



# AMERICA ON THE BRINK: A POLITICAL EXEGESIS UNDER THE AEGIS OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ART & TECHNOLOGY ATHENS, GA

Among the myriad missteps, follies, and outright outrages brought upon our nation and the world by the Bush Administration, the voices of opposition have emerged in a tangle of emotion and purpose while the common thread of protest often falls victim to the forces of chaos and suppression. *America on the Brink: A Political Exegesis Under the Aegis of the U.S. Department of Art & Technology* brought together over forty works by twenty-five artists from eleven states in a forum that both lamented American politics of recent years and celebrated the democratic spirit of dissent (Athens Institute for Contemporary Art (ATHICA), September 9-November 5, 2006).

Appropriately, the show opened just two days before the fifth anniversary of 9/11. The crowded event turned solemn as the attendees gathered outside the gallery to sing the national anthem as the American flag was set ablaze in a patriotic celebration of free speech. The crowd then moved back inside for a graveside *Eulogy for the Nation*, delivered by Randall Packer, Secretary-at-Large of the U.S. Department of Art and Technology (US DAT), a virtual government agency and multimedia artist/political collaborator based in Washington, DC.

Taking cues from Dante and Rimbaud, US DAT's ambitious multimedia installation *America's Grave*, 2006, featured six monitors embedded in a half-ton of fresh dirt and crowned by a headstone reading "United States of America July 4, 1776-January 20, 2005"—the latter date referencing George W. Bush's second inauguration. A wall of verses details *The Cosmology of Hell* and provides a backdrop for the grave, outlining six categories of sins with media quotes as the videos replay cable news clips chronicling the sinners—The Violent Against Their Neighbors; The Traffickers of Holiness; The Falsifiers of Commodification; The Profiteers of the People; The Traitors Against Their Own; and The Sowers of Discord.

The US DAT's *Situational Tour of the USA Bible Belt*, 2006, features a map where the geographical bound-

aries of the Bible Belt are outlined like a bleeding wound on the nation. The multimedia installation also includes video reports from travels throughout the Bible Belt in which US DAT collaborators document evidence of religious extremism and its contribution to political divisiveness. Printouts from the US DAT's ongoing and exhaustive blog highlight cultural landmarks such as a cross-wielding Statue of Liberty in Tennessee and the gigantic bronze praying hands of Oral Roberts adorning the campus of his namesake university in Oklahoma.

Many works offer direct commentary on the War on Terror using familiar images and symbols: Bill Fisher's Bush morphing into bin Laden *Bussana Series*, 2006; Stan Woodard's Bush and bombs video *Sovereign Authority*, 2003; Tim Kilmowicz's flash-animated war casualty map *Iraq War Coalition Fatalities Project*, 2003; George Kennedy's melting soldier made of over a thousand toy soldiers, *Armymansoldierboy*, 2005; Simone Paterson's *Oh Abu*, 2005. In *Screening Wheel*, 2006, Margi Weir uses the iconic silhouettes of soldiers, bombs, tanks, and No Evil Monkeys to configure a hypnotic mandala that, centered around an audibly screaming baby face, is truly memorable. Blaine Whisenand also utilizes familiar images of war, giving them an ironic edge that leads us to question its true motives. In the digital print *Wearable Life Support System*, 2006, a figure's face is obscured by a gas mask whose filter has been replaced by a can of Mobil oil. *I See No Atrocities*, 2006, features a twist on the familiar hooded and noosed figure as the American flag replaces the traditional hood—a clever conjoining of insinuations of patriotism, torture, justice, and denial.

Despite all the doom and gloom, the show is not without elements of humor. Laughter seems to prevail—only as the surest way to keep from crying. Cecilia Kane's installation *Hand to Hand*, 2005, documents a year of horrifying headlines about the Iraq War with comical clown illustrations colorfully painted on white gloves. Isabella Natale draws on the kitsch of consumer culture

in her *Free Dispenser*, 2003, and *Roving Reporter Rove*, 2005, and Pip Brant's hanging *Barrel of Monkeys* tangle of stuffed cowboy George W. Bush dolls, *Bush "Woodcutter"*, 2004-2005, invites visitors to stick them with curses or blessings. In Clark Whittington's installation *King Spoil Board Game: Special PNAC edition*, 2003, visitors can sit down with a beer and bag of pork rinds to play a reformatting version of a 1970s board game glorifying the oil industry—the new version incorporates the character of Dick Cheney and a maze of targets and tanks.

Strategically dispersed throughout the gallery, Whittington's installation *Mandate Cameras*, 2005-2006, comprises seemingly real surveillance cameras that follow visitors as they pass by—reminding us of the Big Brother culture that has emerged in our nation. One of them is even placed in the restroom, where Whittington's *Mandate: A Post-Mortem Analysis*, 2005-2006, a series of business-quality flow charts, is also displayed. These charts chronicle assorted Bush administration follies including "The Go #35!! Yours! Flow Chart," "The Flip-Flip Timeline Defined by Pop Culture, Necessity, and v. Public Perception," and "Repackaged Trickle Down."

The exhibit includes two looming sculptures that surmount our democracy's insecure state and the global stakes of the irresponsible actions of those in power. Jason Brown's *Fifth Column*, 2005, is a teetering tower of emergency cones perched atop a copy of *The Patriot Act*. Conveying both urgency and precariousness, the piece is a subtle call for the masses to step up. Dietrich Wegner's *Playground*, 2005, is a seventeen-foot-tall tree house outfitted in a mushroom cloud of smoky fiberfill stuffing. Both eerie and playful, the piece calls to mind a form out of a Dr. Seussian landscape while serving as an ominous reminder of the dire consequences of failed diplomacy in the nuclear age.

—Melissa Link