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FUSE

M A G A Z I N E

special
issue



art and activism
art and community
art and identity
art and public
art and race
art and sexuality
art and technology
art and theory



FUSE

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Editorial

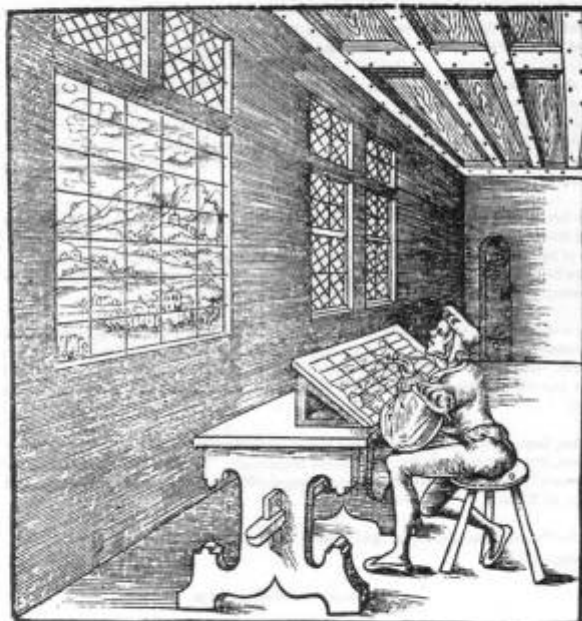
4

Film and Video News

4 KAREN TISCH

Columns

- 6 REPORTS FROM THE FRONT LINE:
FUSE Goes Back to School
by J.J. Lee
- 8 JE ME SOUVIENS
Positive (Inter)Action: Responding to AIDS in Montreal
by Robert W.G. Lee



Cover image: Group of Laocöon and his sons, reconstructed by Filippo Magi, Vatican.



Features

- 14** A NEWER LAOCOÖN:
Toward a Defence of Artists' Self-determination
Through Public Arts Funding
by Robert Labossière
- 21** PORNUTOPIAN PREMISES, POSITIVE PRACTICES:
Michael Balser's Video Art and Activism
by David McIntosh

Profile

- 35** I WANT MORE KITSCHY FISH
Ann Shin on Lee Bul

Artists' Project

- 12** TRANSMEMMORATION
(1945–1995)
by Kyo Maclear

Visual Art and Film Reviews

- 28** SORRY, WRONG NUMBER
Press Enter: Between Seduction and Disbelief
Review by Clint Burnham
- 30** RE-ORIENTING ASIAN
Millie Chen
Cook and Crave
Review by Jamellie Hassan
- 32** AMONG OURSELVES, WITH OTHERS
Toronto Jewish Film Festival
Review by Sandra Haar

Book Reviews

- 38** THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS
Mirror Machine: Video and Identity
Edited by Janine Marchessault
Review by Steve Reinke
- 39** ADVANCING MANUALS ON CULTURAL ACTIVISMS AND
ART THEORIES
But is it Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism
Edited by Nina Felshin
SightLines: Reading Contemporary Canadian Art
Edited by Jessica Bradley and Lesley Johnstone
Review by Clive Robertson
- 41** NEW POLITICAL CARTOGRAPHIES
Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art
Edited by Suzanne Lacy
Review by Deborah Root
- 43** ART, THEORY AND ACTIVISM IN A TIME OF AIDS
Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture
by Craig Owens. Edited by Scott Bryson, Barbara
Kruger, Lynne Tillman, Jane Weinstock
On the Museum's Ruins
by Douglas Crimp with photographs by Louise Lawler
Review by Gordon Brent Ingram

contents

ART, THEORY AND ACTIVISM IN A TIME OF AIDS

Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture

(BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
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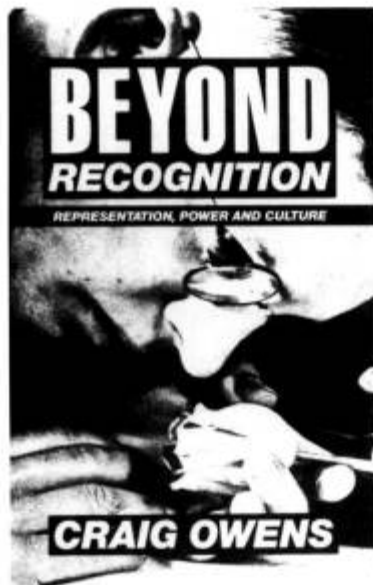
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On the Museum's Ruins

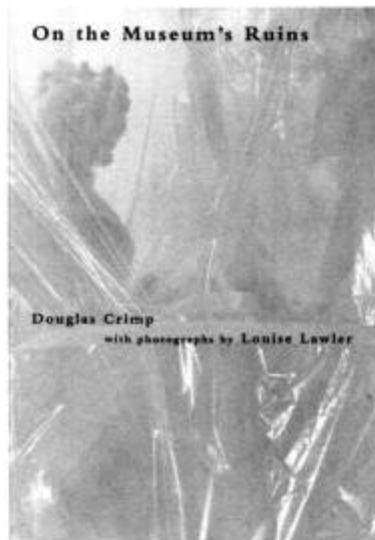
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BY DOUGLAS CRIMP WITH PHOTOGRAPHS
BY LOUISE LAWLER

REVIEW BY GORDON BRENT
INGRAM



Over the last twelve years AIDS has transformed virtually all aspects of our lives. The impact on sex and sexual politics alone has been brutally swift and overwhelming. The HIV pandemic exploded at a time of markedly new stances to the making of art—in particular, the shift to “postmodernism,” site specificity and increasing confrontations with the “cultural authority” (Owens, p. 166) of entrenched misogyny, racism and homo-



phobia. There have been a lot of Queers involved in “pomo” theory, some have died from AIDS, and all of us have had our perspectives radically transformed by what we have seen and lost. Even the connotations of “pomo” for postmodernist theory is instructive. It rhymes with “homo,” and while does not refer explicitly to a sexual identity, definitely has provided a space to support Queer art and activism.

Beyond Recognition and *On the Museum's Ruins* are not about AIDS. But they show that things will never be the same again and, more importantly, that what we conceive of as power, place and truth, particularly in linkages between art, theory and activism, have been totally transformed by the contradictory forces of the HIV pandemic, the not-so-benevolent state and AIDS activism. The confusion, panic and horrors of the decade of despair, beginning in 1981, forced new theoretical perspectives, if only to have more clues to the changes imposed on our lives. While theory is again chic and there is lots of it being written, *Beyond Recognition* and *On the Museum's Ruins* provide the most useful and clear guides for understanding this most contradictory and increasingly Queer *fin-de-siècle*. In contrast to the recent deluge of dry postmodern chitchat on the book market, these two books are

exceptional in their being “from the heart,” having practical relevance to both artists and activists.

Craig Owens was a New York critic of rare vision. His theoretical work was particularly crucial in linking “site specificity” (pp. 17, 55, 150-186) to postmodernism, and feminism to gay male politics. Owens died of complications from AIDS in 1990. *Beyond Recognition* is his posthumous anthology and is made up of the many articles published in such journals as *Art in America* and *October*. More than any other art critic in the '80s, he laid the basis for a radical “postmodernism,” one that relentlessly critiqued such now by-gone art movements as “neoexpressionism,” exemplified by the pseudo-masterly sketches of now almost forgotten artists like Julian Schnabel (p. 148). Owens' early discussions of site, such as in his 1979 *October* essay “Earthwords” (pp. 40-51) on Robert Smithson, began to lay the basis for today's emerging concepts of “Queer space.” Owens' most rigorous theoretical contribution was his 1980 “The allegorical impulse: Towards a theory of postmodernism,” which foreshadowed the importance of (radical) appropriation of imagery and questions of authorship to the art politics that emerged within AIDS activist collectives such as ACT UP, Queer Nation, and artist/activist groups like Gran Fury, Testing the Limits and DIVA TV.

Owens was really the first theoretician to bring questions of feminism and marginalized sexualities into the early notions of (radical) postmodernism. More than anyone, he “decentred” (p. 166) and queered postmodernism and talked with optimism about the “coexistence of different cultures” (p. 186). In 1980, he was prophetic in stating that, “if one of the most salient aspects of our postmodern culture is the presence of an insistent feminist voice... theories of postmodernism have tended either to neglect or to repress that voice” (p. 171).

That it took over a decade for the problems Owens perceived to be widely recognized suggests that his vision is increas-

ingly relevant. One of Owen's last major essays, the 1987 "Outlaws: Gay men in feminism" (pp. 218-235), will have tremendous relevance to alliances between women and men for years to come. He charts the reconstruction of the "legend of the homosexual outlaw," Genet for example, and ends the essay exploring "the media's scapegoating of homosexual men for the AIDS pandemic—a homophobic tactic which is as threatening as the disease itself to the welfare of the entire population." (p. 232)

When Owens died, we lost one of the few male visionaries who had carefully thought out how to build authentic alliances between women and gay men.

Along with Simon Watney, Douglas Crimp has been the most prolific theoretician on AIDS/art/activism beginning well before his 1988 *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* and 1990 *AIDS Demo Graphics On the Museum's Ruins* is about representation and appropriation in art, and the decline of the power of nineteenth-century institutions, particularly the great museums, to regulate imagery and interpretations of culture. His essays were written within roughly the same period as those of Owens. Crimp carefully exposes the so-called "objectivity" of the exhibition and shows it to be a lie through what he terms the "return of the repressed" (p. 108). Crimp covers a wide range of questions from the '80s, including those around the works of Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman. Early on in *On the Museum's Ruins*, Crimp states that,

in confronting aesthetic responses to AIDS, it is impossible to stay within the museum and not only because the most forceful responses rarely appear there. AIDS activist art does not seek primarily to interrupt our notion of art itself but instead to intervene in a wider arena of representation (p. 23).

In other words, the urgency of what was originally perceived as "the gay male health crisis" destroyed and re-worked the old boundaries between art and other forms of communication in ways that

could not be as effectively controlled by the museum and gallery. Crimp then takes his critique much deeper to that of the biases and censorship of museum and modernist formalism (p. 25).

If there are remaining qualms about the necessity of putting AIDS and Queer activist art into the streets, Crimp's 1986 "Redefining site specificity" (pp. 150-186) relates it to questions of power and architecture. The latter parts of *On the Museum's Ruins* suggests various Queer archaeologies (p. 222) where context and place, as the public site where art is expressed, become more important than the pseudo-objectivity of the museum that tends to "dissemble" meanings (p. 287). At a time when art is increasingly being reduced to private intellectual property, Crimp portends a contradictory pressure where all art, if it is to be compelling, is taken to the streets.

To suggest that the main message of these two books is that critical art theory in the '80s and early '90s was shaped by the recognition of official negligence in an epidemic fanned by homophobia misses their full implications. There was also an increasing resistance to feminism, globalization of capital, and the trendiness of postmodernism as a means to scabble what remained of the left. More than any others in activist art theory in recent years, these essays chart the relationships between the profoundly undemocratic forces that have been coalescing and provide the basis for new strategies. Perhaps these times will be remembered in history as much by the transcultural character of the pandemic, and the unmet needs to provide basic safer sex education, along with the subtleties of state censor-

ship. There was a conspiracy of silence and this silence did and does equal death for too many. And when conventional political organizing did little to create new programs to slow the numbers of infections, at least the slim line linking art and theory and activism held some hope. These books are about building in the increasingly devastating aftermath while still only having a limited understanding of what happened. *Beyond Recognition* and *On the Museum's Ruins* allude to what is happening and can happen in the second decade of the pandemic when death, loss and disorientation is increasing, but where the percentage of new HIV infections in gay men is declining. These two books show us how an epidemic provided one of the crucial bases for the difficult birth of Queer theory and how what we conceive of art and theory and activism has been queered forever more.

Gordon Brent Ingram has been active in gay and lesbian political and cultural projects for over twenty years and lived in San Francisco in the early '80s. He received a doctorate from Berkeley in 1989. He is a member of the recently formed Queers in Space, Vancouver, a group of architects, designers, planners, artists, and activists.

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