

PRESSBOOK

Barry MCGEE

Artforum

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His myth looms large: Barry McGee, tag name “Twist,” San Francisco-based art-school graduate, graffiti artist, and vital player in the emergence of the Mission School aesthetic. Following its breathless tributes to Shepard Fairey in 2009 and Os Gemeos in 2012, the ICA Boston is hosting McGee’s traveling survey, which originated at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, where it was organized by Lawrence Rinder and Dena Beard. While the show offers a tempting occasion to rehearse the problematics of populist curatorial programming, those critical arguments would seem to have run out of steam by now, since displays such as “Art in the Streets” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles have pushed the commercial and institutional recuperation of street art to dizzying heights of spectacularization. In an attempt to move forward, can we locate other histories and narratives in McGee’s work, outside of the customary museological discourse that ascribes heroic, avant-gardist aspirations to his practice as an endeavor to reconcile art and life?

As is typical of McGee’s installations, tokens from the life of a graffiti writer play an integral role here as indexes of an activity in which his practice is grounded. Empty spray cans, a paint-covered utility jacket, and vitrines of ephemera from local Boston graffiti artists are included in the room McGee has dubbed the “Boston Contemporary Art Centre,” a kind of show within the show and a tribute to “the street” that exudes an air of folksy nonchalance. He thus would seem to give the museum exactly what it wants—a self-conscious pageantry of knickknacks that offers the ultimate in street cred—but not without a dose of irony.

The absorption of street art into wider culture is also addressed by McGee at the ICA via various mechanical figures programmed to vandalize the gallery walls. Clothed in “typical” street wear, one is poised on top of a garbage can while another scrawls on a mirror inside a Dumpster. Elsewhere, eight coarsely carved wooden statuettes stand on pedestals, each regularly raising and lowering a motorized, spray-cangripping appendage. Are these McGee’s reflections on the institutionalization of graffiti culture or a commentary on the state of all aesthetic aspirations within the historical conditions of global capitalism? With these robotic desecrators turned fun-house attractions, McGee appears to acknowledge his own fate as an artist: to have become an “arm” of the culture industry.

Photographs that document McGee and his crew in the act of tagging are also clustered throughout the exhibition. These illustrate the attention paid to recording and authenticating activities that are traditionally performed under a shroud of anonymity and offer a critique of gentrification and the privatization of urban space. While many of the photos show the hooded protagonists from behind, surveying their handiwork on trucks, in tunnels,



and on bus-stop shelters, others capture their faces and bodies in stereotypical expressions of triumph. Here, McGee brings the public into a cozy relationship with his “illicit” subculture, inviting viewers to contemplate a community they rarely see via images that capture the ready-made set of poses and personas that constitute this “murky” world. Yet the figures’ gestures still goad the audience: By evidencing the illegality of the writers’ practice, the photographs remind viewers of the physical and ideological distance between those who act and those who watch.

Despite a strong curatorial intent to situate McGee within an avantgardist tradition of merging art with social reality, his testing of the permeability of the museum’s walls opens onto larger issues of leakage between antiestablishment subculture and mass-market pop culture and thus points to the insufficiency of the show’s art-historical framework as well as our discourse’s beleaguered fixation on institutional recuperation. Indeed, if this version of avant-gardism is now served at regular intervals as a warm nugget of endearing and entertaining populism, McGee playfully suggests that it can no longer be deployed with the same note of highbrow seriousness that it has struck for so long. The clincher, of course, is that even as he tries to offer a critique of this very state of affairs, McGee continues to deliver the goods to an art industry that thrives on selling the frisson of the marginal elevated to the pedestal of high culture.