

## ART IN RUINS

GIMPEL FILS

Political art does not exist, unless one's conception of the political either features

the sign as the agency of social change, or privileges the acquisition of information as a kind of political consciousness. Representations in art of the political, however, abound. It is precisely the willful confusion of these two registers—coupled with and fortified by the institutionalized separation of art and social practice—that sustains and legitimizes the practice of so-called political art.

The critical and curatorial celebrations of such art generally suppress the difficult and embarrassing contradictions that sustain the fallacy that esthetic form plus political content necessarily yield a political effect. Theodor Adorno already saw that art in capitalist society is ambiguous: it is at once a negation and an affirmation of the social world that gave it voice. Herbert Marcuse suggested that the mode of reception of art implicitly undermines the critical content of the works. Nevertheless, even if the political in art (in the sense of art being an agency for social change) is deemed chimerical, the impulse that seeks to overcome the alienation of art and the artist in contemporary society is real, recurrent, and worth investigating.

Art in Ruins—for the past seven years the project of Glyn Banks and Hannah Vowles—has insightfully tackled these issues. Critically and anarchically colonizing the high ground of post-Modernism, Art in Ruins strives to become one with the world of social affairs. This current group of installations was organized around the fight against apartheid in South Africa waged by the African

National Congress (ANC). The “pure” sentimental view of social revolution as the “proper” attitude to be adopted by non-South African supporters was attacked, providing the basis for a display that focused on the transformation of politics into conventional, consumable objects. Other works in which Art in Ruins rehearsed the familiar sublation of “Minimalist”-inspired form through politicized content served as a counterpoint. Thus, two types of icon—the post-Modern, politically conscious work of art, and the popular fund-raising token—were contrasted and arrayed throughout the catalogue, in apparent disregard for their differences. The danger, of course, was that the whole project might collapse into a familiar post-Modern pastiche. The official ANC tricolor—black, green, and gold—that dominated throughout, however, rescued the catalogue, which became a kind of rake's progress of the political sign.

In the gallery itself, the ANC colors were reduced to interior decor; yet the actual political struggle was not mocked. Art in Ruins suggests that all such icons are the unstable products of human practice in search of empowerment, if not justice. The fact that reification and fragmentation are endemic to the workings of culture under capitalism, for revolutionary and esthete alike, was constantly on view. Art in Ruins mischievously incorporates “artifacts” of their prior history into these works, in the form of references to the architecture of earlier exhibition locations, barely visible within

seemingly monochromatic panels. These and other self-inflicted reifications function like a bizarre form of homeopathy, produced in advance of, and hopefully outflanking, the symptoms of the inevitable art-world event.

Art in Ruins' relationship to current art practice is iconoclastic. In their role as shadow ministers of post-Modernism, Art in Ruins specifically targeted *My Homeland Is Not a Suitcase*, 1991. Twelve utility bags—the cheap kind often used by “guest” workers throughout Western Europe—are mockingly arranged like one of Long's elegant stone circles. Enforced homelessness is contrasted to willful esthetic meandering but not in the sense of opposing “doing nothing” to “Do something!” Arthur Danto's sentiment comes to mind: “It would be wrong or inhuman to take an aesthetic attitude, to put at psychical distance certain realities. The question instead must arise as to what one should do.” Art in Ruins does trash Adornoesque resistance, but then does “nothing” other than donate a portion of their proceeds to the ANC. We are thrust back into the abyss. The dialectic of the affirmative character of culture seems to have been subjected to a monstrous détente. Artists still need to dispel the alienation that is reproduced by the basic separation of art from social practice. Art still searches for its voice...elsewhere. Yet the current agenda is rich and seductive: Where will art find a home for its reconciliation? What is the future of a culture where the production of representations of social practice and social misery count as social practice?

—Michael Corris