to offer against that?

Martinez: Nothing. The Democrats were unable to mobilize the people of this country to think beyond their own personal interests. It is the question of consumerism versus the construction of a civil society or the potential of having some responsibility because we live here, because we coexist—the possibility of reorganizing ourselves with responsibility. But that's not what we were selling.

Strauss: The Democrats were selling virtually the same product that the Republicans were, but in a less compelling, less potent version that looked like it would cost more. Who would buy that brand?

Martinez: Yes, just as in a contest between Pepsi and Coke, Coke always wins because when people go to the store, they will ask for Coke but settle for Pepsi because there is only one image in their minds. What you suggest is that the branding, in the terminology of advertising, of the Republicans was more effective. The Democrats had a similar product, but it was diluted.

Strauss: The Democrats let the Republicans set the terms and write the script, and then they commented on it. They were in a weak position. A vote for Kerry and Edwards was essentially a conservative vote, an attempt to hold back the juggernaut. But it had no strength to it.

Following your Pepsi and Coke analogy, it increasingly looks like the threat we face is coming from two directions at once, and the two wings (Bush and Bin Laden) have much in common. One represents the fundamentalism of the Christian Right and the other the Islamic fundamentalism of Al Qaeda. Both are apocalyptic and depend on the spread of ignorance, anger, and fear.

Martinez: I might add one more fundamentalism to your list: free-market fundamentalism. The ones you mention are small but influential groups of people, but instead of looking just at people, we need to look at apparatuses that function the same way. The free market has the capacity to absorb or consume all other models and all other possible options, therefore leaving itself as the only viable model. This is the way that “democracy” is presented to us—as the only option. All other options of governance have been destroyed. As you said earlier, this “democracy” is being exported around the world under the auspices of freedom, but it demands that we all adhere to a particular set of values.

Strauss: Those two fundamentalisms (Christianity and Capital) are conflated under Bush & Co. As Bush puts it, God wants everyone to be free, which means that God wants everyone to accept (our) free-market values.

Martinez: We’ve been talking about the function of politics in this country. In the talks I give, I raise a rhetorical question about how values function and how they apply to our own lives. One of the ways I talk about this is as an “essential dilemma.” How is it possible to remain free of these structures and values, yet remain sufficiently engaged with them to make a difference? If we exist within a structure that has systemic problems, I’m not sure these things can be changed any other way than structurally. But how do we do this? It is not a question of survival, but one of persistence and how we organize our lives so that we can be effective, even if in a relatively small way.

Strauss: I think this is an active dilemma for any artist or writer. In order to be heard, you have to be of the world, in time.

Martinez: But it is much more difficult to disseminate ideas in the art world, because this world is totally dominated by free-market ideas.

Strauss: I’ve told you about the essay I’m writing, applying the currently dominant political logic to art practices.² It’s a modest proposal for the elimination of American artists engaged in “alternative” art practices. If we really believe in the free market, I argue, we should stop propping up “alternatives” to it. We should stand by our principles. For the Market, everything; against the Market, nothing.

2. David Levi Strauss, “Considering the Alternative: Are ‘Artists’ Really Necessary? (A Reasonable Proposal),” *Brooklyn Rail*, April 2005, 17, available online at <http://www.brooklynrail.org/arts/april05/railingopinion.html>.

this funeral is for the WRONG CORPSE

Daniel Joseph Martinez. *If Only God Had Invented Coca-Cola, Sooner! or The Death of My Pet Monkey*, 2003–04. Silkscreen and woodblock type, hand-set letterpress prints on board. Each 28 x 22 in. (71.1 x 55.9 cm). Series of 22 prints. Installation views, San Juan Triennial, San Juan, Puerto Rico. Courtesy of the artist and The Project Gallery, New York/Los Angeles.

La Perla (The Pearl) is probably the most beautifully situated slum in the world. Perched just outside the city walls of Old San Juan in Puerto Rico, on the cliffs over the Atlantic Ocean, it was originally settled by the poor families of soldiers stationed at the fortress of El Morro and is now a major entry port for drugs moving from south to north. It's become a virtual no-go zone, even for the police, and most travel guides for Puerto Rico carry a warning about the dangers of La Perla, cautioning tourists to avoid it at all costs.

Martinez: So, nothing outside of the market merits our attention. Isn't this just like venture capitalism that demands we only support those ideas that promise to be the most marketable and financially successful?

Strauss: In some pure imagination of the Free Market, everything is measurable in those terms. It either makes money or it doesn't, and you assign relative values based on that sole criterion. "Value" equals values. And that's it. It certainly simplifies things. It eliminates, for example, what I do. Criticism is about making finer and finer distinctions among like things based on criteria that are continually questioned. You don't need to do this anymore if you just let the market decide.

Martinez: If you carry this market-driven idea to its extreme, you are talking about steroid-enhanced, flavor-improved strawberries. You're talking about an art for all seasons. You're talking about taking a product and attempting to make it better through a whole range of enhancements. And if it is genetically improved and has the broadest base of appeal, anything outside of the parameters of this "improved" product seems inferior. You've been conditioned to believe that a genetically enhanced strawberry is the best.

Strauss: If the market is allowed to operate as God intended, with no government (or private foundation) interference, then there is no need for theoretical discussions about relative values, because in a free market, consumers determine all values, and the majority rules. The artists who sell the most work at the highest prices are the best artists. No more questions.

Martinez: It certainly does make it easier. As you know, I was just in Puerto Rico for the San Juan Triennial. Being in Puerto Rico and meeting many artists from many different countries, I felt a sense of generosity and humanity, as well as an absolute disregard for the market of the United States. People want to be successful and do well with their work, but they are not about to roll over to satisfy the needs of the market. Your argument is an interesting one, because it eliminates all of the mess, all of the potential for misunderstanding. It is very tidy. There is no love, humanity, or freedom, no possibility to make mistakes or experiment. In short, there's no possibility to be a genuine human being.

Strauss: I don't agree that there is no experimentalism within the market. You need to continue to make the product better, and you certainly need to experiment with new ways to sell the product.

Martinez: A littler bigger this year. A little redder next year.

Strauss: Or if you can convince people that the non-genetically-enhanced strawberry will actually taste better and make you live longer, you might be able to sell that.

Martinez: So anything can be marketed?

Strauss: Just about anything. I can conceive of a world that operates only on these fundamentalist terms, and I think we are moving rapidly toward it. What I am trying to get to is, what, precisely, is left out of this? I don't agree that humanity is left out. Humans can get used to anything.



Martinez: I think we have to talk about what we mean by humanity. The population is moving to a position of agreeing with decisions and values made for them by externalized sources. This seems to be the lot of humanity.

Strauss: But this is not what people who argue for the market overall would say. They would say that the consumer decides. If consumers decide, and choose one thing over another, that is democracy.

Martinez: There has to be a way to be self-reflective, to create apparatuses in one's life so that one can make determinations based on information, education, and experience, and these can be applied so that people make decisions independently and autonomously about their lives and the world they live in.

Strauss: The only word you use that is outside the rhetoric of the market is "autonomously." Autonomy is something that the market can't accept. But what's the value in autonomy? We're all in this together; we're determining these values together, by majority vote. And if we make a mistake, it can't be pinned on any of us individually. Who would want to be outside of that, a law unto oneself?

Martinez: The consumption of material objects and services leads to profit, and this profit flows into the pockets of a very small number of individuals. It doesn't make sense to me that this consumption can be allowed to be the sole determinant of meaning and value in my life. When do people say this is crazy?

Strauss: Not in this election. Going into it, we had a sagging economy, with the American dollar (and America's reputation in the world community) in free-fall and debt out of control, people losing their jobs right and left, a health-care system that only works for the wealthy, public education in crisis, and a war that was worsening daily, becoming a quagmire, chewing up more and more young men and women daily—and you still get half of the people in the country to buy what this administration is selling.

Martinez: In this country, things have to be really awful before people commit themselves to anything—to change. And even with all the problems, compared to the rest of the world, we have it so good here. What is there to complain about? We live in the empire, David.

Strauss: Yeah, things are good in the empire. So far.

Martinez: What have we got to complain about? We're complainers, David. We're not healthy contributors.

Strauss: Edward Said had a vision of the public intellectual as naturally contentious to the powers that be. He talked about the danger of conformism, as well as the dangers of money, power, and specialization in intellectual life. Those were the three things that could compromise the work of the intellectual, and I include artists and writers in this. We need to be the complainers! We need to be the ones to question if this is the right way, if this is the only way.

Martinez: I agree. Living here, in this time, it seems to me that we need to turn up the volume. Of course, it is no small feat to do what Said suggests. In our society it is not easy to maintain this kind of view or position.

Strauss: It shouldn't be easy, but I think it is even more difficult to be clear, to make a clear dissent. No one is going to show up tomorrow to put me in jail, but making a good enough argument to be heard above the din is a constant struggle.

Martinez: In the context of free-marketing and advertising that we were describing earlier, how does one put forward a clear message within all the clamor?

Strauss: And amid all of these confusions about democracy and elitism, including the elitism of artists, writers, and intellectuals that, I think, was a factor in this last election as well. The people I talked to who voted for Bush indicated that there was a great deal of resentment in their vote, against the media elite, the East-/West-Coast elite. And in the Culture Wars, the artist became the elitist exemplar for many people who really resented being made to feel that they didn't know as much or weren't as sophisticated. The Republicans tapped into this cultural resentment and turned it toward "liberals," a term made synonymous with "intellectuals." George W. Bush has made being ignorant a virtue and being inarticulate a positive value.

Martinez: Isn't this the problem with the form of democracy that is being presented to us—a democracy where everything is leveled out? This seems like a mutation of democracy. As we discussed earlier, if everything in the culture through the market has equal meaning, does this produce more meaning or meaninglessness? Can everything—every idea—have equal significance at the same time?

Said was the perfect example of someone who would not succumb to the marketplace. He would make very clear decisions about where he would lecture, whether there were endorsements. He was very careful about how and where he placed himself in the dissemination of his ideas.

Strauss: In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said at times sounds like he is discussing a spiritual practice of soul-making.³ When he says that an intellectual is fundamentally about knowledge and freedom, that echoes Beuys's statement that in philosophical terms, human liberty is the basic question of art. If you take this out of art, you are left with just another consumer product.

Martinez: I wonder if our role as artists, writers, and intellectuals is not to make faithful copies of the reality we exist in, but to direct ourselves to shaping attitudes about this reality.

Strauss: Artists transform material, and that material can be almost anything, including ideas or social formations. This is what Beuys meant by "social sculpture." For Beuys, art involved the transformation of matter into spirit.

Martinez: It is a powerful idea, and it is striking how far from this most contemporary art practices are. There are exceptions, of course, but if the biennials, art fairs, and magazines are good examples, there is little of this work going on. Curiously, even dealers and others who I talk to admit that there is little work that they genuinely find of interest. Of course, they still do what they do and make money doing it.

3. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

Strauss: Even the most jaded dealer or collector, if you back them into a corner, believes that there is something different about art, something beyond the commodity status. That's why they collect art rather than cars, horses, jewelry, or yachts.

Martinez: In that recent book about Charles Saatchi, *Supercollector*, there appears this exchange, from an interview curator Carl Freedman did with Damien Hirst:

Carl Freedman: If you were asked to work on an advertising campaign for the Tories would you agree?

Hirst: It depends on how much money.

Freedman: So you don't adhere to any particular political beliefs?

Hirst: That kind of integrity is bullshit. Nobody has that kind of integrity. Things change too much. There's no black and whites, only different greys.

Freedman: You're not a socialist at heart?

Hirst: I'm not anything at heart. I'm too greedy . . .⁴

That would be like the Bush campaign calling me up to ask me if I want to make something for the inauguration, and the first question I ask is how much will I get paid to do it.

Strauss: And if you ask a different question or refuse, within the strict, for-the-market-everything, against-the-market-nothing frame, you're just an idiot. An autonomous idiot. There's no other way to explain it. Like Pynchon said, "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers."⁵

Daniel Joseph Martinez is a tactical media practitioner and an internationally exhibiting artist who lives and works on the west bank of the Los Angeles River. The works range from digital to analog, ephemeral to solid. He is Professor of Theory, Practice, and Mediation of Contemporary Art at the University of California, Irvine, in the Studio Art Department, where he teaches in the Graduate Studies and New Genres Department. He is represented by The Project, New York/Los Angeles.

David Levi Strauss is a writer and critic based in New York. His essays and reviews appear regularly in *Artforum* and *Aperture*, and his collection of essays on photography and politics, *Between the Eyes*, with an introduction by John Berger, is being released in paperback from *Aperture* this fall. He received a Guggenheim fellowship in 2003–04 to work on his next book, on images and belief. Strauss currently teaches in the Graduate School of the Arts and at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College.

4. Carl Freedman, "Interview with Damien Hirst," *Minky Manky*, exh. cat. (London: South London Gallery, 1995), quoted in Rita Hatton and John A. Walker, *Supercollector: A Critique of Charles Saatchi* (London: Ellipsis, 2000), 56.

5. Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 255.