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Imitation, Simulation and Tim Davis's *My Life In Politics*

*Here I am, trying to polish the political onto my patinaed mistrust of given cultural meanings. I can almost smell Ambrose Bierce pointing to the passage in The Devil's Dictionary where he describes politics as "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles."*¹

– Tim Davis

*Completely expunged from the political dimension, [power] is dependent, like any other commodity, on production and mass consumption. Its spark has disappeared; only the fiction of a political universe is saved.*²

– Jean Baudrillard

It would be overly deterministic to claim that photographer Tim Davis, like Jean Baudrillard, no longer believes power is real, but is a simulation -- something that once existed and is now flattened by capitalism and simulated only to feed our nostalgia. In actuality, Davis's writing indicates that he believes the signs, symbols and rituals of politics (and, by association, power) are an *imitation* of something that is hidden. They might be feigning something, but the something they feign still exists. His *My Life in Politics* images do flirt with Baudrillard's death of the real in their allusion to processes that were once vital, but have lost their verve, but they are not the result of an attempt to "out" simulacrum. Instead, the essay, images and captions indicate that Davis hopes to unmask the imitations that hide reality by stripping appearances of their claimed ideology and providing clues for what is *really* happening. And, while Davis does not trust the (literal and figurative) signs of power (as they appear in the public realm of politics), in

¹ Tim Davis, "1500 Word Essay" in *My Live In Politics*: Tim Davis, ed. Lesley A. martin (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2006) p. 100

² Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) P. 179

citing Ambrose Bierce's quote that politics is "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles," he alludes to a similar belief in the real. Baudrillard would probably characterize Davis's resistance to embracing the idea of a *hyperreal* world as being a perspective that is not fully developed. The photographer does not, like Baudrillard, see power and politics as no longer being real (Baudrillard's fourth phase of the image), but views them as "masking and perverting" reality (Baudrillard's second phase of the image).

Davis writes that his attention to the topic (power's impulse to feign) was born, in part, from a 1992 incident where he was arrested as a rioter charged with "failure to disperse"³ (but was in actuality on his way to an art opening). Shortly after the incident, he wrote poems that were "elegies for a political life lost, as language itself was slipping and scattering from me. My life in politics was indescribable."⁴ The fact that Davis had accompanied his grandmother to protests during his youth makes the gap between his pre-arrest "life in politics" and post-arrest loss of language wider and more difficult to bridge. Baudrillard would likely describe Davis's arrest as a simulation by political forces that were meant to create crisis -- an installment in convincing us that power is still real. According to Baudrillard, because power wants to reinject itself with an appearance of reality, it "prefers the discourse of crisis."⁵ By arresting people for rioting (even if they are, in actuality, not), power simulates what it once was, "a structure, a strategy, a relation of force, at stake."⁶ Baudrillard claims:

³ Davis, p. 99

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Baudrillard, p. 179

⁶ Baudrillard, p. 181

As long as it was historically threatened by the real, power risked deterrence and simulation, disintegrating every contradiction by means of the production of equivalent signs. When it is threatened today by simulation (the threat of vanishing in a play of signs), power risks the real, risks crisis, it gambles on remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, political stakes. This is a question of life and death for it. But it is too late.⁷

Davis's real life experience could be seen as supporting Baudrillard's theory of power risking the real to remanufacture "political stakes."

The photographs in Davis's *My Life in Politics* series were his second attempt (following the book of poems he wrote by ten years) to find a language that might "work against"⁸ the surface of power – what political advocates, adversaries, workers and culture jammers want to convey – and cut into the underlying reality. He elaborates:

This is the American way. We are a land of deep facades, of reverence for the flatness of advertisement, and the heroic energy of its erection. Photographs are particularly articulate with surface, and in fact converse poorly about anything else. Signage is the skin of meaning. We mean what we say we mean.⁹

Words such as "facades," "surface" and "skin" indicate Davis still seeks an existing reality beneath the surface. The last words of this quote, however, hint at an alliance with some of Baudrillard's ideas about simulacrum and hyperreality. The photographs also support this similarity. In Davis's images, for example, the people appear secondary to the signs (whether physically present or electronically emanating) they, as a society, create. In the literal arena of scale, the people in Davis's photographs are secondary to the signs that surround them. Actual humans are often absent as in *Former Governor*,

⁷ Baudrillard, p. 180

⁸ Davis, p. 99

⁹ Davis, p. 102

Everyday is Bargain Day and *Nixon Monument, Nixon Birthplace*. When people appear, they are often dwarfed by signage (*Press Only, Flag Wavers*) or architecture (*Free Clinic, Anti Flag Burning Rally*), presented as reproductions, in plastic (*Combatant Balls, Soldier Store*), paint (*Jesse Ventura*) and photographs (*Seven Celebrities, Bush Cutout*); or exist as ephemeral small-scale phantasms animated by the television's pixilation (*Closed Circuit*).

The sign (and I mean here literal signs not the signs of "signs and signifiers") is a tool that signals qualities that exist internally (inside the mind, the business, the political party) to the outside world. In Davis's photographs, these supportive communication devices seem to have usurped their creators via volume and scale. In Davis's photographs, has society taken a subordinate role to its own signs? Has society's outside become its inside? Does he mean to reflect Baudrillard's theory that, "It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself?"¹⁰ If this is the case, it is important to remember that Davis contributes to this circularity of relationships. Believing that "photographers must act like critics, sieving out unwanted interpretations and analyzing visual flux into ample intent pictures. The more intent and resolved the picture, the greater its negative capability,"¹¹ each photo is a critique. This is not "documentary" photography. As much as his images are inspired by the urge to unmask and reflect the idea of scratching through the surface to understand reality ("Signage is the skin of meaning" indicates that "meaning" is "real"), they are also (a la Baudrillard) a system of signs in relation to each other. Davis's sentence "We mean what we say we

¹⁰ Baudrillard, p. 167

¹¹ Davis, p. 99

mean.” adds another dimension, reflecting Baudrillard’s belief that “Behind the baroque of images hides the grey image of politics,”¹² and that “Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real; murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity.”¹³ If “we mean what we say we mean” then there is no referent, just a circularity of meaning that is “exchanging in itself.”¹⁴

A suspicion of message in relation to meaning and an understanding of the conflation of commerce and power, create another parallel between Davis’s work and Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra in relation to power. Baudrillard saw power as a product that is dependent “like any other commodity, on production and mass consumption,” adding, “Its spark has disappeared; only the fiction of a political universe is saved.” Tim Davis’s images with their endless flattening out of signs, portraits, campaign headquarters and lobbyist back rooms, indicate that he chooses scenes that support Baudrillard’s observation of the “fiction of a political universe.” Davis’s photographs -- ripe with flags, buttons, patriotic headgear and symbolic art -- also resonate with Baudrillard’s theories about how power uses a profusion of references in an attempt to prove that it is real, writing, “The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social.”¹⁵ Virtually every image in Davis’s *My Life in Politics* exhibits this hyperactive referentiality, indicating the efforts of citizens to create a public social arena

¹² Baudrillard, p. 170

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Baudrillard, p. 179

(protests, volunteer work and patriotic tourism etc.) and of those in power to insert their presence by artistic representation as well as mechanical or reproducible means (phone, television, photographs, bumper stickers etc.). The selling of political ideas also pervades the entire body of work, but takes on forms that range from the historical (*Former Governor, Liberty Bell with Painted Crack*) to the personal (*Anarchy and Copyright*) to the commercial. In this last category commerce and politics share the same stage. In images such as *One People One Nation One Taco One Destiny* and *House of Representatives Barber Shop*, the accomplishments of civil rights icon Martin Luther King and a branch of the US government are subsumed into spaces of commerce.

Viewing Davis's *My Life in Politics* in relation to Baudrillard, it is possible to see the entire body of work as a reflection of Baudrillard's view of "power itself eventually breaking apart in this space and becoming a simulation of power (disconnected from its aims and objectives, and dedicated to power effects and mass simulation)."¹⁶ This statement swims alongside Davis's earlier statement that "language itself was slipping and scattering from me," but the swimmers are utilizing different strokes. There is a sense of breaking apart in Davis's photographs – people as missing from or misfits within their own words, edifices and belief systems – but Davis believes the reality they try to recapture still exists. Perhaps Baudrillard would consider Davis's approach to the subject as an expression of the mourning he cites, writing, "We are still in the same boat: none of our societies know how to manage their mourning for the real, for power, for the social itself, which is implicated in the same breakdown. And it is by an artificial

¹⁶ Baudrillard, p. 179

realization of all this that we try to escape it.”¹⁷ If this is true, Baudrillard might criticize Davis for seeking realizations that cannot exist. Despite the references to the hyperreal present in his photographs, Davis’s texts indicate he is still looking for something under the surface. In his caption for *Press Only*, he writes, “I couldn’t hear the announcements, but noted the annunciation.”¹⁸ These words could be seen as a metaphor for Davis’s approach to photographing the political. While the photographer’s ideas and his photographs overlap with some of Baudrillard’s philosophy, it is apparent that Tim Davis, unlike Baudrillard, still believes there is an announcement to be heard -- that, while reality might be obscured (just as the figures in *Press Only* are), it still exists.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, p. 181

¹⁸ Davis, p. 23