

FFACTORY

“Political art”

By Bill Sebring

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Even good political art tends to be tedious (say, Hans Haacke, for instance): no matter how smart it is, I tend to want to repair to the bar. And, of course, most of what passes for political art is a simple declaration of one's beliefs - often pacifist, or anti-Bush - and that generally looks like a bumper sticker, or not really art at all.

But the best political art illuminates the, ahem, power structure and how we relate to it: think Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), a urinal that was submitted to frustrate the Society of Independent Artists - Duchamp himself was a member - a group whose slogan was “No juries, no awards.” The artist magically transformed a simple, utilitarian object into a conundrum and a legendary artwork with the simple act of submitting the “fountain” with the required entrance fee: this elegant idea is a remarkable and art-historical twofer, elevating the ordinary and exploding the power structure of the artists' world *itself*.

Julia Kim Smith, Francesca Danieli, and David Beaudouin have produced a short film with similar staying power: entitled *One Nice Thing*, it implores political partisans from the national party conventions of 2004 to “say one nice thing about” Republicans or Democrats, depending on your political allegiance, and “really mean it.” The nine-minute-and-twenty-second short surveys the Democrats and asks them to be nice to Republicans, and vice versa.

The results are far from surprising: you get folks who flat-out refuse to make nice, and folks who say their opponents are potential converts to the cause. Some identify individuals in the opposing party whom they admire (Lincoln is a favorite). Another tack involves citing family members who do not share political affiliations with the interviewee, and so on. Thoughtful answers are rare and, as a result, surprising (the best one? probably from former congressman and knucklehead MSNBC conservative pundit Joe Scarborough!). What results is not so much a list of what's right about politicians and politics as it is an illumination of what's wrong with *us*, a meditation on why we *personally* can't find common ground with our political opponents, a laser-like focus on how political opinion attaches to each individual's identity.

What do our political leanings, our political speech say about us? About others? *One Nice Thing* suggests that we carve out a little bit of time to think about those questions, and that each partisan might profit from this redemptive place. The film was an official selection of the 2005 Sedona International Film Festival & Workshop, as well as for the upcoming 2005 Maryland Film Festival. *ONT* deserves your support and some quiet contemplation: say one nice thing about your opponents today!

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