ARTNEWS

REVIEWS WINTER 2017

What You Can't See Can Hurt You: 'Invisible Adversaries' at Bard Considers the Power of Dark Societal Forces

BY ***Alex Greenberger*** POSTED **12/29/16 10:38 AM**

June 25–September 18, in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Mona Hatoum, *Performance Still*, 1985, black-and-white photograph on aluminum,32⅝ x 43¼ inches.
HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART, CENTER FOR CURATORIAL STUDIES, BARD COLLEGE, ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK, MARIELUISE HESSEL COLLECTION

In a year of terrorist attacks, police shootings, and information leaks, it's no surprise that a sense of paranoia has seeped into recent exhibitions in museums and galleries. It certainly pervaded "Invisible Adversaries" at the CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art, where about 100 works—mostly from the museum's collection, supplemented by a few loans—dealt with unseen threats from government surveillance to racism and sexism.

Curators Lauren Cornell, of the New Museum, and Hessel Museum director Tom Eccles named the exhibition after a 1976 Valie Export film in which a Viennese woman becomes convinced that an alien species called the Hyksos have taken over the minds of ordinary Austrians. Superficially a Godardian take on *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the film is in effect an allegory for Nazism's continuing influence in Europe.

At the time of its release, an Austrian publication called Export's film a *Bürgerschreck*, or "bourgeois nightmare," and the same could be said of a number of pieces in the Bard show. Take Patty Chang's 1998 video *Shaved (At a Loss)*, in which Chang, clad in petticoat and blindfold, lifts her skirt and proceeds to shave her pubic area. The staging may be that of a 19th-century erotic painting, but this is a thriller: one slip could spell disaster. Submitting to the male gaze, Chang suggests, is a form of self-harm.

Some of the best works at Bard featured subjects who return society's prejudiced gaze. A 2012 Carrie Mae Weems video installation draws on minstrelsy, a form of theater popular into the early 20th century that cast black actors in grossly caricatured roles. Weems cast herself as a crazed actress who points to her audience and whispers, "I'm gonna destroy ya . . . Revenge is a motherfucker."

Racism is addressed more obliquely by William Pope.L, whose 1990 video had him crawling across the ground on his stomach. It's nicely echoed by a photograph by Mona Hatoum, which shows her walking through London barefoot, with Doc Martens tethered to her ankles like a ball and chain—her way of symbolizing oppression.

Nikki S. Lee, *The Ohio Project (7)*, 1999, Fujiflex print, 28⅞ x 22 inches.
HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART, CENTER FOR CURATORIAL STUDIES, BARD COLLEGE, ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK, MARIELUISE HESSEL COLLECTION

Some artists approach stereotypes by playing into them. In the 1990s, Nikki S. Lee memorably took on various identities—a black hip-hop character, a Hispanic

stripper, a white yuppie, among others. Bard had a pair of photographs from Lee's 1999 series "The Ohio Project," which has her passing as an underprivileged Midwesterner. In one, she sits next to a man who grips a shotgun; in the other, she poses for a family portrait. As Johanna Fateman points out in the "Invisible Adversaries" catalogue, in her work, Lee herself became an alien.

"Invisible Adversaries" was a show about abstractions—that is to say, general ideas not based on any particular real persons, things, or situations. And it suggested, through its preponderance of photography, film, and video, that such abstractions are best addressed by representational art. Painting and sculpture were rare, and the few abstract pieces in the exhibition, among them a torqued steel sculpture by Phyllida Barlow and a suite of minimalist colored-pencil drawings by Ulrike Müller, felt somewhat out of place. Rachel Harrison's sculpture *Pink Stool* (2005), which splits the difference between figuration and abstraction, fared a bit better. A wooden stool supporting a bubblegum-pink mound resembling a squashed female figure, it could read as a statement about how female artists get flattened in a male-dominated art world.

What felt most at home in this show were works that focused on the digital realm, perhaps not so surprising, given that co-curator Lauren Cornell is well known for her writings on art after the internet. One of the exhibition's most compelling strands was its look at how the virtual world can be a sinister one.

Surveillance technology appeared in several works, among them Emily Jacir's *linz diary* (2003), a series of stills from webcam footage showing the artist standing in a plaza. Jacir knew about the webcam (she installed it herself), but in the photographs she appears oblivious to it, as many citizens are to such hidden cameras all around the world. More unsettling was a 2015 Trevor Paglen photograph, *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, a drone barely visible against the backdrop of an Instagram-worthy sunset.

Hito Steyerl's elaborate video installation *Factory of the Sun* (2015) goes deeper into digital technology's dystopic potential. It takes the form of a futuristic scenario in which Deutsche Bank harvests workers' energy by tracking their movements. Viral videos come into play, as does Marxism. The whole thing crescendos with the game short-circuiting and the anime-like avatars splintering into pixels as pop music blares in celebration.

With Paul Chan's dreamy video projection *5th Light* (2006), the show turned from the future to the recent past, and from conflict to its aftermath. Projected at an angle, with half its image on the floor, it calls to mind a window's reflection. Silhouetted objects drift slowly downward, recalling the bodies and debris that fell from the World Trade Center on September 11. Chan's meditative video fades not to black, but to light purple, then to a rich shade of orange, as when a projector, its source unplugged, turns deep blue—an image without an image.

In contrast to Chan's quiet work, Bruce Nauman's 1985 video installation *Good Boy, Bad Boy*, on view nearby, was causing a racket. In it, a white woman and a black man, inhabiting two different TV monitors, stare out at the viewer, talking over each other about hate, among other things. "I hate. You hate. We hate. This is hating." Usually exhibited with the two videos side by side, here the piece was shown with the monitors facing each other, such that the viewer had to stand between them. Consider the power of invisible forces, the Bard show proposed. In Nauman's piece, the unseen figure's voice was always the more disturbing one.

A version of this story originally appeared in the Winter 2017 issue of *ARTnews* on page 134 under the title " 'Invisible Adversaries.' "