

Suzanne McClelland: 36 x 24 x 36
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WHEN IS ART POLITICAL? SUZANNE MCCLELLAND'S CALL WITH INFORMATION

By: Thierry de Duve
2015

Let's say you heard the title of Suzanne McClelland's second solo show at Team Gallery, in February 2015, before you saw the show. "Call With Information" sounds uncannily ominous right away. What puts you on the defensive, ready to expect the worse, is not just the Orwellian innuendo, or the imperative mode per se; it's more something like the twist on the innocuous and familiar "Call for information," which you might read under a 1-800 number. "Call with information—or else!"

Now let's say you entered the show innocently, without prior knowledge of its title. The first thing you would see, facing you, is a wide, confrontational partition, papered from top to bottom with one, obsessively repeated, black and white poster (below). There are things on top of that wallpaper interfering with it—a very dark photo portrait and five works on paper, all black and white—but it's the posters that summon you. They reveal themselves so densely packed with text that they force you to neglect not only the works hanging on top of them but also the large paintings on the left and right walls that beckon in your peripheral vision. Taking in the posters from a distance, first you notice a partly illegible headline in a huge typeface at the top, then a number of dates in a somewhat smaller font, interspersed with a profusion of photos, statistical charts, newspaper clippings, handwritten notes, and finally, columns and blocks of text set in a hardly legible font size. The overall effect is no less ominous than the show's title: "Read the small print—or else!"

The small print and the disorderly design of the poster are rebarbative enough to make you want to turn around and seek solace in the paintings in the room. What stops you is that, amidst other visual disturbances, you caught in the corner of your eye an anomaly that had hindered smooth identification of the headline. The latter reads: SINCE OAKLAHOMA. The typo that slipped an A between the O and the K has been tentatively erased with white paint and then pasted over with what seems to be a press clipping broad enough to partially

obliterate the K and the L as well (below). Though your reading was slowed down a bit by the caesura so produced, in the end “Since Oklahoma” leaves you without a doubt as to the event the headline refers to. Indeed, should you read the poster, starting in the upper left corner, you would be reminded of the following:

At 9:02 a.m. on April 19, 1995, a 7000 pound truck bomb, constructed of ammonium nitrate fertilizer and nitromethane racing fuel and packed into 13 plastic barrels, ripped through the heart of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The explosion wrecked much of downtown Oklahoma City and killed 168 people, including 19 children in a day-care center. Another 500 were injured. Although many Americans initially suspected an attack by Middle-Eastern radicals, it quickly became clear that the mass murder had actually been carried out by domestic, right-wing terrorists.¹

Domestic terrorism, especially right wing, is something Americans would prefer to ignore. The name Timothy McVeigh didn't sell tabloids the way Osama bin Laden did. McClelland's confrontational wall of posters puts you in front of a dilemma almost as soon as you have entered the gallery: to read on or to walk away. Or—for there is a third option— to turn your attention to the paintings. There are four in the room, at first sight Abstract Expressionist in both size and handling of the paint. They don't quite offer relief from the anxiety caused by the intimation to remember Oklahoma and to read the small print on the posters; the paintings look pretty ominous, too. The large one on your left (p.196–97) throws you in the middle of an explosion, and the one on the right sucks you up in a tornado (p.192–93). But they are or look abstract and, as such, apparently beg to be viewed in reassuring, formalist terms. The posters, by contrast (and the photographs as well), are tokens of conceptual art—and current critical orthodoxy has decreed that conceptual art was, if not intrinsically political, at least sympathetic to being harnessed for political usage. In her formative years, McClelland was attentive to the work of Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, who had taken stock of the linguistic and photographic turns accomplished by the first generation of conceptual artists and brilliantly made them serve the cause of feminism. The posters bear traces of their influence. It is therefore all the more surprising to see them in the company of paintings. Indeed, the same critical orthodoxy that hails conceptual art for its criticality deems painting, especially if it borrows from the AbEx idiom, at best benignly apolitical and at worst downright reactionary. Suzanne McClelland is mixing genres, dangerously so. She deliberately pits the conceptual-political look of the posters and photos against the expressionist, subjectivist, romantic look of the paintings. What exactly does she expect from the clash?

She cannot expect any serious response from the serious viewer unless he or she does the effort of reading the small print on the posters. Should you do that, you would learn that no less than 112 murders, acts of sabotage, random shooting sprees, bomb attacks, and other expressions of racist violence, all qualified as hate crimes, were perpetrated between April 1995, the date of the Oklahoma City bombing, and November 2014, when the poster was made for McClelland's show. The perpetrators were antigovernment activists, militiamen, separatist Texans, anti-tax maniacs, “sovereign citizens” who believe police have no right to regulate road travel, conspiracy theorists of various creeds, Ku Klux Klan members, white supremacists under such banners as Forever Enduring, Always Ready (FEAR), brutal racist skinheads, and the inevitable militants of neo-Nazi groups with names such as Sons of Gestapo or the White Aryan Resistance. Most are in prison, some have done their time, many were killed or committed suicide during their action. The weapons ranged from sawed-off shotguns to C-4 plastic explosives, from Sarin nerve gas to trip-wired booby- traps, from GLOCK pistols with armor-piercing bullets to Sten Mark submachine guns, AK-47s, and silenced AR-15 assault rifles, not to mention an array of homemade, often pathetic contraptions: improvised flame throwers, pipe bombs, grenades packed into soda cans, missiles built from model rocket engines and propane canisters, and so on. The targets were IRS buildings, energy facilities, black and Jewish landmarks, Planned Parenthood offices and abortion clinics, gay bars, the King Fahad Mosque in Culver City, California, the State Capitol building in Olympia, Washington, the Mexican consulate in St. Paul, Minnesota, a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, an Oklahoma City synagogue called the Temple B'Nai Israel, or an Islamic center in Houston, Texas, called the Madrasah Islamiah. When the victims or intended victims were not police officers, sheriffs, or state troopers, they were overwhelmingly people of color: black immigrant workers from Cape Verde and Haiti; Mexicans in general; the AfricanAmerican crowd at a Martin Luther King Jr. Day parade; and, of course, Barack Obama before and after his election.

This and other chilling details you would have learned if you had read the small print on the posters. But gallery-goers don't usually read, especially if it's small print, and the posters, designed by Ninze Chen under the artist's supervision, were not really meant to be read—on the premises, that is.² They constitute an archive of sorts, the proof that Suzanne McClelland has done her homework, the source material she shares with her viewers the way the author of a dissertation shares with her readers the page of acknowledgments that prefaces it. For, in truth, the exhibition is not about the terrorist attacks meticulously listed on the posters. It is about domestic terrorists still at large.

The appellation “domestic terrorism” is a sub-rubric of the FBI’s “Most Wanted” category, under which the Bureau classifies nationals considered enemies of the state. When the artist consulted the FBI website for her project, there were seven “domestic terrorists” listed, five of them, surprisingly, female. All but one, a woman called Joanne Deborah Chesimard, who since then was moved to the “Most Wanted Terrorists” sub-rubric, are still currently on the list—from which one gathers that none has yet been captured.

Those seven subjects are the subject—the subject matter, but you might as well say the object—of McClelland’s “Call With Information” show. The four large, apparently abstract paintings in the front room of the gallery are in fact “portraits” of three of those subjects. (Each was given a horizontal and a slightly smaller, vertical canvas, so that the series comprises fourteen paintings, only four of which were shown at Team.) Chesimard’s two “portraits” are in the show, the vertical one under the title Domestic Terrorist—Shakur Reward \$2,000,000.00 (p.226) and the horizontal one entitled Domestic Terrorist: Shakur NCIC W220305367 (p.192–93). Assata Shakur is one of the many aliases under which Chesimard has been hiding since she escaped from prison in 1979. The letters NCIC stand for National Criminal Information Code, and W220305367 is Shakur’s matriculation number, referring to the kind of crimes she committed and other data.

Words and numbers matter a lot to Suzanne McClelland, and she uses them in and out of paintings in a very idiosyncratic, uncommunicative, almost ritualistic way. For example, in her first show at Team Gallery, in October 2013, she exhibited a group of canvases entitled “Ideal Proportions,” (p.24–59) which are “portraits” of famous body-builders executed by way of the various measurements—waist, chest, biceps, thigh, neck circumferences, and so on— which set the standards by which jurors assess the proportions, ideal or not, of the athletes in body-building contests. In one of them, the portrait of Arnold “The Body” (p.48), whose last name hardly needs mentioning, Californians will have recognized the likeness of their former governor—a purely conceptual likeness, however hardly identifiable as conceptual art, which Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger might approve for its feminist humor but in which they would be hard pressed to recognize their influence.

Painted in charcoal, polymer, and oil on linen, the larger of the two canvases dedicated to Shakur (p.192–93) feels more like landscape than portrait, a landscape with a very low horizon and an immense sky. A twister that seems to originate from an oval in the lower left part of the canvas and moves toward the right at high speed sets the whole composition in turbulent motion. One thinks of Leonardo’s drawings of storms (below left) and of Turner’s *Rain, Steam and Speed*. McClelland readily embraces those associations, convinced as she is that weather conditions are the most apt metaphors for feelings, sensations and states of mind. In the oval are inscribed—graffitied might be the right word if it existed—the letters NCIC and Shakur’s matriculation number. All around the oval, other half-decipherable words are drawn with the finger in the wet paint, while toward the upper right corner, in barely legible handwriting, the phrase “Scars and Marks” is scribbled—it was actually dripped in transparent medium (below right)—referring to a line on Shakur’s FBI Wanted poster that reads: “Scars and Marks: Chesimard has scars on her chest, abdomen, left shoulder, and left knee.”

None of this information can be garnered from looking at the painting, though. Or rather: some of it is there, plainly or less plainly visible, but you don’t know it counts as information unless you have worked your way from the painting back to the FBI poster that is its source. The words and numbers in the painting, though legible, are meaningless to you: they are purely formal devices. They might as well be squares and triangles, or blobs of paint, or gratuitous, Pollock-like arabesques. Or perhaps not. Once you summon Pollock as a relevant comparison to McClelland’s graffitied words and numbers, it should be the Pollock of *Male and Female* (1942), or of *Stenographic Figure* (1942), or of *Guardians of the Secret* (1943): a symbolist, esoteric Pollock rather than the purely abstract Pollock of the drip period. And once you start summoning artists with

whom McClelland's Shakur painting invites comparison, you are out in the wild, in a country where styles are jumbled and aesthetic affiliations are up for grabs. Proper names are prompted, certainly: Tàpies for the taped-off cross and the masonry in that part of the painting; Twombly for the scribbles; Polke for the swoop and the awkward mixture of media in the whirlpool region; Ryman for the scumbled white surface on the right. Individual works are prompted, too—I mentioned Leonardo's storm drawings—but "isms" and stylistic categories are not; they are too general to answer the call. And formal comparisons don't tell the whole story. Although they have little in common, formally, there is in my view conceptual—or should I say spiritual—affinity between McClelland's use of numbers in the Domestic Terrorist series and Rauschenberg's use of numbers in *The Lily White* (below), a rather incomprehensible painting from 1950. The fact that the young Rauschenberg, then a student at Black Mountain College, did that painting in the middle of a life-drawing class, with his back defiantly turned on the model, may not be foreign to the affinity I feel. One doesn't make portraits out of dehumanizing numbers without defiantly turning one's back on the models, especially if they are as fascinatingly repulsive as terrorists.

The second room of the exhibition will reveal more affinities with Rauschenberg. But you are not done yet with the paintings in the first room and their contrast to the wall of posters. You make up for the slight pang of guilt you felt for not having read the small print by granting Suzanne McClelland an aesthetic strategy more complex than it appeared at first. You struggle to reconcile her dry conceptualism in the posters with the sumptuous contempt for readability that the paintings exhibit. For you must deal with a contradiction: there is a wall of small print containing too much information to absorb in a gallery visit, or even in several; and there are four canvases playing with words and numbers that don't bother to inform the viewer at all. On the one hand, a harsh political documentary on domestic terrorism; and on the other, a fantasy with merely nominal references to the real world where terrorists operate. And you begin to suspect that the AbEx look of the canvases is deceiving. Isn't Abstract Expressionism supposed to be all about the artist's interiority, a vehicle for his (rarely her) existential angst, a narcissistic demand for recognition thrown at the world? You have read enough of the posters by now to realize that this is not what the show is about. Could it be that the AbEx look of McClelland's paintings is a disguise, a foil, an alibi? Is she not quoting AbEx as a generic style the better to subvert and criticize it, to undermine it with irony? Are the paintings after all not as conceptual and political as the posters, but in a tortuous way, in that their criticality is turned against themselves, against the medium of painting, and against the myth of the painter's sovereign subjectivity?

You soon realize you'd be on the wrong track if you followed that hunch. There is not a trace of irony in the paintings, not a hint of "second-degree" art making, none of that distancing thanks to which clever painters today have their painterly cake and eat it critically too. The canvases are perhaps not Abstract Expressionist, if the word "expressionism" should be reserved for the public projection of a private, navel-gazing subjectivity, but they are definitely expressive, and how! Straightforwardly, unapologetically expressive. And what they express is Suzanne McClelland's tormented feelings and existential angst. Only that angst and those feelings are not endogenous and self-centered: the canvases are much too extraverted and centrifugal to allow such a reading. McClelland's tormented feelings come from elsewhere and are directed elsewhere. What's more, they are systematically mediated by language. Nothing demonstrates better that her expressionism is conceptual and her conceptualism expressive than the "Internal Sensation" series (p.60–71) included in her first show at Team, together with the "Ideal Proportion" series. Whereas (according to the cliché) AbEx painters project onto the canvas proprioceptive sensations in a supposedly raw, prelinguistic state, McClelland writes on the canvas the words used to express those sensations, imbued with them. So are words such as "yearn" or "rub" calligrams that literally portray the concepts of yearning or rubbing (p. 70–71).

Contrary to what happens in the "Internal Sensation" series, the feelings and sensations expressed in the Domestic Terrorist series are not internal in the sense of endogenous. They bear the imprint of external causes. There is panic and fear in *Domestic Terrorist: Shakur* NCIC W220305367 (p.192–93), and there is revolt and anger in *Domestic Terrorist: Kerkow* NCIC W333088341 (p.196–97), a painting where the matriculation number of Catherine Marie Kerkow literally screams at you. And there is speed in both—speed standing for haste and urgency. The mood varies tremendously from one painting to the next in the series, but on the whole it is somber even when the canvas is not, broody, pessimistic, and inhabited by an exacerbated sense of danger and emergency. McClelland's angst has not been poured on the canvas to call attention to itself or to the subject who experienced it. The subjects of the paintings are the seven domestic terrorists on

the run. You still know nothing about them—so far the words and numbers are cryptic—and you don't know either what exactly caused McClelland's angst. Is it the fugitives, is it terrorism in general, or is it the terror of having to live in a society so anxious about terrorism that security trumps liberty everywhere?

"Call With Information" is a demanding exhibition. First it put the serious viewer in front of the dilemma of whether to read the posters or to focus on the paintings. Then it prompted questions as to the conceptual or the expressive nature of the artist's practice. In the process it made you reflect critically on the current orthodoxy that has created such an opposition by pitting the good conceptualists, intellectually and politically conscious, against the bad expressionists, romantic, instinctive, and ignorant of the outer world. As if the outer world had not entered paintings such as de Kooning's *Gotham News*; as if Motherwell had never painted *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*; as if Existentialism and Abstract Expressionism had not been responses to politically dark times; and as if our own times were so rosy that the revival of Existentialism and Abstract Expressionism should be called nostalgic and regressive in the face of post-conceptual practices. You are still pondering on all this when you notice that you have not yet addressed the photos and the works on paper affixed to the wall of posters. Will they furnish the mediating ground allowing you to solve the dilemmas and contradictions you have encountered so far?

Not quite, but they are so to speak the trailer to the second room. And in that room, behind the partition, things do indeed come together (p.96–187). At first sight, however, they do anything but. The walls are sheer chaos. Why these clusters of overlapping images pinned to the wall as if on a bulletin board? And why that little forlorn image alone in the middle of a wide expanse of unoccupied wall space? What unifies the room in the strangest of ways, because it catches your eye and hits you in the face, is the shrill pink color of a number of elements in that chaos. It is as if Warhol had visited Schwitters's *Merzbau* and spattered it with *Day-Glo*. Upon closer inspection, that pink proves to be played out on a gamut of nuances that goes from orange-reddish to pink-bluish, with fluorescent pigment thrown in only at the bluish end of the spectrum to produce what I call *rose froid*, cool or cold pink. It's a color as antagonistic to the *AbEx* idiom as imaginable, the color of nylon socks and underwear sold at a discount on open-air markets in the third-world, the cheapest, most unromantic color you can get. But when that pink (below) blends with warmer hues of rose, as it does in some of the images in the room, it carries the taste of raspberries and the scents of cardamom and saffron, and the lushness of Indian saris, and memories of the walls of Jaipur, the pink city of Rajasthan. That luscious pink is sheer aesthetic pleasure, and it's not even spoiled when you discover that it is background to the FBI Wanted posters that would have put a face on the four, oh! so abstract portraits in the first room if only the artist had not deliberately left her viewers clueless.

The second room is about the clues to the first. I say "about" the clues because it alludes to them in a whimsical, roundabout fashion; it doesn't deliver them straightaway, in the documentary manner of the posters. Suzanne McClelland must have had fun mixing them, practicing cut-ups à la Brion Gysin on the FBI posters, answering the rubric "Race" with "Hazel," (p.104–05) or the rubric "eye color" with "lesbian Queens." Actually, she subcontracted the cut-ups to her poet sister, Heather McClelland. Her fun and pleasure—which are palpable in this room—are rooted in collaboration, in particular with women accomplices from her family or from Dieu Donné, the non-profit institution dedicated to the collaborative creation of hand papermaking, where she produced the works in this room with the help of Amy Jacobs.³ Fun and sheer aesthetic pleasure don't for all that forbid disturbing pieces of information to come across if you pay close attention. One of the prints on the back wall reproduces a newspaper headline containing the phrase, "When plane hits tower" (p.128). It predates 9/11 by many years. Does that bad omen spoil the sensuous mix of pinks in the lower part of the composition? No. Does it put the pressure on you, enjoining you not to shut your eyes on the violence of the world in order to preserve the comfort of your aesthetic experience? Yes. Does it tell you how to resolve the contradiction? No. If you want to have your painterly cake and eat it critically too, that's up to you, the artist is not going to make things easier for you. But she tells you of her mood, her feelings, her various states of mind in the face of domestic terrorism. What I think this room puts forward is the dynamic antidote to the dark, brooding mood of the paintings in the first room. As much as pessimism and angst oozed from those, panic mixed with an almost manic elation and proactive energy emanates from the wall pieces in the second room. In homage to Rauschenberg's combine paintings, I'd like to call them "combine collages" or "combine assemblages." They are technically so diverse that they defy description. Let's just say that they involve a frenzy of techniques for making paper from cotton rags, linen cloth, or recycled paper pulp, in thicknesses

ranging from cigarette paper to pulpy crepes, and various printing techniques ranging from photocopy to silkscreen, not to mention the lackadaisical dropping of a cut-out text into the pulp before it is put under a press and assumes its quasi random shape once and for all. Individual items comprise photocopied or dye-transferred surveillance snapshots of people running, abstract sheets of pink brushstrokes, facsimiles of the FBI Wanted posters on very thin light blue paper, screens of nylon wire mesh, helter-skelter collages from the material found on the FBI website, and more. They are displayed on the walls of the room in seven explosive clusters, so that all seven domestic terrorists the FBI is chasing are given their dues. Each cluster spreads on the wall the content of one portfolio preserved in a huge cardboard folder when stored away, and each portfolio is dedicated to one of the seven domestic terrorists. Fullfledged portraits, I wouldn't say, but a differentiated ambiguous tribute, yes, perhaps. Shall I call it repulsive-attractive?

Although McClelland swears she didn't choose her favorite domestic terrorists—they were wanted by the FBI, not by her—she confesses how flabbergasted and perhaps secretly happy she was to discover that the bulk of the domestic terrorists still at large were ultra- leftist in persuasion, whereas the ones listed on her poster were all ultra-rightist. Catherine Marie Kerkow was a Black Panther who hijacked a plane and got political asylum in Algeria. Chesimard alias Shakur was a member of the Black Liberation Army who escaped from prison and eventually settled in Cuba. Donna Joan Borup was an anti-apartheid militant and the member of a Marxist-Leninist group known as the May 19th Communist Organization, “which advocated communism and the violent overthrow of the United States government” (as her FBI Wanted poster puts it). Elizabeth Anna Duke belonged to the same organization. Arrested in May 1985 for her alleged participation in this group, she was released on bail and fled; she has been a fugitive since October 1985. The case of Josephine Sunshine Overaker is more ambiguous, as is that of Joseph Mahmoud Dibee: both allegedly belong to the Earth Liberation Front, or to the Animal Liberation Front, causes that are often defended with left-wing rhetoric while rooted in right-wing, fundamentalist, deep ecology. As for the motivations of Leo Frederick Burt, they are politically unfathomable: the FBI doesn't know why he blew up a building on the campus of the University of Wisconsin in 1970. And that is another, not the least intriguing, feature of most of the seven domestic terrorists who are McClelland's subjects: their crimes go back as far as the seventies, and their convictions—the artists calls them “beliefs bigger than themselves”—reach even further back, to the revolutionary fever of the sixties. Why the FBI reserves the appellation “domestic terrorists” to them whereas there must be far more criminals in the ultra-rightist camp who are still on the loose is one of the unanswered questions that propelled Suzanne McClelland to research those seven lost souls and to build them a cubist-looking cenotaph perhaps fraught with her secret, ambivalent sympathies. However unpardonable their acts, they were, the artist says, “out there to rescue something.”

Coda

On November 6, 2015, at REDCAT in Los Angeles, I read the above text at a conference organized around the question, “When is art political?”⁴ I ended my talk with some reflections on that question, in which I stated that the assumption, largely shared by the assembly, that political art meant politically progressive art should not go unexamined if we wanted the question “when is art political?” to have transhistorical validity, but that I'd go along with that assumption provided its bias was clearly affirmed. There are, I believe, good reasons to maintain that when art deserves to be called political, in a normative sense that doesn't apply, say, to Rigaud's portrait of Louis XIV or to Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will, it can only be an art that carries aspirations to emancipation, freedom, equality, and justice. Let that rest assured. By raising the “when” question, the organizers were smart enough to disqualify the theory—actually quite typical of the sixties and seventies—that art is always political, especially when it claims not to be. That belief was part of the “everything is political” motto that had brought politics into the classroom and the bedroom and that treated every protest of innocence as a disavowal. It had its time and its time is over. Next, there was the issue of generality: when is art—art in general—political? I said that I found myself unable to answer such a question because, in art, there is no generality that doesn't rest on the singularity of aesthetic experience, and no aesthetic experience except of singular works of art. Accordingly, rather than “when is art political?”, I addressed the question, “when is Suzanne McClelland's art political?”

My answer—which was “not always”—implied a slight dissatisfaction with the way the question of the conference was phrased. In the brief statement printed on its folder, the organizers had announced their

intention of “leaving the quest for an essence of political art aside in order to inquire instead into the ever-changing conditions that make art political.” Clear enough: they wanted the question “when is art political?” to replace the question “what is political art?” I was struck by the resemblance between this move and that of Nelson Goodman, who famously replaced the question “what is art?” with the question “when is art?”⁵ One of Goodman’s motivations was that the ontological question had apparently been disqualified by works of art such as Duchamp’s readymades: a bottle-rack is not always art; it functions as a bottle-rack when it dries bottles in the wine cellar, and it functions as art when it is presented as such in a museum. It didn’t seem to me that this time-dependent (or space-dependent) change of function applied to Suzanne McClelland’s works. None of them toggles between political and non-political art according to circumstances. They are not time- or space-dependent but rather ideology-dependent. The “Ideal Proportions” series of paintings is political art only if you have decided a priori that replacing the figurative likeness of someone with a numerical profile is inherently political, either because it refuses the idealization of athletic bodies à la Leni Riefenstahl or because it makes fun of a former governor of California whose politics you abhor. And the “Internal Sensations” series is definitely not political unless you are convinced a priori that imprinting the linguistic turn of conceptual art on Abstract Expressionism and/or criticizing the disembodied abstractness of conceptual art by making words expressive are intrinsically political gestures. Convictions like these are ideological postulates to me. I think it makes a lot more sense—pace Goodman—to revert from the “when” question to the “what” question. “Call With Information” is a body of work that makes an unambiguous claim to the status of political art whereas “Internal Sensations” makes no such claim.

I could adduce many arguments in favor of my thesis. They all boil down to stressing the adequacy of the overtly political subject matter of the “Call With Information” show with its form, its mode of presentation, its aesthetic embodiment, and its address to the viewer. The way the documentary style of the posters, the expressivity of the paintings and works on paper, and the playful but maniacal abruptness of the “combine collages” interact and clash against each other seems to me an adequate expression of the mixed feelings and critical reflections which domestic terrorism from left and right has inspired in Suzanne McClelland. Nothing in that show indicates that she might condone terrorism, but nothing betrays moralizing judgment either, not even on the racist hate crimes listed on the posters. Is that a problem, given the identification of political art with politically progressive art? I already hear voices clamoring that she aestheticized the politics of terrorists. Implied by that old Benjaminian saw is that she made terrorism from left or right palatable by treating it as the subject matter of aesthetic decisions. No doubt she made aesthetic decisions; no doubt they were about a repulsive subject matter. She did what Goya did in *El Tres de Mayo* or Picasso in *Guernica*. Whether she has made that repulsive subject matter palatable is for each viewer to decide. For me, she has not.

I concluded my remarks by proposing a theoretical distinction that I think answers the question, “when is art political?” in a way that doesn’t whisk away the ontological question, “what is political art?” It is the distinction between “art as art” and “art in the name of art.” It is farfetched and in my view wrong but not totally absurd to say that the various photos, silkscreens, sheets of handmade paper and cut-ups from the FBI Wanted posters that compose the portrait of one domestic terrorist function as art when they are displayed on the walls of the Team Gallery and cease to function as art when they are stored in their portfolio box. And it is less farfetched and absurd, and perhaps not wrong at all, to say that the posters function as sheer political information when you read the small print and as art when you take in from a distance their obsessive repetition on the wall that’s facing you as you enter the gallery. But I am not satisfied with such answers. To make a comparison that I think is relevant, Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson* doesn’t cease to be art when it is in storage, or when it is shown as a document in a didactic exhibition on the history of surgery. What happens is that, in the art museum, it is kept as art and shown both as art and in the name of art—that is, for the sake of aesthetic comparability with other art—and that in the exhibition on the history of surgery, it is still shown as art but in the name of didactic, documentary enlightenment. The body of work McClelland titled “Call With Information” was shown at Team Gallery as art and in the name of art. It was not shown in the name of political enlightenment (unless you lend McClelland the condescending intention of raising your political awareness, which is insulting both to her and to yourself). I think political art is an apposite denomination for that body of work, but I don’t in the least think the work was shown in the name of politics. Political art shown in the name of politics is propaganda. There have been great works in that vein—witness John Heartfield—but that’s simply not what McClelland is doing. The counterevidence is provided by the fate of a work that inspired her for “Call With Information”: Andy Warhol’s *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* (opposite). Commissioned for the New York State

pavilion at the 1964 World Fair in order to be installed outdoors, on the circular wall of the pavilion, it was censored and painted over with a silver wash when Governor Nelson Rockefeller expressed his concern that the images—mostly depicting men of Italian descent—would be insulting to an important segment of his electorate. Whether Warhol's Most Wanted Men was political art is debatable. The pun on "Wanted" makes the work political from the point of view of queer theory but by the same token makes it apolitical with regard to, say, a critique of the penitentiary system. But the work, which was commissioned in the name of cultural propaganda, was clearly made and shown as art, and was "unshown" in the name of politics as usual, i.e., for the sake of electoral calculation. It never stopped being art: Rockefeller didn't dispute that it was art; he wasn't even concerned with its possible political content; he censured it in the name of his immediate political concerns. Warhol's Most Wanted Men is, I believe, exemplary in that it shows where the "when" question is relevant: in the distinction to be made between art shown in the name of art and art shown in the name of something else.

With these remarks I ended my talk at REDCAT on November 6, 2015. And then events caught up with me and made me reconsider the "when" question. Exactly a week later, on November 13, carnage struck Paris. 130 people were killed in six coordinated terrorist attacks on restaurants, cafés, the national soccer stadium, and the Bataclan concert hall. The attacks were claimed by Daesh, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, also called ISIS or ISIL. As I am writing in the immediate aftermath of this tragedy, it suddenly dawns on me that Suzanne McClelland opened her "Call With Information" show a month and a half after the attacks on Charlie Hebdo, and that in both Parisian attacks domestic terrorists were involved. All of a sudden, the notion of "domestic terrorism" has ceased to be an obsession of the FBI or a monopoly of the United States. It has also been snatched away from the traditional left-right polarization of our Western political life in order to designate individuals holding passports from European democracies who see themselves as soldiers in a war against all democracies. Soldiers—or perhaps more to the point, martyrs. For theirs is a religious war, a holy war, a war they claim to justify by way of literal faithfulness to the scriptures and at times frightfully elaborate theological sophistry. What the caliphate in Syria and Iraq has reawakened is an archaic notion of the politico-theological we Westerners (turning a blind eye on Israel) thought had been definitively superseded by our enlightened secularism. I now realize how scarily pertinent the organizers of the conference at REDCAT had been when they moved away from the ontological question on political art "in order to inquire instead into the ever-changing conditions that make art political." And I hear in "Call With Information" a response to such conditions, an unintended wake-up call of the kind produced by what Walter Benjamin termed a dialectical image:

It's not that the past casts its light on the present or the present its light on the past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, an image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal one, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: it is not temporal but in the nature of an image.⁶

The Paris attacks of both January and November—indeed the November repetition of the January attack on a more tragic and randomly universalizing scale—have revealed "Call With Information" as a dialectical image in Benjamin's sense: a figurative constellation capable of "unleashing the enormous forces that remained prisoner of the 'once upon a time' of classical historiography."⁷ The Oklahoma City bombing happened twenty years ago, and Timothy McVeigh has paid for his crime with his life. The Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army recede even further, to a bygone "once upon a time" of romantic revolutionary delusion that has since avowed its murderous portent and gathered a lot of dust. Why would an artist working in 2015 memorialize such stale examples of terrorist mayhem? I'm sure there were viewers of "Call With Information" who deemed the show pointless or fueled by dubious nostalgia for the days when being politicized meant holding that a righteous end justified the means, no matter how gruesome. Those were also the days when politicizing art seemed the correct response to aestheticizing politics. I called that response an old Benjaminian saw, and I repeat that I don't hear Suzanne McClelland singing it. Nor do I see her memorializing anything: "Call With Information" is a memorial neither to right wing, McVeigh-style, nor to left wing, Black Panthers-style terrorism. Dialectical images are not memorials. But the question is posed of what exactly "Call With

Information” is a dialectical image of. What past does the exhibition telescope with the now? What enormous historical forces does it show as having been unleashed?

However wicked the motivation of their acts and deranged their idea of salvation, all terrorists want to save the world. Even McVeigh. And certainly the Black Panthers. It is not only the seven lost souls for whom McClelland has ambivalent sympathy who are “out there to rescue something.” So are the jihadists of the Paris attacks, if only to their own eyes. The constellation that lights up in “Call With Information” is the image of redemption that terrorism carries with itself. It is that image rendered dialectical. “Dialectical,” for Benjamin, means that the promise of redemption has shown its horror and that the horror still shows a glimpse of the promise. To someone alerted to the theological underpinnings of Benjamin’s dialectics, however, a dialectical image of redemption opens a strangely self-referential abyss. It is as if the forces it has unleashed had turned on themselves to make the very notion of the dialectical image implode. Out of the resulting black hole radiates the dark energy of the three monotheisms clashing with one another. Both Judaism and Islam are iconophobic; Christianity is the religion of the Image.⁸ Benjamin was indulging in wishful thinking when he said politics displaced religion as the pertinent referential plane for art. When is art political? His answer was: when it dismisses religion: no more aura, no more cult value.⁹ As if to compensate, he assigned politics a Messianic mission that restored the dominance of religion over both politics and art with a vengeance. Did he not write that theology was the dwarf inside the mechanical chess player named historical materialism?¹⁰ He meant Hebraic theology, for which it is essential that the piled-up catastrophes of history testify to the necessity of confiding in a Messiah whose arrival is perpetually postponed. To what extent was he conscious that with the notion of dialectical image he was invoking Christian theology instead? I leave that question to scholars of Benjamin. But I shiver at the thought of the three monotheisms vying for the definitive hold on the concept of redemption. And I can’t help but think that Suzanne McClelland—probably in spite of herself—has pinpointed precisely that rivalry in her “Call With Information” show. Nothing reassuring, I’d say: the ominous “or else” has set the tone. May I find solace in a pun? Perhaps it is in focusing on terrorists at large—terrorists on the run—that McClelland was able to locate the politico-theological nexus of terrorism at large—terrorism in general.

- 1 The Southern Poverty Law Center based in Montgomery, Alabama, was McClelland's source for the research on the poster. The artist wishes to thank Mark Potok, senior fellow at the Center, who very kindly answered all her queries.
- 2 Initially, McClelland had the intention of making a stack of posters available to the public as take-aways, so that people could read the small print at home. It was a conscious homage to Felix Gonzales-Torres, who had initiated that practice. Since Oklahoma was even directly modeled on "Untitled" (Death By Gun), 1990, a poster offered in endless copies, of which it borrowed the dimensions (33 x 45").
- 3 Dieu Donne is a non-profit cultural institution dedicated to serving established and emerging artists through the collaborative creation of contemporary art using the process of hand papermaking. It is located at 315, W. 36th Street, New York, NY 10018. See <http://www.dieudonne.org>
- 4 The conference was organized by Arne De Boever, director of the "Aesthetics and Politics" program of the School of Critical Studies at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), and Michael Kelly, editor of the Oxford University Press Encyclopedia of Aesthetics. REDCAT is a theater belonging to CalArts and located in downtown Los Angeles.
- 5 Nelson Goodman, "When is Art ?", in *Ways of Worldmaking* (Cambridge, MA : Hacker, 1978).
- 6 Walter Benjamin, "Awakening," *The Arcades Project*, N3, 1. I quote and translate from the French edition, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle, Le livre des passages* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989), 479-480.
- 7 *Ibid.*, N3, 4, 480.
- 8 The theology of the incarnation presents Christ as the Image of his Father. Christianity has made the invisible God of Judaism visible, iconic. There have been iconoclastic episodes in the history of Christianity, most notably during the Byzantine Bilderstreit of the 8th and 9th centuries and the rise of Lutheran and Calvinist Protestantism. To those crises, both the Greek-Orthodox and the Catholic Church reacted with strong iconophilic campaigns: the cult of icons in Byzantium, and the baroque art of the Counter-reformation.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *W. Benjamin, Illuminations* (New York, Schocken, 1969).
- 10 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *ibid.*, 253.