

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

May 2, 2007

Art & Borat

Filed under: [aesthetics](#), [Pamela Anderson](#) — alecsothblog @ 5:51 pm

My [recent post](#) on Pamela Anderson got me thinking again about Borat. I was one of the last people to see the movie a couple of months ago. While I found the filmmaking to be truly one-of-a-kind, the overall sensibility seemed familiar. Crude, confrontational and deeply cynical, Baron Sacha Cohen's view of the world reminded me of a lot of contemporary art.

I suppose I should say modern art. Ever since Duchamp there has been a long line of provocative pranksters in the art world. I suspect Borat would get a kick out of Manzoni's [Shit Cans](#). But the first artist to come to mind was Maurizio Cattelan:



In [an interview with Sculpture Magazine](#), Andrea Bellini asks Cattelan about his creative persona:

Andrea Bellini: Listen, I don't mean to be blunt, but even in that case some people said you were a real con-man. You organized fake biennials in the Caribbean, you attached a dealer to the walls of his gallery with Scotch-tape, you copied the show of another artist in every detail, you sold your space at the Venice Biennial to a publicity agency that was launching a new perfume, you denounced the robbery of an invisible work of art of yours to the police, you slashed Zorro's "Z" into a painting, imitating Fontana's cuts, you had a 300-year-old tree grow right through a flashy new Audi car. Who is Maurizio Cattelan, a court jester, a liar, or a con-man?

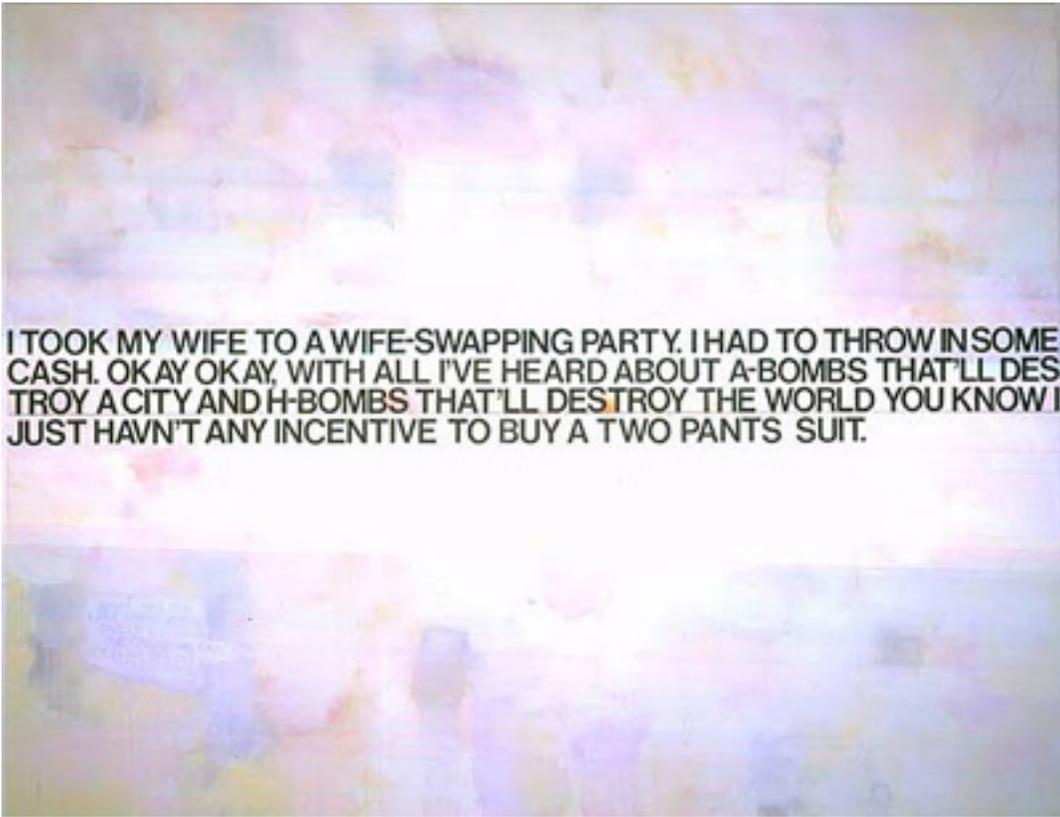
Maurizio Cattelan: A jester? I've been trying to say serious things for a lifetime, but nobody ever believes me. A con-man? I never robbed anyone, never committed perjury, never committed immoral acts. A liar? I don't believe in a single truth, only in an infinite combination of possibilities. I'm a bundle of contradictions, just like everyone else.



'him' 2001 © Maurizio Cattelan

"I like publicity: beautiful images, lots of girls. But I don't think that Hitler was a publicity stunt. He wasn't trying to sell anything. On the contrary, it was a rough image about peeling off masks and roles." Maurizio Cattelan

While Cattelan's vision can be dark, it doesn't leave me with the same kind of rot gut that I get from Borat. A number of jaded artists come to mind (Mike Kelly, The Chapman Brothers, Jason Rhodes, Sean Landers, Charles Ray, Paul McCarthy), but the one I keep coming back to is Richard Prince. First there is the cynical humor:



Jokes, 1999-2000 by Richard Prince

Then there is the social commentary/provocation:



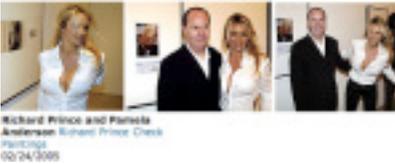
Spiritual America, 1983, by Richard Prince

Finally, like Borat, Richard Prince has a thing for Pamela Anderson. He's made devotional art:



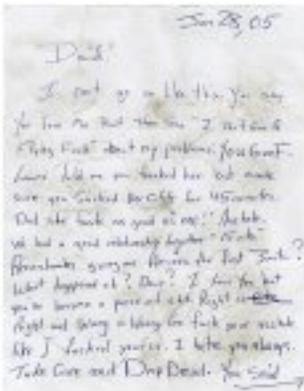
untitled (Bruce Willis, Daryl Hannah, Pamela Anderson), 1999 by Richard Prince

He's even gotten Pam into the [Kazakh Wedding Sack](#):



Like Borat, Prince's vision of the world leaves me spinning. On the one hand, I find his technique dazzling. It has also been influential. I doubt I would have collected the Niagara love letters if it weren't for him.

For the record, Richard Prince owns one of these letters:



I can't go on like this 2005, by Alec Soth

This is one of the nastiest pictures I've ever produced. While editing NIAGARA, I deleted it from the main sequence of images. The project was already dark, but this image [and a couple of others](#) seemed to overwhelm the book in nihilism.

While I laughed along with everyone else at Borat, the movie left me sick to my stomach. The fans at the rodeo are a part of America, but they aren't America. Same with Prince's biker-chicks. As much as I respond to the work, I hesitate to give myself over to it. Pamela can have Richard Prince (and Kid Rock and Tommy Lee). I'll take my wife, please.

21 Comments

1. Speaking of Borat + art, there's this:
[999 Borats](#).

Which you can read about [Torontoist](#).

Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — May 2, 2007 @ [7:08 pm](#)

2. Great post. I've thought about the problems that Richard Prince and Duchamp present in slightly more general terms: that many of the most influential artists from the 20th century leave us with ideas and philosophies that have a greater lasting impact than their actual work supports. (punk rock!) There is a Gerhard Richter quote to the effect of "Warhol made some of the most important pictures in the 20th century, but as an artist, he is rather mediocre." I think this is a great observation. If a Warhol retrospective were to happen, I wouldn't be that psyched to go because what's important are his ideas. Visually and emotionally, it's rather stunted work. I sort of feel that way about people like Richard Prince. I get what they are saying, and its nihilism can be liberating, but to what end?

Comment by [Jake](#) — May 2, 2007 @ [8:20 pm](#)

3. It seems that not so long ago no young band would lend their music to a tv commercial, now many bands aspire to that possibility. In the movie Crumb the cartoonist Bill Griffith (Zippy the Pinhead) claimed that for most young people today the dream is to sell out. I see that with my students all the time. The notion of a real critique of commerce or the market, or a kind of artistic practice that radically resists the market seems not just impossible today, but not even conceivable. It seems strange to find the Art Fairs depressing (which I do for the same reasons as you) and at the same time reject an artist like Cattelan, who is in a sense skewering that market (as was Manzoni). Perhaps my reading of Cattelan's work is wrong, but what seems deeply cynical is to critique the market then to participate in it. I realize that Cattelan obviously does this, but he claims right up front to be a deeply cynical guy, so his practice is consistent, probably even adding to the work itself. I think Jeff Wall's work is great also, and those light boxes are a kind of political statement in themselves. A co-opting of commercial imagery for art (vs the other way round). Each one is a kind of subversion.

Comment by [stefan](#) — May 2, 2007 @ [9:05 pm](#)

4. Hey Alec: speaking of movies and modern art, I was likewise thinking of this correlation and would like to make a recommendation of checking out "Stranger than fiction"

This cinematography is great.

Comment by [David Wilson Burnham](#) — May 2, 2007 @ [9:11 pm](#)

5. i don't know alec, i'd agree with some of what you say about borat. the laughs come at the expense -to a degree- of less educated people, so the enlightened ones can giggle and scoff from their place up high. the undercurrent to borat's humor is from a very dark place and often dealing with such fear is it not better to be a little light hearted? but i think this kind of humor only succeeds if it also makes people recognize some of the same traits within themselves.

maybe some of those photos of yours that you left out could have made the cut but probably would have to of been offset with some light. that sadness exists and by ignoring it it becomes something that people feel ashamed of, or, something that is isolated to them.

all that said it all obviously depends on what you focus on. my parents are still together and love each other after 32 years of marriage. these are also things we should not ignore.

Comment by [pj](#) — May 2, 2007 @ [9:27 pm](#)

6. da ali g show was excellent. his interviews with the high and mighty are beyond description.

Comment by j zorn — May 2, 2007 @ [10:02 pm](#)

7. yes Borat makes you laugh, but leaves you with a nasty taste. some of that is exactly what he intended, and some isn't. He seems to think that the over-arching big dark secret in America is antisemitism, which (i.m.h.o.) simply isn't so. If he'd took that energy and aimed it at racism, it would have been far more accurate, but nobody would have laughed for a moment. sad.

Prince is a genius. His 'landscape' (?) photography – tire planters, rusting hoops, trash in back lots, tire burn out marks – is way, way better than all that bourgeois mystical stuff that 95% of landscape photography is sadly hung up on.

Comment by peter yardley — May 3, 2007 @ [8:14 am](#)

8. All this cynicism makes me feel that art is broken. I made a dan flavin light for my room, it cost me 35 dollars.

Comment by [Dan](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [8:17 am](#)

9. I think that the letter your posted is just as much a part of "Love" as the people at the rodeo are a part of America. Yes, they do not sum it up, or represent the whole, but they do represent an important part. The letter is a bit nihilistic, but it carries with it a lot of power and genuine emotion, which are things that Borat pulls out of America during his pseudo cross country road trip. Either way, great post, and by the way I believe I deserve the title of "the last person to see Borat," sad(?) to say I just watched it 2 weeks ago!

Comment by [Justin](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [9:02 am](#)

10. Isn't it one of the prices of satire and social criticism (or any condescending and provocative exploration of the parts of culture which thoughtful people find repugnant or depressing) that looking and reacting to the art or the satire confuses people into thinking they've addressed it in some meaningful way?

This is something that gets talked about year after year, that there is so much inaction about ignorance because the media shares its commentaries mostly with an audience of passive observers who relish the distance between themselves and their subjects, because this technique is comforting. Sometimes I think we're trained to think the only alternatives are to be labeled a kook, an exploitative humanist, or a hippy.

Borat and Banksy aren't that different from eachother, either, in the sense that they both take political acts of public vandalism and make them inclusive amusements and games. I mean, it's fun if you're in on it, but they're like empty calories. We're mostly all still really afraid to trade our comforts for change, even though we'll buy the book and the t-shirts.

Comment by Michael G. — May 3, 2007 @ [11:19 am](#)

11. [...] alec soth – blog photographica, miscellanea, etcetera « Art & Borat [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [Adult Comedy Action Drama](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [11:50 am](#)

12. The horse fell over in the middle of the rodeo.

Sometimes art is created, other times merely captured.

Comment by [ross](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [12:00 pm](#)

13. why did the guy get fired from the orange juice factory??
cause he couldn't concentrate!

Comment by [stewart](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [12:23 pm](#)

14. given the state of the contemporary art world did you feel any pressure to include those left out photos in the final cut?

Comment by [j zorn](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [1:03 pm](#)

15. Not at all.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [1:08 pm](#)

16. Cattelan is closer to Orozco than Borat in my opinion. Cattelan's work seems to stem from a very ingrained cultural condition(ing) whereas Cohen's work (assumed identities) deals more with cultural appropriation (he floats above and preys on easy targets, sort of like a vulture, a very humorous and intelligent vulture).

Both artists have their moments, but Cattelan is less of a one-trick pony for me.

Comment by [Brett Kallusky](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [10:42 pm](#)

17. ...not that the Pope couldn't be seen as an easy target (for a meteor).

Comment by [Brett Kallusky](#) — May 3, 2007 @ [10:44 pm](#)

18. I saw Borat too, but I wouldn't say that I could pin down Sasha Baron Cohen's world view on the basis of it. The movie is deeply critical, but "nihilistic" or "cynical" I'm not so sure.

Comment by [Mike](#) — May 4, 2007 @ [10:35 pm](#)

19. Alec,
you write
"For the record, Richard Prince owns one of these letters:
I can't go on like this 2005, by Alec Soth"

- * Does he own the letter itself or a picture you took?
- * Did you use your large format camera for this picture?
- * Did you take a picture of the first page only?

Comment by [Jay Watkins](#) — May 7, 2007 @ [5:40 am](#)

20. The most cynical of artists i know are the former duet of Komar & Melamid, if you remember the Thai Elephan project and the Painting by Numbers work. Not to metion everything else...., especially the latest stuff they started doing while still together on art as religion.

Comment by [Anna Shteynshleyger](#) — May 9, 2007 @ [10:29 pm](#)

21. [...] These two projects seem like a really good introduction to this sort of documentary photography. But more importantly for me, provide a contrast to a trend in contemporary art and films, something Alec Soth discusses in a recent post "Art + Borat" on his blog. I'll let you read his post and won't try to synopsize it, but the most important line for me was: "While I laughed along with everyone else at Borat, the movie left me sick to my stomach. The fans at the rodeo are a part of America, but they aren't America. Same with Prince's biker-chicks. As much as I respond to the work, I hesitate to give myself over to it. Pamela can have Richard Prince (and Kid Rock and Tommy Lee). I'll take my wife, please." [...]

