Kramer vs. the FBI: Making Art of Politics

by Margia Kramer

Because of her support of the Black Panther Party, actress Jean Seberg became the object of FBI surveillance and harassment. In May 1970, the Los Angeles FBI field office requested authorization from FBI headquarters to plant a false letter to a gossip columnist that would “possibly cause her embarrassment.” The letter was subsequently sent, and a ten-foot-high viewing platform. In the January 21 Village Voice, Kay Larson described the effect in this way:

From a scary height near the ceiling, you look down on a carpet of black sand... The words, formed with red and yellow sand, recall the medicinal power of Navajo sandpaintings, but the visual and physical contortions necessary to lean over and read the inscription obliterates any sense of well-being and force you to stare uncomfortably into this black morass of nausea and self-disgust. You feel that you could easily topple over the edge and fall into the nightmare.

To explore the issues involved in making this type of documentary art, I conducted the following self-interview.

You were asked by May Stevens to participate in a panel called “Art as Intervention” on March 18 at the School of Visual Arts. How do you interpret that title?

I think that the title of the panel could as easily have read “Intervention as Art,” because the concept is one of exchange between art and public events. To me, it means art-making that proceeds from the explicit moral convictions of the artist. And this is one of the notions that differentiates my art from other contemporary art. The locus of the art-work—its themes, materials, methods of communication, and setting—moves between public, internal realities and public, shared, external reality.

I want to begin this interview with a quotation from John Grierson, who started the documentary film movement in England in 1929. He invented the word “documentary,” defining it as “the creative treatment of actuality.” The quotation is the following: “a mirror held up to nature is not as important as the hammer which shapes it.”

The roots of documentary art are in the 19th century, in events and so-called art movements such as Romanticism and Realism. Mirror and hammer are metaphors for esthetic and social concerns. With mirror and hammer the artist is not only “of one’s time,” reflecting; the artist also shapes and participates in his or her time. Within a realist or documentary framework, the definition of personal (as observed by Linda Nochlin) is, by its nature, social. Meaning interactive instead of hermetic or avant-garde; meaning direct, concrete, specific, grounded in the 20th century workplace. The documentary visual artist, like the Realist before, makes a “drama from the ordinary.”

How do you go about making this “documentary drama”?

My primary source of public observation is the daily newspapers, which I read for news of actual events and sources, fashions in political debate, and the opinion of the public on the meaning of propaganda. I clip articles relating to my interests: primarily, at present, about the FBI, CIA, FOIA, constitutional rights, visual propaganda in Iran, American reaction to the hostage situation, the treatment of Eastern-bloc and Soviet artists, writers, and dissidents, Amnesty International, International PEN, etc.

Sometimes I retype a particularly compelling excerpt or quotation and hang it on my bathroom wall. As I look at it each day, if the material seems more and more urgent, I may isolate it, write it out in my own handwriting, thereby appropriating it to myself, and start working. The more compelling is the larger it becomes over time, the larger I start it up again and again. The most urgent states—the ones that speak to my personal, moral convictions most clearly and passionately—are then used in more extended pieces, such as the book installation and book as Artists Space. Requesting documents and sources under the FOIA is a technique of investigative reporting and historical research that I have pre-empted for my art. This technique seems logical and appropriate to the work, because my primary concern is the free press and freedom of information.

Is this documentary art different from other contemporary art?

Because the nature of the observed events, news, and sources is flexible and unpredictable, documentary art has a living openness that is lacking in less socially engaged art. In documentary art, there is no esthetic resolution of positied problems per se, because the artist must participate in every part of every resolution by actively constructing meaning from the thematic materials presented by the artist. This constructed meaning may alter old choices and patterns of thought.

This is not art propaganda. Rather, in my own work, a familiar media story is reformulated, investigated, placed in a dramatic, human context, blown up, slowed down, appropriately framed, and personalized by identification with a famous person, so that its almost unbelievable, outrageous, frightening reality is comprehensible.

If I told you what you have just described as propaganda?

A crucial distinction must be made between a work of documentary visual art and art propaganda. Propaganda must lull the viewer by short-circuiting all thought and decision-making, by utilizing true or false or fragmentary references along with visual content, with the purpose of making the viewer serve some cause, ideal, prevailing collective myth, or collective dream. Propaganda operates on an unconscious level. Documentary art, however, does not mask the artist’s position and should inspire and stimulate individual thought and decision-making.
How did you come to do the installation at Artists Space last January?

The constructed space developed from my moral convictions regarding constitutional rights and the FBI surveillance of Jean Seberg. In a similar sense, religious architecture follows liturgical imperatives. Lacking a common liturgy, I relied on simple references and familiar objects: a ladder, platform, book, large-scale words, primary colors, and tactile surfaces in order to separate each viewer from the mass of viewers, to provoke fear, and to hammer a bit at memories, expectations, and conceptions of art viewing in relation to events of the late 1960s and early 1970s in America.

Part III of "Secret" can be seen May 3 to 31 at Printed Matter, 7-9 Lispenard Street in New York City. Part IV will be installed at the Franklin Furnace, 112 Franklin Street in New York City from May 13 to 31.