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N1 .A814

TN 1470328
Title:
Call Number: N1 .A814 V. 37 NO. 5-6
Year: 1999
V. 37
Issue/Part: 5
pg. 12-18 +response letter 4
Article Title: Ballad of Jones and Yoko (Response to Ronald Jones's review of the recent Yoko Ono exhibitions)
Article Author:
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1002102976

Artforum international

DD : Scan,
02/04/2019

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LETTERS

WOOLY BULLY

To the Editor:

Dave Hickey have a personal grudge against Christopher Wool? Or Ann Goldstein? His review of Christopher Wool’s exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in the October issue of Artforum certainly seems like an attack on both of them and on anyone who actually thinks Mr. Wool is a talented, worthy artist who is saying something unique with his paintings right now (and not just “ten years ago”). My response to the show was exactly the opposite. I have never been so moved by an exhibition. Mr. Hickey says we need to feel the artist’s purpose in our bodies and not be told what to feel by a curator. Standing in front of a black painting from the mid-’80s, I was breathless from the absolute perfection of the piece. I felt it in my body and, although the curator had selected it and thus may be trying to guide me in some way, I was thankful to see this piece since it is rare to see one of Wool’s early paintings in person. And other paintings from ten years ago still had an intense impact such as the powerful Apocalypse Now/Sell the Home Self/Sell the Car Self/Sell the Kids. It was strong ten years ago, it is strong now, and it remains pertinent with the approaching millennium.

Mr. Hickey implies that Wool’s use of wallpaper stencils and refers is no more than wallpaper or a conceptual joke of sorts. I disagree once again with Mr. Hickey. Seeing several roiler paintings and works on paper together allowed the opportunity to reflect on the process of painting and the choice of materials and the many possible intentions of the artist. And I find it untrue of Mr. Hickey to assume that just because other artists have used “ornamental instamasking” and wallpaper that it is somehow less important or valid when Wool uses it.

The exhibition catalogues were also criticized by Mr. Hickey. I think if he were to consider the body of exhibition catalogues by Mr. Wool, perhaps he would see that the artist uses his catalogues as an opportunity to reinterpret his work, to alter the response of the audience. His catalogues are artist’s books rather than simple reproductions of what is in the show. And, as a member of that audience, I appreciate these catalogues more than some other artist’s catalogues because they are like having a piece of the art.

—Claudia Carson
Norwalk, Connecticut

Dave Hickey responds:

My dear Ms. Carson:

I am delighted that you enjoyed Christopher Wool’s exhibition at MCA. I have no doubt that the works responded well to your thoughtful approach to them as paintings within the broader discourse of painting. As I suggested in my review, this seems the appropriate mode of address for work as much as Wool’s. Unfortunately, I was assigned to review the exhibition, not the individual paintings, which, in my view, were somewhat overwhelmed by curatorial agenda. So please understand that I did not dismiss Wool’s wallpaper paintings as conceptual jokes. I suggested that if they are conceptual jokes, as a number of the catalogue’s contributors infer, they are not very good ones. As paintings, they clearly have their virtues. Also, I meant no disrespect to the work or to its collectors by emphasizing its private popularity. I merely suggested that this private rogue has meaning and implication that might well have been addressed in the catalogue.

Finally, please know that I do not consider my review to have been particularly “scathing,” nor do I have any personal grudge against either Christopher Wool or Ann Goldstein, neither of whom I have ever met. I have nothing but respect for them as fellow artists in the severe vacuum of contemporary art. I just didn’t like the show. I liked some of the paintings. Happens all the time. Thank you for your thoughtful response.

BOLLAD OF JONES AND YOKO

To the Editor:

After reading Ronald Jones’s review of the recent Yoko Ono exhibitions in your October issue, it occurred to me that it was perhaps misplaced in the Focus section and, in fact, for the Columns. Even as a reviewer, of course, Mr. Jones is certainly entitled (even expected) to offer his opinions, but generally these opinions have to do with the work being reviewed. In his positive review of Ono’s tandem exhibitions at Emmerich and Deitch, however, Jones devotes most of his text to his apparent personal infatuation with John Lennon, to whom he refers as “Yoko’s creative ghost limb,” claiming justification for this critical approach by putting
Refuse, light, and a joke invented in drunkeness

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LETTERS

Lennon's words in Ono's mouth. Jones states that "without John, the question of how well Yoko endures as a solo artist depends on whether it is possible to see her as a stand-alone, free of her self-imposed artistic dependency." This claimed "self-imposition," however, is supported by Lennon's quoted statement that "everything we do is together," not Ono's. And when Jones answers his own question by stating that it is difficult to "get to Yoko without John getting into the picture," he would seem to be addressing his own personal biases (although hardly unique among middle-age Beatles fans), which stand in the way of his ability to offer any insights or criticisms of the work that was actually on exhibition.

To state that "whenever fascination circulates around [Ono's] work, it must grow largely from a fetish for the notion of John and Yoko—a way of honoring the dead, and sustaining their collaboration through our only mortal link to John," offers little insight into Ono's work. But Mc. Jones can hardly be accused of pretensions to objectivity; he lets readers know right at the start that Ono came out of "the yawning indulgence that was the Fluxus movement, the spattering bulb is the otherwise dazzling marquee that blinks: THE ART OF THE SIXTIES." Given his self-appointed lack of sympathy with Fluxus, it is puzzling that he took on Ono's exhibitions to review. I can only surmise that his motivation lay in his "fetish for the nostalgia of John and Yoko."

While readers of Jones' review could hardly be expected to notice, with the exception of a single piece dated 1973, all the work on exhibition was created either prior to Lennon and Ono's partnership (which began in the spring of 1968) or after Lennon's tragic death in 1980. While the Emmrich exhibition featured several rooms full of work, Jones managed to discuss only a single piece, the "Bed-In Painting (Yes)," which he reminds us "was the first John saw by his bride-to-be." Aside from his own literal interpretation of Bed In as being about John and Yoko's inexplicable, even death, this is as close as Jones comes to making any case at all for Lennon's implication in this work. The "simplest spirit" that Jones ascribes to Ono's "work prior to John's death" is more appropriately descriptive of his review. The latter phrase points both to what is really at issue for Jones (a rock star's legacy) and his cursory chronology of Ono's work. What Jones describes as "work prior to John's death" (Doodle Painting, 1962, and Cut Piece, 1965) is in fact "work prior to John and Yoko's first meeting."

His lack of familiarity (or even concern) with Ono's work is revealed throughout the review. For example, he describes John and Yoko's "early forays into sound art," as "collaborative," apparently unaware that these early forays (presumably the 1968 Revolution 9) were preceded by several years by Ono's own recording work with tape composition for performance and vocalized film scores—documented from at least as early as 1965-66 (see-Fale). Jones' real displeasure, of course, seems to be over a Macmmmoh advertising campaign that features an image of John and Yoko from the Bed-In (not in the exhibition). While Jones's discussion of the ad seems mainly focused on Lennon's overreliance to represent innovation, Artforum readers would, I think, be better served by a discussion of how this advertising intervention builds on Ono's earlier work. Her 1965 advertising intervention in the New York Arts Calendar, for example, offered "Circle Freerets," of various materials and sizes for sale at the fictional Ideal Art Gallery. This advertising—artwork as institutional critique preceded those of other Conceptual artists (to whom this innovation has been attributed) by three years. This advertising intervention was followed by several other advertising/artworks Ono placed in Art and Artists in 1966. Jones concludes his review by mocking Ono's statement that "the idealism of the Sixties still exists," taking her to task for being "sentimental about an earlier and simpler time, a time when a Bed-In could mean something." I would argue that Jones's notion that the 60's was a "simple time" is naive and that, in spite of his critical assertion to the contrary, a Bed-In apparently still does mean something—certainly Macmmmoh believes so, too, the corporation wouldn't have acquired the Bed-In photo for its ad campaign.

For Jones to spend a full page castigating Ono for work that "sits right on the surface," while talking all around the work—devoting considerably more commentary to her marriage, advertising deals, and albums covers than to any work on view—is pervasively ironic; the work itself is hardly addressed, not even its surface. I look forward to Jones's review of the John Lennon Anthology, and reading about how difficult it is to consider his work without Yoko getting into the picture.

—Kevin Concanon
Richmond, Virginia

Ronald Jones responds:

Above all, Mr. Concanon should not be permitted to routinely call middle-age Beatles fans "middle-age Beatles fans." It is every bit as incomprehensible, and especially, I believe, toward himself. And while his letter seemed overeager given the mission he obviously holds for Yoko Ono's artistic contributions, I would like to notice that Mr. Concanon's review sounds quite like the spattering preamble to Yoko's Declaration of Independence, and not from John Lennon's legacy, but from history itself. History, I am afraid, will not have it. In any review I was not spinning myth out of some indulgence I wanted to trick. I took my cue from Yoko and John themselves. The "collaboration myth" seems to be the way they preferred to leave it—preferring it enough to deposit a very deep impression on history by way of their artful words and artistic deeds. Mr. Concanon is clearly a buff when it comes to the history of John and Yoko, and that being the case, he can and certainly agree that Yoko was present when John had to say what he had to say about their artistic ineptitude, otherwise, what could have been the point?

And in turn, he and I can agree that she did not speak up then or later to contradict her husband—indeed, to the contrary, she consistently promoted their collaboration, even after his death. We have learned by example that Yoko does not hesitate to speak for herself, and she could have taken exception with John, but she has not.

Made painfully clear by the Emmrich and Dutch exhibitions is that, at the end of the day, what is to be penetrating interest in all this are not her own (pre-1968) profoundly dreary works of art, nor their post-68 efforts, but instead the collaboration John and Yoko worked so very hard to build. The plain question hobia about in the wake of John's murder, and these exhibitions—what must be asked and answered before one proceeds—whether Ono has managed to be productive on her own. She has not.

One final note. The Bed-In, Yoko, and John's give-and-take-chance politics, come from the heart, and helped to rally a hippie youth culture to join the antiwar movement. And in another form the Bed-In has, indeed survived all that; it does still mean something. In this sense it is true what Yoko says: "The idealism of the Sixties still exists," because, as we know too well, Idealism sells. In this recent reincarnation, it sold the nostaliga for "thinking outside the box" that Steve Jobs needed to merge with Macmmmoh's bounce-back image.

Ronald Jones
ARTFORUM