

DADATABASE

Vancouver, BC, INFO@DADATABASE.CA

TEMPORAL FORM VS AN INSISTING SUBSTANCE (Modifying an art object or a call to arms?)

Airborne propaganda has been used in political and military conflicts since the 19th century. In 1871, the French National Guard employed balloons to release propaganda leaflets over the Prussian army engulfing the city of Paris:

Paris defies the enemy. The whole of France rallies. Death to the invaders. Foolish people, shall we always throttle one another for the pleasure and proudness of Kings? Glory and conquest are crimes; defeat brings hate and desire for vengeance. Only one war is just and holy; that of independence.¹

In the late 1960s the African National Congress (ANC), in collaboration with the South African Communist Party and South Africans living in exile, invented a leaflet dispenser known to the activists as the 'bucket bomb' and to the police as the 'ideological bomb'. This was one of the most effective and widely used propaganda weapons of the ANC as can be witnessed by its frequent application during the 1960s and 1970s in the struggle against Apartheid.²

Modify Me is the most ambitious project that A.S.Dhillon has initiated in his series of public works installations. Through months of preparation and consultation with a team of engineers, volunteers and documentary assistants, he recreated a balloon-operated leaflet dispenser and used it to spread hundreds of 8.5X11 flyers, containing his well known phrase "Are We The Good Guys", over the Strathcona Neighborhood in Vancouver. The process was photographed for later exhibitions, specifically Shrink-wrapped at the Belkin Satellite/Or Gallery this December.³

The title of Dhillon's new work can be understood in relation to his art making practice, particularly the public works series. In this series, an action, which in another context would be denounced for being disruptive or destructive, can be legitimized or even considered as successful art by stretching the boundaries of freedom while closing the gap that separates the 'artistic' from the 'political'. Dhillon's greatest achievement in his previous installations had been to turn the practice of image-making and representational labour into an actualized social dissent rivaling politics itself. The previous installations comfortably occupied the empty space left by the absence of an actual political movement on the streets and functioned as such in the time of crisis.

Contrary to the previous installations in which the work had a concrete presence in relation to time and place, the new work functions more as a temporal act accompanied by its residual impact. Changing from a physical installation to a time based process could potentially be the inspiration for the work's title. Moving from "the thing" to "the act" is the most dramatic modification Dhillon has made so far in his recent work.

It seems that Dhillon is interested in this shift since it represents the red line that separates legitimate protest from political violence. If what Dhillon does is art, then what does a shift from generating legal protest to taking action against the law signify? If Dhillon's acts are political action, then *Modify Me* compares Dhillon's art making with those of political movements who decide to change tactics from utilizing legal protest to incorporating illegal violence into their agenda.

The latest US presidential campaign provided a chance to remember an organization and some of its associated individuals who themselves crossed these lines in the 1970's. Weather Underground whose member William Ayers was frequently linked to Obama in the Republican campaign was founded by radicals who had previously worked within the student movement across the country but, as he result of Vietnam war, became disillusioned with the democratic process, civil disobedient and non violent political action. They decided to form a violent guerilla organization to more effectively insert their political demand for an end to the war in the public arena. After spending close to two decades in the underground, some of these individuals, including William Ayers, crossed the line in reverse and came back to be rehabilitated through pursuing their social and political agenda within the legal and civil framework.

Dhillon's unauthorized flying of a balloon and dispensing of flyers over a neighborhood combine the use of airborne leaflets as a way of communicating with the enemy in a war with the use of leaflets as a means of

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political activity and community organization within a like minded group for peaceful purposes. This pairing simultaneously unmask the common features of war and peace at the same time that it breaks the cycle in both forms of application by cohabitating them in the practice of contemporary art. One cannot escape the fact that *Modify Me* was made specifically for the exhibition Shrink-warpped under a certain curatorial mandate.⁴ The photographs of this installation will be treated and traded as contemporary art, rendering *Modify Me* as neither political violence nor political propaganda and judging its appearance as an art object.

It is crucial to distinguish between Dhillon's actions at face value and their artistic relevance and symbolic value. When comparing Dhillon's flying of a balloon over the sky to the metaphor of underground political violence, we cannot neglect to mention that Dhillon does not endorse the use of violence but rather contextualizes it by its incorporation into the realm of art and exposing it for what is always was, a public political spectacle aimed at attracting attention and influencing debate. This should not be interpreted as Dhillon's aversion to spectacle and spectacular politics. Quite contrary, *Modify Me* is the artist's ultimate confession about his willingness to embrace the always already doomed spectacle as the only place where real and effective political action might effect social change and progress.

The text on the flyer has been a reoccurring element in Dhillon's recent work. He has used the trademark "Are We The Good Guys" since his first solo exhibition at DADABASE in March 2006. Like a corporate advertising campaign the phrase has been made into stationary, mobile and hanging signs, as well as flyers and displayed throughout out Vancouver. Dhillon essentially keeps asking the same question, while continually pointing to different ways of subverting the public space for both creating art and occupying the political discourse. But this time, the implicit consequences of using his new found medium would give his old question a new urgency.

1. John Cassell, History of the Wars Between France and Germany (1870-1871), http://www.archive.org/stream/cassellshistoryo01olliuoft/cassellshistoryo01olliuoft_djvu.txt
2. Terry Bell, Dumisa Buhle Ntsebeza Unfinished Business: South Africa, Apartheid and Truth, New York, Verso, 2003 http://books.google.com/books?id=ALA8SgeiA_wC
3. Adel Abidin, Abbas Akhavan, A.S. Dhillon, Josephine Meckseper, Martha Rosler, Gail Wight and Retort, Curated by Alison Rajah, Shrink-wrapped, Or Gallery, Vancouver, December 6, 2008 - January 24, 2009
4. Dan Berger, Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity, Portland, AK Press, 2005