

Pangburn, DJ, “Infotainment’: A Playbook for Fighting Trump’s America,” *TheCreatorsProject.vice.com*, December 16, 2016

‘Infotainment’: A Playbook for Fighting Trump’s America

A revival of the seminal ‘Infotainment’ exhibition shows how artists responded to a right wing political shift amidst the Information Age.

The first time America elected a politically conservative television star, a generation of East Village artists responded with a subversive group show that took aim at the intersection of mass media, politics, commercialization, and the dawn of the information age. Titled *Infotainment*, the show featured work by 18 emerging artists and ran the multimedia gamut, from radical photography to new media, painting, sculpture, video, and more.

Oddly enough, for a show featuring East Village-based artists, *Infotainment* never appeared in New York. Instead it made its way around the U.S. and Europe from 1985 to 1987. Realizing that the *Infotainment* artists deserved a new historical appraisal, Elizabeth Dee recently resurrected the show and added to it. Now titled *Every Future Has a Price: 30 Years After Infotainment*, the exhibition is expanded to include 30 artists that weren’t in the original version, but which are essential to understanding the time and its art.

Originals like David Robbins’ sarcastic *The Art Dealer’s Eye Test* and Steven Parrino’s punk-influenced paintings now stand alongside new additions like Philip Taaffe’s psychedelic mixed-media piece, *Undercurrent*, and a two-channel video installation by pioneering new media artist Gretchen Bender. While the *Infotainment* artists found inspiration in the Pictures Generation, Dee says they felt that there was big shift in aspiration values with Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980. American culture and media started becoming far more commercial just as 24-hour cable news and the information age were coming into existence.

Dee singles out Sarah Charlesworth as one of the primary and radical innovators of photography. Her piece *Rider* is lifted from the Richard Prince image of the Marlboro Man on a horse. Inserted into the silhouette is an image of a woman amidst a red backdrop that spills onto the work’s frame. Dee points out that it merges the the male gaze with the female figure, while the monochrome red radically rethinks the picture frame.



Gretchen Bender, *Wild Dead*, 1984. Two-channel video on 4 monitors; color; sound; 1’41”. Edition 2 of 5. Courtesy of The Gretchen Bender Estate and OSMOS

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The artist Jennifer Bolande also experimented with photos by making them sculptural. Two of Bolande's photo sculptures appear in the show, one of which is *Alphabet Junkyard* (1989). This work combines a crumpled and torn black-and-white photograph of the letter "A" with a frame and a large, stainless steel letter "O." In *Cascade*, created in 1987, a duratrans print of a photograph looks as if it is sliding or melting off the wall, like an ad poster for a place, not the place itself.



Installation view



Installation view



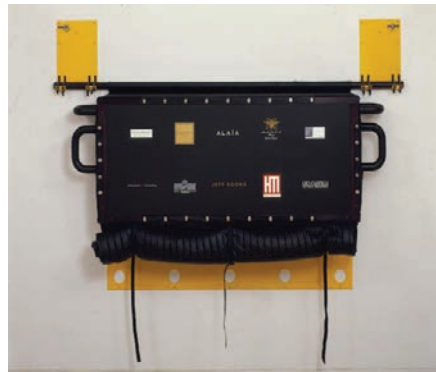
Installation view

Thomas Lawson's *Don't Hit Her Again* shows how current events seeped into Infotainment artists' work. Lawson, like Ronald Jones (whose ZG essay "Every Future Has a Price" inspired the show's title), was one of the group's artist-theorists. During the 80s he noticed the *New York Post* was consistently featuring pictures of young kids and teens on the front page alongside horrific headlines like "Battered Body Found in Freezer" and "Boy Shot for Bike, Beaten to Death." Lawson, who had been collecting the headlines, decided to make a series of works in the same format, but slightly larger. *Don't Hit Her Again* comes from this group.

New media art is represented at the exhibition with Gretchen Bender's *Wild Dead* (1984), a two-channel dystopian video installation in the form of a stack of televisions. An audiovisual work, the screens in the piece contain a number of animated symbols (including corporate logos) and shapes rotating in abstract ways. Of the many artists at *Every Future Has a Price*, Bender's work is surprisingly in line with current trends in new media art.



Philip Taaffe, *Undercurrent*, 1983. Mixed media on canvas



Ashley Bickerton, *Commercial Piece 3*, 1990. Anodized aluminum, wood, leather, acrylic, rubber



Jennifer Bolande, *Alphabet Junkyard*, 1989. Stainless steel letter O, crumpled and torn black and white photograph, wooden frame

On the opposite of the conceptual spectrum is *Commercial Piece 3* by Ashley Bickerton. This sculptural piece features artist and gallery logos (Jeff Koons and Leo Castelli) alongside high-end fashion brands such as Alaïa. Dee says Bickerton was interested in how artists and their works were becoming commodified, competing against big brands by the end of the 80s.

Not all Infotainment artists went on to have careers after the 80s. After the economic bubble burst, many returned to their own artistic practices instead of running a major corporate artistic brand. Gallery associations also disbanded like post-punk bands at the end of the 80s, while a select few continued into the 90s, like Metro Pictures, 303 Gallery, and Colin de Land. Those artists that didn't join a gallery in the 90s, as Dee notes, found themselves out of the artistic conversation.

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Dee says that the art, which utilized some of the same Infotainment strategies, become broader, more mainstream. It became less concept-driven and political.

“Now we have a very similar political situation to 1980 and artists aren’t happy about it,,” Dee says. “So I’m hopeful that we’ll go back to addressing our social and political culture more directly.”

Every Future Has a Price: 30 Years After Infotainment runs until December 17th at Elizabeth Dee gallery in New York City.



Thomas Lawson, *Don't Hit Her Again*, 1981. Oil on canvas



Peter Halley, *Rectangular Cell with Conduit*, 1983. Acrylic, fluorescent acrylic, and RollaTex on canvas