

Marxist Caucus at CAA

'Marxist Approaches to Art History'

Panel, *Caucus for Marxism & Art*, Feb. 1

Eunice Lipton, Carol Duncan, moderators; David Kunzle, Ken Lawrence, Gary Tartakov, Josephine Gear, Adrian Rifkin, speakers.

□ It's no news that art history is generally taught in a context apart from, or above, history—as though artists, by the nature of their work, have no social responsibility. At this year's CAA convention, the Caucus for Marxism and Art presented an alternative to this general situation and to the convention itself with the panel "Marxist Approaches to Art History."

Eunice Lipton, opening the session, noted the presence of three British speakers out of the five panelists. The first three papers dealt with the connection of art to imperialism; the other two were specific subjects seen from a Marxist perspective.

David Kunzle discussed the role of art in Chile during the Allende regime and under the current military dictatorship, seeing art as a part of, not a response to, social change. At first, he said, murals and posters avoided confrontation with the enemy, later grew less passive. Since the coup in '73 and the concurrent attempts at destruction of popular, political art, new forms of underground art have appeared. For example, *arpilleras*, fabric wall hangings made by Chilean women. Like the quilts of early American women, they involve individual origin and collective production. Many of the *arpilleras* contain explicitly political messages; some are less overt and some are simply beautiful. (Both slides and actual examples were shown.)

Women are able to earn money through the sale of this work, frequently supporting families splintered by the junta. Pinochet's government finds this and other art with a similar perspective threatening, and has tried, unsuccessfully, to co-opt the *arpillera* movement.

Ken Lawrence provided a refreshing break from the recent deluge of Tut-dom. Showing how the African-ness, the Egyptian-ness of the Boy King has been distorted, the conflicts of that period of history de-emphasized, Lawrence discussed the way art is used by imperialism because it's "not political."

Gary Tartakov defined exotica as what is "incomprehensible and irrational to us." The title of his talk was "Exoticism and the Imperialist Vision of 19th-Century European Photography of India." Showing some of these photographs in slides, he demonstrated the way that subjects viewed out of context can give an entirely false view of a country and its people. For example, the familiar image of a man lying on a bed of nails conjures up visions of asceticism, pain, and strangeness. Actually, this is a painless, safe religious act done *for money* by the very poor—at the bottom of the photo, generally cropped, is the receptacle into which to throw coins.

Josephine Gear's topic was "The Cult of the Baby in 19th-Century Art." Using extraordinary slides of British art, all containing two figures (mother and child), she spoke about baby worship and its relationship to the conditions of the time. The creation of nuclear families brought about upheavals in male-female relationships amounting to "the husband producing labor, the wife producing love." Along with this came an idealization of motherhood and, as a result, of babies. The repressed sexuality of the time was also

expressed in the strong eroticism of some of the work (this relationship apparently having been the only acceptable place for women's sexuality). Other paintings reflected moods ranging from adulation to fun. In this context, the discussion of women's rights in England became especially meaningful.

Adrian Rifkin, speaking about the cultural context of the Paris Commune, showed another collection of beautiful slides. Most of these were of cartoons demonstrating the formation of class alliances within the political struggle. The degree of physical violence depicted in these cartoons—on both sides—was high. The women's movement was seen as the most socialist of the left at that time.

In the question-and-answer period, there was some discussion about the Caucus and its work within the CAA. In a brief exchange, Carol Duncan politely refused to agree with CAA representative Beatrice Farwell that the CAA is a democratic organization. Gary Tartakov characterized the difference in objectives as "kings and queens, not Queens and Bronx."



Rose Weil (l.) of CAA calls "time" on Marxist panel, Martha Rosler (r.), mod.

'Artists and Community in the Context of Social Change'

Panel, *Caucus for Marxism & Art*, Feb. 2

Martha Rosler, Alan Sekula, moderators; Mel Rosenthal, Suzanne Lacey, Fred Lonidier, speakers.

□ The second meeting of the Caucus for Marxism and Art at the CAA convention was a step out of art history and into making art today—specifically, making art that effects social change. Because the Caucus had been granted a very brief time slot, only three artists were scheduled to speak, each to discuss her/his work in the context of social change. Martha Rosler, in her introduction, noted that each artist was dealing with violence: physical violence or social violence. Later, she tied this to the responsibility of political artists to gain control of language, to move away from the media definition of "violence."

Photographer Mel Rosenthal described his discomfort with audiences that skim over the political content of his photographs, responding only to the form of the work. In his photographs of the South Bronx, Rosenthal has insisted not only on the political meaning of the subject, but on the relationship between the art and the subject—the people of the area. His original idea was to make portraits of everyone living on the street where he works at a health center. It became apparent that many of these people had never seen accurate photos of themselves; in the course of a year, Rosenthal became very involved with them through his work. The photographs show the subjects as very real people—in very real poverty—not just another burned-out-South-Bronx photo in the media.

Suzanne Lacey presented much of the material she'd covered in a previous panel on

performance and environmental art from a somewhat different perspective. She and Leslie Labowitz co-founded Ariadne to work against violence against women. Discussing several projects on rape, murder, and violence in the record industry, Lacey explained her use of the media. This entails not only getting the personal cooperation of local government officials and journalists, but actually setting up performances and exhibits to accommodate the media. Underlying this is Ariadne's analysis of the role played by media in preventing or allowing political change.

Fred Lonidier spoke about reaching a labor-union audience. Believing that the whole structure of the workplace must be changed to affect occupational health problems in a major way, Lonidier created a photo exhibit. He took photographs of the results of work-caused diseases and added a text about the historical context of these diseases and injuries within the work situation. The exhibit did attract many union members. At the panel, he spoke of the difficulties of reaching such "non-art" audiences.

When our time in the Lincoln Room ran out (we were reminded of this by another CAA rep), we were left hanging in mid-discussion. Then it was discovered that another spot was, unofficially, available. Perhaps 40 of us sat in a circle there and continued to talk and talk about the role the media play for the political artist, about the difference between (performance) art and political activism (is Phyllis Schlafly a performance artist?), about political art as a process of self-identification (for example, the exhibit of shopping-bag ladies' art at the Met, organized by Anne Marie Rousseau), about definitions of "cultural worker." ■ —Leslie Satin

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