“POST NO BILLS”
WHITE COLUMNS

Since Matthew Higgs joined White Columns as director and chief curator at the end of last year, the venerable not-for-profit’s Higgsification has proceeded apace. Wasting little time (or space), he hit the ground running in February 2005 with six concurrent projects. The most prominent of these was “Trade,” a group exhibition of pairs of artworks that had at some point been exchanged by their makers. The show’s conceit was typical of its organizer’s predilection for collaborative enterprises that forge ahead with domino-effect inevitability or proliferate like benevolent viruses. Higgs’s sensibility in general is likeably catholic: Fixed by the eclectic enthusiasms of an omnivorous fan, he is also fascinated by observing what happens when the spotlight is swung away from center stage and into the wings or the crowd—or even out of the theater altogether.

“Post No Bills” arrived in the gallery’s main space at the start of the summer, but transcended its quiet slot by mobilizing a multigenerational roster of more than seventy contributors that included everyone from Fiona Banner to Allen Ruppersberg, Rirkrit Tiravanija to John Waters (the last entertainingly represented by Visit Marfa, 2005, as seen on the cover of the Summer 2004 issue of Artforum). Not coincidentally, it was possible to extract from this expansive checklist a partial who’s who of Higgs’s recent and not-so-recent allies: Paul Noble, Jeremy Deller, Scott King, Bob and Roberta Smith, and Inventory, to name but a few. All these artists were represented here by posters, or rather “works that either (literally) take the form of a poster, or works that adopt or approximate the language(s) and formats of posters.”

Higgs’s interest in independent publishing and printed ephemera is well known. As a teenager in the late ’70s, he produced a fanzine, Photophobia, and later launched Imprint 93, a series of cheap commissioned multiples that were mailed out unsolicited—and sometimes unannounced as art. In “Post No Bills,” therefore, he was in his element. Most of the works included were editions, many large or unlimited. A few of these were even offered as giveaways—I left with copies of Walead Beshty’s elliptical ARCHITECTURE IS NOT SCULPTURE (Paul Rudolph, Oriental Gardens, 1970–1981, doubled, inverted, cinemascopic), 2005; Michael Smith’s hilariously disparaging Class Evaluation, 2003; and a 1990/2005 Xerox by Jonathan Monk bearing the single word CANCELLED that could be used to announce (or prankishly encourage) the abandonment of any given event through its application to an existing announcement.

While some works advertise or document real goings-on (Lucy McKenzie’s Florish Publicity Posters, 2002–2003; Clint Burnham’s At Work, 2003), others, such as Matthew Buckingham’s The Six Grandfathers (also known as Slaughterhouse Peak, Cougar Mountain, and now Mt. Rushmore) in the year 502,002 C.E., 2002, allude to more fanciful possibilities. Still further inclusions appropriate existing examples of the genre: Wayne Gonzalez and David Silver’s Untitled, 2005, for example, reproduces in cool silver and black a stringent dress code sign that, unaccountably, forbids black boots. There are also those that draw specifically on the bold graphic conventions of poster design: John Armleder’s None of the Above, 2005, and Kathy Slade’s I Want It All I Want It Now, 2003, both of which rely on strong text and flat color for their impact, fall into this category. But only occasionally, as in Aleksandra Mir’s The 21st Century Abortion Abolitionists, 2005, and Guerrilla GirlsBroadBand’s typically sardonic The Advantages of Another Bush Presidency, 2004, did the overtly political make its presence felt.

Ultimately, however, the show’s success lay not so much in its individual works as in communicating the energy and purpose of a broad-based but habitually sidelined area of artistic activity. In a style that was equal parts street and salon, “Post No Bills” made a convincing case for continuing to ignore that very instruction.

—Michael Wilson