

The Seattle Stuckists vs. The Pigs On Parade: The Whole Story

On Saturday, May 26th, the Seattle Stuckists (J. Puma, Z.F. Lively, Amanda Perrin, and myself, Brett Hamil) gathered to protest the kick-off of the Pigs On Parade event here in the Emerald City. For those who are unfamiliar, this is the latest in a plague of "Animals On Parade" events which will or have already occurred in about three dozen cities this summer alone (including London [cows] and Lexington, Kentucky [horses]).

The basic setup is this: artists make proposals to decorate large, pre-fab, fiberglass animals, which are then selected by corporate sponsors who pay thousands of dollars to have their name and logo included in all the various promotional materials (billboards, bus ads, banners, press releases, etc.) Corporate sponsors also have the option to design their own pigs. Either way, the bylaws of basically all the Animals on Parade events restrict any work of a "political, religious, or sexual" nature, and in addition to being chosen by a sponsor, the designs must be approved by the fundraising group as well as by various civic and commercial organizations that are attached, lamprey-like, to the event.

The Seattle Stuckists began their planning for the event about a month in advance. At first, I was unsure of my level of commitment to the protest, not wanting to appear as a "spoilsport" or cranky cultural elitist. However, once I familiarized myself with the facts, I was galvanized into action. The Animals on Parade phenomenon represents an insidious trend in corporate art-vertising. It appeals to the lowest public tastes by providing a kitschy, totally predigested and inoffensive McArt for the masses, while giving business interests a way to stamp their brand on a massive civic endeavour, putting a smiley face to their stranglehold on the downtown heart of a city.

Here in Seattle, it is illegal to post fliers on telephone poles (deemed a "visual nuisance"), yet it is perfectly okay to fill the downtown area with 200 gaudy fiberglass pigs. Here, it is illegal to sit on the sidewalk, and a bum resting his dogies can be whisked away by the cops in mere minutes, yet it is fine to leave tacky pigs sitting out on the sidewalks for four months.

A visit to the event's website (www.pigsonparade.com) revealed from the opening page an unmistakable corporate presence, with Starbucks and AT&T logos abounding. Indeed, there was far more information of a fiscal nature on the site than anything else. After researching the event's effects and the response from other afflicted cities, my resolve was steeled: I would, indeed, be there at the grand Pig Parade, with a sign covered in bacon. I would proclaim to all assembled, "ART-VERTISING IS BAD FOR THE SOUL."

Here was an event perfectly suited for Stuckist dialogue: the underdog voice of sincerity and authenticity rising up against a sea of PR and empty aesthetics. As much of a no-brainer as, say, rising up against pickled sheep and unmade beds, but with a slightly different emphasis. Here, instead of standing up against vapid and sensationalistic postmodernism, we were

standing up against the "palatable" blending of art and advertising. The results, in my opinion, are the same: to voice an opposition to a cultural milieu that has come to mirror the hegemonic consumerist tyranny that good art is supposed to rail against.

In New York city, when they had their cow parade, the PETA-sponsored cow was rejected because it was decorated with butcher's marks intended to comment upon the hypocrisy of parading an animal that is inhumanely slaughtered and consumed by the millions. They took their case to the State Supreme court and lost. David Lynch, famed director/renaissance man, also had his cow rejected, on the grounds that it was too gruesome and unpalatable. In Chicago, outsider artist Ed Paschke decorated his \$11,000 cow with gang symbols and was ordered to remove it from public view by the office of Cultural Affairs, who later relented and allowed it to be displayed behind thick glass and watched over by museum docents.

The point of the parade, of course, is to raise millions of dollars in civic funds. When Chicago (copying Zurich, the originator of the event) reported revenue of \$200 million dollars, it was only a matter of time before cities across the world would follow suit, hungry for the big bucks. It's interesting to note that London's cow parade has been slapped with a lawsuit by Cow Parade Holdings in Zurich, the original copyright holders, for stealing their idea. The London parade is boasting the participation of YBA Damien Hirst, who will presumably lend "artistic credibility" to the event. It's strange that London would choose cows in the midst of a hoof-and-mouth disease outbreak, along with mad cow disease. Likewise Lexington, Kentucky, who are parading horses while at the same time grappling with a mysterious horse-killing infection whose cause is still unknown.

Here in Seattle, they sidestepped the copyright issue by choosing pigs. The fundraiser was going to benefit the Pike Place Market Foundation, who already owns the copyright on the pig. The parade pigs were designed by the artist of the original "piggybank" sculpture that sits at the entrance to the Market, right in front of the famed fish-throwers. The artist made two versions of the pig: standing and sitting. Both are made of fiberglass and average 5 and a half feet long and two inches wide (about the same average size of our city's homeless and disenfranchised, who are not allowed to sit on the sidewalks.)

A few days before the event, our crack media specialist J. Puma, sent out a press release to all the local media, as well as to gallery owners and other interested parties. The release was modeled on an anti-Pigs rant that I wrote, which is slated to be printed in an independent local free weekly, the Tablet, whose editors I found to be highly supportive of our ideas.

On the morning of the Parade, we awoke early to put the finishing touches on our signs and watch the morning news broadcast. We were surprised to hear this on KING 5 News:

Newsdrone A: "Well, the Pigs On Parade event kicks off today. A group called the Seattle Stuckists plan to protest the event, though we're not sure why."
(glib chuckle)

Newsdrone B: "Well it sure won't be because of this great weather we're having, heh heh. Over to you, Bob."

(It's interesting that the newsdrones expressed ignorance as to the reasons for our protest, when we sent them a press release that precisely outlined them. Not exactly rigorous journalism.)

Another news channel was showing man-on-the-street interviews, and we were encouraged to learn that for every mindless housewife who said, "This is such a fun event!" there was someone who found it ridiculous. One normal-looking businessman type said, "When I look at them all I think is 'Starbucks' or 'Nordstrom's,' that's what it seems to be all about--getting company names out there."

Our spirits buoyed, we piled into Amanda's car to head downtown. J. Puma had a sign that said "STOP CORPORATE ART" on one side and "PIGS=TACKY PIGS=LAME" on the other. My sign said "TACKY AND LAME EVENT" (stapled with bacon, of course) and "ART-VERTISING IS BAD FOR THE SOUL." Z.F. Lively was to be our camera man, so he wore a sign hanging from his belt that said "END ART-VERTISING!" We also had smaller signs that bore the Seattle Stuckist screed, and we came armed with a pile of fliers containing the Pigs rant that came with a sticker meant for the pigs that said "Please Remove--By order of the Aesthetic Counseling Center."

Traffic was gridlocked as we got closer to the event, so Amanda dropped us off on the sidewalk and planned to rendezvous later, in front of the reviewing stand. Almost immediately we began receiving both dirty looks and shouts of solidarity as we pressed through the crowd. Below is a list of the most commonly heard responses:

"They're not for real--it's just a joke."

"Find a real cause to protest!"

"You have too much time on your hands!" (to which I replied, "No, I took off work to be here today.")

"We're just here to have fun!" (to which I replied, "So are we!")

"You're pissing a lot of people off!"

"You guys are uglier than the pigs!" (from a surly drunk)

"I've always thought that 'art' was three-quarters of 'fart' anyways." (probably the most thoughtful commentary of all)

One of the best responses was from a portly black police officer stationed on the parade route, who pointed up at my "TACKY AND LAME" sign and said, "Now that's I sign I can agree with!" in amused complicity.

There was actually a great level of dialogue going on between we four protesters and attendees of the parade. We talked to several different artists who had designed pigs that were selected. I had expected the artists to be offended by our presence, but instead they seemed to be copacetic to our cause. They agreed that the event is bad for artists and for the art scene, and freely admitted that it was merely a cheesy way to make \$1500 and pay their bills. One artist immediately approached us, handed me his card, and smiling, said "Put me on your mailing list, man." Another artist was from a watercolor society who had communally designed a pig, and after I explained our reasons, she gave me her encouragement, and assured me that any proceeds their society made would be put into a scholarship for artists. Another artist, who obviously had some ego-energy invested in the event, wanted to make sure that we had looked at the different decorated pigs and said "Are you saying my pig is tacky and lame?" I assured him that we were not protesting against the artists or their work, but rather against the unacceptable way in which they are made to kowtow to corporate interests. Wouldn't a giant open-air art fair downtown be a much more palatable way to get their work to the public and raise money for a good cause?

The funds raised by the Pigs On Parade (once you subtract a massive PR budget, and things like the \$250-a-gallon shellack used to protect the pigs from weather and vandalism) are ostensibly to go to the Pike Place Market Foundation, which subsidizes low-rent housing. This was the main point of pro-Pigs people; it's for a good cause, therefore you have no right to protest it. However, most of them backed off when informed that, first of all, the Pike Foundation is nowhere near penniless, they are a thriving charity with ample coffers. Pike Place Market is the eighth-most-popular tourist attraction on the West Coast. And there's also the fact that Washington is one of the top 5 wealthiest states in the country. There are plenty of other ways to help low-income people without turning downtown into a corporate advertising nightmare. Add in the fact that no public input was solicited or even considered in the planning of the event, and you've got one whole heap of bullshit.

Indeed, the corporate presence was stifling. Logos everywhere, official merchandise booths, etc. If you can believe it, there were Starbucks employees wearing pig snouts and carrying tanks of coffee on their backs, wending through the crowd and handing out free shots of crappy java. Every time a pig was announced from the reviewing stand, the name of its corporate sponsor was noticeably more audible than the name of the artist.

We finally met up with Amanda after our second promenade around the parade route. She had been held up in traffic for the first half of the parade. Originally, Amanda hadn't planned on carrying a sign ("I'm not as obnoxious

as you guys," she said.) She was going to hand out fliers to interested people. But after trekking all the way through the crowd to find us in front of the reviewing stand, she was fired up and pissed off at all the corporate sloganeering and kitschy crap she saw, and she asked us to let her have one of our signs, which she bore high and proud. (Note to other protesters: a pretty girl in your group can only help.)

Somewhere in there we were photographed and interviewed by reporters from the Stranger, the city's most popular pseudo-alternative weekly. The reporter asked Z.F. to stop filming her because, she said, "I'm already taking enough shit for writing this article." Many, many other people photographed us with our signs, whether because they agreed with us or possibly because in Seattle, site of the WTO "riots", protesters are ubiquitous to the point of becoming a tourist attraction. One group of elderly tourists from Salt Lake City even asked if they could pose with my sign, and of course I let them. The said, "We're gonna put this in our newspaper back home!" One older guy asked, "What's that stuck to the sign?" When I told him it was bacon, he laughed uproariously.

Almost every single person who looked to be under 30 gave us the thumbs up. Many folks thanked us sincerely for saying exactly what they had been thinking, and doing it publicly and unabashedly. Schoolteachers, homeless kids, old hippies, pierced-and-tattooed alternative lifestylers, art fans, at least half of everyone we encountered was behind what we were doing. Most people who strongly disagreed seemed to have some sort of vested interest in the event. One ignorant soul was heard to say as we passed, "Protesting art, that's what's lame!"

The most potentially scary moment came when a man wearing an event staff (neon green) t-shirt came up to me, got about 5 inches from my face, and said "Take that sign down or I'll tear it down." I stood my ground and said, "This is America, man, you have no legal basis for telling me to take my sign down. I'm expressing a dissenting opinion. I wouldn't do anything stupid if I were you--we're videotaping this." I pointed to Z.F. with the camcorder. He then took off his staff shirt, I guess so that he wouldn't get in trouble, and continued to harangue me with questions like, "You know what this event is for? It's good for the community. Do you know anything about how the world works?" He then turned to Jeremy and began haranguing him. Jeremy answered all of his questions with remarkable aplomb, holding back from laughing in the guy's reddened face, and, in the end, the guy backed off, even to the point of saying, "Well it sure is a nice day for it, isn't it? You guys sure found a great spot for this"(gesturing to our proud spot directly across from the reviewing stand.) When he left, he said, "Okay, we're okay then."

Truly, this scene marks some of the most brilliant footage in confrontational guerrilla aesthetics, to see every step as we gingerly guided the angry staff member into admitting that we did have a valid point of view, and we were merely expressing it. We kept telling him, "We're simply expressing a dissenting opinion." The Pigs on Parade event may benefit the community,

but only at the expense of art and cultural credibility, and only with the further proliferation of corporate advertising. There is definitely a better way. To watch his expressions on tape, changing from anger, to suspicion, to confusion, to near-camaraderie and unto downright agreeableness, has got to be one of the most rewarding outcomes of the whole debacle. (Watch for it on a Stuckist DVD in the works!)

And if you think that just four people with signs will never make a difference, I'll tell you that the parade's emcee, local TV host John Curly, even acknowledged our presence to the whole crowd by saying, "The pigs--some people here think they're tacky but we love 'em!" Truly, by the end of the parade we had been accepted into the dynamic of the event, and there was less rancor than curiosity. I alone talked to at least 50 people, and almost all of them were receptive.

In closing, we never showed up on any TV news, and I was unsurprised to learn that the news stations didn't even send their own reporters or camera crews, they merely used the footage fed to them by the event staff, and overdubbed the requisite stupid puns to make this event, in the public eye, one big shimmering feel-good smiley face. ("These big piggies are going to Market to bring home the bacon for charity! A fun time was had by all!") This comes as absolutely no surprise, since all the news stations sponsored their own pigs! Journalism or promoterism, you decide.

I maintain that it is crucial that Stuckists register their disapproval of corporate art wherever it rears its shameful visage. In America, companies spend an average of \$2000 per household(!) each year in marketing and advertising. The Animals on Parade events are certainly part of that budget, yet they hide under the cloak of "public art." I believe that it is in keeping with Stuckist ideals to protest, and I hope anyone living in a city that plans to hold one of these lamentable events should at least take the time to paint a sign and represent the Stuckists. You'd be surprised at how many people will walk up to you and tell you that you're voicing exactly what they were thinking. For some reason, Stuckists are saddled with the task of vocalizing what everyone already knows, and yet that doesn't make it any less valid. It just makes it that much more regrettable that no one's said it yet.