

From: Peering Over The Precipice: Millennialism as Zeitgeist in Los Angeles. Visions Magazine, Fall 1992 by Kay Whitney

Stuart Bender and Angelo Funicelli are aesthetic brothers to the Viennese Actionists. Their work, carefully choreographed videos with live and pre-recorded music, takes on the highly ambitious task of coming to terms with those most elemental and profound aspects of life, religion and nature. Their performance/installation *Visitations* is an attempt to show the link between revolution and hallucination - the power of vision to direct history.

Seeing Christianity as an old-world revolution, *Visitations* examines new-world revolutions and revolutionary attempts using three historical events: the Salem witch hunts of the 1690's, the Haitian revolution of the 1790's and the Native American Ghost Dance religion of the 1890's.

Like the Actionists, rather than being submerged by the weight of the millennium, Bender and Funicelli attempt to gauge its parameters by using history in its various versions and revisions. Though they are clearly dealing with the decline of Western culture as a subtext, they see it quite contextually, as a part of an historical ebb and flow. Their work is an unselfconscious and subversive celebration of multiculturalism.

One of the premier achievements of Bender and Funicelli lies in how they subvert their given form. While they clearly believe in the inherent value of imagery, they also undermine the brainless passivity of TV-watching through their careful manipulation and juxtaposition of imagery. In the way that Bender and Funicelli utilize it, video is simultaneously an enormous bricolage and a Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk.

Their work is both Dionysian (in its appeal to the senses) and didactic, appealing to reason through its choice of metaphorical and referential imagery. Performed within a highly-charged historical arena, it engages our millennial anxieties, but reaches for comprehension outside that sphere. *Visitations* forces the viewer to analyze and reinterpret the electronically-generated illusions and symbols that have become unquestioned cultural cliches.

It has been said that our own Middle Ages will be an era of "permanent transition" for which new methods of adjustment will need to be found and employed. The problem, in other words, is to find new hypotheses for the exploitation of disorder and new ways to enter into the logic of conflict. For this, we will need to develop a culture of continual response and readjustment. A thousand years ago, this process was characterized by plagues and massacres, intolerance and death: but a renaissance eventually followed.

In his book *The Eclipse of Reason*, Max Horkheimer writes that the threat posed to civilization by the massive culture industry consists in its assault on the capacity to engage in critical thought as a meaningful form of social discourse. With the escalation and raffination of the media assault, people of all social classes seem less and less able to penetrate beyond the surfaces of things to reach aspects that may not be immediately visible. Many people seem unable to conceive of the possibility that the imagination, or reason, might be employed to yield knowledge.

If a renaissance is to follow our time, then artists will be forced to address this issue, by questioning and re-examining the nature of the imaginative act and its consequences -not by continuing to be servants to the entrapping Zeitgeist.