

The Spirit of Endurance

Essential to the spirit of art as activism is a pact in the belief of collective strategies for producing art. As Holland Cotter recently expressed in *The New York Times*, “this concept is strenuously resisted by the mainstream art world at the moment.” Yet, Bradley McCallum & Jacqueline Tarry represent the forefront of a new generation of artists for whom the problems of the world today are first and foremost subject matter in their artwork. It’s not their story alone, but they tell it well. Articulated with straight ahead sincerity, McCallum and Tarry’s photographs and video works illustrate how socioeconomic realities and political ideologies dominate ordinary, though highly personal lives. Presenting critical analyses in accessible forms, they merge performance, narrative and documentary images to create their art works.

While McCallum & Tarry constantly negotiate the terrain of issues like racism, gender, religion and equality (from a historical point of view), their art is always keenly tied to present manifestations of sociopolitical and cultural significance. With each specific issue—from race, police brutality and religion to homelessness—the formal strategy and methodology change according to the artists’ ceaseless activist goals. Collaborative by nature as a duo, each project widens the scope of their authorship by incorporating others, and further challenging notions of the individual, heroic artist and a cult-like belief in the artist, so closely attached to the stale history of western art practices.

Viewing public participation as crucial to the artworks success, McCallum & Tarry’s art progressively broadens the audience for contemporary art, no small feat in our overloaded digital present. In doing so, they engage in what Jeff Kelley has called, “a dialogical process that changes both the participant and the artist.” Certainly, their most recent project evokes this fact. While the fruit of their process and work are a new series of color saturated life-size photographs and a video documenting a 25-hour performance with homeless Seattle teenagers, it is the performance aspect of *Civic Endurance* that is essential, not only to the artists’ process, but for the lived experience of all the work’s

initial participants. This process of interaction in the initial creation of the work infuses the product with a politically viable representation in gorgeous pictures.

On the surface, the photographs recall the large color Polaroid portraits of Catherine Opie, whose pictures of body manipulators and others came to prominence in the mid-90s and were duly attacked as incendiary evidence of visual art's celebration of the abject. Yet, the art of McCallum & Tarry shares much with the recent popularity of art collectives cited in shows like the recent Documenta XI and Venice Biennial. While this recent movement to collectivize harks back to the 1960's when the impetus to collaborate was catalyzed by war in Vietnam, Civil Rights in America and gender debates everywhere, the Internet, itself an intrinsically collective medium, has also spurred on collaborative art in the new millennium, post-911, though McCallum and Tarry have been at it for some time.

While the artists' share concerns with artists of a past generation like Adrian Piper and Hans Haacke, for example, McCallum and Tarry's work cleverly subverts the norms of politically challenging contemporary art with seductive formal qualities. On one level, *Civic Endurance* is a beautiful series of original portrait photography. On another level, *Civic Endurance* embodies the spirit of making art matter in our moment, poetically rendering new narratives.

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