

SIGN LANGUAGE AS POLITICS

INFINITU ET CONTINI: REPEATED HISTORIES, REINVENTED RESISTANCES

SMACK MELLON MULTIPLEX

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

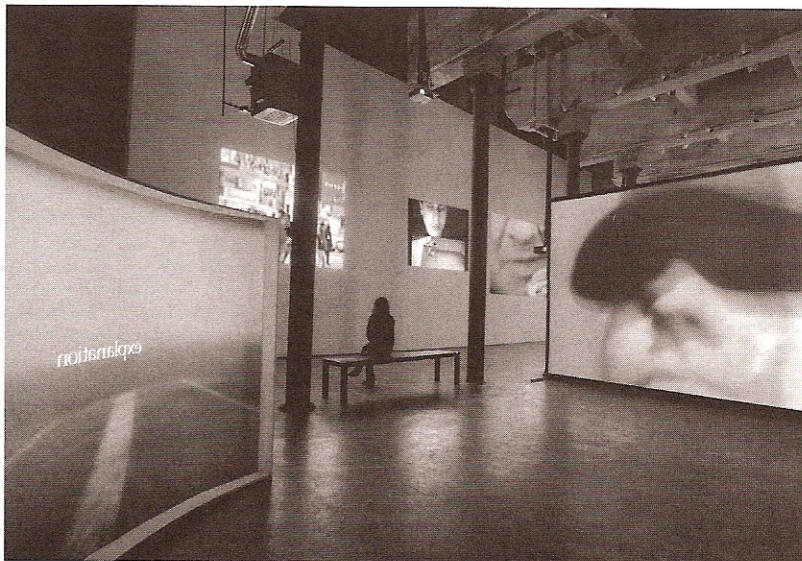
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Resistance is being choreographed under the Brooklyn Bridge. Smack Mellon Multiplex's latest presentation, "Infinitu et conti: Repeated Histories, Reinvented Resistances," began with the premise that militaristic ideologies have become so entrenched in our culture that they exceed all possible delimitations of war zones. Veritably, we live in and with an "army of shadows" that can neither be contained nor, in many instances, ever seen. In those few moments when it is visible, it is often elided by an all-encompassing spectacle of visual consumption and nationalist desire.

An incessant drum roll echoed throughout the ample exhibition space, giving an eerily hypnotic and grating rhythm to the viewer. This most recent curatorial project by Denise Carvalho referenced Jean-Pierre Melville's 1969 film *Army of Shadows* in its title, looking to the inescapable anxiety, terror, overwhelming pain, and sadness of this narrative about the organization and the persistence of the French Resistance against the Nazis during World War II. As a curatorial concept, connoting "the fight" is a powerful gesture and, beyond any given work in the exhibition, it is truly this desire that haunted the space. While prescient themes of militarism are connoted and denoted by all the works included in the show, their position as properly political is ultimately untenable. Featuring fifteen artists, the "spectacle" that was summoned in the Debordian sense was not taken to task. In effect, the shadow that remained when one left the exhibition was clearly not one of hope but of increasing doubt.

Gesture was the subtext of this entire exhibition, a move that further attests to the difficulties of articulating a clear political position in our current moment. It is a common denominator that cleverly, and in some places with effective ambiguity, points to the body and its limits as not only one of the central preoccupations in the beginnings of video art itself, but also the body as a means of interrogating how individuals reconcile what we say with what we do or what we think with how we move in the world. Ultimately, a clear position was not taken anywhere in this show.

This tactic is effective in sparse works such as Michael Paul Britto's *Cool Pose #1* (2007), a black-and-white digital video that projects a shadowed figure against the wall, gesturing in ways that blend defensive posture with aggressive antagonism. The discernible outline is of a youth in hip-hop attire, connoting the hoodlum, who taunts with his hands, and at moments appears to be holding a gun. His stance is a challenge—an invitation to a duel with an enemy that is yet unclear. Perhaps it is the viewers themselves. Perhaps the enemy is the stealthy capitalist system under shifting guises, constantly suspended in its own internal contradictions.



This cliché of being "cool," along with its stigmas of race and manliness, are also the thematic thrust of Matthew Suib's *Cocked* (2003), a video that is similarly all threat, no action. Layered cuts from Spaghetti Western showdown sequences are suspended, never revealing the climax, and focusing almost exclusively on close-ups of "the look" between men, which forms a series of interlinked staring contests culminating only in interminable brinkmanship.

Shalom Gorewitz's *I Want You* (2007) also plays on the desire to look and the desire for the physical body. Here Uncle Sam is prominently featured among the circulating cultural icons of a dizzying Times Square, recruiting and threatening at the same time. As a viewer, one is pulled in and pushed out of the excess of unreadable signs available for consumption and lost in the psychedelic violence.

Performance of Desire (2007) by Janet Biggs is yet another vision of the not so subtle choreography of quotidian militarization. An intense display of conformity and controlled bodies resonates in a Busby Berkeley-style with a similarly disconcerting entertainment value. Via cuts back and forth between scenes, the work elicits a compelling comparison between military cadets performing a silent drill in unison and synchronized swimmers mutely performing underwater. Both groups remain equally breathless and pressurized, creating a palpable sensation of constriction and discipline. Once again, there is no release from this frail cycle of suspended mortality.

ABOVE

Installation view of "Infinitu et Conti: Repeated Histories, Reinvented Resistances"



Miriam Ghani's *Universal Games* (2000) is based on found footage from one uncanny October 2000 week on American primetime television in which the two top network stories were the Yankees–Mets World Series and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The viewer is given front row seats to both Shea Stadium and the West Bank where pitches lose their specificity and are reduced to signs. The most suggestive aspect of this coincidence is again the pose of all the players—insurgents and athletes alike.

The questionable effectiveness of such analogies points to an ultimate emptiness, perhaps best exemplified by the explicitly empty gestures of the protagonist in Maritza Molina's video *Conquering Space* (2004), which shows a woman failingly yet continuously battling the invisible “reality” that surrounds her.

In attempting to comment on the ubiquity of militarism and the tenor of uniformity and conformity, “Infinitu et Contini” simply scratched the surface. Repetition was exposed but merely reiterated, making the possibility of reinvented resistances seem like a long shot. Here, dissidence itself was choreographed. Ultimately it linked the Sisyphean question of “what is to be done?” with the reality that too many gestures of resistance are assimilated at their beginnings, in effect reifying the very spectacle they seek to oppose.

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ABOVE

Still from *Performance of Desire* (2007) by Janet Biggs; courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery; image courtesy of Smack Mellon

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