

Songs of Precarious Being

When Piotr Szyhalski prepares for an exhibition, he described it to me as a kind of incubation process. An artist partial to manifestos and the exegetical, to political stances as ephemeral installations, to performance, to history as a manifestation of the future, to interactive technologies as well as photography, to paintings, posters, drawings, he works on a slew of things simultaneously (as well as exhaustively) so it depends upon which works are ready to be presented. For instance, he is thinking about obsolete gramophone records at the moment and designing labels for them. Recorded on the discs are original compositions but he plans to hang them as a sound installation in which the vocalization is present but silenced, de-activated, a reference to the contingencies inherent in information systems and the relaying of that information. He cited sound as a variable and in the interval that exists between the time it is produced and the time it is heard, a shift or disconnect, a deformation occurs. He said he thinks of history like that. It gives him a way to handle it.

Szyhalski's distinctive visual vocabulary has been much influenced by Soviet/Polish graphic design and propaganda, in particular by billboards, posters and other printed matter and he is constantly in search of historical templates and exemplars as he extensively researches all his productions. *Seeds of Victory*, for example, is one source, a classic textbook on psychological warfare and propaganda by Richard Johnson and used by the U.S. military. Describing the aerial drop of millions of leaflets by the United States over strategic Iraqi sites in 1991 during the Gulf War (a drop he would like to replicate), he developed "IF/THEN: Honor Will Never Be Regained" and "IF/THEN: You Decide," two sets of leaflets dispensed by machines he calls "message force multipliers" in unlimited quantities, part of his ongoing leaflet series. "Honor" consists of two leaflets, one modeled after that released in Iraq imprinted with a twenty-five dinar note and a text originally in Arabic that states, "Honor will never be regained no matter what the

cost.” It is paired with another that depicts a twenty dollar bill, the same text in English and Arabic on both--Saddam Hussein and Andrew Jackson in a complicated face-off. “You Decide” is a series of six images with a proposition and a consequence and overall, they address the distribution of information cross-culturally under drastically disparate circumstances as Szyhalski provocatively translates one reality into another.

Even though much of his practice utilizes the technological, he is profoundly invested in his leaflet production. It is something he always returns to, drawn to the immediacy and efficacy with which these small, low-tech posters can communicate. They are intellectual shortcuts that balance image and word for maximum message, on the one hand, and they are condensations of a larger discourse on the other. Instruments of propaganda, they are easily and cheaply introduced into the public domain, their effect repercussive and have been in continuous use for centuries. “Someone,” he said, “is designing all of this.”

“White Star Cluster,” a recent multimedia project with the Labor Camp Orchestra, presented at the LABoral Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial in Gijon, Spain in 2009-2010, is a further investigation of the theme of information exchange and dissemination, of purposive lapse and disconnect, the latest incarnation of his complex “Theater of Operations” project and subtitled “The Third Sonic Reenactment of Operation Iraqi Freedom,” following The “First and Second Sonic Reenactments.” The empty gallery was made into a surround sound environment (by means of 16 synchronized audio streams) that transmitted, simulated the raw ambience of a war zone, the text transcribed from videos made by cameras mounted on American troops’ helmets on December 4, 2006 in Ramadi, Iraq. The transcriptions were re-recorded in the studio by vocalists whose tones ranged from intimate whispers to anger, fear and urgency as the performers expressed a full spectrum of human emotions in this nihilistic opera that both describes and questions the disasters of war. In “Theatre of Operations,” Szyhalski asks what do

we really know and understand about this war, about any historic event and how are we personally implicated?

Systems of communication, how they function and proliferate, how they are manipulated, are recurrent subjects. He cites John Cage as one significant influence. Cage, in a 1974 interview said that he was interested in making English less comprehensible and less controlled. Comparing syntax to the army and its regulations in *Empty Words*, Cage discussed the demilitarization of language, an undertaking that Szyhalski found sympathetic, not least for its military terminology. Cage offered him a way to purify words, to leach the sinister out of them by turning them into sounds, into music. This premise became one point of departure for several projects, including a sound composition he is creating that merges a Cage text with the voice of an Iraqi man reading from propaganda leaflets in his native tongue to create a chorus, a musical composition. He is also reading Mao, condensing what he has just read into one line as he proceeds. These redactions became the basis for a multitude of videos feeding off indexes of various books about the Cultural Revolution, World War II, labor camps, gulags and totalitarian systems, he said, that were included in “Labor Camp Study Rooms A and C,” part of the “Labor Camp Project,” exhibited in 2007 at the Weisman Art Museum and the Ingenuity Festival in Cleveland. Szyhalski writes one of these sentences on a chalkboard, erases it, writes another, erases it, repeating the process again and again, destroying the message, replacing it in an endless loop.

“I’m interested in extreme moments of history, earth-shattering events that change the course of time,” he continued. Diane Mullin, writing on Szyhalski’s “Labor Camp,” cites Walter Benjamin’s metaphor for history as an angel perpetually “blown backward into the future,” looking to piece together what has already occurred. As a critique of history as a linear, culminating progression, it is applicable to Szyhalski’s view of it as an artificial, ideological

construct. He proposes other models for conceptualizing time, as represented in *Labor Camp*. A complex, resonant multimedia project that includes interactive web components, videos, text, music, a blog and on-line resources, it is based on expanding, interlinked structures of thought and is a rejection of the idea that cultural contributions are perpetuated only through objects conventionally designated as art. "The object is not the art, it is a vehicle that allows the art," he has stated repeatedly. *Labor Camp* is his most comprehensive exploration of those ideas and every work he makes is somehow related to it if not actually part of it. He embraces labor and its result, immateriality and flux, erasures, the non-proprietary and non-authorial and finds "a strange void in work that doesn't have these interests in mind." As an artist engagé, an agent provocateur, Szyhalski belongs to an illustrious European tradition, one that reverberates with circularity and the weight of calamitous history. His projects, characterized by their fierce, utopian desire for a more incorruptible, more enlightened, humane world, are also poignant since their very existence acknowledges that it is not.

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