

Andy Diaz Hope

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**Beauty in Bile: Political Artists Transform Television
Hostility Into a Charming Installation**

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By Jonathan Curiel
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On the morning of Aug. 9, Republican pundits appeared on the Fox News Network to accuse Barack Obama of corruption and malfeasance. Fox was doing what it always does — except this segment, "The Journal Editorial Report," was especially vitriolic. *The Wall Street Journal's* Daniel Henninger said Obama and his "well-oiled machine" had, through the Internal Revenue Service, declared a "total war" on "average Americans" in a development that was worse than Richard Nixon's Watergate misdeeds. *The Wall Street Journal's* Dorothy Rabinowitz, meanwhile, called Obama a "radical" who, she implied, thought of the United States "as the enemy of all that is good and true." Wow.



The venue to watch Fox that morning was the Catharine Clark Gallery in San Francisco, where two liberal artists had assembled an art piece, called *Beautification Machine*, that instantly converted Henninger's and Rabinowitz's bile into moody music, audio fragments, bifurcated video clips, and strobe lights. *Beautification Machine* is anchored in the

gallery's media room, a darkened chamber that accentuates the machine's tiny, reflecting mirrors and all-around good-vibe glow. To borrow a phrase from the 1970s, *Beautification Machine* is "far out" — a multi sensory experience that, despite the beautifying bells and whistles, is testing the patience of every liberal artgoer who ever said aloud, "I will never watch Fox's right-wing blowhards!" And that's one of the artwork's charms: Its very name, along with its execution, implores artgoers to try and watch Fox with a sense of humor. Of course, it's easier said than done, even in an art context that tempers the tantrums emanating from a network proclaiming to be "fair and balanced." More than 2 million people a day watch Rupert Murdoch's cable station.

"Showing the piece in San Francisco is probably not going to convert any Republicans, but hopefully it will call attention to how powerful and effectively divisive Fox has become," says Jon Bernson, the musician and media artist who did the artwork's audio portion. Bernson, who collaborated with Andy Diaz Hope, says that Fox "is easy to ignore here in the Bay Area because NPR is everywhere, but it is a major force across most of America. When liberals are shocked that the American public could vote for George Bush, or support other highly dubious choices, we should be aware that Fox manipulates the facts so effectively that it makes these choices seem sensible and the alternatives seem absurd."

Still, *Beautification Machine* is meant to sift through any TV news network that presents lopsided views, and that includes left-leaning MSNBC, say Bernson and Diaz Hope. Strictly as an art piece, *Beautification Machine* is a triumph. Diaz Hope often uses glass, and his new creation lets visitors peer into its center, where a spinning patchwork of mirrors bedazzles like a jeweled planet in orbit. On the morning I was there, bits of Fox's aural finger-pointing emerged from the gallery's speakers, but the babble was short-lived, and there are minutes when Bernson's atmospheric music plays uninterrupted. That's a good thing. Bernson is an accomplished audio artist whose music with the group Exray's appeared in *The Social Network*, the Hollywood film about Facebook's founding. Bernson's songs are satisfyingly discordant, and his teaming with Diaz Hope is an ideal meeting of artistic minds.

Both artists bring an intellectual heft to their work. Bernson studied philosophy at England's Oxford University, while Diaz Hope has a masters in engineering from Stanford's Joint Program in Design. Diaz Hope originated the idea for *Beautification Machine* 20 years ago, but couldn't pull it off until connecting with Bernson. "When I was designing and building furniture in the '90s," says Diaz Hope, "I created pieces of furniture that turned your television into an abstracted mood screen and surreptitiously tried to break the tractor beam of the television and encourage people to re-engage their surroundings. Sound was always a key element to creating an immersive experience and one I didn't address because so many art installations seem to have a generic droning sound track and I didn't have the skills to create something more appropriate."

Beautification Machine follows in the best traditions of progressive gallery and museum art that tries, however slyly or shockingly, to undermine political reality and to sound the alarm. One example is Wafaa Bilal's "Domestic Tension," the 2007 work where Bilal locked himself in a room at a Chicago art gallery, and anyone who went to a website could command a paint gun to fire directly at him. An Iraqi native who survived Saddam Hussein's brutal suppression of the country, Bilal was protesting the Iraq War and the way it dehumanized and killed thousands of Iraqi civilians. Then, the media was dehumanizing Iraqis, too. Fox is still at war, though Obama and liberals have replaced Saddam Hussein as Enemy No. 1. In the darkness of Catharine Clark Gallery, Fox's hatred does, indeed, dissipate. But it never disappears entirely. And eventually, art-goers have to leave the space, just like Bilal had to leave his paintball silo. Diaz Hope and Bernson hope that *Beautification Machine* travels to exhibit spaces beyond San Francisco, even to galleries in so-called "red states." That would be the true test of *Beautification Machine* — to anchor it in the middle of a conservative community, and see how many art-goers actually laugh and how many shake their heads in disgust.