

frieze

October 2006



Sculpture Center, New York, USA

In the press release for 'Grey Flags' (included as a piece in the show) the artist Seth Price writes: 'we have entered a new kind of nature, a nature composed of images.' Besides constituting a narrow vision of the world, this sounds like an over-prescriptive place for art. The fact that he continues, saying 'there can be no criticism of images', implies reduced expectations for art and a self-fulfilling prophecy of its marginality.

The show's organizers, P.S.1 curator Anthony Huberman and artist Paul Pfeiffer, included several works that involved images of natural phenomena or imitations of nature, as if to affirm Price's thesis. This included pairing two visually similar (but conceptually radically divergent) works showing speeded-up sunsets. Walid Raad's *I Only Wish That I Could Weep (Operator #17)* (2001) features video footage (supposedly illicitly obtained from Lebanese intelligence agents assigned to monitor suspicious persons) of the sun sinking into the Mediterranean from a variety of vantage points along Beirut's corniche, with strollers whizzing by like fleeting apparitions; Tacita Dean's 16mm colour film *The Green Ray* (2001) similarly shows a sun descending into a body of shimmering water. What is this coupling meant to tell us? Is this 'nature' or a 'nature of images'? Does it matter when the simplistic correlation obliterates the political melancholy of the former's fictional narrative and the coolly nostalgic

Grey Flags
2006
Installation view

romanticism of the latter?

Nature aside, what this show mostly illustrated is how thoughtful artists can - with widely varying results - revisit seemingly exhausted territory. Kelley Walker's retooled recycling logo (the familiar triad of folding arrows inscribed on a sheet of laser-cut aluminium) is an impressive example of self-reflexivity in art-making, for good or ill. In a cyclical chain of associations the image refers to its own lack of originality as a pre-existing emblem of 'recycling', to the conventionality of the artistic strategy of appropriation itself as one continually 'recycled', and to the feedback loop of its own self-consciousness. Like his nearby wallpaper with a repeating brick motif taken from the same brick wall it obscures - a conceptual tautology first played out by William Anastasi in 1967 at the Dwan Gallery in New York - it also recalls Tom Friedman's circular logic (a material's own structure or standard use-value suggesting what should be done with it sculpturally) while falling somewhat short of that artist's rigorous follow-through. Also coming across as the implementation of a premeditated one-liner was Jonathan Monk's painting *Walter De Maria's Lightning Field Painted in the Style of Jack Goldstein circa 1986* (2006), which is exactly that; painted in the style of Goldstein's Photorealist lightning pictures, it seemed sadly pointless and too clever by half. Art so myopically fixed on the art world, its associations and mechanisms, has the tendency to fall into such traps of reductive

condescension. Liam Gillick's *Dispersed Discussion Structure* (2006 - glitter scattered across the gallery floor) was similarly emblematic of a prevailing vagueness of purpose, a pilfering of art-historical inferences and a palpable glibness.

But glib whimsy doesn't always equate with wit, and, with the possible exception of Lutz Bacher's *Jackie & Me* (1989), depicting a fictional incidence of a paparazzo chasing Jackie Onassis through Central Park, there was little to break the humourlessness. In general, the show displayed a brand of knowingness that served as a substitute for genuine experience or originality of thought: art-historical gamesmanship for its own sake. But the larger problem here - despite some cursory nods toward political engagement - was a suffocating insularity that felt essentially tame and academic (although Bacher's and Raad's work and Shirana Shahbazi's powerful photographs of a globalized world avoided this). Actually, Kelley Walker's own qualified description of a piece of art he mailed to *Artforum* for the magazine's 2004 political issue may be the most telling indication of the shortcomings of 'Grey Flags': 'It is a little weird, but I think it works.' The striking thing here is the implied acquiescence to authority, to the arbiters of 'criticality' ('I think') and to a set of pre-ordained standards ('it works'), and the seeming apology for any whiff of originality ('...weird, but ...'). So, does it work?

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Grey Flags