

Dwight Conquergood. *Four Seasons* by Marc Chagall. Perspective: Critical Cultural Politics

This perspective is sometimes called anti-art because it rejects the presuppositions that art is timeless, transcendent, disinterested, and apolitical--a redemptive, self-sufficient, self-sustaining space, "art for art's sake." Instead, this perspective construes art as a rhetorical agency of mystification. It situates public art in metonymic tension with other artifacts of the built environment and the urban institutions of commerce and civility they index. It looks at public art as a rhetorical *topos*--quite literally a place, a site of struggle and conflict of interpretations about the meaning of civic centers and urban life. It asks, how did, how does this sculpture take place (physically and symbolically), and what does it displace? Building on Walter Benjamin's insight that every document of civilization is simultaneously a document of barbarism, it asks, how is this work of art deployed to mask, elide, purify, and de-politicize the economic structures of violence and exclusion that define late-twentieth-century urban America?

Critical cultural politics reads an artwork from the perspective of what it excludes, what lies just outside of the frame. Context becomes significant, over-riding. Instead of focussing on an intrinsic, formalistic analysis of the extraordinarily beautiful images of idyllic peasant life in Chagall's monumental *Four Seasons*, my eye is drawn to the architectural tower of the Continental Bank, a structure with which *Four Seasons* shares both physical and ideological space. The contiguity of Chagall's artistic masterpiece with Chicago's monolithic temple to monopoly capitalism is deeply meaningful. Both are located within the same socio-economic formation.

As every urban sociologist knows, Chicago is the most residentially segregated city in the U.S. This pattern of racial and class exclusion is underwritten--quite literally--by the "red-lining" practices of banks, insurance companies, and commercial institutions for which Continental Bank stands as synecdoche. The bucolic peasants frolicking eternally inside Chagall's seasonal panels are sanitized representations of the real working-class migrants--many of them drawn from rural peasant cultures--now living in Chicago's dilapidated tenements of the South and West Side. The horrible housing they must inhabit as well as the unfair employment conditions they suffer are sustained by the macro-structures of political economy that Continental Bank signifies (Conquergood, 1992). How does *Four Seasons* aestheticize the seasonal lay-offs of the working poor?

The violence of these macro-structures of containment, control, and surveillance can be seen around the edges of *Four Seasons*. For me, two peripheral artifacts belie the nostalgic innocence of the images of romantic peasant life displayed inside *Four Seasons*: the heavy security chain that circumscribes the sculpture, and the video surveillance cameras mounted nearby. These instruments of security form a metonymic chain of surveillance, exclusion, and containment that leads back to Continental Bank. The slippage between economic and police control is ironically proclaimed by the "Security" sign on Continental Bank Plaza--in this context "security" can be read as the police force, and as financial securities. "[T]he neo-military syntax of contemporary architecture insinuates violence and conjures imaginary dangers. In many instances the semiotics of so-called 'defensible space' are just about as subtle as a swaggering white cop. Today's upscale, pseudo-public spaces--sumptuary malls, office centers, culture acropolises, and so on--are full of invisible signs warning off the underclass 'Other'" (Davis 1990, 226).

References

Dwight Conquergood, "Life in Big Red: Struggles and Accommodations in a Chicago Polyethnic Tenement," *Structuring Diversity: Ethnographic Perspectives on the New Immigration*. Ed. Louise Lamphere, pp. 95-144. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1992.

Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*. London: Verso, 1990.

See also: Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," *October*, 31 (Winter, 1984):91-111; Jonathan Brenkman, *Culture and Domination*. Ithaca: Cornell UP