

Holland Cotter, 'No Frames, No Brushes, Just a Limitless Flickering Screen', The New York Times, Jan 17, 2006

ART REVIEW

No Frames, No Brushes, Just a Limitless Flickering Screen

By HOLLAND COTTER

Political anxiety pulses away in practically every corner of American culture, including contemporary art. It's an odd kind of anxiety, almost independent of individual events like wars and terrorist threats. It's amorphous and atmospheric, like an enveloping data stream with no off-switch. American mainstream culture has trouble dealing with such a condition, one that eludes packaging and marketing, that can't be turned into a movie or a painting, or even a protest poster.

But artists are smart. Although many have recently appeared to be softening or dropping political content, others were doing something else. They were altering the delivery system, twisting the angle of approach, changing their mode of address from declarative to interrogative. That change is the subtext of "Low-Intensity Conflict," a modest but potent program of 10 short films and videos being screened at 7 tonight at the Swiss Institute, 495 Broadway, near Spring Street, in SoHo.

As a medium, film is well suited to a socially engaged art. It can be duplicated endlessly and cheaply and circulated widely. It does not need galleries and museums; it can be shown on the exterior of a skyscraper or the wall of a tent, on television or on the Internet. And it can cast "political" in many forms, as documentary or fiction, tragedy or comedy, in forms polished or rough, conclusive or open-ended.

All these turn up in the Swiss Institute program, an intense hour and a half of looking and thinking organized by a young New York curator, Miriam Katzef. Some of the pieces



Rehearsing a Brecht passage on screen, in "Reference Over Time."

Low-Intensity Conflict

Swiss Institute

are straightforward agitprop, like a two-minute film titled "30 Second Hate/Suckers" by the San Francisco filmmaker Bryan Boyce, which uses a fast-paced montage of news clips and cartoons to zap the current White House administration.

Also clocking in at two minutes is "In Search of the Suspicious" by the Dutch artist Marc Bijl, a kind of docudrama send-up. Filmed in Berlin, it shows armed military police directing startled subway commuters through a metal detector, and searching those who set off alarms. In fact, the police are actors and Mr. Bijl supplied the detector. But the subway riders are real, and few of them question or protest the procedures.

The British artist Phil Collins documents a different kind of manipulation in his stinging film series "How to Make a Refugee," shot in war-torn Eastern Europe in 1999. In the segment to be shown tonight, a Western European camera crew interviews a large refugee Kosovar family, quiz-

zing them about their hardships and urging them to expose their wounds, before herding them together for a group picture, like exotic animals in a zoo.

An element of exoticism is also at work in "Enema to Capitalism" (2005), a documentary of an anarchist squatter community in St. Petersburg made by the Russian artist Dmitry Vilensky. To a New Yorker, the punk style of the young subjects is a downtown look from the early 1980's, though in Russia, the same look, not to mention the implied political sentiments, would have been unthinkable until fairly recently. Is the film evidence of a vaunted new international culture of resistance, or of an imported lifestyle more effective as theater than as politics?

The New York artist Seth Price asks a similar question in "Folk Music and Documentary," in which a young man stands in front of the camera voicing negative views about war and globalism. But he looks as if he were performing for a screen test with a script he hadn't fully memorized.

"Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screed No. 20" is Sharon Hayes's talking-head re-creation of a video made by Patty Hearst and her captors after her kidnapping in 1974. She upbraids her parents for their wealth, accuses the American government of trying to kill her and declares solidarity with the revolution.

Ms. Hayes performed the piece in front of a live audience to whom she had given transcripts of the speech, instructing them to hold her to word-for-word accuracy, and they do. The stumbling results come close at times to stand-up comedy; but in presenting history as a constantly corrected script, she makes sure you consider every last strange word.

Andrea Geyer's "Reference Over

Time" is also a monologue, though one with several voices, as an on-screen actress rehearses a passage from a Bertolt Brecht text titled "Conversation Among Refugees." In the text, written while Brecht was in exile from Germany in the 1940's, two men, also refugees, talk bitterly about politics and come to the realization that talking is all they do.

The German-born Ms. Geyer made the film in the United States in 2004, when debates over the Patriot Act were in the air. As the actress rehearses Brecht's loaded words she experiments with ways to deliver them, pointedly or passively.

Tone isn't an issue — it's straightforward — in the newest and most challenging of the films Ms. Katzef has chosen, Paul Chan's portrait of Lynne F. Stewart, the New York lawyer convicted last year of aiding Islamic terrorism by smuggling messages out of jail from a client she was defending, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman. Now disbarred, Ms. Stewart faces a 30-year jail sentence.

The film, which Mr. Chan calls a work-in-progress, simply shows Ms. Stewart talking; in a sense it is a self-portrait. She talks about her trial, about her career as an activist lawyer and about a personal politics that sounds instinctual rather than ideological. She also reads poetry.

One of the poems she reads is William Blake's "On Another's Sorrow," from "Songs of Innocence." It isn't "political" in any overt way. It is filled with both questions and answers. While she reads, Mr. Chan turns the screen into a field of changing colors, so that we concentrate on the music of the words, the activism of the soul that poetry is, the power outlet that art can be. It's a simple device, and like any effective political action, right or wrong, brilliant because it works.