



outside, TTSS, 1983. Photo: Teri Stokin

SEX AND DEATH AND SHOCK AND SCHLOCK
A Long Review
of The Times Square Show

Anne Ominous

Overheard in downtown art territory: "Have you seen The Times Square Show?" "Not yet, but I hear it's the best thing around." "That's not what I heard."

The Show

Well, by now everybody's heard something about "The Times Square Show"—a sleazy, artist-organized extravaganza in a deteriorating former massage parlor on 41st street and 7th Avenue in New York City. Abundant press coverage has been as contradictory as the show itself. Word of mouth to mouth has often been tongue in cheek. What makes TTSS noteworthy, no matter what one thinks of the art in it, is the levels it offers. TTSS is an organizational feat—an object lesson in object-organizing by artists. It is a weird kind of cultural colonization that worked because colonizers and colonized had something in common: an exhibition of "unsalable" works accompanied by a gifte shoppe that managed to sell just such works—cheap; a constantly changing panorama of esthetic neuroses; a performance and film festival; a throwback to the early '60s happenings-and-storefront syndrome; a sunny apotheosis of shady sexism; a cry of rage against current artworldiness and a ghastly glance into the future of art. It's also a lot of knives and guns and money and dirt and cocks and cunts and blood and gore housed in four wrecked floors (plus basement) donated to the organizers, by the landlord.

The extraordinary transformation of the space over two weeks was noticeable only to those who saw it both before and after, because after imitated before, littering the floors with sawdust, the corridors with broken glass, the walls with graffiti, despite pre-show cleaning and repainting and putting in windows. Neat art was out, and those who risked it made art that stood out. Every inch of the space was tarted up with art or an unreasonable facsimile. Some of it was barely recognizable as such, which is how you knew it was avant-garde. At the same time, works came and went and changed places and evolved. There were

some 100 artists included, with the makers of the "Exotic Events" that took place several times a week. At the beginning the organizers (the artists' group Collaborative Projects, Inc., or Colab, and friends and some enemies) asked for "proposals" like any self-respecting institution. Because of the success of their previous shows (including the "Manifesto Show," the "Doctors and Dentists Show," the "Money Show" and "The Real Estate Show"), they were swamped with would-be exhibitors. The result was the kind of chaos in which the group operates best anyway. Artists who persisted made work that existed—as far as I can tell from the experience of an Australian friend of mine, unknown to and not exactly well-received by the organizers, but with the self-confidence not to slink off rejected. I shudder to think about how the various spaces were appropriated, but people found their niches—in closets, dark halls, toilet stalls, ceilings and stairways. (No list of artists appeared, most of the work wasn't signed, and there were no nice typed labels.)

A huge banner on 7th Avenue announced the show. Below it from a row of unglazed windows, taped music and laughter wafted in the Fashion Avenue breezes, mixing with the fast-food odors of the diner below them. Around the corner was a big store window and a bright yellow "naive" mural by a Czech and German group called "NORMAL" on the walls of "The Gift Shop," which was in some ways TTSS's most innovative aspect. The average price was five dollars, and there was plenty to buy for a quarter or a dollar ninety-nine; the idea was that if something didn't sell in the first few days it would be disappeared; featured were chatchkas for the downwardly mobilized—a winged penis, a pornographic fan, pill capsules with messages, books, posters, etc. The usually silver lobby with its blasting juke box, bandstand, shabby plastic couch and miscellaneous artworks, including a large montage drawing of a beaten black man hung by chains, offered a certain casual reception. But dim stairs beckoned up and down.

The Art

It would take longer to describe than to see. Here are some of the things I was moved by or involved by:

A red-painted stairway ending in a huge comic-graphic gun/arrow beht around a corner; phrases and photos (and deaf alphabet translations) on walls and stairs. Descending you got "We all lose in the end" on the wall; going up you got "But the loss is kept obscure" and on the steps "Quick with your lip bite your tongue."

The dark, low-ceilinged basement room totally covered with black-on-white handprints ("in touch with the space") inhabited by an ambiguously-sexed, painted figure wielding a circular beam of light; vantage points marked in the room; the piece not an "alien" as some would have it, but an illusive/allusive statement about control by a male feminist. Back in the shadows, another artist's wax paper "ghost."

A room wallpapered in money and rats. "Marginal Economy," a miniature board fence plastered with photos of black people and vacant lots.

The "Portrait Gallery" containing among other things ceramic heads of the eight U.S. soldiers killed in the "rescue attempt" in Iran, the ubiquitous and exuberant painted plaster heads of South Bronx residents, and some conventional paintings that gained interest from their context.

Varnished and garnished with marbles, wooden clubs hanging overhead in a short corridor.

A room (most effective at night) with a chicken wire woman on bed springs holding a prayer book, an ominously gleaming gold plaster bust of a black man "seated" in a shoddy armchair; an altar to violence in the closet; a skillfully painted pink pig labeled "The pig is the only domestic animal raised exclusively for slaughter"; a videotape of the Panthers on TV and "Revolutionary People's Communications Networks Voodoo Comics" wallpaper.

A tawdry "nest" in an upstairs closet filled with cloth, tinsel, satin, leopard-skin smelling of stale perfume and make-up and of the loneliness and ugliness





lobby, TTSS, 1980. Photo: Andrea Callard



stairway in lobby, TTSS, 1980. Photo: Andrea Callard

of a whore's fantasy and reality.

Some quite traditional, or just the opposite, figure paintings not on black velvet but on large cow hides.

Ceramic snakes' heads jutting over a stairway door.

Black-and-white raw cartoon montages self-critically parodying Macho and festooned (coincidentally) with dainty blinking Xmas lights ("MACHO ME, ME ME ME"; "MACHO PLAY, BANG BANG BANG"; "MACHO WORK, BOOM BOOM BOOM"; "MACHO MACHO, HOT CHA CHA"—a message also echoed in a big "Stupid Victor" mural by the same artist).

A room of collage installation protesting the Virgin/Whore image of women and the violence promoted by porn, complete with mermaid, bride, witch, nurse, madonna and little girl stereotypes crudely daubed with paint and arrayed with pink plastic tits and

accompanied by porn magazine collages.

A long funny sad narrative revealed sequentially between the black bars of a manually-cranked "peep show" machine.

A punching bag hung before an open black wall labeled "Diletante Guerillas" (sic) and enthusiastically chalked with audience responses.

A fringed white "rug" (under the punching bag) with advertising images of money inscribed "Chase Man" and "publicity is the culture of the consumer society" and "when times are hard, capitalists display images of money to make self-determination by the poor appear impossible" and "Walk Over Capitalism." Behind it, out the window, is a view of Chase Manhattan itself, Times Square Branch (is its money dirtier than money elsewhere?).

And a hand sink overflowing with grimy salt crystals, and some terrific feminist comic strip posters, and a room of painted clothes, and SAMO's critical graffiti, and "Take Back the Night" scrawled here and there, and a scab-picker's bathroom of peeling red paint I liked better than the work in it, and a garbage and rat fountain and the ubiquitous decorated machines and a lot of other Indescribable Things You get the picture?

The Issues

TTSS was ostensibly about Times Square—that is, about sex and money and violence and human degradation. It was also about artists banding together as pseudo-terrorists and identifying with the denizens of this chosen locale—envying them and imitating them



at the same time as colonizing them, thus rebelling against the cleanliness and godlessness of the art-world institutions, "alternate" and otherwise. It was also about artists making a microcosmic strike for economic independence and control of their products through the store, and the more or less "open" exhibition. (It is an illusion that Colab is some sort of pariah working "outside the funding structure" when in fact they have a persuasive touch for or on official funds and a talent for PR that Show World should envy.)¹ Most important, TTSS, like all the other Colab "theme shows," was about art being about something other than art.

While the energy of the whole heady mixture was a much-needed antidote to the mechanical novelty of today's artworld, I didn't admire the contents of TTSS as much as I enjoyed them. As a whole the show did successfully appeal to a fairly varied audience—locals as well as disillusioned sophisticates, cynical radicals and chic seekers. This accomplishment can't be underestimated. It is very rare that even the best-intentioned artworld offspring communicate outside their own yards. What I worry about is the depth of commitment even in that work I got my kicks out of. (Maybe I shouldn't ask for more? Gift horses and all that?)

I know from TTSS's organizers' past activities that "politics" was a major impetus. (However the word was not mentioned on the press release, which was all fun and games; it did appear on the jazzier street poster, listed generically with "art, performance, film, video, store and music.") By virtue of its location alone TTSS was "political." But even though the general issues were easily identifiable it was often impossible to tell where the artists stood on them. Many seem to have thought that pictures of guns, pictures of dollars, pictures of sex (actually pictures of women since women and sex are interchangeable, right?) constitute a statement in themselves. This is a sort of reverse Magrittean situation ("This is not a pipe") in which the image carries all the weight no matter how fragile it may be. Or is this just the middle-class TV terrorism which, with S & M, is the dominant subject matter for so much new-no-nuwave art?

There's a lot of random violence—"I'm going to kill you" scrawled out of context on a wall; "How to Stop a Bullet and Live" on a poster—and a horrendous arsenal of weaponry aimed nowhere, unless it's at the spectator. Social criticism this is not, though it is a loud and clear expression of alienation. As far as I can tell, these images are rarely meant as satire or protest, but intend rather to focus if not on the object then on the act—of dancing on the razor's edge, coming down Left or Right with the risk of straddling the middle. A game of American Roulette is being played with art as the itchy trigger finger. This is possible because art is supposed to be either above it all or below it all but not part of it all. Art, like pornography itself, is fantasy without action.² But TTSS—as a collaged whole—has managed to be very much a part of it all. Although more appropriately secretive than "The Real Estate Show," it is out of the white-walled isolation ward. Its madness is up front, upstairs and downstairs and in milady's chamber.



stairs from basement, TTSS, 1980.



fourth floor, TTSS, 1980.

The studied crudity that is so much a part of TTSS is also a part of the pervasive level of political naïveté. Whether self-conscious or manipulative or innocent or consciously critical, it is the cutting edge these mostly young artists are looking for (in sex as well as art and politics, it seems; one participant suggested that the best review of this show might be from an informed psycho-sexual viewpoint). I keep coming back to the way "politics" floats so politely in this iconoclastic but still "art" context. I've complained before about the assumption that style alone (as opposed to image) can make a political statement—the idea that badly printed photos and harsh tabloid graphics attached to no matter what kind of irresponsible or undigested imagery is "political."³ And after some three years of the "punk" posters that paper SoHo, Tribeca and the Lower East Side, I'm getting sick of all the guns and skulls and racist/sexist slurs. (The latest is something about "Japs" and was included in TTSS events; it is presumably by someone for whom World War II only existed in the comic strips.) Even though these posters are often witty and eye-catching and an improvement on the Hallmark variety, it doesn't seem to me that the world situation is such that games around war and killing and race hatred are very funny. (Maybe it's just gallows humor, or shallows, or callow humor?) I'm angered that the *urgency* of so much of this art, in and out of TTSS, is being wasted on superficial fantasies—which is why Times Square is a sadly apt location.⁴

Those artists with an image of themselves as the daring agents of an esthetic catharsis, would do well to listen to a 1939 statement by René Magritte, himself soon to become the darling of the bourgeois collectors:

The very special value accorded to art by the bourgeoisie brutally unmasks the vanity of its esthetic concepts under the pressure of class interests totally foreign to cultural preoccupations. The artist does not practice the priesthood that bourgeois duplicity tries to attribute to him [sic]. Let him not lose sight of the fact that his effort, like that of every worker, is necessary to the dialectic development of the world.⁵

There are also plenty of lessons to be learned from the historical fate of Dada, which seems to be a rather unfamiliar but approved source of much new art. A warning from George Grosz in 1925:

Dada was the breakthrough, taking place with bawling and scornful laughter; it came out of a narrow, overbearing and overrated milieu and, floating in the air between classes, knew no responsibility to the general public. We saw the insane end products of the ruling order of society and burst into laughter. We had not yet seen the system behind this insanity.

The impending revolution brought gradual understanding of this system. There were no more laughing matters, there were more important problems than those of art; if art was still to have a meaning it had to submit to those problems.⁶

"We're interested in taking up situations that activate people outside the art world," says one of TTSS' organizers. And Richard Goldstein of the *Village Voice* claims that TTSS "... lets a certain class of artists in for the first time." Actually, Fashion Moda has

been providing this model for two years, showing "non-art" and "street art" and mass-produced art in an open context and confusing the boundaries between high and low culture more consistently than any single situation can.⁷ In fact, to go back further, TTSS might have been concocted in the early '60s, along with Oldenburg's storefront on the Lower East Side, the grungy early Happenings, French "neo-Dada" (an unclean Pop or dirty old man), the March Gallery group's "Doom Show," Sam Goodman's "Shit Show," some Fluxus events and, more recently, the Guerilla Art Action Group, the "Flag Show," (which landed three artists under arrest), the feminists' tampaxes and eggs in the Whitney, the Artworkers' Coalition's break into the Metropolitan Museum's Trustees' Dinner and so forth. So it's been Done Before. So What? The illusion of the new, like that of obsolescence, is fostered by competitive commercial interests.

That's what.

But the inclusion of "disenfranchised art" in both Fashion Moda and TTSS raised some other interesting questions about class which I can only suggest here. Goldstein called TTSS "... three chord art anyone can play."⁸ Its ineptness, and the ramifications of that ineptness, were among its most endearing and significant attributes. It is becoming clearer daily to more and more people that rather than the lucky few making art so unsuccessfully for the unlucky many, the artists' role may be to open up the making and distribution of art to everyone as an exchange rather than an imposition, with empathy rather than condescension as the bridge. Mass production by the masses instead of for the masses. The do-it-yourself esthetic extended to art-making makes especially good sense in the economically depressed '80s and it is one of the goals of progressive artists today.⁹

So if schlock art is as valuable as shock art and if supermarket and sidewalk art is not to be looked down on—then what proportion of shows like TTSS

should be just that kind of so-called "kitsch"? How much interclass and intercultural leavening is necessary to get across the message? Would TTSS have been twice as successful in "activating people outside the art world" if it had consisted primarily of street art? Of dime-store art? Of calendar art? Of hobby art? Of straight porn? A marvelously ugly abstract sculpture in TTSS was made, I believe, by someone who had never shown in art places before. S/He probably wasn't interested in "ugliness," and would I like it so much if the whole show were nothing else? How eclectic can you get without losing the provocative point? How far from political issues can you stray, even with the best intentions before you are "apolitical" like you're supposed to be?

For instance, TTSS's focus on sex had to include consideration of gender—a ticklish subject in these days of right wing backlash against feminist strengths (and feminist moralizing). With a few exceptions, it was in fact neglected, along with significant contradictions raised around pornography by Women Against Pornography and its opponents in and out of the Women's Movement. Significant issues of exploitation were also ignored—not merely that of the women who are made into disposable sex objects, but that of the men whose manipulated desires are also pretty pathetic. (One artist in the show wore a "sex for profit" T-shirt on opening night; his misogynous peep show had disappeared by the next time I was there.) Somewhere in the process, issues of censorship versus selection must have been confronted by the organizers, though as Richard Goldstein remarked, the solution was apparently to assure an antithesis for every thesis, rather than to reject "politically incorrect" art. Similarly Iggy Pop: "A good product has the ability to set forth true and false propositions. If someone comes on with only what's true, it's very boring, because nobody has that much truth in them."¹⁰

True (enough, since no one knows the truths so there's no need to dissemble them). But underlying such solutions is also the notion that any moral stance is uncool. Some disturbing aspects are illuminated by Deirdre English's definition of porn, which could double as a definition not only of "punk art" and of retrochic, but even of the valid goals of all avant-garde art:

Pornography depends on shock value. It lives to violate taboos. Porn, by definition, undermines the norms, attacks our values, attacks respectability. Pornography is what you're ashamed of enjoying. Porn is the devil. Porn says, here is what I really think. You don't like it? So what?¹¹

Artists with esthetic integrity usually get around such problems by using codes understandable to their audiences. But this dependence on context doesn't work when art, as in TTSS, moves out into the world; a socio-economically mixed audience gets mixed signals. Take the evolution of the sexually exploited woman image. In the '60s (Pop Art), several male artists made bundles on non-satirical blowups of soft-core porn. In the '70s, with the advent of feminism, it was safe to say that such an image was intended to be read one of two ways—as belligerent sexism or as satire/protest against that same sexism. With a little help from critics, curators and dealers, artworld audiences knew, more or less, where the artists stood, and read the images more or less as they were intended. By the end of the '70s, however, backlash and retrochic had confused matters again, giving rise to more thoughtful analyses of how art uses life and where the lines should be drawn. (Viz. the reprehensibly titled "Nigger Drawings" exhibition, which brought a crucial issue to the surface of art dialogue: Is art by nature merely neutral or can and must it mean something and take responsibility for that meaning or lack thereof?)

TTSS images of hard and soft porn may have

seemed quite daring and "real life" to an art audience. To the street audience they were probably downright opaque. On opening night two feminist women periodically performed a horrifying off-the-cuff five minute piece with one of those life-size inflatable female nudes one can buy around the corner. She has three useful orifices and the two performers, strapped onto huge didos, used them in the most brutal ways possible, yelling things like "She likes it. She loves it. Don't you, dearie?" Two men kept muttering "All you women ever think about is sex," and to the repeated question "Is this Turning You On?" one finally cried out "NO. It's disgusting!" A woman in the audience yelled, "You got it, Baby." And the point of the performance was made.

Or was it? I could barely stand to watch it, even though my politics are those of the performers. A small boy watched the piece several times in rapt fascination. I don't know what the Times Square locals thought about it, but I do know that one of the performers, after thinking it over, decided they had made a terrible mistake in disregarding coding and context; they were turning men on. Similar conflicts haunted the otherwise lively virgin/whore room, made in collaboration by two young women. The stated message was the same: "Pornography Lies About Women." Women artists all over the country for a decade now have been making very similar collage and installation pieces, so the main interest of this room was the fact that it existed not in an art gallery or a woman's center but in the heart of "enemy territory." Parts of it were strong enough to make the most hardened viewer shudder: the little girl's party dress adorned with nipple-shaped colored candies, and the porn collage of split beavers labeled "Is This Sexy?" But again, I'm not at all sure that everyone who saw it answered with an unqualified "No." For those who don't share the artists' views, it had to be either scary, cute, obvious, or—yes, sexy. Men came in for

some degradation too. A pair of cleanly professional photographs show a man being tortured—into the image of a woman, pincers pulling up breasts, etc.; a dancing black puppet recalls the minstrel stereotype black (James Brown notwithstanding). The show included a larger percentage of Third World artists than usual (which isn't saying that much), and women were well represented among its organizers and exhibitors. Yet after ten years of outraged satire, impressive women's erotic art, performances and pieces in which women overtly and covertly exploit their own bodies in an effort to liberate certain notions of sexuality from the vise of the dominant culture, and a still unabated plethora of works about the image of women in the media, much of the art in TTSS seemed pretty ineffective. It seemed mainly to exorcise individual esthetic taboos and cultural constrictions, maybe to pave the way for a more directly powerful statement. The same thing can be said, alas, for a great deal of current American "political art." I, for one, am so encouraged that such things exist at all that I find it hard to be harsh on them. However, if we don't have enough respect for these attempts to question their success and to urge them on to more expressive forms, then we so-called "political" artworkers are also failing at our tasks.

Speaking of which, I had planned to tape the responses of the various TTSS audiences and to use the comments as the basis of this "review." Life interfered and I didn't do it. Perhaps the analysis that could emerge from such raw material will come from the organizing group itself which has, I hope, spent some time evaluating its own process and experience now that the show is down. What next? "The Death Of Equal Rights Show" at the Statue of Liberty? Or the "Inflation Unemployment Show" which could take place in hot air balloons over City Hall? Or "The Whole Earth Show" at the Mudd Club featuring the Great Goddess? Or another "Sex and Death Show" by

Hooker at Love Canal? Or the "Marathon Show" at Three Mile Island? Or the "Terrorist Show" (at last) at your local railway station? "The WASP Show" at Artists' Space? "The Class Show" at P.S.1? Or maybe even "The Art Show" as a collaboration between Exxon and Mobil? ■

(Anne Ominous, of course, is Lucy R. Lippard.)

Lucy R. Lippard is a feminist art critic who is a member of The Heresies Collective. Among other things, she is involved with the recently started PAD (Political Art Documentation).

1. Richard Goldstein, "The First Radical Art Show of the '80s," *The Village Voice* (June 16, 1980); the sources acknowledged on TTSS "Exotic Events" program are: New York State Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, Beard's Fund, Robert Burden, Arfour Corporation, National Video Industries, Department of Cultural Affairs, Spectator, Inc., Sandra Devlin, Richard Sawitzky, and 112 Workshop, as well as Anonymous.
2. Deldre English, "The Politics of Porn," *Mother Jones* (April 1980), p. 20.
3. Cf. Lucy R. Lippard, "Retrochic, looking Back in Anger," *The Village Voice* (December 1979); and "Some Propaganda for Propaganda," *Heresies* (No. 5, 1980).
4. Another bad pun on the locale emerges from the fact that some of these artists are, quite naturally, on the make and take. What about the embossed card I got admitting me to a "private reception" for TTSS, from six to nine P.M. on a Tuesday—traditional uptown gallery opening hours? How square are the lines showing themselves to be? Note Rudy Burchardt's 1967 film, *Square Times*. I understand this is already getting to be a problem for Cotab. It's a shame that artists have to take the brunt of a crisis of conscience that should be laid squarely on the lap of a society that has no idea what to do with artists and consequently dumps them in this no-person's land between a reasonable desire to support themselves by doing what they do best and "selling out." Nobody put this conflict better than Ad Reinhardt in his writings and cartoons. I hate to see this generation confronted with the same problem that has smothered previous political artists in visions of sugarplums.
5. René Magritte and Jean Souterrain, "L'Art Bourgeois," in Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Sumrealists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 156.
6. George Grosz, "Art is in Danger," in Lucy R. Lippard, *Dates on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall), p. 81.
7. See Lucy R. Lippard, "Real Estate and Real Art is a Fashion Moda," *Seven Days*, (April 1980).
8. Richard Goldstein, *op cit*.
9. The notion of empathy replacing condescension emerged from a symposium on social change art that took place in Cincinnati, June 1980.
10. Quoted by Edith Duke, *Artforum* (February 1980), p. 92.
11. Deldre English, *op cit*.

As is evident this article is illustrated with installation views rather than with representations of individual works. This seems in keeping with the sensibility of the exhibition. We understand that at the beginning of the show there was no formal list of exhibitors but that about halfway through, an incomplete list and floor plan were made and were available.

—The Editor