BY ESTHER PARADA

published by the University Art Museum, State University of New York at Binghamton, as part of the Current Events series
DEFINE DEFY
THE FRAME
AN UNFOLDING EXHIBITION
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On the left and right flaps of this folder you see two individuals — worlds apart in circumstance and cultural background — who sought to share their visual impressions: North American Lieutenant Colonel North was in the full glare of U.S. media coverage; Nicaraguan Maria Medina Pavon was in the privacy of her modest home. What are the implications of imposing this symmetry or apparent balance on the lopsided structure of media attention? I ask you to consider my manipulations as part of an ongoing process of challenging received information. The piece within this folder can be looked at as an accordion-fold “book” in two sections. It is also meant to be viewed as a poster by unfolding the two strips side by side, with the predominantly black and white section on the left.

The photograph of North with one of his soldiers at the Iran-Contra hearing (taken by Paul Horstman, chief photographer for The New York Times in Washington D.C.) ran on page four of The Times, July 17, 1987. It accompanied a story headlined “North, Minus His Slides, Makes Case for Contras,” which went on to describe the compromising, went out with the Senate panel — their intense maneuvering shown in a four-column photograph on the following page. “North” was permitted to give his lecture... but without his slides thereby depriving him of the visual image that pro-contra members of the committee wanted magnified before a national television audience.

From an artist’s perspective there is a certain satisfaction in this congressional recognition of the power of visual images, although the news story actually went on with several paragraphs with detailed descriptions of the slides. The very last paragraph of the suggested text, with typical journalistic understatement, that there might be alternatives to North’s version of the truth: “Like many of the elements in Colonel North’s presentation, a number of the figures he often has been the subject of debate...”

Nevertheless The Times, like the majority of mainstream media sources in the United States, functions as a forum for official government pronouncements on issues of foreign policy. At best, it showcases the narrow spectrum of debate determination, by the administration’s agenda: to aid or not to aid, to show (like the appeals for aid or not to use, sit... The intent of Define/Defy the Frame is to encourage an expansion of the viewers’ perspective beyond the parameters of attention established by the U.S. government; and reported—whether in meticulous detail or skinny sound byte—by the media.

The Moroccans: United States Intervention in Morocco’s Civil War (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1988). The Moroccan National Guard by U.S. soldiers, at the Government House in Rabat. That framework was first developed in The Monroe Doctrine, Theme and Variations (1987). It was elaborated in The Monroe Doctrine, Part Two (1989), which introduced a latter-day variant of the 1827 Ocalan healing theme: the closing ceremony at the School of the Americas in Panama. This ceremonial photograph (by James LaMayne in The New York Times, September 24, 1984, p. 8) and the equally benign headline, “School for Latinos Closes in Panama,” accompanying LaMayne’s story belie the damage and controversy which this facility provoked. We learn in later paragraphs of the Times story that the school trained more than 45,000 Latin American officers since its opening in 1947, and that “Panamanian nationalists and leftist critics... described the American-run facility as a school where students whose graduations were turned against their own governments.”

“The school may not have deserved the level of criticism it sometimes received. Several of its graduates did, however, take control of their countries. They included Brg. Gen. Omar Torrijos Herrera of Panama, Gen. Lecrado Oates of Argentina and Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero of El Salvador. In addition, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez of Honduras asserted a dominant role in his country’s politics.”

The article goes on to quote Col. Michael J. Sierra, the school’s commander, defending the United States’ role in running the school: “The school’s an extension of our foreign policy... and our foreign policy tries to influence people in a manner beneficial to the United States.”

It is my hope that you as viewers will extend these perspectives by bringing images, text, or documents from your own personal experience or professional expertise to become participants in this “unfolding exhibition.”

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EXPAND THE NARRATIVE FRAME:

“A few minutes later, I was standing in the hall. I had just pulled up a chair at the desk where the woman sat. She looked at me and smiled. ‘What can I do for you?’ she asked. ‘I’ve been told to come here for help.’

I explained my situation to the woman. I was feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work I had to do. She listened carefully to my story and then offered me some advice. ‘First of all, take a deep breath,’ she said. ‘You’re feeling overwhelmed, but you can handle this.’

‘How do I do that?’ I asked.

‘Just focus on one thing at a time,’ she advised. ‘Complete that task, and then move on to the next one.’

I took her advice and made a list of tasks I needed to complete. I started with the most important one and worked my way through the list.

Eventually, I was able to finish all of my work. I was much more productive after following her advice. I learned that sometimes it’s better to take things slow and focus on one task at a time. Now I feel confident that I can handle anything that comes my way.”
The Art Museum’s exhibition (March 2 - April 6, 1990) and publication of work by Esther Parada is part of our Current Events series. Current Events refers to timely political and cultural events as well as progressive and challenging ways of thinking about art. A critical and experimental approach is characteristic of the artists in this series, who seek a synthesis between visual expression and political or social struggle. The series attempts to present a diversity of opinion that adamantly challenges the notion of a singular Eurocentric or monocultural perspective. Parada’s investigations into the representation/misrepresentation of information fit squarely within these parameters.

Define/Defy the Frame attempts to dislocate a conventional reading of museum exhibition and publication formats. The “catalogue” in this case is not documentation, but rather another exhibition venue. It could be described as a folding book or poster; Esther calls it an “unfolding exhibition.” In using this experimental form she seeks to open up a dialogue between different elements of the work—such as the poster and the folder—as well as between artist and viewer. Within the gallery space we want to challenge the authority of the museum in determining artistic “quality” and interpretation, and to begin to transform conventional assumptions about art practice. Recognizing the significance of the viewer in the production of meaning, we invite artists, writers, curators, historians, students, and others to collaborate in the development of this “unfolding exhibition.” It is in this spirit that Esther (with computer equipment) will be resident in the gallery space during a three-day period to facilitate the processing of text and/or images contributed by those who wish to expand or challenge the printed work. Adriana Angel’s offer to transcribe her 1989 interview with Maria Medina for inclusion in the exhibition space is one example of this interactivity.

Nancy Gonchar, Curator

Define/Defy the Frame was generated on a Macintosh II computer using QuarkXpress page layout software. Black & white photographs were digitized using AppleScan or HyperScan software on an Apple Scanner, while slides were digitized with a Barneyscan 35mm slide scanner. These scans were manipulated using SuperPaint, Digital Darkroom, and/or Image Studio software. Color slides were printed by Ross Ehler Photo Labs, Chicago, or projected and manipulated on a Canon Color Laser Copier 500. Black & white film output from disk was printed by Anzographics, Chicago, while color film separations were made by IPP Lithocolor, Chicago. Offset lithography was by Rider Dickerson, Inc., Chicago, on 80 lb. gloss Product Lith text for the 4-color poster and 8 pt. Carolina Cover C2S for the black & white folder.