Hakim Bey, Jaye C. Beldo
Interview with Hakim Bey on Victim Art

web.archive.org

theanarchistlibrary.org

Interview with Hakim Bey on Victim Art

Hakim Bey, Jaye C. Beldo

I asked Hakim Bey in New York City, author of the books Temporary Autonomous Zone: Ontological Anarchy and Poetic Terrorism and Immediatism to comment about victim art and what its cultural/ societal implications are in relation to the volatile debate currently raging in the art world. So far he has offered the most substantially refreshing observations, free of the reactionary taint that clouds the many sides of the issue.

Jaye C. Beldo: What have your experiences with Victim art been like … has it all been negative?

Hakim: Not everything about victim art has been negative. After talking with some friends who are in the victim art world, who are very worried what's going to happen to their projects under Gingrichism, commented that as far as arts administrators are concerned, what they're doing is extracting money from wherever they can and taking it away from the artist as an individual, creative ego and trying to give it to the community as artist or artistic force. A lot of the funding

for what you and I would easily call victim art has come about through a desire to de-fetishize fine or high art, western culture or western civilization in favor of something which is in fact more truly communitarian or egalitarian.

JCB: One of the ironies of this is that victim art itself is ultimately fetishistic.

Hakim: But not everything that has come across as victim art was necessarily meant that way. There are reasons why this is occurring. One is the futility of art itself. As a fellow cultural worker I think you'll understand that we all live on the arts reservation or in the creativity ghetto. There's a lively trade for hand made trinkets for the tourists, but the reservation cannot support itself. The reservation lives on hands outs, like the reservations of the Native Americans. One of the reasons why the reservation is supported as a source of vitality and imagination and ideas is for it to be co-opted and ripped off by the commercial sector.

JCB: Yes, in your book Immediatism you describe art as 'fodder for McDeath's ads.'

Hakim: Yes, exactly and it's not only black or gay people or the various ghettoized minorities which are known for their creativity that have long been the sources for this vampiric activity. The spectacle needs to be able to point at the reservation and call it freedom of speech and freedom of expression … the privileged few who elect themselves into this reservation and I certainly include myself among them, are exempt from a lot of the forces which emanate from the usual power/control structures, a tacit permission has been granted to behave in a bohemian fashion and indulge in radical rhetoric and so forth ….

JCB: I'm worried about the victim art form anesthetizing people because of this tendency for it to become fodder, to become what I call tragi-tainment and that in the end will ultimately defeat itself.

Hakim: What it all amounts to is systematic/economic disempowerment-and this is why artists are so frustrated. It's about the totality of the structure in which they're caught up, the art machine. When a right wing regime such as the present one comes into power, the threat of defending comes along. The hothouse effect of this closed off and rather futile rhetoric turns on itself and makes severe philosophical and semantic misapprehensions of what is actually going on. There is this general atmosphere of futility and in this atmosphere, victim art finds its expression. What is going on is an expression of disernpowerment, not even of powerlessness, but of disern-powerment of a process, of an aggression that has been carried out more or less successfully against the idea that art is central to a culture, rather than peripheral. The whole art world has been subsumed in this sense into the spectacle. Individuals may live on the reservation and produce good art but they do so in a context of futility and spectacularization. Look for an analysis that goes deeper than the surface of this victim style. The victim style is upsetting in a way that it is not meant to be … it doesn't re-empower. One of the reasons why victim art is so popular is because of its unspoken presumption that victimization is natural … people have to suffer. That's why power likes this kind of art because although the gesture it seems to make is one of contention or dissidence, the inner structure of the situation is well … here is this painting hanging in a stupid gallery, where it will be seen by yuppies, bought by a bank, stored away in a vault and it will become a great investment potential for everyone except the artist who painted it … so it0s back to the reservation. So I think beyond the cycle of futility victim art finds itself prolonging we have

to look to a deeper dialectical level and find the positivity within that negativity but also a yet deeper negativity. I think it relates to the whole idea of the suppression and realization of art that the Situationists used to talk about, that is the suppression of art as a separate fetishistic category of art experts who are separated from the so-called ordinary people or everyday life and the realization of art as a creative force and power within every self -liberated individual on the level of everyday life. In other words, in a crude sort of way that every one should be an artist. That art should not be fetishized and the true revolutionary gesture therefore has nothing to do in this sense with the content of the art and this is where the victim artists go wrong. They want to depict victimization which in one sense, simply prolongs the act of victimization … it simply repeats it … reiterates it … keeps it alive in the aesthetic memory. What the Situationists would have said is that the whole economic structure of art itself has to be defused, to be attacked..It's the world of museums, galleries with fifty percent commissions and the world of the passive consumer mass in relation to the individual/creative genius. This kind of classical European fetishization of the artist is what has to be attacked/overcome. So the animus we feel on a level on a aesthetic and emotional level towards this needless reiteration of victimization and suffering is displaced and it should be replaced into a truly insurrectionary mode that would call for the end for the very structure of the art world and for the closing down of the reservation. The revolutionary project of art should be the re-emergence of the marvelous, the re-emergence of desire in the world of individual creation and the whole fetishized category of art itself should be severely called into question and subjected to revolutionary violence … that's the opinion of 1968 … I don't myself see that too many things have changed … the major change is that the art world itself has had to recuperate the most radical energies that

have come out of that world. I would press the critique farther.

JCB: I'm having trouble finding people to dialogue rationally on this topic if at all, so it will be hard to press the critique farther because of its taboo nature.

Hakim: That's the nature of the fetish, that's the pseudo-aura of the fetish at work. The social taint of this aura persists. It is absolutely true that America is trying to turn itself into a society of cops and victims.