

# RENÉE GREEN

## political projections



Renée Green, plan for an exhibiton at the Secession, Vienna: 'I converted the [Vienna] Secession exhibition space into a maze. Within the maze one could encounter a combination of interrelated works produced between 1996 and 1999 and for the first time presented in relation to each other.' {Green, 1999}

Art like humour tends to be less effective the more didactic it becomes. Accordingly, political art often employs allegory which is less concerned with communicating a clear (ideological) message than with placing interpretation into the hands of the viewer.

Renée Green is of interest because she tackles topics that have obvious political connotations yet she is far from prescriptive in the messages her works convey. In this respect she could be contrasted with a fellow African-American artist Fred Wilson who's works transmit more explicit political messages. Green's work is characterized by her use of counter-narrative strategies that avoid the closure of meaning evident in classical linear narrative. As one commentator notes, Green deploys 'many kinds of models for discerning knowledge and in turn alludes to the tensions between them' {Secession, 1999}. In so doing she inevitably creates complexity rather than certainty. Her methodologies make information more complex in a manner antithetical to classical modes of narrative. Hers is a quintessentially *counter-narrative* practice.



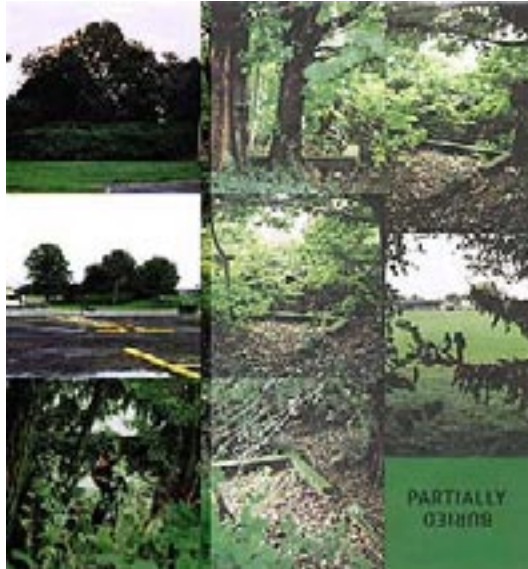
According to the classical framework there is a situation which should be correctly interpreted by the artist according to the proper political framework. But in Green's work the observer (both author and reader) becomes entwined in what he or she observes leading to what might be termed an *implicative narrative*: which is to say a narrative that to a significant degree depends on the reader for its meanings and which is deliberately open ended in order to facilitate this process.

Green's working methods are revealed particularly well in *Partially Buried in Three Parts*. Like many of her works it is constructed and reconstructed over years. She often recycles pieces into other pieces in a way that makes her oeuvre comparable to a holistic system in which the parts and subsystems continually interact and re-organize.

In a talk at Secession in Vienna Green noted that *Partially Buried in Three Parts* began with a reflection upon Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970, which like many earth art works is no longer physically extant and is available solely through its photodocumentation. Instances of these photodocuments are reproduced here. Green's *Partially Buried in Three Parts* grew out of a consideration of the year 1970 and, as will all her works, the associations became increasingly dense as she delved deeper into the project {Secession, 1999}.

In a text on *Partially Buried in Three Parts*, 1996-99, Green provides us with valuable insight into her working method. She cites Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's *Arts of Impoverishment* {Bersani, 1993} noting that their theory of art provides 'a formal model of how human beings "find themselves"





through a process of misrecognition' (CEPA, 1999). In the context of Green's installation *Partially Buried in Three Parts* she observes that according to the Bursani-Dutoit position the role of viewer is understood as one of piecing 'together the various parts of the work, rather than attempting to absorb and master it' (CEPA, 1999). Applied to Green's work this means adopting a mode of display that will avoid an overly coherent reading on the part of both the author and the reader (and the author-reader).

This interpretation is supported when Green reports that from the Bursani-Dutoit standpoint the *exhibition* of works of art can be understood in similar terms. Instead of there being a single site that is specific to the unique work of art there are 'a network of operations which can take place over time and in a number of places' (CEPA, 1999). Green notes that *Partially Buried in Three Parts* involves a 'web of genealogical traces which are probed through the notions of sites of memory as well as site-specific work'.

It would appear that Green imagines her work as operating beyond the confines of its literal exhibition. She explains that in Part One, *Partially Buried* (originally shown at Pat Hearn Gallery in 1996), she was concerned with:

what the notion of "site" or "nonsite" might mean today, when one's sense of place and time can depend largely on where one's computer screen is, and when memory is determined for some by computer storage capacity. How are the 'returns of what is repressed' mediated and how do they erupt? The concept of being an 'American artist,' and the notion of national identities and cultural predilections



become conflated; entropy, memory and its contradictions, memorials and monuments, nostalgia, and “radical” change repeated as style are all ideas which circulate in this work {CEPA, 1999}.

Green points to the fact that globalized communications are altering traditional concepts of home, community, nationality and identity. Personal memory is radically intersected by the Westernized collective consciousness that is mass media and the prosthetic memory that is the internet search engine. The instantaneity of mass media forces us out of the *then* of nostalgia and into the *now* of fashion, celebrity and the latest must-have consumer item. On the other hand increasingly available electronic knowledge opens up previously less accessible vaults of information.

To the immediacy of communications media one can add increased international travel and an acceptance of the need for career-oriented mobility. It is less usual for someone to stay in the same town all their life than it might have been even twenty years ago. An exception might be if that person was born in a major metropolis such as London, Tokyo or New York which function like central processing units into which the rest of the world is connected by millions of differentiated threads: metropolises such as these are simultaneously somewhere and everywhere. They are both sites and nonsites. And they have always been a focus for political struggle as well as being cultural and financial centres.

One can also compare Green’s notion of the intersection of personal memory with the collective consciousness that is mass media and communication and the aesthetics of mon-



tage that stretches back from contemporary digital media to early twentieth century experiments with collage, photography and film. We can connect the peculiarly modernist aesthetics of montage with Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory and the use of such ideas by Craig Owens to theorize postmodernism {Owens, 1984}. Owens observes that 'allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete' {Owens, 1984: 206} and also points to Benjamin's allegorical conception of history as ruins buried in the landscape of the now.

Green gave Part Two of *Partially Buried* the subtitle '*Übertragen/Transfer*'. She explains that this second part explores the change in the perception of Germans living in Germany during the 1970s who since moved to the USA. Specifically she was interested in how they perceived the USA from the standpoint of living in Europe. It can be noted that in line with Green's observations regarding the motility of perception these people will have not only altered their perception of the USA by living there but will have also altered their perceptions of Germany. Green meditates on this cosmopolitan quandry:

How does one return? To a country, to a place of birth? To a location which reeks of remembered sensations? But what are these sensations? Is it possible to trace how they are triggered and why they are accompanied with as much dread as anticipation? {Secession, 1999}.

Green is describing the effect of culture shock that occurs not only when one leaves one's 'native' culture for a 'foreign'

culture, but also when one becomes acclimatized to the foreign culture, going 'native' as it were, and then returns to one's 'homeland' only to experience it with a similar degree of culture shock to that experienced when first arriving in the 'foreign' culture. As such relocations increase so do the psychological states that accompany them. In a sense we are all becoming 'displaced persons'.

Part Three of *Partially Buried* concerns Green's memories of photojournalistic images of the Korean War which she saw as a child. When exhibiting at the Kwangju Biennale 1997 she took photographs of Kwangju and Seoul and mixed them with the Korean War images. She explains that she wanted to express a 'mingling of present and past, what is near and what is far, what is other and what is one's self' {CEPA, 1999}. The resulting photoinstallation draws attention to the complexity of our mental representations of nationalities, and specific times and places. It also introduces a significant element of defamiliarization via a juxtaposition of images of war and peace without any guide to how these ought to be interrelated. The reader is left to make up their own connections.

What is especially interesting about Green's approach here is the way in which she inserts a personal dimension into what could in other artists' hands be purely political commentaries. This marks an interesting development in the genre of political art which is constantly bedevilled by art theoretical prescriptiveness from Walter Benjamin {Benjamin, 1984 [1935]} Peter Bürger {Bürger, 1984 [1974]} through to Benjamin Buchloh {Buchloh, 1982}.

In contrast to such prescriptiveness, it would appear that

Green is intent on deliberately skewing the focus of her messages. One might refer to this, after Craig Owens {Owens, 1984}, as an 'allegorical procedure' where allegory implies the a Derridean labyrinth of representation in contrast to the more direct messages of artists such as John Heartfield or Hans Haacke.