

THREESCORE, ELEVEN ARTISTS, A THOUSAND WORDS ON WORLD HISTORIES

JON WINET

Dateline: Rijeka, Croatia,¹ March 2008.

1948 | At the height of the Baby Boom, at the dawn of the Cold War, at the near dead center of the 20th century, the Des Moines Art Center opened for business. That year, the Soviet Union began to jam Voice of America broadcasts behind the soon-to-be-formidable Iron Curtain. The legendary motorcycle gang, the Hells Angels, was founded in California. The state of Israel declared its independence of the British Mandate of Palestine, followed in short order by a war with neighboring countries, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Scientist William Shockley filed a patent for the first transistor. Harry S. Truman defeated Thomas E. Dewey and Strom Thurmond for the U.S. presidency. Among those born that year were music legends Rick James and Johnny Ramone, Olympic figure skating champion Peggy Fleming, and *All in the Family's* Sally Struthers. Those who died included pacifist Mahatma Gandhi, pioneer of cinema D. W. Griffith, and Babe Ruth, baseball's "Sultan of Swat."²

[1] The final draft of this essay was completed during a trip to Croatia. Coincidentally, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka was in the midst of *Formal* ↔ *Engaged*, their 60th anniversary exhibition, developed by museum director Branko Franceschi. This coincidence is certainly a reminder of the synchronous, parallel unfolding of histories across the globe, and of the opportunities now provided to compare and contextualize artistic, cultural, and institutional practices.

[2] Source: Wikipedia entry for 1948: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948>.

2008 | Threescore years later, the Des Moines Art Center marks its 60th anniversary with *World Histories*, a decidedly international exhibition featuring 11 artists spanning the globe. In the early years of this century, globalization has led to a more evenly distributed geography of recognized creative production in the visual arts. Artists from areas remote to the art world, such as Iowa or Indonesia, once forced to relocate to Paris and then New York to gain international attention—or, at the very least, to improve their odds—now have the option to live and work from home or in one of a number of art centers, including Berlin, London, New York, and Beijing.

Developments in technology make this all the more possible. For some artists, being everywhere and nowhere is just a network connection away, negating geographic imperatives. As Case, the protagonist in William Gibson's seminal 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, put it in the past tense: "Travel was a meat thing,"³ and those who wish to are virtually able to locate and dislocate at will. That said, the emergence of local art of international significance permeates contemporary practice and is a trend well-represented in this exhibition, with work reflecting both local regional interests and traditions, as well as global concerns and awareness.

Back online, available everywhere, and all the time, social networks such as Facebook, MySpace and Second Life allow for the showcase of culture in ways that deftly circumvent the dual tyrannies of time and space. For time-based media artists, YouTube and myriad similar sites⁴ also provide a simple,

[3] William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, ACE, New York, 1984. Quoted from the cybersource <http://project.cyberpunk.ru/lib/neuromancer/#part1>.

[4] Of many, Blip TV (<http://blip.tv>) is one that seems to be attracting more serious producers. Given the hyper-brief history of online video on demand, it will be interesting to see how the current media leaders, and contemporary 2008 practices, weather the test of time.

brilliant means for the distribution and display of their work. Once a "read only" destination for quirky amateur video, these sites now allow viewers to write directly to the producer or publicly comment on work and post video responses. Subscribers can follow their favorite author/media collector faithfully. These networks not only promote new delivery systems for art and culture, but also reposition viewers toward a more active stance, encouraging everyone to, as Apple Computer Inc. put it in a 1997–2002 ad campaign, "Think Different."

New networks also result in artists negotiating new relationships with major institutions such as the museum, television network, and stage. By virtue of their inclusion in a museum exhibition, all the artists in *World Histories* are involved in "the museal,"⁵ but to varying degrees. Like their colleagues over at YouTube, their practice challenges commonly held and cherished assumptions about art and art objects.⁶ As conceived and in some cases as executed, the works in the exhibition, like the best of drawings, are principally the documentary traces of an artist's ideas. Viewed from an adjacent perspective, the work is more engaged in promoting reflection and dialogue than pure aesthetic experience.

While challenging the "museal," artists and experimental curators are also opening venerable institutions to new, exciting approaches to

[5] On this topic, 20th-century Frankfurt School German philosopher Theodor Adorno writes: "The German word *museal* (museum like) has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. More than phonetic associations connect museum and mausoleum. Museums are the family sepulchres of works of art." [Theodor W. Adorno, "Valery, Proust Museum," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, Neville Spearman, London, 1967, pp. 173–186.]

[6] Not surprisingly, more than half of the artists have one or more of their own Web sites. All the others have a large online presence, with an overwhelming percentage of commercial galleries now boasting substantial sites, often delivering information in several languages.

programming. DIY (do-it-yourself) culture, a standard of artists' environments from "squats" in Berlin to artist-run organizations in San Francisco,⁷ finds artists engaged in all aspects of cultural production. Interdisciplinary practice and cross- and pop-cultural proclivities inform this distinctively, albeit discreetly political show. Politics is fair game on this stage. In these times, artists live consciously political lives and, as global citizens, take on the issues confronting all of us. Best of all, they do so with wit and imagination, creating accessible, often lighthearted, open texts that trigger sometimes long overdue conversations.

Globalization, a negative term for the most part Stateside, is more neutral and nuanced in other parts of the world. While there is something admittedly disorienting and disconcerting about the sameness of pedestrian malls such as Newcastle Upon Tyne's Northumberland Street in northern England or Stuttgart's Königstrasse in southern Germany's rich Baden-Württemberg region—especially when confronted with the ubiquitous French Connection U.K. stores and their F.C.U.K brand, particularly alarming for semi-dyslexics like myself—these "merch" emporia are clearly a source of civic pride, and evidence of a relatively high level of prosperity. To quote the T-shirt or cat hat—or, in abbreviated form, the faceplate of my whizbang cell phone—"Life is Good."⁸

Back at home, at a time when the price of oil—tied to the value of a dollar plummeting—can barely see \$100 a barrel in its rearview mirror, we

[7] Molekula, a brilliant example of DIY, is a consortium of small, dynamic, and edgy arts organizations in Rijeka on Croatia's Adriatic coast. It promotes and produces arts and culture spanning literature, theater, media, dance, visual arts, and social activism, while exhibiting a strong commitment to community-building. Fortunate artists and communities have counterparts in their locales.

[8] For those of you who remember the brand "Gold Star," generally the least expensive alternative to Sony electronics back when, the Wikipedia entry for "LG" is instructive: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LG>.

are reminded emphatically that the American Century is over. Historians of the present speculate that the real lead story of this period won't be as much about Iraq and the current American administration's obsession with the conduct of an endless and unwinnable war on jihadism, as it will be about the ascendancy of China and India to economic powerhouse status. These developments are reflected in a significant shift in world markets, leading to a logical evolution to global arts and culture. Ultimately, as Americans, we may well want to exhale a collective sigh of relief to have the burden of our uncontested superpower role removed from our morally exhausted shoulders. World histories and the nation will, I suspect, be the better for it.

JON WINET is an associate professor at The University of Iowa. He directs the Intermedia area in the School of Art and Art History. He is currently working on "The Electoral College," a year-long New Media project on the 2008 U.S. presidential elections.