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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2005

Art in Review

'If It's Too Bad to Be True, It Could Be Disinformation'

Apexart

291 Church Street, between Walker
and White Streets, TriBeCa
Through Nov. 26

Old-style political art said yes or no, told you what to do, advertised an ethic. New-style political art, as often as not, obscures its intentions, makes you wonder what it's up to, goes for confusion, often in an attempt to beat disinformation at its own game.

Disinformation? As defined by this shrewd, almost dematerialized group exhibition, it is a passive form of political deceit. Often associated with government, and sometimes with the news media, it means telling lies through the omission of facts, the idea being that the less people know about what officials are doing, the less likely they are to raise a fuss.

Some of the art in the show, organized by Mercedes Vicente, curator of contemporary art at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, New Zealand, demonstrates how disinformation operates; the rest suggests how it might be resisted. A video by Martha Rosler edits news into selective sound bites. Paul Chan uses an essay on democracy by Saddam Hussein to illustrate the persuasive impenetrability of ideology-babble. Neither piece, however, qualifies as didactic in a protest-art sense.

Almost all the other contributions are by artist-collectives. The neutral collective voice offers a reasonable equivalent to disinformation's tone of authorless authority. At the same time, collective action is a conveniently diffuse way to infiltrate the disinformation stream.

In some cases, this means adapting existing information to new messages. A collective called the Yes Men reimagined Dow Chemical's Web site to create a fictional public announcement in which the company admitted full responsibility for the 1984 Bhopal catastrophe and promised reparations. The Italian collective called 0100101110101101.org/ (Eva and Franco Mattes) used a replicated version of the Nike corporation's Web site to spread the (false) word about the redesign of public spaces in Europe to conform to the Nike label. Both works are satirical in tone, but glimpsed for a moment during an Internet surf, they carry conviction.

Other pieces are cautionary. A series of digital photographs by the Speculative Archive/Julia Meltzer and David Thorne refers to instances of people being arrested as terrorist suspects for photographing public sites. Still others are carnivalesque calls to action. A film by Marcelo Expósito documents swarms of music-making protesters who turn globalist-business-as-usual into an anarchic party. And the collective neuro-Transmitter, which used a portable radio unit to broadcast alternative news during the last Republican Party convention, will give a performance at the gallery on Wednesday, telling visitors how they, too, can hit the airwaves and become anti-disinformational stars.

HOLLAND COTTER