

JON ROUTSON

Transgressive art is as rare these days as a rotary phone. Yet Baltimore-based, 33-year-old Jon Routson managed to deliver a frisson of naughtiness in his recent show at Team Gallery in New York City. In three small rooms, set up like a mini-multiplex, he screened his homemade bootleg recordings of recent Hollywood releases. The bill of fare changed without advance notice: three films per day, including *The Passion of the Christ*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake, *Gothika*, the Olsen twins movie, and *Elf*. Technically speaking, the guy sneaks a camcorder into movie theaters, tapes the entire film, and shows the very imperfect recording as his own work. Throughout the show's run, he continued to bootleg, adding to the exhibit while it was still in progress. The result was a surprisingly powerful revivification of the well-worn art practice of appropriation—that is, recycling ready-made images to foreground the cultural constructedness of everything. Presenting the world as pictures about pictures, appropriation has been the leading contemporary art tic since the Eighties. It's now about as thought-provoking as wallpaper, however brilliantly milked by such masters as Richard Prince and Louise Lawler, so it's hard to believe at this late date that one can experience repurposed images as shockingly new again. But that is precisely what Routson achieves with his chutzpahdik bootlegs. In typical art-world fashion, just when you think things couldn't get any thinner, someone trots along and raises the stakes through sheer artlessness.

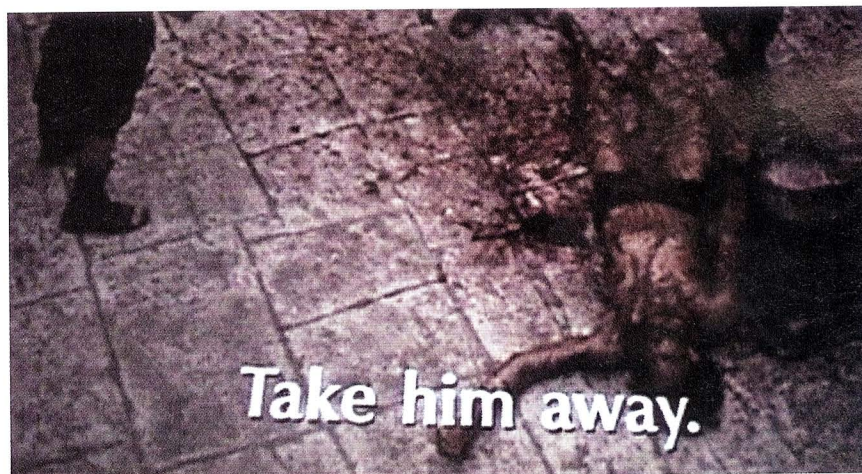
As luck would have it, the day this Jew dropped by the gallery it featured a Jesus triple whammy: *The Passion of the Christ* appeared on all three screens. Lest I hastily conclude the artist had totally dispensed with craftsmanship, the receptionist cheerfully assured me the trinity was kosher: "He saw it three different times. Each recording was made separately." As I passed through the gallery's rooms, three scenes of the biblical splatterfest were in progress, like a serial peep show of agony. It was

clear each copy was an "original" made on a different occasion. In one the subtitles were blocked by the seats, although the EXIT sign was clearly visible; another listed to the side, revealing only the right half of the translations. Only in the third, in which I caught the final death throes of the savior-as-chop meat, was the text fully legible.

To confuse Routson's work with the illegal copies sold on Canal Street is to not see it—conceptually or formally. It

accepting it on terms dictated by the marketplace. If Mel Gibson is the symptom, Routson's art is the antidote. It was weird to find oneself making such old-fashioned distinctions between art and pop all over again.

According to the gallery press release, "this is probably the last time he will be able to display his bootlegs. A new law, due to go into effect in June, will affect the legal status of his project." From Marcel Duchamp's found objects to Andy



is the one-remove from the original that *is* his work, and that position makes for a unique and even analytic experience. Instead of sucking us into the fantasy world of the movie, Routson's re-presentation prevents our immersion into a *Passion*, a *Gothika*, or even an *Elf*, however alluring they may be. (In the case of Gibson's movie, the very flawed documents fabulously ironize the icky kitsch-fest.) Pulling back the wizard's curtain, Rout-

son presents the film along with everything we usually block out once the lights dim in the theater—the seats in front, the cheap ceiling panels, the extraneous coughing sounds—thereby denying us the pleasure of movie-watching. By putting the film in *his* picture, he neutralizes its hypnotic power. In a deadpan, even lame way, Routson's camera imposes its own point of view onto this absurdly hyped, culturally dominant product, rather than passively

Warhol's original copies, strategies that confuse taking and making, producing and consuming, have been validated by art history. Now more than ever, people construct not only their art but also their identities and their lives by copying ready-made stuff. The marketplace trains us to be docile consumers—to interact with the world

The artist is represented by Team Gallery in NYC

either by looking at it or buying it. Routson's passive aggression—as an unruly consumer—reveals the market's control over how we're supposed to process culture. His filched oeuvre asks who controls the fate of an image and exposes a central contradiction in our supposedly freedom-of-expression-loving society: issues of private property are impossible to reconcile with the way we actually experience our visual world.—RHONDA LIEBERMAN