

ART/MEDIA

Feedback from the Region

1.

"SUBVERSIVE ACTS: Artists Working With The Media Politically," opened on Jan 7, 1986. A spectacular eye, from a 1974 New Mexico highway billboard, scanned the steps of the North--now Van Deren Coke--Gallery of The University of New Mexico Art Museum.

The show was part of a larger vision called ART/MEDIA, a two month series of exhibitions, lectures, performances, with artworks on billboards around Albuquerque, in newspapers, magazines, and on T.V.

The project had begun in 1984, when Albuquerque artists Patrick Clancy and Duane Griffin decided to collaborate on a billboard. Applying to the city's 1% for Art Program, they learned that these funds could only be used to make sited art intended to last more than twenty years. The artists decided to educate the public as to the value of supporting temporary artforms.

Now the project expanded to include using mass media in general as potential vehicles for artworks. The city's Community Cultural Affairs Program donated office space and a telephone, and Albuquerque Arts Alliance agreed to act as sponsoring organization for any grant initiatives.

In the fall of 1984, sculptor Eve Laramee, and media artist Ann Zimmerman, took over as project co-ordinators.

In early 1985, Robert Gaylor, Co-director of the Santa Fe Center for Contemporary Arts, offered space and financial support. By summer, grants were assured from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New Mexico Arts Division. Some corporate funds and many in-kind services were secured, including radio and T.V. airtime, newspaper and magazine space, and free billboards.

By late fall, 1985, the guest list was finalized. First, Jenny Holzer would lecture on her work. She'd be followed one week later by High Performance editor Steve Durland.

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Over the next month or so, the following people took to platforms, either in Albuquerque or Santa Fe: Terry Allen, Craig Owens (who had been scheduled to lecture at UNM, and agreed to lend his name to ART/MEDIA publicity and interviews), Paul Bob, Rachel Rosenthal, and Hans Haacke.

Local artists who participated include: Patrick Clancy, Gwen Widmer, Jim Stuber, Violet Ray, poet Larry Goodell, and video artist Bob Willis.

Woody & Steina Vasulka videotaped the events, the result of which is being edited for commercial distribution. A catalogue is also being produced.

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After "SUBSERVIVE ACTS" had been scheduled, a new director and staff were appointed to the University Art Museum. They inherited a show over which they had no control, and were vocally unhappy with the situation.

The procedure had been unusual. None of the material was seen before installation. This, coupled with the curatorial inexperience of Laramee and Zimmerman, served to exhume a sharp air of mistrust between the parties.

The artists, in turn, were exposed to this mephitic atmosphere.

Museum director, Peter Walch, first looked to the positive. Since he wouldn't have approved the show, maybe--since it was here--something could be learned from it.

"I hate it," he finally admitted. "Not in its terms but in its tactics."

Joseph Traugott, Curator of Exhibitions, voiced his concerns by opening a distinction between "visual politics" and "Political Art."

Visual politics manipulated the media into propogandizing one's (obvious) viewpoint. This is akin to Aristotle's

enthymeme: "We all agree that..." Then, once agreement on the major, generally acceptable, premise is secured, the speaker's conclusion is clinched. D.L. O'Keefe (in Stolen Lightning) characterizes this operation as "a first person singular speaking in the first person plural, and getting away with it." Political Art, on the other hand, strives to expose and critique underlying conceits of power.

"Political Art is a doomed art," Woody Vasulka said. The issues that engender the work are temporal. But Vasulka quickly realized his all too reductive statement, and went on to say that Guernica is a rare example of successful political art. In it, Picasso casts light not so much on the bombing of a small town in Spain as on the dark side of human nature: that area that, when literalized, often precipitates atrocities. Guernica is as relevant to Vietnam, Lebanon, South Africa, Central America...as it was to Spain.

Visual politics, Peter Walch said, preaches "to the already converted." Its message is not only obvious, it is also ironic. And irony, Kierkegaard wrote (in The Concept of Irony), "is not concerned with the irony of the situation but only with the irony of itself." When the work of art became defined as a perihelion within the artist's aura, irony could no longer be mastered. The ironic gesture became solipsistic. Art became identity. What is most identifiable is what is most obvious. And what is presented in an obvious manner is indelibly self-destructive, as it does not allow for further interpretations, but feeds on its own muscularity. Before the jury can return with its decision, the rope hangs itself.

Political Art, however, does not encode its own interpretation. For this, Vasulka counsils, "you must work on it, grow older." For art is not, finally, a political

or social problem. "I see art as a problem of individuals."

"SUBVERSIVE ACTS" had included Jenny Holzer's "Inflammatory Essays;" an altar display of artifacts (candle holders, plastic flowers, etc.) by The Church of the SubGenius; Violet Ray's "Advertising the Contradictions," (advertising layouts juxtaposing corporate slogans and images with the human suffering they actually induce); Jim Stuber's "Unlimited Fun" (woodcuts printed on pages of Pravda), and "Non-Roman" (Library index cards, printed in various languages. Stuber, a cataloguer at UNM's Zimmerman Library, was literally putting his work on the table.); a 1974 research project, conducted in New Mexico, "to determine whether the media could be organized to raise the level of public awareness of a representative urban community...relative to an important social issue (invasion of privacy by technology) as a background to significant social change;" and a videotape of work by Paul Boh, Jenny Holtzer, The Church of the SubGenius, Bob Willis, et al.

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They arrived with their arsenal of slides, fuzzy images flattened against dusty screens. Their voices floated out from dim pools of light, deified by the hum of amplifiers.

Jenny Holzer presented a retrospective of her posters and electronic signs, juxtaposing their history with that of her confederates.

Craig Owens advanced his evolving theory on serialization, sprinkling his commentary with the perfume of French citations.

Hans Haacke delivered his report on the machinations of the Military/Post-Industrial/Culture Complex.

It is not that these names, theories, research, don't interest us. The Nuclear Age began in New Mexico, and continues to grow here like a malignant carbuncle.

But as our experience of international art is acquired primarily through magazine reproductions, the importance of maturing our own line of art history is manifest.

Of those who came here, the performance artists were most salient. They were their work and the site of their work. It was almost as if language were whole again,

signifiers reaching out to embrace signifieds. Though it was possible only by the force of Presence. In a world in which the cognitive map is the territory (brought about, in part, by Nietzschean misreadings of Buddhist metaphysics) to occupy space with meaning and grace, however temporal, is an act of achievement.

They arrived in the spirit of some of the best known artists (John Sloan, Stuart Davis, John Marin, Marsden Hartley, et al.) who came to New Mexico to work, then returned home.

We understand this as the sudden floods that drown all the tropes of civilization...only to, just as suddenly, drain into the innocence of trackless sand. Our ancestor/artists, after all, left no names--only the evidence of their thirst.

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New Mexico reveals its desiccated face quickly, while its depth is plumbed painfully slow. It has an unpredictable temper. It is moody. Insecure. Polysemously mad.

Here is located a prolix cultural thesaurus; but one that has been appropriated by Chambers of Commerce who sell it to tourists as nostalgia.

It is time for artists and critics residing here to wrest back our inheritance, working it into a larger relevance.

Presently, there is no community of contemporary artists in New Mexico. This is historically interesting, because of the famous Santa Fe and Taos art colonies earlier in this century. Contemporary Art suffers from this confluence. The old and new live side-by-side, the traditional (Indian and Anglo crafts) providing a handy sachet for conservative funding.

In Albuquerque, which has one-third of the state's population, two galleries show contemporary work by local artists. Looking at this situation from New York, for example, it would seem an unfavorable place for an artist to live: a cultural desert. Yet it is a seedbed where the visions of artists are nurtured by what Hartley called "essentially a sculptural country." It is a place to work, travel out from, and return to.

Also, like a desert, its inactivity is deceptive. More than once in a while there blooms beautiful particular projects. ART/MEDIA is one of these. Lovely but thorny.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The goals of the project are to promote public awareness, understanding and interest in contemporary art. It is an educational outreach program which introduces contemporary art to people who don't normally go to museums and art galleries and have little contact with art in their daily lives. Through the use of mass media techniques, a very wide public audience will be reached.

We must first ask whether promoting "public awareness, understanding and interest in contemporary art" can be accomplished by exposure. In a retort to Kathleen Shields' review of "SUBVERSIVE ACTS," in the Albuquerque Journal, Eve Laramee wrote that "The text/Image appearance of this work may 'look like' conceptual art, but if one looks at the content, rather than the form, the issues raised are today's issues..."

So that ART/MEDIA is envisioned as presenting issues to the public. Political issues, from which aesthetical concerns are not independent.

There was a sense of proselytism, of holy mission. The artists,

brought here from New York and Los Angeles, were treated by Laramee and Zimmerman like visiting clergy of The Church of Contemporary Art. Craig Owens as clerk.

The organizers were somewhat less sensitive to the problems of people working for the media. Although some successful relationships were formed, there were also misunderstandings and accusations, particularly of censorship.

As for reaching "a very wide public audience": Patrick Clancy and Gwen Widmer did re-photograph images and texts of an edition of Albuquerque Living, printing their collage in that same edition. The magazine's circulation is about 17,000.

Impact, the weekly magazine of the Albuquerque Journal--New Mexico's statewide morning newspaper--, devoted an issue to "Art and The Media--An art project adopts techniques of the mass media."

Illustrated Daily, the news/interview show of KNME-TV--Albuquerque's PBS affiliate--, did a half-hour montage of ART/MEDIA events and discussions.

The exhibitions in Albuquerque and Santa Fe drew respectably-sized audiences, as did the performances. Even the lectures were well-attended.

There was a problem with the billboards. As Albuquerque has no Times Square, and its Downtown development is still in Planner's Heaven, billboard locations, a list not readily available, were difficult to find in the city's mosaic of signs.

This aside, and given the conditions of a region whose media has minimal interest in contemporary art, ART/MEDIA's disbursement was quite successful. But how do we measure the overall accomplishment of an enterprise such as this?

The visiting artists are gone.

Aside from videotape documentation, most of the artworks

have disappeared.

Laramee has returned to sculpting, preparing for a show in New York later this year. Zimmerman is writing a paper on censorship.

I think we must wait and see if it creates a mythology.

-Joel Weishaus

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