Vile Days: The Village Voice Art Columns 1985-1988

Kim Levin

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/46708>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.46708

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupe d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Electronic reference

Kim Levin, « Vile Days: The Village Voice Art Columns 1985-1988 », *Critique d'art* [Online], All the reviews on line, Online since 27 May 2020, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/46708> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.46708>

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.

EN

Vile Days: The Village Voice Art Columns 1985-1988

Kim Levin

- 1 Between 1985 and 1988—before he became known as a transgressive novelist—Gary Indiana wrote art criticism for the *Village Voice*, which was then the alternative paper known round the world. For those three years his weekly columns caustically deconstructed exhibitions, critiqued the art world, and questioned the limits of art. His highly personal and insidiously political weekly criticism always provided a terrific read. *Vile Days: The Village Voice Art Columns 1985-1988* adds up to something much more. It is an essential account of the sudden rise and tragic fall of the East Village art scene during “that stunningly deranged decade,” as Indiana wrote, quoting Carol Squiers. Its appearance is especially timely at this semi-nostalgic moment after the demise of the *Village Voice*. When Indiana’s first novel, *Horse Crazy*, was published in 1989, William Burroughs compared him to Jean Genet. I was working at the *Voice* then and thought of him more as a new Truman Capote. The columns are cynical, sarcastic, outrageous, and increasingly jaundiced as mass culture and money began to take over the scene, but Indiana could also be generous and even sentimental. “If you live long enough, you even get fond of people you thought you hated,” he wrote. Separately his pieces were eccentric and witty—about art but also about sex, drugs, AIDS, hypocrisy and people whose names we had forgotten: Nicolas Moufarrege! Steven Sprouse! Together they are brilliant and startling. Indiana compared Eric Fischl to Norman Rockwell. He wrote about Gerhard Richter in terms of the notion of sincerity. In a piece called *Clownophobia* he paired the AIDS crisis with Bruce Nauman’s *Clown Torture* (1987). He delved into “the mutation of aura into homily,” and wrote about a sumo-wrestling contest (“Deep Fat”) and about a flower show, probing life as art. Most impressive in those early days of the Guerrilla Girls, Indiana delved into institutional critique with an early focus on exhibitions by artists who happened to be women (Barbara Kruger, Nancy Spero, Louise Bourgeois, Meg Webster, Cindy Sherman, Louise Lawler), dropping nuggets of wisdom and saving his scathing bits for white male artists. He sniffed out the pedantic and the bogus and scrutinized the increasingly slippery nature of reality and theory. My favorite piece in *Vile Days* is Indiana’s two-part article from November 1986, titled

“Janet Malcolm Gets it Wrong,” in which he deconstructed her October 1986 two-part *New Yorker* profile of Ingrid Sischy, then editor of *Artforum*. He interviewed Malcolm’s interviewees, including Rosalind Krauss and Barbara Rose, examining their accounts of the interviews as well as Malcolm’s malicious descriptions of their lifestyles. It is a brilliant mash-up of Jacques Derrida and Martin Margiela—sleeves inside out and threads dangling—deconstruction by parody. Interviewee Sherrie Levine told Indiana: “I knew nothing good was coming when the fact checker called to ask if it would be accurate to say that my bathroom is in the kitchen and I live alone with my cat.” Yet he manages to be almost kind to everyone except Malcolm, who was then embroiled in a literary scandal and libel lawsuit involving her 1984 book *In the Freud Archives*, which expanded on her pair of *New Yorker* articles about psychoanalyst Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, archivist of the Freud Museum in London. Looking back, Gary Indiana was brilliantly getting even. At our own moment of ethical lapses, betrayals, and exploitations, this look in the rearview mirror revives questions of fabricated quotes and competing narratives. The slippage between reality and fakery—in art, society and politics—has become infinitely twisted since then.