

Journal of Contemporary Art

INTERVIEWS & PROJECTS

*"We have Jesse Helms
to thank for all this
sexually explicit stuff.
If he hadn't started
complaining, we
wouldn't have all these
people respond with
sexually explicit art."
—Annie Sprinkle, p. 109.*

Barbara Bloom
James Hyde/Buzz Spector
Mary Kelly
Alain Kirili
Joyce Kozloff
Tim Maul
Joseph Nechvatal
Mari Ratanen
Allen Ruppersberg
Cindy Sherman
Thomas Skomski
Annie Sprinkle
Haim Steinbach
The Abortion Project

Fall 1992

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Joseph Nechvatal

Philip Pocock: What brought you to France this year?

Joseph Nechvatal: The Dole Museum here put on a retrospective of my work recently. Then the curator, François Cheval, invited me to live and work in Arbois for two years as artist-in-residence. Arbois is a wonderfully beautiful and charming wine-making village. I'm provided with an enormous studio and a very classically French apartment in the Musée d'Arbois. Besides working on my art I'm organizing an exhibit for the museum entitled "Excess in the Techno-Mediocratic Society." Also, I'm working at the computer lab in Arch-et-Senans. I'm very interested in a certain lineage of French artists, writers, poets, and philosophers and the French interest in technology and its relationship to art.

PP: You've begun work on a "computer virus" project. It seems a logical extension of the graphite, xerox, and scan pieces. Your chaotic syncopation of concealing and revealing images, of seeing and not seeing simultaneously will keep working. And the "virus" implication

resonates with your earlier doom and gloom message.

JN: Yes, that's fairly accurate. What's fascinating in these ideas is exactly that chancy interplay between concealment, of negation really, and the affirmative, reassuring quality of recognition. The viral project consists of my uploading my entire visual production into a very powerful computer. At that point I infect it all with a computer virus. The results are then used in a new series of robotic-assisted scan paintings. So there is introduced the unseen, chaotic or fractal interaction which one finds in the early work. Your other observation about that in relationship to the doom of apocalypse is an interesting one, carried over from my nuclear works. But now doom is more personal. The metaphor for AIDS is, of course, a strong one, but it's not the only way to look or think about this work. I'm looking at the viral work not only as a meditation on the deadly AIDS tragedy but also as a sabotaging, ecstatic freedom, which radical change and openness can bring to life.

PP: *So your viral device is perceptual and not merely political?*

JN: That's right. I'm convinced our perceptual habits and political actions are inexorably intertwined. For example, it used to be thought that people's sensibilities were constructed upon the fastidious distinction between original and reproduction. Today these categories have collapsed. The logic of any viral theory starts with this basic premise. No longer are we theorizing some sovereign, free-standing entity, which can be perceived from the outside as self-enclosed and original but something that is perceived on the inside, invisibly, and follows three basic patterns: the invasion of the host, the reproduction of the host's master code,

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and the excessive replication of the viral logic now energized and fed by the dying host. The invasion of the host body, be it the personal, singular body, or the body politic, by subversive and invisible antigens, has tremendous perceptual, political, and psychological ramifications. When people are faced with the circulation of fatal pathologies, a resultant prophylactic mentality is bound to ensue. This panicked repression of the Id by the collective Super-ego creates the necessity for an ever-increasing ecstatic promiscuity. It's really this line I'm most interested in following with my work.

PP: You make drawings, objects, and paintings. You founded the audiocassette magazine Tellus and you write for Artforum as well as other magazines. Do you find it difficult to project a clear definition of Nechvatal the artist/objectmaker, while there exists a partial perception of you as an editor/critic? Or have these categories begun to collapse?

JN: My editorial, curatorial, and theoretical activities can give people actually a clearer understanding of my visual production. I know it did for me when I read the writings of Mondrian, Newman, Morris, Reinhardt, Judd, Smithson, and others. I believe I learned mostly from the Conceptualists not to be passively mute as an artist. But I don't believe I really do practice criticism. Let's separate theorizing from criticism. I've read enough real criticism of my own exhibitions to inoculate and immunize me from doing any myself. That's not to suggest I don't gain a great deal by being criticized. I do. It serves an absolutely vital role in providing the strength of affirmation and the necessity of critical analyses.

PP: But in the margin, on the boundary?

JN: I think I can locate myself, my art, and my

words somewhere between the boundaries of dread and kitsch, between ecstasy and catastrophe, and love and violence. I think we all are at a point in time where these references converge and implode into each other. A chimerical response therefore is not that inappropriate. For example, I think a nihilist like Camus is a very funny and wise guy. Here we have a perfect example of an ambivalent individual involving himself in the deep debate between individual freedom and collective justice. Within my intellectual imagination, the deterritorializing of rigid pedagogy is a very captivating and serious drive. Foucault describes it in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as the hard work of freedom. By using concepts such as discontinuity, rupture, threshold, and transformation in my strategic project, I can open up a number of possible positions, instead of fixing their limits. Even something fundamental like what a "painting" is can still be stretched. Duchamp's bachelor machine can be stretched.

It's by violating the traditional limitations that art and technology have heretofore defined themselves that there is room to really run. We live in the aftermath of the implosion of the technologically image-saturated dynamo. The excessive cancellation of difference which has occurred from this violence is, however, capable of re-energizing our thinking and seeing processes. There really is an emancipation to be found in the great flow of decoded signs, once one passes through the initial nihilistic shock. My take on theory is that it itself is in shock because, after all, theory is basically media and therefore suffers from the same delirious exhaustion, the same melancholy excess that media has. If theory fails to take pleasure in the text, it's finished. No one is grimmer than I am in refusing the grand, serious metaphysics of phallogocentric

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cultural order. In the wonderful world of alchemical-feminist theory, one drifts fabulously across the shattered and entwined ideological mediascape, floating in the art debris of all previously seductive signs while simultaneously theorizing the most possibly advanced expression of the new patterns of emancipatory political thought.

PP: Will feminist philosophy, a potential catalyst for artists Prince, Kruger, Trockel and Koons, be embraced as the dominant system of thought?

JN: I don't know if I can presume to cast a totalizing overview upon the motivations and relative success or failure of the artists you mentioned, so I want to dodge the question a bit and just try to speak about feminist theory in a very loose way. If you are referring to what now is the established feminist line becoming the primary political philosophy, my guess would be no, that no one codified ideological set of meanings will or could become primary in today's very scattered, very controlled mediascape. 1970s-style critical feminist theory in art suffers from the same debilitating cynicism as everything else. We all need to drop our preconceived masks. And let's be honest: only the media, television, and the law can deconstruct or construct anything in reality. Why is the supposed deconstruction of meaning offered by artists not shared by now by a consumer public that has continued to indulge itself in traditional image voting and purchasing? The deconstruction of the meaning of signs attempted within the structure of those very signs has been ignored. OK, for me the legacy of feminist thought is not the strategy of deconstruction. It's plain to see that it does not work. The feminist position, which I accept and which I hope will be strengthened, are the values of decentering, liquid-

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ity, dissolution, and fragmentation in application to images and their meaning. We need these values in order to loosen repressive mechanisms and to proliferate tolerance and wonder and humor. But your question is an impossible one. We as men can only learn to respond to feminism, to be supportive of it. Our need to theorize about it, to insulate ourselves from a position of critique, deteriorates our ability to do so. I think Julia Kristeva stated the situation best when she pointed out that didacticism, rhetoric, and dogmatism of any kind, in any field, no longer commands attention. Only one language grows more and more contemporary—the language of Finnegans Wake.

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Joseph Nechvatal is an artist based in New York. His collected writings on art have been published recently by Antoine Candau. Paris.

Philip Pocock is an artist living in Europe. He was a founding editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Art*.