

Heartney, Eleanor. "Conrad Atkinson at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts." *Art in America* 77, no. 6 (June 1989): 165-66.

Conrad Atkinson at Ronald Feldman

The focal point of this show was a series of mock front pages from

a variety of American and English journals of record. The familiar mastheads of the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Village Voice* and *Daily News*, along with such invented publications as the *Sunday Consumernica* and the *Bushington Post*, were fleshed out with almost credible hand-drawn headlines and lead paragraphs which skillfully mixed the clichés of art writing and political writing. Thus, for instance, the Atkinson version of the *Financial Times* notes that the "Sandinistas Face Severe Problems of Re(presentation)," while the *Daily Consumernica* reports that "Matisse Says Thatcherism Fails to Take Account of the Pleasure Principle." Back in the USA, the cover of the *Village Voice* promises an article on "How to Dress for Third World Events," while the venerable *Wall Street Journal* observes that "Lack of a Poetic Dimension in Defense Pronouncements Cause for Great Concern, says President."

Atkinson has a good ear for the absurdity of jargon and, at their best, his satiric texts offer a seamless interweaving of the clichés of esthetic, political and cultural discourse. His mock front pages bring to mind Erika Rothenberg's equally skillful parodies of print and television advertis-

ing. However, while Rothenberg's pseudo-storyboards derive from a sense of moral outrage over the false promises and manufactured consensus of the mass media, Atkinson's own point of departure is less clear. His works exhibit a free-floating irony and appear to issue from several conflicting points of view. Some of the headlines, by portraying world leaders vitally concerned about matters of purely esthetic interest, seem to mock these figures' actual cultural ignorance while underscoring the real-life insignificance of art in the wider political arena. At other times, Atkinson's target seems to be the contemporary artist's bottomless political naiveté. Yet other statements seem to issue from a Baudrillardian posture, suggesting that, in fact, style governs politics.

Atkinson seems both gleeful and oddly regretful as he drags art out of the ivory tower and into the political trenches. In good postmodern fashion, he acknowledges art's loss of aura; at the same time, he appears to wish that the rest of life could be elevated to art's now debunked state of purity; and finally, he makes sure that the art viewer is reminded of the art world's actual unsavory connections to power and money. The show was rounded out with two sets of sculptures, consisting of amalgamations of artists' paraphernalia and domestic and military objects, which extended the theme of the entanglement of art and politics.

Atkinson exploits a sly humor in these works in order to convey a sense of the absurdity of the current pursuits of both artists and politicians. In the end, however, the satire turns dark, leading to reflections on the dismal state of esthetic and political matters and transforming the viewer's good-natured chuckle into a hollow laugh. (For illustrations, see pp. 39, 41.)

—Eleanor Heartney