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CULTURE

The Relevance of Art

by **Melissa Danaczko**

February 9, 2004

After the events of September 11, 2001, Scott Mycklebust's art started to change. Mr. Mycklebust, who has worked out of his Soho-based studio since the 80's, said he felt he had a duty as an artist to comment on contemporary society.

In an interview with New York News Network, Mr. Mycklebust said, "After September 11, I felt a pretty picture didn't mean much anymore; I felt an obligation to talk about what was going on in the world."

Mr. Mycklebust's recent work has included portrayals of political figures, as well as reflections on how the public is reacting to the United States' expanding military role in the world. "GW Presidential" is a painting that deals with this subject. The piece, which depicts President George W. Bush raising his fist in the air, comments on the president's news role as an international leader following the events of 9/11.

Other work that explores similar themes includes a recent sound installation at the Chelsea Art Museum. Entitled "REV," this installation opened two days before the United States invaded Iraq and examined the impact of militaristic imagery on the public as visitors to the museum were assailed with the sounds of F-18 fighter jets amidst background music.

Given the impending war at the time, Mr. Mycklebust noted, "In a sense, I wanted to suggest, what if this was real, because there are places in the world where people have to live with this and they are not play acting. In Iraq it won't just be sounds, they'll be dropping bombs."

To address these issues, Mr. Mycklebust also created the Public Art Squad, an organization that has been planning to perform in a variety of public venues around New York City this summer. The Public Art Squad hopes that the unexpected presence of a uniformed group performing a combination of military drills and pedestrian movements will encourage people to reflect and exchange ideas on the role of the military in our society.

In a throwback to the "Fluxus" movement of the sixties, Mr. Mycklebust felt a large scale version of performance art implicitly linked to current social concerns would impact the public. "This is about bringing art to the public in unexpected times and places. It's not new, but it hasn't been done for twenty years or on such a large scale." This idea gave rise to the organization's slogan, Art Can Change People. "It sounds kind of corny and really lofty, but at the same time, when you hear a beautiful song or see a

beautiful painting, it affects you," said Mr. Mycklebust.

The action sequences will occur on two separate days. First, the Public Art Squad intends to send four groups of four uniformed performers into some of New York City's densely populated areas, such as Herald Square and Grand Central Station. Mr. Mycklebust said, "I picked places strategically where they would have some kind of impact, where people would really notice."

Mr. Mycklebust also stressed that the element of surprise was key to the project's success. Throughout the day, the small groups would get the public's attention by making loud noises with drums or whistles. Then the uniformed squad would perform rehearsed movements for 10 to 15 minutes under the orders of an instructor speaking into a megaphone. After ceasing the action, the squad would circulate handbills to the public and move on to its next location around the city.

The second planned action sequence is scheduled to occur in Soho and include close to 200 uniformed volunteers. Movements would be similar to those in the first routine, with the performance lasting about 20 minutes before the participants distribute handbills.

These handbills are intended to pose provocative questions and encourage discourse amongst audience members. Responses to the questions and reactions to the performance will later be posted on the organization's website as part of the interactive dialogue between the art and the public.

Mr. Mycklebust explained that part of his goal was to record the different responses people had to the art. "People bring their own interpretations based on their backgrounds. I'm not giving my personal point of view, but the point of view of contemporary society," said Mr. Mycklebust.

Mr. Mycklebust is still raising money for the project.



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