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State of the Nation

American artist Jonathan Horowitz employs contemporary culture as his medium

Free Store, 2009, installation view, Sadie Coles HQ. Courtesy: Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, Sadie Coles HQ, London, and the artist

'I put to you that the United States', declared Harold Pinter in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in December 2005, 'is without doubt the greatest show on the road. Brutal, indifferent, scornful and ruthless it may be, but it is also very clever. As a salesman it is out on its own and its most saleable commodity is self-love. It's a winner.'[1]

Some months before Pinter's finely tuned attack, Jonathan Horowitz mounted an exhibition titled 'The New Communism' in his hometown of New York. Coinciding with George W. Bush's re-election, the show tackled the blanket patriotism that, in a post-9/11 United States, had pushed aside nuanced political thought and expression. Taking aim at paranoia and knee-jerk aggression, Horowitz altered the symbols of this patriotism: a surrogate American flag replaced the red and white stripes with a full spectrum of violet hues, ranging from Republican red to Democrat blue, adorned with a single white star, suggesting a shift in the notion of a clear-cut national identity. This was brought to the point in the work's provocative title: *New American Flag Made in China* (2005). On a low pedestal in the gallery, a bright white Prius – Toyota's popular hybrid car – was displayed, its bumper decorated with a yellow ribbon sticker advising us to *Support Their Troops* (2005). Other works addressed immigrant labour, terrorist 'sleepers' and homosexuality in the military: a check-list of hot-button topics that would no doubt find a largely sympathetic audience in Manhattan.

But, whether he finds approval or not, politics for Horowitz is first of all a matter of personal choice. As an artist, what better way to express this choice than to make art about it? After all, what's the alternative? To make something elegant, neutral and harmless? Another of Horowitz' commemorative ribbon bumper stickers – this one in white – implies an answer: *Untitled (Support Art about Nothing and Maintain the Status Quo)* (2005). By borrowing the patriotic symbols the nation clings to and undermining their supposed worth, Horowitz articulates his criticism in showman's terms to try and approach something closer to the reality of the problematic, multi-faceted society that makes up the supposed unity of the American people. Again, Pinter put it succinctly in his speech: 'Listen to all American presidents on television say the words "the American people" [...] It's a scintillating stratagem. Language is actually employed to keep thought at bay. The words "the American people" provide a truly voluptuous cushion of reassurance.'[2]

But fast-forward three years or so, and now the words 'the American people', when spoken by the new American President, Barack Obama, have undergone a considerable semantic shift: a new inclusiveness is achieved because of this man's racial identity and unconventional upbringing. In November 2008, Horowitz staged another show in New York, this one titled simply 'Obama '08'. Again timed to coincide with the general election, the exhibition brought into play all the paraphernalia familiar from televised party conventions. The main gallery was carpeted half in red, half in blue (*Your Land/My Land*, 2008) while flat-screens suspended from the ceiling showed CNN on one side of the divide, and the right-wing Fox News Channel on the other, providing continuously streaming parallel commentaries (*Culture War (CNN vs. Fox)*, 2008). The 43 official presidential portraits were framed and hung in a line around the gallery walls: the portrait of Obama rested on the floor, awaiting the election results.

On 4 November 2008, election day, the gallery was packed full of people keeping apace of the voting results as news came in and, once Obama's victory was announced, a net full of red, white and blue balloons (*Balloon Drop, If (For Barack)*, 2008) was released from the ceiling, to the accompaniment of much cheering, kissing and popping of corks. Again, you might want to ask: why? A celebration of Obama's election victory is hardly unexpected in a city rife with the kind of liberals that delivered this man his presidency. But this was a perfect example of Horowitz' artistic strategy at work. He takes contemporary culture itself as his medium, and carves from its components a subtly suggestive message. In this case, by harnessing the election of Obama (itself already a masterpiece of political spectacle and rhetoric) and framing it as his own spectacular event, Horowitz could both mirror and mediate the impact of the event as it happened. 'I do like to imagine, sometimes, that I'm preserving information for future generations – like Warhol's time capsules, only not boxed up,'[3] Horowitz said in a recent interview.

But beneath the jubilation at this ground-breaking victory was a critique that ran throughout the exhibition, of the bipartisanship that divides the USA, concisely summed up in one piece: a vending machine selling Coke and Pepsi (*Coke and/or Pepsi Machine*, 2007–8). Whether it comes in a red or a blue can, the contents are basically the same. Freedom of choice is just an illusion. When the political is articulated as a matter of personal opinion, critical distance is hard to achieve. Together with Horowitz' adoption of the language and symbolism of those he is undermining, this gives his works a kind of embedded quality, where the critique is intrinsic to the object. The absorption of – and communication

through – the common products of contemporary culture has been at the centre of Horowitz' works since he began experimenting with single-channel videos in the early 1990s.

Having graduated with a degree in philosophy, he was living in New York and working as a video editor when he decided to use this experience to begin to explore the medium of video in analytical terms. One of his first works, *Maxell* (1990), employs several standard characteristics of structural film-making – a fixed camera position, a 'flicker' effect and the photographic reproduction of the image – but adapts them to the cheap and available medium of the VHS videotape, with its low-culture connotations of home entertainment and wedding souvenirs. In this single-channel projection, the clear white Maxell videotape logo appears on a black screen. But rather than making way for some programme of light entertainment, the logo remains, fixed in the centre. As the video progresses, it begins to shift and break down; the distortion gradually becoming more pronounced, until finally there is nothing left but a mess of tracking lines, grey flecks and white noise. Each ten-second stretch of the videotape has been copied from the previous ten seconds; the image is corrupted and the video player struggles to read the degraded data. The medium itself plays out its limitations and approaching obsolescence, while Maxell's advertised promises of long-evity and high performance take a battering, along with the audience's expectations of an easily followed narrative. Instead, viewers are subject to a state of endless, uncomfortable suspension and witness to the dramatic decaying effects of time passing.

A series of works over the next few years continued to deal analytically with the specifics of video as a medium, while beginning to look more closely at the conventions of television, home entertainment and popular culture as the ever-present backdrop to daily life. Adopting a sparse style of presentation – with monitors and VCRs displayed on basic, slotted-metal-frame stands – the works adapt cultural commodities (sitcoms, sports programming, celebrity interviews) in clear-cut terms, focusing on the mechanics of their production (canned laughter, editing cuts, panning shots), while teasing out unexpected political or cultural undertones from within their polished narratives. In one of the most poignantly simple of these works (*Countdown*, 1995), a single monitor plays Jonathan Demme's Oscar-winning movie *Philadelphia* (1993) starring Tom Hanks, with the image visible only within the form of a number cut out of an otherwise white screen; every time an edit occurs, the number increases. While ostensibly providing a banal tally of film edits, this rapidly increasing number takes on another grave meaning, given that the film was one of the first Hollywood movies to address AIDS: the work's neutral structural device becomes a rapidly increasing death toll, as society slowly wakes up to the reality of this stigmatized disease. The work's apparently contradictory title, meanwhile, is a bald commentary on the tragic fatality of the AIDS epidemic, and an implicit criticism of the lack of political action taken when the disease was first identified. The white screen therefore becomes a metaphor for the political whitewash of the facts of AIDS that took place in the Reagan era.

In his exhibition 'The Jonathan Horowitz Show' in 2000, Horowitz approached the personal head-on to show just how intertwined it is with the political, and underscored the crucial role the entertainment industry plays in the formation of that connection. Seven monitors on metal stands were arranged in a circle, each representing a span of time in the artist's life, the dates of which appeared as subtitles. On each monitor, a collection of images – still images, clips from television shows or films – illustrated that time-period, alternating with short texts in white on a black screen describing memories. Some of these were fairly innocuous, the type of memories anyone might have of their childhood: 'Hawaii', captioning the period of 1974 to 1976, conjures up a happy childhood holiday, while the dachshund standing in

the grass ('No Caption', 1994–2000) could be anyone's beloved pet. However, the uneasy caption 'thinking that my life is so good that something bad must be about to happen' (1974–6) is a rather dark thought to occur to an eight year old, while 'my mother holding my hand' (1988–93) is a moving image that ties in poignantly with another chilling quote from the same time period: 'I think I have AIDS.' Meanwhile, clips from staples of 1970s American television, like the Mary Tyler Moore Show, along with movies such as Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) do not merely punctuate the process of growing up, they ineluctably influence it. As Horowitz seamlessly weaves together three kinds of memories – personal emotions or incidents; still photographs of his family, friends and surroundings; pre-produced forms of entertainment – it becomes clear that all three played an equally significant role in the carving out of an identity. In this startlingly frank show, Horowitz set out his vulnerabilities and articulated vividly how a young person comes to terms with his own identity and sexuality by defining himself not only by his own experiences, but also in relation – or reaction – to the standardized roles he finds depicted around him in popular culture.

Horowitz' determination to read mainstream political events or cultural products against the grain informed a vivid, multi-themed portrait of the USA in his recent retrospective 'And/Or' at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York. Rather than adopt a chronological hang, the exhibition mixed works from different stages of his career to illuminate various aspects of American life: authority, national identity, politics, war, gender roles, celebrity, love, sexuality, lifestyle choices. In Horowitz' work, there are no hard and fast divisions between politics and celebrity culture: having presented us with the reality of politics as a bloated media spectacle, he also shows us the slightly less predictable flipside: mainstream entertainment as a political vehicle. Portraits of celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor are captioned with quotes that highlight their chosen political causes: *Portrait of Elizabeth Taylor (AIDS Activist)* (2003). Horowitz takes Michael Jackson's video for his single 'Earth Song' (1995) – in which Jackson appears to heal a destroyed earth through the power of his song, the video's imagery running backwards to reverse the effects of devastation – and transforms it into *The Body Song* (1997): simply reversing the original video to turn an allegory of healing powers into a parable of repression and mindless destruction. The commemorative coin showing Helen Keller – the famous deafblind American writer – takes on an unexpected irony when juxtaposed with a quote from her adult writings about the dollars spent making 'slaves' of human beings within the 'capitalist scheme' (*Helen Keller Quarter (Capitalist Scheme)*, 2003). Twinned biographies of Rock Hudson and Doris Day are sharply edited to produce a meditation on the two former co-stars: his hidden sexuality and ultimate death from AIDS, and her personal struggles and animal rights campaigning (*It's Magic/Acting the Part*, 2001).

The contradictory strategy Horowitz adopts of denying himself a critical distance by speaking in the voice of the media on the one hand, while focusing on issues that are important to him personally on the other, is what gives many of his works an alluring ambivalence and prevents them from falling into didacticism. Personal allegiances, choices and influences are pointed to but are left open to interpretation. By foregrounding his own lifestyle choices, meanwhile, as a vegetarian Prius-driving homosexual environmentalist artist, Horowitz advocates not merely an intellectual approach to personal responsibility, but a proactive one too. This was put into play in Horowitz' recent show at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, where he demonstrated his position on climate change by creating a carbon-neutral exhibition. Solar panels installed on the museum's roof provided enough electricity to power a projector in a viewing space built from sheet-rock panels left over from previous installations. The projected film, *Apocalypto Now* (2008), was a vibrant dovetailing of fiction and reality, combining

footage from Hollywood disaster movies and documentary imagery of impending climate-induced natural disasters with cameo appearances by Al Gore and Stephen Hawking, to construct a double-edged picture both of society's voracious appetite for make-believe catastrophe, and its reluctance to accept the real impending disaster of irreversible climate change. Excerpts from interviews with Mel Gibson, spliced together with outrageously brutal clips from his religious splatter-pic *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), meanwhile, added an ominous overtone of prophesied doom. A honey-smooth documentary voice-over tied all these elements together seamlessly to make a dense and sophisticated analysis of the complex relations between destruction, desire and denial.

While tolerance, empathy and difference are touchstones in Horowitz' work, personal responsibility is the key. *We the People are People Too* (2008) is the declarative title of one recent work, a huge collection of trashy gift-shop figurines, their comic tag-lines significantly altered to suggest a radical new inclusivity: 'Terrorists Are People Too', 'Predatory Lenders Are People Too', 'Flip-Floppers Are People Too'. Beneath the political mongering, media circus or celebrity baiting, when it comes down to it we're all people, and we all deserve respect. It is this sense of dignity, on an individual and a collective level, that Horowitz' work appeals to – as did Pinter when he claimed: 'I believe that, despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all [...] If such a determination is not embodied in our political vision we have no hope of restoring what is so nearly lost to us: the dignity of man.'[4]

[1] Harold Pinter, **'Nobel Lecture. Art, Truth & Politics'**, © The Nobel Foundation 2005

[2] Ibid.

[3] 'As Tim Gunn Would Say', Alessandro Rabottini, interview with Jonathan Horowitz, *Mousse*, issue 19, summer 2009, p. 23

[4] Pinter, ibid.