

Table of Contents

The Postmodern Condition 1

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By Raimundas Malasauskas

After the heady days of the dot com boom and the online corporate critique that followed in its wake, net artists' and activists' preoccupations are shifting towards the state. Raimundas Malasauskas reports on one New York example

[IMAGE]

'Dear Director, I am writing to inform you that I am deeply troubled by your closure of White Box, an absolutely un-American thing to do. Please rescind the order as soon as possible and affirm our freedom of speech and assembly.' So wrote one angry activist in an email to Carolyn Parker Mayes, the director of the Homeland Security Cultural Bureau (HSCB), after it ordered the White Box gallery in New York's Chelsea to be shut down on September 11 2002.

The newly founded HSCB, whose stated purpose is 'to protect the interests of the country's national security by employing efforts to direct and guide the parameters of cultural production' found that the exhibition *Radioactive* by Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri posed a threat to national security.

No detailed statement about the closure was released to the public, yet one could fill in the gaps by browsing the HSCB website [<http://www.hscb.org>]. Along with the mission statement and a description of its activities ('to explore issues; conduct studies and analysis; locate and eliminate projects and institutions which undermine national security'), it introduced several extensive analyses of post-9/11 cultural politics.

One of them, Debbie Schmidt's 'The Terrorists and the Postmodernists', argues that, in artistic terms, 'nihilist postmodernists' can be most clearly aligned with the strategies of terror. From this perspective, it wasn't surprising that the HSCB took *Radioactive* as its target. Whether Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri were postmodernists or cultural activists, they had taken up the challenge to address America's post-September 11 political situation, including the industry of 'homeland security' and censorship. 'Who Stands United?' asked one of the works in the project, which was described as a series of programmes – news, interviews, discussions and acoustic works – on radio.

One day before the show was due to open, however, an email message appeared on the mailing list of the 16 Beaver Street Group [<http://www.16beavergroup.org>], an initiative run by Anastas, Gabri and other artists in NYC. It requested forwarding 'as widely as possible', and stated that the HSCB had forced the closure of the gallery. It also quoted HSCB 'board member' Arnold Schwarzenegger as admitting that the closure was a 'wrong move', and asserting his support for 'alternative voices within culture.' This was probably the last nail in the coffin of any claim to authenticity the HSCB had. In fact the whole affair, HSCB included, turned out to be the invention of Anastas and Gabri themselves.

Regrettably, the exposure of the prank has only intensified the shrillness of reactions to it. Upon realising they had been deceived about the true origins of this ramping-up of The War On Terror's repressive powers, both the conservative and progressive wings of a hyper-sensitive art community accused the artists of 'irresponsibility' and 'going too far.' A sense that their trust had been broken and their support abused deflected attention away from the issues the spoof and the *Radioactive* show itself had sought to highlight. The ensuing hate mail and love letters are now logged on the 16 Beaver group website.

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