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Art that causes pain

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by Kenneth Baker

Most critics, including me, spend much of their allotted space discussing the pleasures of art - of observation, of recognition, of making connections. But what about the pain?

I am thinking not of the nearly unendurable tedium of Matthew Barney's cinematic epics, for example, but of effects deliberately conceived and contrived to unnerve.

David Hammons' New York gallery show of a huge, empty space in total darkness, with only a tiny blue LED for each visitor, comes to mind. So does Alfredo Jaar's "Lament of the Images" (2002), in which, after reading three brief historical texts by David Levi Strauss concerning the whiting out of information, viewers rounded a corner to confront a wall of light whose intensity seemed tolerable at first, but before long drove one from the room.

For an example closer to home, recall the frigid room in which Olafur Eliasson displayed an ice-bound BMW during his 2007-08 retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

While a certain public will watch slasher movies with relish, visitors to art venues apparently come more often seeking aesthetic equivalents of consolation or, in today's mass-marketed museum realm, the feeling of plugging into cultural celebrity.

But for much of the 20th century, artists who styled themselves avant-garde, and even some who didn't, devised means to derange the expectations and sensibilities of observers in the name of a disillusioning modernity, of social revolution or just pure orneriness. But with the avant-garde behind us, as nearly everyone acknowledges it is, what excuses remain for artists contriving the shocks to the psyche and senses that we occasionally encounter in contemporary art?

Two fresh examples that I happened to experience in Pittsburgh last month linger vividly in memory. The more intense of the two, "Zee" (2008) by Austrian Kurt Hentschläger, defies reproduction. It occupies, through December, the Wood Street Galleries in downtown Pittsburgh, a project of the nonprofit Pittsburgh Cultural Trust.

Arriving from street level by elevator, the visitor to "Zee" enters a dimly lighted foyer with two doors in the wall opposite an attendant's desk. Visitors wearing pacemakers or known to have respiratory problems, epilepsy or migraines are discouraged from entering the piece, and wisely so. The drone of sound from within the installation muffles conversation even among people standing just outside it.

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Inside, all utterances drown in waves of pulsing, enveloping sound. Although I could hear other people shouting to one another inside “Zee,” I could not tell whether they succeeded in communicating.

The visitor to “Zee” enters through a narrow vestibule, brightly lighted and suffused with a thin, nearly odorless fog. Open the door to the main space and the fog confronts you as a permeable plenum. Once one enters it, the only sources of orientation are the feeling of the floor underfoot and a waist-level rope that, one is assured beforehand, circuits the space and eventually leads to the exit.

In a matter of seconds, the strobe light and drubbing sound that pervade the fog overwhelm all other sensations, and even memory, inducing an almost sickening sense of imprisonment in immediacy. Did Hentschläger have “the fog of war” in mind? It certainly seems a pertinent association.

The sole compensation for this immersion is hallucinations - or so they seemed to me - of faintly pulsing kaleidoscopic geometry, fugitive crystalline figures that seemed to come from behind one’s eyes.

What a relief when the door handle at the exit finally materializes just beyond the rope’s end.

The reward for this ordeal became apparent only when I returned to street level and daylight: Suddenly, everything took on an astonishing clarity and definition. My eyes recoiled from the strange mingling of overload and deprivation in “Zee” to experiencing ordinary vision as purified and miraculous, the doors of perception cleansed, as commended by William Blake.

Hentschläger’s piece, in other words, delivered literally on the hackneyed promise that art will refashion one’s way of seeing the world. The effect lasted only a few minutes, but it was as unforgettable as the ordeal that engendered it.

“Gravity of Light” (2008), a powerful installation by Doug and Mike Starn, relied on more conceptual justification for its sometimes painful intensity. Another event under the auspices of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, “Gravity of Light” occupied for three weeks a derelict industrial space known as the Pipe Building.

Here visitors had to put on safety glasses before entering the long, run-down vacant space. Deep shadows added to the difficulty of walking over a pitted brick and sand floor. A single light source - but what a light source - stood high at the far end of the space: a carbon arc lamp flickering, at its brightest, with the equivalent of 50,000 watts of electric light. It was as if a small star had somehow made its way indoors.

In the bays of the factory walls, the Starns hung seven of their very large composite photographs - the smallest measuring more than 12 by 8 feet - printed on friable-looking, but quite stable, gampi or Thai mulberry paper.

The largest image describes at colossal scale a statue of the blind eighth century Buddhist monk Ganjin. He personifies the immemorial metaphoric association of light with insight. Other images, representing earlier Starn projects, included moths, denuded trees and immensely magnified leaves decayed to a lacework of veins and stems.

These elements coalesced into a mute meditation on light, time, growth and decay. The carbon arc, painful even to glance at but fascinating in the purity, intensity and immediacy of the light it shed, acted as translator. It translated into physical sensations the pictures’ symbolism of our ambivalence toward growth and our own embeddedness in nature. {sbox}