

CONRAD ATKINSON, Ronald Feldman Gallery; VICTOR BURGIN, John Weber Gallery; ED KERNS, Rosa Esman Gallery:

I have always found the mixture of art and social purpose to be like a "lady's drink"—the marriage of the sweet and the bitter, an appealing, tasteful presentation of that which if consumed undiluted and without the little paper-umbrella swizzle stick, would disturb and shake you. It was with this bias that I went to see the work of CONRAD ATKINSON and VICTOR BURGIN, both of which defy categorization; they can be seen as political protest, sociology, anthropology and/or art.

An interesting counterpoint is set up between Atkinson and Burgin, each with his individual approach to that juncture between art and politics. Conrad Atkinson is more the artist/activist of the two; his work has often engaged historical events in a real confrontation. A collage piece of 1978, entitled *Silver Liberties: A Souvenir of a Wonderful Anniversary Year*, which is part of the present show, was initially banned in Belfast. When the British government intervened and allowed the work to be shown, a picket was mounted by Protestant students outside the gallery.

Atkinson's present exhibition, in its transplantation to the United States, may have lost some of its dialogue quality and immediacy; the windowless gallery space is stifling. The installation consists of photographs, paintings, multi-media collages, xeroxed documents, clippings from newspapers and real objects which, arranged on the wall, chronicle political situations which affect the quality of human life in the world today: hunger in the Third World, the struggle in Northern Ireland, industrially caused diseases.

Asbestos presents the case history of a man who died of mesothelioma due to a year's exposure to asbestos 35 years before. Atkinson tells the story in exposé form, like a file stolen from some official office with xeroxed correspondence and evidence—asbestos floor tiles; repair webbing, weather-proofing compounds, placed in coroner-style plastic bags and organized on the wall with the earnestness of an elementary school bulletin board. Important points and inconsistencies are circled energetically, such as the absence of warnings against prolonged exposure and inhalation on the packages, or the inadequacy of monetary compensation for the man's widow.

Atkinson's photographic series on Northern Ireland (1968) and May Day (1975) focuses on the signs and warnings printed by the government to alarm people to the dangers in such mindless actions as starting a car or opening a door. The threatening chill of the signage is not lessened by the inertness of the photograph: "Don't let the bomber get your car"; "Your front door—Next time?"; "Stay alive: Break your routine." The problem in Northern Ireland is further delved into in *Silver Liberties* . . . four panels painted green, white, orange and black respectively, the first three making up the Irish Republican flag. The green panel is affixed with photos of Catholic victims of the Bloody Sunday shootings with short biogra-



Conrad Atkinson, *Northern Ireland 1968—May Day, 1975*, (detail), 1979, color photographs and typewritten sheets.

phies set alongside like grave markers. The orange panel has a copy of a spray-painted image of a club-wielding, pig-faced British soldier. The deliberate crudeness of the display and the unabashed repainting of an image is almost as distasteful as the situation it describes.

Atkinson's editorial voice surfaces from the plethora of material once in a while, and then only in the form of a circled item or a formal decision about the installation itself. Emulating Shelley and quoting the poet on numerous occasions, Atkinson sees the artist as an "unacknowledged legislator" of the world, whose subject matter must skirt the self in favor of the real issues.

Burgin's photographs have printed captions superimposed on them, which at first glance have the look of a line of sentimental greeting cards. The graphic conventions have purposely been drawn from mass-media photography; it is with these conventions that Burgin seeks to show the dislocation between social myths and social realities.

"US77" and "ZOO78" are the two groupings of photographs dealing respectively with mass-media myths in American society and Berlin, the divided city. One of the 40-by-60-inch black and white photographs in the "US77" series, *Framed*, pictures a Marlboro cigarette poster hanging in a subway station. Superimposed on the photo of the ad is a narrative vignette, the story of

a middle-aged, dark-haired woman who gives her hairdresser a photo showing the style she wants duplicated. The model in the photo, we are told, is very young and very blond. The hairdresser props the picture by the mirror so that he can see the face of his client watching her own reflection. . . .

"That's it," he says. But the woman continues sitting, continues staring at her reflection in the mirror." Myth and reality bear no relation to each other. The print, the advertisement and the mirror in the text are all framing devices, hence the title of this piece. Associations to the title word—"to be misrepresented," "made to appear guilty," persuade us into Burgin's "reading" of the scene.

Burgin's presence in the work comes through the rhetorical operations that work with or against the image, even if ambiguous or paradoxical. *Framed* uses numerous antilogies to fill the synapse between the picture and the information: the Marlboro man is by no means in "Marlboro Country" and the woman in the narrative in no way resembles the model she wishes to emulate. The tone of other photos such as *Omnipotence* is more direct: a smoking man waits behind the wheel of his car as pedestrians make their way through the crush of traffic. The caption, the words which belie the image, calls the father's authority in his house an "anachronism which recalls pre-industrial times when

he directed family-based production. . . . Simultaneously master-of-the-house and servant in his place of employment, the identity of the patriarch as wage-slave is in perpetual transit between work and home."

As opposed to "US77," the graphic and linguistic sensibility in "ZOO78" is less commercial and more poetic since it deals less with present-day reality than with the Berlin of our imaginings: the decadence of the '20s, the Wall. Repeated references are made to Victor Shklovski's *Zoo, or letters not about love*, written as an exile in this city in 1923. From that comes the title of this series as well as from the fact, documented in one of the photographs, that the central railway station is called "Zoo" because the Zoological Garden is right alongside it. Again, layers of meaning are applied and peeled away: a zoo, bars, a psycho-linguistic play on that—barrooms, the wall, the sex-shows, women as objects on view, surveillance. The feeling of peeking and looking is emphasized by assorted framing devices as it is in the "US77" series: photographs of photographs, windows, mirrors.

Socio-political statement can stumble into the same pitfalls as does art-speak by providing content without form. If an experience can be too easily extrapolated in a literary or verbal form, then the arena of performance must shift from art to academics. The accompanying texts by both Atkinson and Burgin, however, to my surprise, are no more or less important than the images. The relationships between their words and images provide ironic dialogue that is created when viewing their blends of images and texts. Although the works with their high-pitched texts underscore some level of intellectual overkill, they firmly reinstate the rank of social purpose and political comment in the realm of the visual arts.