

**Urbanite**

**"State of the Art: Political Art"**

By Bill Sebring  
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Baltimore is in the midst of a remarkable run of museum shows concerned with political themes. Since late 2004, a surge of contemporary political work has figured prominently in the city's artistic life, taking over gallery spaces while shedding light on the nature of institutional power.

Many of the shows have centered around two of the city's established arts institutions: the Contemporary Museum and the Baltimore Museum of Art. These shows can be credited to curator Chris Gilbert, who recently left the BMA for the University of California Berkeley Art Museum, and curator Cira Pascual Marquina of the Contemporary.

Shortly after Gilbert's arrival in Baltimore in 2003, he launched a series of experimental mini-exhibitions (*Cram Sessions*) designed to "radicalize" the museum. Gilbert, who has described himself in the press as a "Marxist of a fairly predictable variety," envisioned the exhibition space as a launching pad for political action. At their best, the shows illuminated the nexus between art and everyday living. The second installation, *Dark Matter*, drew parallels between cosmological "dark matter" (most of the universe's stuff - black holes and subatomic particles - is invisible, since it emits little light) with the hidden economy of the arts, consisting of scrapbookers, quilters, gamers, and underground artists of all stripes. This artistic dark matter interacts with the visible economy of galleries, collectors, and institutions in ways that are little understood or noticed. At the Contemporary, Pascual Marquina aims to reclaim the white-cube exhibition space for social works - (*Reliving Democracy*, which closed in January this year, examined the use of eminent domain in Baltimore to facilitate East Baltimore development by Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions. This, and upcoming community-based artist projects - including a partnership with a neighborhood halfway house - use the museum as a base of operations, a lecture hall, a resource center, and a forum.

Ultimately, though, these efforts to claim the museum for progressive political action suffer from several thorny problems, not the least of which is that many artists, critics, and the audience don't quite know what to make of this new wave of projects. The shows are less concerned with traditional artistic objects and aesthetic measures, and more concerned with *process* - political and moral. What do these exhibitions do better than traditional journalism, community-arts centers, political action, and advocacy groups, those traditional sources of real, sustained politics? It is tempting to conclude that these efforts may be found wanting as both art and as politics. Marshall McLuhan, in his seminal 1964 book *Understanding Media*, noted that "the medium is the message." McLuhan's dictum warns us that some vehicles are more (or less) hospitable for a given message, and that human beings have the final say.

Taking politics out of the gallery and putting it back on a television set, Julia Kim Smith, Francesca Danieli, and Baltimore-based David Beaudouin collaborated to produce a video that simply and elegantly illuminates the polarized state of current political discourse. *One Nice Thing* implores partisans from the national conventions of 2004 to "say one nice thing about" Republicans or Democrats - the enemy, depending on one's affiliation - and "really mean it."

What results is not so much a list of what's right about politicians and politics as it is an illustration 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 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.

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