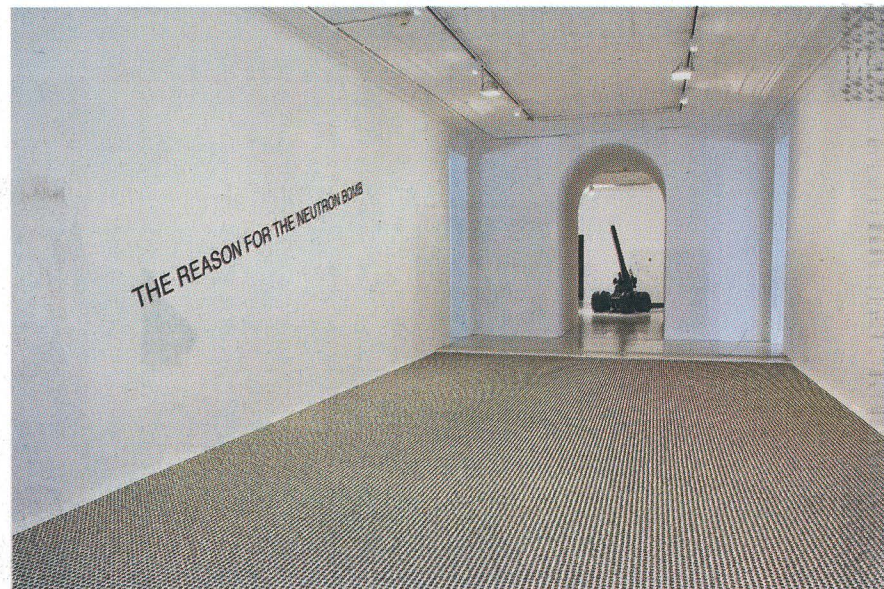




PHOTOGRAPHS FROM P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

Damián Ortega's "Controller of the Universe," a 2007 sculpture in the Weapons section.



Chris Burden's "Reason for the Neutron Bomb," with its 50,000 nickels and matchsticks.

## Will the Revolution Be Museumized? Will There Be a Revolution?

Simplistic yet muddled, strident yet curiously tepid, "That Was Then . . . This Is Now" at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center is an ambitious if disappointing effort to extend the activist spirit of the Vietnam War protest days into the Iraq war era.

### ART REVIEW

KEN JOHNSON

The exhibition presents a confusing mix of politically motivated artworks from the 1960s to today by more than 60 artists, united, a wall text says, "by a desire to mobilize art as a means of change." It was organized by the director of P.S. 1, Alanna Heiss; the center's senior curatorial adviser, Neville Wakefield; and six other advisers. So many curators! Maybe that is why the show is so unfocused.

Instead of following a historical time line, the exhibition is divided into three theme-based sections: Weapons, Flags and Dreams. Weapons begins impressively

"That Was Then . . . This Is Now," continues through Sept. 22 at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Avenue at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 784-2084, ps1.org.

### That Was Then . . . This Is Now P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center

with "The Reason for the Neutron Bomb," Chris Burden's 1979 installation of 50,000 nickels, a wooden matchstick attached to each, arrayed on the floor in a big grid. Its reference is to the number of Soviet tanks at the time.

Elsewhere a beautiful digitally animated video from 2002 by Jeremy Blake meditates on a mysterious house built in San Jose, Calif., by Sarah Winchester, the Winchester rifle heiress.

Over all, though, the Weapons section presents a puzzling assortment of works that relate to the theme in no consistent way. In one room hangs Damián Ortega's "Controller of the Universe," a 2007 sculpture consisting of scores of suspended hand tools pointing outward as though in midexplosion. For no clear reason it is accompanied by two Andy Warhol prints: a 1971 "Electric Chair" and a 1964 "Race Riot."

Wandering through the rest of this section you come across Steve Mumford's hand-drawn scenes from the war in Iraq;

paintings of mercenaries from 1975 by Leon Golub; a glossy, heavily pixilated enlargement of an Internet image of one of the twin towers burning by Thomas Ruff from 2004; a big drawing of a handgun pointing at you from 1993 by Robert Longo; and fiercely expressionistic allegories in ink and watercolor protesting the Vietnam War made by Nancy Spero in the late 1960s.

In one room there is a funny juxtaposition between a sculptural simulation of a modern cannon made in 1965 by Pino Pascali and a 1969 photograph of the feminist Valie Export holding a machine gun while wearing jeans with the crotch cut out. It's a duel between the phallic and the vaginal.

But Weapons represents so many different perspectives that it ends up saying nothing surprising or illuminating about weapons or the politics of weapons.

The Flag section, which consists of various representations and misrepresentations of the United States flag, is similarly inconclusive. David Hammons's 1990 rendition of an African-American flag with the stars and stripes in red, green and black is visually sumptuous. Barbara Kruger's 1991 silkscreen version



Leo Villareal's "Flag," made of flashing tubular lights attached to the ceiling.

with white stripes made of letters spelling out questions — "Who dies first? Who laughs last?" — still has great rhetorical punch. And Marc Handelman's big semi-abstract red, white and blue painting from 2008 composed of free-floating stars and stripes has a painterly and theatrical verve.

In a big, photographic repro-

duction of a poster by Adam McEwen, a rock group in military gear plants the flag, à la Iwo Jima. In a sculpture by Peter Hendrick the flags of Iraq, Ireland, Israel, the Palestinians, Britain and the United States have been recreated in white fabric. In the elevator, you'll find a flag made of flashing tubular lights by Leo Villareal attached to the ceiling.

There are flag prints by Jasper Johns, a flag drawn in graphite by Banks Violette and flags flying against the setting sun in photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. The most perplexing inclusion is Spencer Sweeney's police car — actually a converted taxicab — fixed upside down to the ceiling with a disco ball and theater lights attached to its roof.

The upshot of all these approaches is that the flag is drained of whatever symbolic urgency it might have. It's just an empty political football for artists to kick around.

But the least coherent section is Dreams. If you were hoping to draw some inspiration for the future from this theme, it's also the most disappointing. In the main gallery of this section, a 1994 word piece by Lawrence Weiner

high on one wall reads "Milk and Honey Taken Far Away" in English and German. It's accompanied by a 1978 architectural model for a pavilion of see-through mirrors by Dan Graham; jazzy '60s-era posters with corny liberation slogans by Sister Corita Kent; and, from 1989, gauzy blue curtains hanging over windows by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Another room presents an indigestible accumulation of printed material documenting activity by the Art Workers Coalition, a protest and lobbying group in the late '60s.

Videos include a semi-abstract film by Josephine Meckseper focusing on a 2006 peace march in New York, an understandable reference to Dreams. But an oblique 2000 video by Paul Chan in which he used law enforcement software to depict activists' facial-hair styles makes less sense under this heading.

A 1997 video in which Andrea Fraser mimics museum dignitaries and politicians' speeches about the importance of art and culture is great satire. But it's hard to see how her witty critique is going to help spur the activist revival so ineffectually imagined by this show.