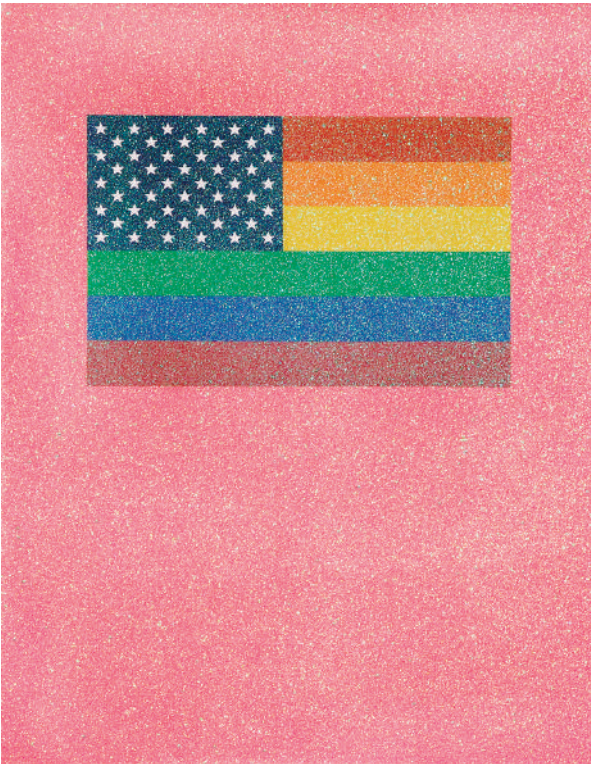


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After three decades of *Entertainment Tonight*, *Inside Edition*, *E! News*, *Access Hollywood*, *The Insider* and *TMZ*, why do today's artists bother to dig up more media-generated drivel? The art world is awash in satirists who simultaneously sanctify and slight celebritydom (Larry Johnson, Karen Kilimnik, Elizabeth Peyton, Rob Pruitt or Billy Sullivan), brandish incriminating, witty remarks (Aleksandra Mir, William Powhida, Danh Vo or early Sue Williams), post sardonic raves and revolts (Robbie Conal, Dan Perjovschi or Shepard Fairey), or tell belittling tales (Sean Landers, Jim Shaw or Nedko Solakov). And then there's Jonathan Horowitz who freely lambastes, ridicules, derides, mocks or teases anyone who is fodder for his "surf-ed-up" scoff. Casting a wide net, his very pretty *Rainbow American Flag on Pink Field of Jasper in the Style of Artist's Boyfriend* (2007) pokes fun at the flag, his significant other's sparkly paintings and his own art, since this flag's tag recalls his earlier, colorful send-up of Johns's three-flag classic.

The interesting twist here is that Horowitz is a dyed-in-the-wool conceptualist, driven more by connecting, abutting, and playing with mass media

than by some urge to scourge. *Earth Song* (1996), Michael Jackson's music video that depicts him lamenting devastations incurred by mankind while his Christ-like "energy" suddenly mends damages, begs to be played in reverse as Horowitz's *Body Song* (1997) does, transporting spectators from MJ's verdant dream to front-page news stories. With *Vietnam, Paris, Iraq* (2007), Horowitz highlights the irony of Nick Ut's revisiting the spotlight with a paparazzi shot of Paris Hilton in tears. (Exactly 35 years earlier to the day, Ut shot his Pulitzer-winning photograph of a fleeing napalm victim, an iconic war image.) Indicative of the naming rights afforded star status, *Three Stars* (1997) depicts 36 possible first-name arrangements for headliners Davis, Jr., Minnelli and Sinatra. *Go Vegan! (200 Celebrity Vegetarians Downloaded from the Internet)* (2002) features only 119 faces, yet the volume of influential figures gives force or farce to the peer-pressure meat eaters. Whether or not Horowitz is pushing his personal agenda, this work visualizes the social stigma associated with the "omnivore's dilemma." However ambiguously his media mash-ups read, they inadvertently tender droll commentary.

In an era when people pretend to bemoan the diminished shock factor, the "Jonathan Horowitz Show" (actual title of his 2000 exhibition at Greene Naftali) can still scandalize. He has no trouble crossing boundaries the genteel art world is hesitant to explore, though none could dismiss his forays as simply un-PC. Horowitz's frontier is public domain imagery. Bound to the ubiquitous, his humor streams blacker than blue. Were the world not rife with images of Jane Fonda, Anita Bryant or Jerry Lewis, or voice recordings of Marilyn Monroe, Horowitz couldn't capture their stirring "stories" as his art. Some may view as horrific works like *CBS Evening News/www.Britneycrotch.org* (2008), which aligns Couric's torso over Spears's net-surfed pubis, or *Untitled (Operation Iraqi Freedom)* (2007), a lenticular photograph flickering between cleaned-up and bloody Iraqi scenes. Other works may read as bitter-sweet, like the life-size tchotchke *Hillary Clinton is a Person Too* (2008); the *Portrait of Elizabeth Taylor (AIDS Activist)*, parodying the drama of this flame dame's generosity; *Portrait of Doris Day (Have Your Pet Spayed or Neutered)*, spoofing Day's sexual politics; or *Portrait of Chrissie Hynde (I Hope the Muslims Win)* (all 2003), divulging Hynde's anti-war axiom. So how does Horowitz keep socking us sucker punches?

Critics roundly compare Horowitz to Andy Warhol, but he's far more scornful than Warhol, whose celebrated subjects remain unscathed. Even if Warhol played all sides and no sides, as Holland Cotter insists, Warhol seems incapable of ridicule, though of course carrying out his preposterous tasks must have embarrassed some players. Horowitz has rather lifted a page from the Letterist International playbook. In "A User's Guide to Détournement" (1956), Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman wrote that, "It is thus necessary to envisage a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of 'détourned' elements [defacements à la Duchamp's Mona Lisa mustache, recontextualizations, pastiche and graffiti], far from aiming to arouse indignation or laughter by eluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity." While Horowitz's strategy has mid-



century roots, his oeuvre is uniquely twenty-first-century. Debord, who desperately feared celebrity clout, would never have dared to tamper with such icons of the spectacle. Yet they are putty in Horowitz's hands, perhaps because he wields technology on par with the current spectacle, unlike Debord whose Neo-Luddite tools (scissors, paste, ink, paint and film) rendered him ineffectual.

The most ingenious piece in P.S.1's recent Horowitz survey, "And/Or" (through last September 14), is *Silent Movie* (2003), an 11-minute video composed of fragments from four films projected on a screen, accompanied by an electronic player piano intermittently transmitting tunes from the *Tommy* (1975) soundtrack. Selected fragments prompt thoughts of "I'm Free" and "See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me, Heal Me." Each of these films' main characters is a deaf-mute, and each finds remediation through some mix of sexual liberation/exploitation, submission/defiance, and linguistic access. In *Silent Movie*, we watch them wrestle through stages of trauma, physical abuse, humiliation, fear, exasperation and escape/flight, only to return to the film's opening scene, suggesting that traumas always remain. His 16-minute biopic *Rome* (2006) draws parallels between William Wyler's 1959 epic remake of *Ben-Hur* and Benito Mussolini's monumental makeover of Rome; Italian Fascism and Vatican consent; Napoleon's conquest of Rome and his Julius Caesar fetish; U.S. founders and their love of Roman history; and Gore Vidal's unaccredited role in re-writing *Ben-Hur* and his later disowning of his 1979 *Caligula* screenplay, let alone his numerous essays critical of America's imperialist agenda. Accompanying the film are several travel posters featuring Rome's unsightly sites, snapped in situ by Horowitz, as well as *Official Vatican Portrait of Pope Benedict XVI Torn in Half (After Sinéad O'Connor)* (2008) in honor of the singer's live, televised "action." (After singing Bob Marley's "War" on *Saturday Night Live*, Sinéad ripped up a photo of John Paul II, sending shockwaves through TV Land.)

Tofu on Pedestal in Gallery (2002) is the most hilarious work on show, not because the block of tofu just floats in a topless glass box, but because its wall label credits a dozen corporations (mostly banks) for pooling their funds to purchase this inexpensive morsel for Frankfurt's Museum of Modern Art. The loveliest work is *Pillow Talk Bed* (2002), whose changeable cases *qua* diptychs pair names of fictional bedfellows Kirk and Spock, Thelma/Louise and R2-D2/C-3PO, or eternal mates John and Yoko, Gertrude and Alice, and Felix and Ross. These "cases" for BFFs offer the first clue



regarding Horowitz's celebrity obsession. Like the perpetually lit cigarette featured in his 10-minute video *Je t'aime* (1990), celebrities hold our fascination forever because their ludicrous antics constantly fuel our anticipation. So long as the flame never dies, the light never goes out.

As video seems to be Horowitz's preferred medium, a second clue arises from his concern to visualize time. *Maxell* (1990) captures a taped logo of the videocassette manufacturer degrading with each new copy, and *mon.-sun.* (1996) presents each day's title. Horowitz even applies his interest in time to non-video works. While tofu decays, stacks of newspaper grow in *Recycling Sculpture (World Trade Center Memorial)* (2005); pillow cases change; net-surfed strangers make simultaneous appearances on *Go Vegan!*; images across eras surface in his celebrity "stories"; money accumulates in *Contribution Cube* (2005); staff re-write the dedications posted on *Two-Sided Monument* (2006); and the changing scenes of his *Stairmaster Suites* (1996) reflect varying treks across the machine's bubbled-in terrain.

The third and final clue concerns the uncanny passage between mediated scenes and world events, whereby the mediated so dominates our lives that when something really happens, we hardly notice it. It gets increasingly harder to remember which celebrities are dead. We may hear a song like "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," yet forget that the female singer Tammi Terrell died only three years after the song became a hit. However mediated, the horrifying scenes in *Body Song* prove routine. Jane Fonda, Anita Bryant and Jerry Lewis really did do things that stirred people up. Lots of celebrities get caught doing such weird stuff that we lose track of what's real and what's made up by publicists. ~Sue Spaid



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