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ARTFORUM

Peter Nagy

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As an artist and a cofounder of legendary East Village gallery Nature Morte, Peter Nagy launched his storied career amid the combative, hyperintellectual atmosphere of 1980s postmodernity. This retrospective survey of works produced between 1982 and 1992, all rendered in black and white, constituted a richly nuanced time capsule of a paradigm-shifting period.

To revisit work predicated on cultural critique several decades after its production is to submit it to quite an acid test. How amazing to discover that Nagy's early output, which shows the artist's penchant for mapping transformations wrought by expanded media, increased corporate power, and concentrated flows of capital, felt downright prescient today. Like Warhol, Nagy was practically clairvoyant in his observations about art and its commodification, the ballooning culture of the copy, and our ongoing anxieties about authenticity. Two persistent themes concerned dysfunction and obsolescence in relation to the canonical history of art, as well as the idea that history itself has come to an end. What a time to bring this era of Nagy's art back: in a "future" New York boarded up and in the grip of a pandemic.

The exhibition took its name from an eleven-foot-wide print on vinyl, *Entertainment Erases History*, 1983, that replicates the look of a classroom wall chart. It features a time line of the twentieth-century avant-garde, but, instead of displaying illustrations of famous artworks, it is littered with images of old electronics in the style of a Crazy Eddie discount store advertisement. One saw TV sets, transistor tape recorders, cassette decks, office telephones, even a vintage computer monitor and keyboard. But the piece reveals something else as well: It typifies Nagy's near-obsessive interrogation of the distinction between art culture and mass entertainment, which he pursued across a broad spectrum of materials. In works ranging from acrylic on canvas to enamel on aluminum—and those dispersing images and text on wool, vinyl, photo-etched magnesium, sandblasted aluminum, and photocopy paper—the experimental range of production values is matched by stylistic diversity. The artist has borrowed from Conceptual and commercial art to create hybridized objects that speak as much to the experience of the consumer as to the acquisitive instincts of the collector.

Nagy's work revels in subterfuge. In *Intellectual History*, 1984, he appropriates a map of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and substitutes a horde of corporate logos—AT&T, Atari, Canon, IBM, Xerox, and others—for the art. *International Survey Condominiums*, 1985–90, promotes playful confusion between a museum and a condo

tower. These works critique institutions, but on occasion Nagy may have also waded into the personal. Take *The Illusion of Aesthetics*, 1983, which replicates an old advertisement for Jon Gnagy, the popular mid-century television artist who demystified the process of creating art for generations of kids through his syndicated program, *Learn to Draw*. One wondered if Big Gnagy made a lasting impression upon Little Nagy once upon a time.

Yet for all of its droll observations, Nagy's art of this period is ingrained with a sense of loss, as if something profound was coming to an end. A series of graphic black-and-white paintings produced between 1985 and 1987 are collectively known as the "Cancer Paintings." According to the gallery, the artist "applied the pathology of cancer to the production of signs, creating 'cells' by sandwiching logos and other graphic elements until defamiliarized and abstracted." The works resonate as brand insignia, but disfigured—distortion itself takes center stage. *Four Cancer Logos*, 1989, a woodcut, might represent any number of contagions. Its quartet of rondels are so densely worked that their illegibility translates as our inability to see clearly—but also as productive chaos. Then and now, we revel in excess, visual pandemonium, and scrambled cultural references as our global modus operandi. Perhaps the collision of periods, styles, and differences is a necessary prerequisite for culture's advancement, for out of contamination comes a grand new cosmopolitanism.

—Jan Avgikos

Peter Nagy,
Entertainment Erases History (detail),
1983, UV print on vinyl, 6' x 11' 1".

