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REVIEWS

"Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s" at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington

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"Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s" at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2018. Left to right: Ken Lum, *Untitled Furniture Sculpture*, 1980s; Sherrie Levine, *Chair Seat: 5*, 1986; Philip Taaffe, *Undercurrent*, 1984.

Photo: Cathy Carver.

Text by Stefano Cernuschi

When President Ronald Reagan took the stage, at the Potomac-on-the-River restaurant, the audience at the American Foundation for AIDS Research fundraising dinner held its breath. It was Washington, DC, May 31, 1987. Reagan had accepted the invitation of amfAR's president, Elizabeth Taylor, to give the keynote. "It would do so much for us to get rid of the archaic stigma attached to the disease and to make people realize that it is no longer a minority disease; it can happen to anyone. It's nobody's fault and everybody's problem," Taylor had pleaded in her letter addressed to the White House. At the lectern, having finished with the pleasantries, Reagan began persuasively, with ugly cases of marginalization against people with AIDS informed by "old-fashioned fear," which should have "no place in the home of the brave." The audience erupted, but the relief was to last only for a couple more paragraphs. "I hope," Reagan pressed on, "that AIDS education or any aspect of sex education will not be value-neutral... So, yes, *after* there is a moral base, then you can discuss preventives and other scientific measures."

Donald Moffett responded with equal confidence: "HE KILLS ME." Moffett's famous work, a mockery of a grotesque and sinister health prevention ad campaign about a lethal virus, comes at the end of *Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s*, a rich and articulated exhibition of artworks that incorporate commodity imagery and accept—at times

embrace—their own nature as art objects as commodities, curated by Gianni Jetzer at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC. At the dawn of an age of purposeful optimism, adoration of the glossy and the new, and supply-side economics, an insistence on hygiene, fear, and death ran rampant. The same year, 1987, the Silence=Death Project debuted their poster. And, under the circular roof of the Hirshhorn, Jeff Koons's re-signified vacuum cleaners, made mute and ensconced in Plexiglas, suddenly, unintentionally, echo that silence (among other things). The exhibition stresses a sense of development. In 1983 Robert Gober sculpted his first sink—many would follow over the following three years, all projecting thick silence. Two years earlier, Haim Steinbach put a can of Ajax cleanser on a ledge made of wood branches and floral-print fabric (quite a Goberesque shelf), and moved art's approach to consumer items from Andy Warhol's representations to actual appropriation. *This* is the brand-new, profoundly distinctive act.



(<http://bienalsescvideobrasil.org.br/>)

Such a new was about engaging the market logic all the way downstream, and can be found in many works in the exhibition, maybe nowhere more than in Ashley Bickerton's

Tormented Self-Portrait. Susie at Arles (1988), which is composed of, among other things, car, food, tobacco, and casual wear logos. As Barbara Kruger said best in 1987 with *I Shop Therefore I Am*—and, at the beginning of the decade, with *Pictures and Promises: A Display of Advertisings, Slogans and Intervention*, a show she organized at The Kitchen in New York—the 1980s were the time when brand identity collided with identity through branding. Bickerton had in fact given himself a brand new identity: Ashley was Susie. (Precisely with regard to self-branding, Warhol had been significantly more seminal; by making himself famous, he showed how to use the tools of celebrity as instruments in art-making.) Another case in point is *John, Not Johnny* (1987), a metal spare tire cover on which John Dogg sublimated another self-portrait in a logo-like single word, "John."

WALKING THROUGH WALLS

(http://https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/berliner-festspiele/programm/bfs-gesamtprogramm/programmdetail_274530.html)

Several of the most arresting moments in *Brand New* are courtesy of women artists. Julia Wachtel, Annette Lemieux, and Gretchen Bender are present with some of their best work. At the beginning of the exhibition, Dara Birnbaum's film *Rémy/Grand Central: Trains and Boats and Plane* (1980)

is a riveting montage featuring a woman alternately drinking, showing off, and smashing a bottle of the French cognac—a feast of corporate boldness that Rémy Martin commissioned to show at Grand Central. Next, one wall is striped in yellow, fuchsia, red, blue, green, white—rows of posters exude violent titillation, the thrill of a lurking unrest, and the atonement it may deliver: “You get amazing sensations from guns,” “Let fire be the celebration of your deliverance,” “It will be demonstrated that nothing is safe.” Jenny Holzer’s *Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82), with their seducing lexicon and all-caps type, a mélange of ad jargon and conspiracy theory, expose undercurrents that are as deep and dark as they are persistent. They haven’t faded one bit.

at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Washington (<https://hirshhorn.si.edu/>)
until 13 May 2018

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