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Kota Ezawa and Michele O'Mara: 'Version' *A Room for Debate*

Alison Bing, October 7, 2004

New Langton Arts and guest curator Anne Collier have created a far more interesting room for debate than you'll see on television. With so many competing messages clamoring for our attention, we simply cannot hang on presidential candidates' every word; as Kota Ezawa's multichannel animation "Lennon Sontag Beuys" shows, only the occasional phrase manages to rise above the din of media blitzes staged for our benefit. When viewed together, it's the overall performances and not the specifics we remember from John Lennon's press conference in bed with Yoko Ono, Susan Sontag's lecture at Columbia and Joseph Beuys' public dialogue at the New School for Social Research. What filters through Ezawa's dazzling collage of rhetoric is an awareness of how speech is made memorable by the speaker. Ezawa presents these speeches as cartoons stripped down to their barest elements of shape and color, drawing our attention away from the particulars and to the broad stagecraft that makes all the difference between white noise and colorful anecdote. Michele O'Mara also restages dialogue in her multichannel video "Peacehead," which features actors reciting lines from 1970s conspiracy-theory thrillers about oil-price inflation and international cartels that are eerie echoes of contemporary political debates. Of course, no political candidate has O'Mara's sense of humor: Her actors camp it up '70s style, affecting "Charlie's Angels" gun poses while wearing rainbow costumes and sporting giant foam peace signs as headdresses. But watch carefully, because O'Mara has embedded affecting moments in her broad satire. At the end of her video, the actors circle one another and give each other loving looks as though they're attending some EST self-esteem day camp. But when they turn those loving looks outward to their audience, the tone shifts from goofy to genuine, and the audience is left considering Elvis Costello's classic quandary: What's so funny about peace, love and understanding?