LIFE AT RISD

volume 6, issue 4.
Response Heard on the Mixed Media Answering Machine:

Hi! I just wanted to call and say that I really like the article that Don Morton wrote in this month's issue and also the article on the following page is great, too... And good luck in the contest—the win a date with Allen Spetnagel [laughter] contest—that's cute. Just a RISD community person... You're doing a great job! See ya, bye!

This letter is in response to the recent response concerning the apparel events held at Woods-Gerry Gallery and Fort Thunder. After reading the article, I felt that certain issues were overlooked and ignored, hence resulting in an inaccurate account of the event. I will be able only to comment upon the Fort Thunder show as I unfortunately missed the Woods-Gerry event. The level of professionalism involved at Fort Thunder does invite a critique, but when the critique is effected by the audience's drunken response-the resulting observations are jaded. According to the critique, "the clothes seemed less designed to display craft, creativity, or talent than to elicit catcalls from the audience." I would like to stress the fact that while catcalls did fill the air-a greater number of beers circulated the room, A drunken group of college students are not going to stand passively while their classmates are expressing and celebrating their sexuality. While the article was interesting... I felt that the artists were gender conscious in their choices made at Fort Thunder. The article mentions that the clothes do not empower but, "dress women up to play the same roles we've always had to play." I would argue that the clothing did empower the models, and celebrated the versatility in which females can and does express their sexuality. By recognizing roles and interpreting them through the clothing and dance performed, the designers successfully displayed the fluidity of sexual identities even to the extreme of incorporating a drag queen into the performance. The audience, both male and female alike, were able to identify with each role from both levels of the runway. The article concludes with a question in regards to the designer's goal, message, or statement. I would like to conclude with my own interpretation of the event. (This is by no means me speaking for the artists, for I do not even know them.) The statement or message dis...
community person... You're doing a great job! See ya, bye!

In response to the letter to the editor in last issue:

I am saddened and absolutely disgusted by the lack of intellectual curiosity and respect for fellow students who attend and discuss the events that we are valid. Yet I am troubled by the way some students seem to dismiss the effort of others without consideration. I am curious to know who appointed you as an authority on art and culture, and I question the right wing's mentalities to dismiss the projects of people who believe in "artistic expression" in depth, not just its shallow surface.

I am sorry to be reminded that some artists in this world do not value the collaboration and respect that goes into making such magnificent statements. I am not sorry to say that you are full of shit.

Elizabeth Tomaselli

This letter is in response to the recent response concerning the apparel events held at Woods-Gerry Gallery and Fort Thunder. After reading the article, I felt that certain issues were overlooked and ignored, hence resulting in an inaccurate account of the event. I will be able only to comment upon the Fort Thunder show as unfortunately missed the Woods-Gerry event. The level of professionalism in Fort Thunder does invite a critique, but I think the critique is effective by the audience's drunken response-the resulting observations are jaded. According to the critique, "the clothes seemed less designed to display craft, creativity, or talent than to elicit catcalls from the audience." I would like to stress the fact that while catcalls did fill the air a greater number of beers circulated the room. A drunken group of college students are not going to stand passively while their classmates are expressing and celebrating their sexuality. While the authors may feel that this was inappropriate, the environment functioned as a means to maximize the exposure of their designs. The actions of the public do not dictate or disqualify whether the clothing displayed craft, creativity, or talent. The structure and method of presentation at Fort Thunder exhibited the strength and versatility of female sexuality. Each model came out portraying a different stock character, some of which included the critics called, "clifed feminine roles." While the vamp, doll, call girl, and bride were actuated, the article neglected to mention the tomboy, business woman, and ballerina. The show was not weighted to strengthen the voyeuristic gaze, but to display the variety of forms female sexuality may exhibit. As far as the role of the impactive male models, they appeared to function as guards for the models, servants, or merely pieces of scenery. Personally, I felt that the artists were gender conscious in their choices made at Fort Thunder. The article mentions that the clothes do not empower but, "dress women up to play the same roles we've always had to play." I would argue that the clothing did empower the models, and celebrated the versatility in which females can and do express their sexuality. By taking recognizable roles and interpreting them through the clothing and dance performed, the designers successfully displayed the fluidity of sexual identities even to the extreme of incorporating a drag queen into the performance. The audience, both male and female alike, were able to identify with each role from both levels of the runway. The article concludes with a question in regards to the designer's goal, message, or statement. I would like to conclude with my own interpretation of the event. (This is by no means me speaking for the artists, for I do not even know them). The statement or message displayed through the combination of seamless transitions, charged clothing, and expressive models, uphold the range and freedom of sexuality and therefore celebrates what it means to be young, physical, and alive. A message which extends and includes both sexes.

-Abby Dehnert '01
Does anyone else find the trendy "White Trash" theme to fall a little short of being funny?

-Antonymous

In response to the sexual fantasy peep-show silhouette sculpture girls who have so much intellectual insight:

damn isn't displaying your body fun?!! We had a blast at the Ft. Thunder show. Sorry your sexual fantasies have to be limited to restrictive gender consciousness imposed by college ethics. Would we engage in a show that perpetuated gender stereotypes? Damn straight, sisters, if it's sexy and fun. Let's not get caught up in a politically correct agenda. We all want to get laid. The performance at the Arcade spoke of women's interior role models; our show flaunted women's exterior behaviors. So it irri-
Does anyone else find the trendy “White Trash” theme to fall a little short of being funny?

—Anonymous

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—See you next weekend.

Andrea Hackman
Lu Heintz

FIGHT OR FOLLOW
WE ARE THE FUTURE

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meetings are in the mixed media office above the mailroom, wednesdays at 7:30pm.
On Monday, April 10th, at 7 p.m. in the RISD Auditorium, Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o delivered a lecture titled "After Asmara: The Language of Arts, Knowledge and Scholarship in Africa." Considered to be one of the most important living African authors, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an internationally acclaimed playwright, novelist, and critic, and is Professor of Comparative Literature and Performance Studies at New York University. The lecture grew out of Prof. Ngugi's recent participation in a groundbreaking conference on African languages (the first such conference ever to be hosted on African soil) in Asmara, Eritrea. His talk revealed how the dominance of European languages in Africa has become one of the most subtle means of excluding the majority of the African population from the venues of official culture and power.

Language, for Prof. Ngugi, is the voice of a whole culture; when a language is lost, so is that culture and the particular histories, experiences, and values contained within it. The dominance of European languages is the obvious result of colonial and imperial intervention in Africa; separated from their lands and homes, the African people were also separated from what Prof. Ngugi calls their "base" and forced to speak through a series of Western constructs or masks. Prof. Ngugi's work recuperates these silenced cultural forms. More of a performance than a linear academic presentation, Prof. Ngugi's lecture used oral storytelling techniques to link together a set of interrelated concepts — homestead, base, language — into an evocative talk/story. Prof. Ngugi has stated that "struggle is a main part of [his] aesthetic." His novels elaborate on this statement, not only in the way they draw on the cultural roots of his people, but also in the way they insist on linking the plight of individual characters to the history and struggle of a collective.

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Art, no matter what its context, is always political for Prof. Ngugi; it may either serve to support the assumptions and value judgments of the status quo, or to call these assump-
tions into question. Prof. Ngugi’s novels include: Weep Not Child (1963) for which he received the UNESCO First Prize, A Grain of Wheat (1967), Petals of Blood (1980), Devil on the Cross (1982), and Matigari (1986). These novels are powerful chronicles of the struggle against the colonial state. His novel A Grain of Wheat dramatizes the anger aroused by the colonial state’s public execution of the Mau-Mau guerrillas who resisted British rule in Kenya during the 1950’s. From this, one of his earliest works, he focuses on forms of exploitation and control that link the colonial to the post-colonial state. Matigari, a seemingly simple yet incredibly haunting novel, traces the journey of the novel’s eponymous protagonist as he struggles to find his lost family and people and gain possession of the home that he built with his own hands but that was taken away from him.

Of all of Prof. Ngugi’s novels, Matigari is the one most consciously based on oral storytelling techniques; the repetitions in the novel strengthen the mythic resonances of the character Matigari, who, ageless and often formless (he sometimes appears as a dwarf, at others as a giant) seems to be an enigmatic ghost, a Christ-figure, and a fragment of rumor. Located in an unspecified but clearly colonized space, the novel blurs the distinction between particular, individual definitions of family, home, and identity and the larger but related concepts of “people,” “country,” and the “masses.” Matigari first struggles to wrest his home out of the hands of the appropriately named Settler Williams, only to find that during this struggle John Boy Jr., the son of Settler Williams’s faithful black servant, has made it his residence. Educated at the London School of Economics, John Boy Jr. is on the governing board of a number of multinational companies and, consequently, is in a position to have his interests represented by the governors of his ostensibly democratic state — he is able, after all, to contribute generously to their various “charitable” causes. When Matigari reminds John Boy Jr. of his debt to his own people, John Boy replies, “I would ask you to learn the meaning of the word individual.

Of our people. They don’t know the importance of the word individual as opposed to the word masses.” The novel reveals the complex network of racial, class, and political oppression veiled under the rhetoric of free-enterprise and tales of individual triumph that continues to plague the post-colonial state. Prof. Ngugi is currently working on a 1,500 page novel titled The Wizard of the Crow.

Prof. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s critical work combines his interest in African and Caribbean literatures, theatre, film, and cultural theory and practice, and elaborates on the connections between art and politics evident in his novels. His critical writings include Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (1986), Moving the Center: Struggle for Cultural Freedoms (1993), and, most recently, Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa (1998), which was drawn from his Clarendon Lectures, delivered at Oxford University in 1996. His most recent book, Penpoints, explores the relationship between what he calls “the state of art and the art of the state” in their struggle for the control of performance space. For Prof. Ngugi, the concept of performance space is crucial: it encompasses not only the literal space of an artistic performance, but also the whole state as a type of “stage” that imposes certain roles and restrictions on its citizens. The question of the politics of the performance space is, he argues, “basic to any theorizing about the post-colonial condition because it touches on nearly all aspects of power and being in a colonial and post-colonial society. It is germane to issues of what constitutes the national and the mainstream. In a post-colonial state this takes the form of a struggle between those who defend the continuity of colonial traditions and those who want to see reflections of a new nation and a new people in the performance space as a unified field of internal and external politics.” Born and bred in Kenya. Prof. Ngugi studied in Uganda and England. During the mid-70s he participated as a writer in a community-based literacy and culture program with theater at its center, program became a truly community affair, involving peasants and workers who created a play based on their own histories and sung in their own language — Gikuyu — rather than English.

These plays and their community-based structure were extremely threatening to the ruling regime, and Prof. Ngugi was arrested in 1977; he was confined to a maximum security prison for a year, to be released only after the death of the first head of state, Jomo Kenyatta. Since 1982 he has been in exile from Kenya. Much of his work, both fictional and critical, focuses on this issue of exile and homelessness. Prof. Ngugi has likened the state of exile to a type of imprisonment, an “exclusion,” as he puts it, from the space which nourishes the artist’s imagination; yet, exile can also grant the writer a type of freedom, a chance to reach back into his territorial space —ironically enough— through the authorizing ear of a global audience. Prof. Ngugi is consummately aware of the politics of the consumption, appropriation, and dissemination of postcolonial texts: he points to the prominence of postcolonial texts published in English and the avid consumption of certain genres in the West. His novel Matigari provides a particularly interesting example of the ironies of postcolonial writing in exile. Matigari was written in 1983-1984, in the first couple of years of Prof. Ngugi’s exile, and is the second of his novels written in the Gikuyu language (since Devil on a Cross, all of Prof. Ngugi’s novels have been written in Gikuyu).

It came out in 1986 and was very positively received in Kenya, so much so that the police issued a warrant for the arrest of the agitator Matigari. When it became apparent to the authorities that Matigari was, in fact, a fictional character, the book itself was “arrested” and taken out of circulation. The English translation of the novel came out in 1991, and two years later was sold in Kenya in this English translation; it wasn’t until 1997 that the Gikuyu language original was slowly and somewhat surreptitiously reissued in Kenya.
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