



Black Iron Vatican

Andy Roche

an *At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago* project

January 29-March 8, 2008

Related film and video screening, *The Religious Show*, curated by Ben Russell:
Wednesday, February 20, 7pm

With the exhibition *Black Iron Vatican* Andy Roche develops an aesthetic examination of the Catholic left. In an installation of multiple video works and posters, Roche draws a relationship between the subjectivity expressed in the radical witnessing of Catholic leftists and the reverie of pop culture devotees holed up behind bedroom doors. Featured elements of this, Roche's first solo exhibition, include a recitation of the rosary as a howling dub performance, images of nuclear warheads played like marimbas, the arrests that follow the annual protest trespass at Fort Benning, Georgia, and scenes of ecstatic collective protest.

The central piece, *Black Iron Vatican*, a 16 minute long silent video, shifts through allusion and documentary toward evocative results. Opening with a scene of discussion, possibly religious testifying, the action quickly segues into found footage of the Hennessey sisters, famous siblings and Franciscan nuns from Dubuque, Iowa, long active in radical social activism. In 2001, Dorothy, at the time 88, and Gwen, at the time 68, were sentenced to 6 months each in federal prison for trespassing on Fort Benning's Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly the School of the Americas), a base implicated in the training of Latin American paramilitary groups known for human rights abuses. Setting a foundation for issues of witnessing, surveillance, testifying, higher powers and subterfuge, the Hennessey sisters imagery gives way to hammering hands and commences to a series of disconcerting intercuts, including recent footage of Fort Benning protests, that suture together the mundane and the fantastical as based in faith and body. In fleeting

footage that is sometimes frenetic and sometimes elusive, even foreboding, the zone of trespass at Fort Benning is established. When one protestor, enacting her belief, quickly crosses that line, the force of her capture is felt through a long close-up shot. The fuzzy and faded exposures and focus of *Black Iron Vatican* recall the formal qualities of independent cinema as well as leftist guerilla filmmaking of the 60s and 70s, evoking questions about the position of the sites, activities and aesthetics of contemporary protest as they have been influenced by established histories and practices.

Several other works in the exhibition, videos and posters, raise questions of disappointment, powerlessness, worship and fellowship. One video work, *Announcing the Mysteries* (19 mins), takes as its inspiration long running Catholic Television programs featuring rosary recitation. The original typically featured soft focus and superimposed edits with multiple camera angles trained on an idyllic youth in a lush landscape leading the rosary and slowly joined by others in his or her faith. In his self-performed work, Roche's incantation is more guttural and ambiguous. Isolated in a rural landscape his primal repetitions point toward an earth-bound aesthetic and incomprehensible pain, as well as a faith that eludes definition as either ironic or sincere. Roche's posters, drawn from Super-8 film sequences, explore these themes in highly saturated imagery manipulated through film distortion and layering, video processing, and radical scale shifts. Throughout the exhibition, the failure to attain a true transcendence of spirit is omnipresent; the body from which this expression is uttered continually betrays the ecstatic witnessing that Roche portrays.

Gallery 400's At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago series annually commissions four new projects from Chicago area artists. At the Edge aims to support experimental projects that might not find support elsewhere.