

Cultural Renewal

Afrika at Southern Exposure Gallery

BY JOHN RAPKO

American responses to Pop art read like a survey of the soil from which American political attitudes grow: fear of social change, delight in technological novelty, a weakly ironic fascination with spectacle and high-minded ascetic rejection are all attitudes which help constitute patterns of both political and esthetic response. American artists who work with pop imagery rely upon this common ground of attitudes to supply their work with a critical charge. Pop art raises the question of political ideology in all three senses of the term: as an articulated programme of social action, as the pervasive symbology or non-

verbal practice which unify a society, and as the use of symbols to facilitate social oppression.

The American art world has settled largely upon the conception of ideology as domination. This decision gives contemporary Pop art two aspects: the presentation of the imagery itself in its sheer dumb, unavoidable facticity, and an ironic response leading to rejection of corporate culture and the search for some different source of agency. No apple pie gets into American art without its dollop of irony. Here, Jeff Koons is the exception which proves the rule; the fury which his work incites stems from his refusal to ironize.

Because of the naturalness with which we accept these assumed American strategies of irony, contemporary foreign art often is difficult to understand. The current exhibition of the young Soviet artist Sergei Bugaev at Southern Exposure Gallery looks at first like a standard ironic appropriation of American pop culture; Bugaev, who has adopted the *nom d'art* "Afrika," has painted the face of Donald Duck on each of a series of imposing male portraits. McDonald's hamburger wrappings decorate a wall-hanging monolith constructed from rectangles of rusted metal. One wall is covered with a collage of large photographs of productive Soviet people; these monumental photographs, which mostly assume a dramatically lowered perspective, turn the subjects into ideological icons of virile men and fertile women. The centerpiece of the show is a chunk of metal that Afrika stole from a monumental sculpture of a hammer-carrying male worker and a sickle-wielding female farmer. The metal is mounted on a motorized pendulum suspended from a tall four-legged metal rig. Each leg rests upon a metal cage which houses a maquette of the whole sculpture. In a dense and wild accompanying essay, Afrika claims to be involved in "Donal destruction," a destruction through mimicry of American ideology. Afrika claims that Americans treat real or material values as sacred values, which he parodies as the Trinity of McDonald's the father, Donald Duck the

son and Donald Trump the spirit. He calls for "a new type of interaction with ideology."

Is this American-style ironic appropriation?

According to the Soviet philosopher and critic Boris Groys, all ambitious contemporary Soviet art is marked by two historical experiences which have no Western analogue. In the Soviet Union, industrialization was tied to official, unhistorical utopian ideology. If history is the story of class struggle, there was no more history in the

from New York to Leningrad. The Stalinist transformation of Soviet life left behind a heterogeneous landscape of Soviet Realist images and decrepit industrial products. Ideology is everywhere; the American cultural invasion is just one more transformation.

Afrika treats this new invasion as an opportunity for cultural renewal. Far from being ironic, the exhibition as a whole is figured as a scene for instruction in a new mythology. If Stal-



Afrika, *Donald Destruction*, 1991, installation view, at Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco. (Photo: John Wilson White.)

Soviet Union. When the myth of utopia collapsed, Soviet artists made an effort to reenter history and return to the crucible of high modernist avant-garde experimentation—only to discover that history had moved on.

Afrika's work considers these two realizations together with a third shock—the entry of the American art market into the Soviet Union. Amidst the photographs, Afrika has hung a map of the world with a red arrow, like the symbol for a bombing sortie, stretched

in was the most brutally successful mythmaking ideologue, the contemporary artists can only escape his influence by wrenching bits of the old environment into a new, more livable world. Ideology is understood here not as a type of domination but as a goad to action. Afrika suggests restlessly active appropriation as an antidote to irony. ■

Afrika through April 20 at Southern Exposure Gallery, 401 Alabama St., San Francisco.

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