

Report from Times Square

The "Times Square Show" was an aggressively unkempt exhibition housed at the epicenter of the city's viceland. Mixing energy and desire with memories of Fluxus and Pop, the show resulted from the collaboration of two fledgling art groups with outsider bases on the Lower East Side and in the South Bronx.

BY JEFFREY DEITCH

Times Square is New York's behavioral sink, the place where people go to do all the things that they can't do at home. Art appreciation does not generally fall within that category. This past June, however, the hordes of half-wild, half-crazed, and fully degenerate individuals who keep pouring out of the 42nd Street subway had occasion to check out a whole building full of art that was just as raw, raucous, trashy and perhaps even as exciting as some of the more notorious attractions of the tenderloin. Carnival music and hawkers' chants lured the curious toward a ramshackle four-story structure on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 41st Street covered with midway signs, banners and subway-style graffiti. A motley collection of ragged-looking and aggressively fashionable characters leaned out of the open holes that had once been windows and stood talking on the sidewalk, mixing with the street people who wandered by. Those adventurous enough to ask were told they had stumbled upon the "Times Square Show," a month-long party, business enterprise and loosely curated exhibition of art, film, fashion and exotica.

Inside, this former bus depot and massage parlor had been transformed into a sort of art funhouse. Just beyond the door, a motorized James Brown cutout danced and jerked to one of his records spinning on a plastic phonograph. To the right, a souvenir shop was stocked with all sorts of bizarre trinkets. Movies, video or live performances were often in progress in the first floor lobby. Those who wandered upstairs and then down to the basement were astounded by a startling variety of paintings, peep shows, sculpture, sta-



Souvenir Shop with items by Otterness, Christy Rupp, Cara Perlman, Rebecca Howland, Marc Blaine, Kiki Smith, Jenny Holtzer, Jim Caseberg, Larry Meltzer, Kenny Scharf, Peggy Katz, C. Kohlhofer.



Tom Otterness's signs on the exterior of the building referred to works on exhibition within.

tues, model rooms, bundled clothing and even a punching bag set up for practice.

Several dozen of the organizers, participants and hangers-on virtually lived at the site for the show's duration. The ensuing interchange with the neighborhood, the active involvement of both blacks and whites, and the many unlikely friendships that resulted were part of the exhilarating energy that even casual visitors to the show experienced. The show itself was an illustration of that elusive process by which artists with a certain affinity somehow band together to form an unstructured but synergistic association which might almost be called a movement.

The idea for the "Times Square Show" was initially the product of a semi-organized group of about 50 young artists known as Colab, or more formally, Collaborative Projects, Inc. Colab is a post-SoHo phenomenon, a reaction to the clogged channels and art-for-art's sake orientation of the post-Minimalist academy. Most of Colab's members are committed to social change, approaching art as a radical communications medium rather than as a circular dialogue with the art traditions of the past. Since most of Colab is too young to have been able to take advantage of the SoHo loft bonanza enjoyed by an earlier New York generation, many members live on the crumbling blocks of the Lower East Side. For a number of these artists, commitment to social transformation and racial interchange is more than liberal fantasy; it is a matter of survival. Most of the Colab people are also linked to the new wave/no wave rock arena, chronicling the scene with their films and other works and often making music themselves. Over the past two years, Colab has produced several "Times Square Show" precursors, such as the "Real Estate Show," an exhibition about the workings of Lower East Side real estate. (Organized by Alan Moore and several others in an abandoned Delancey Street building that they had "liberated" from its owner, the City of New York, the show received wide publicity when the city's Real Estate Department repossessed the building.)

As Colab developed downtown, artists Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis were forming Fashion Moda, a courageous art enterprise in the South Bronx. This exhibition and performance space brings together downtown artists with



Jamie Summers transformed a broken sink on the fourth floor with rock salt, wax and needles.

Like the new wave music and fashion in which many of the artists are also involved, the art at the show celebrated America's cultural quirks.

their counterparts from the local community, and rather than simply exporting downtown art to the South Bronx, it has succeeded in developing an active, multi-racial constituency. Many of the people involved with Colab and Fashion Moda are close friends, and ultimately it was the natural fusion of the two groups that made the "Times Square Show" possible.¹

The idea did not begin to achieve concrete shape until last spring, when artists John Ahearn and Tom Otterness stumbled across an intriguing-looking building with a "for rent or sale" sign. Inquiries were made, and after a generous offer of a month's free use from landlord Mark Finkelstein, the "Times Square Show" was off to a running start. Colab could make a little money available from its National Endowment for the Arts grant, and to the delight and astonishment of the organizing group, a private foundation, the Beard's Fund, offered a \$4,000 donation.

From the moment the doors opened, the network of participants quickly expanded to include the business owners, office workers, gangsters, prostitutes and other neighborhood people whose curiosity took them inside. This accessibility was the most important ingredient in the show's success, and the building's open door was a perfect metaphor for the accessibility of the art itself. Some of it was mildly shocking, but like the voodoo shrine that was stocked with razor blades and strewn with broken glass (a collaboration by David Hammons, Candace Hill Montgomery, Bill Stephens and John Ahearn), it was far more riveting than foreboding. Most of the art had at least a streak of raucous humor—like Dick Miller's sculpture, *Man Killed By Air Conditioner*, in which a life-sized clay figure lay crushed by an actual air conditioner.

By and large, the art used imagery that anyone who walks the streets of New York would find familiar. The three card monte hustler, almost a Times Square trademark, was used to great effect by June Dickson and Charlie Ahearn in their wonderfully garish poster that perfectly captured the show's spirit. (Dickson used the same motif even more dramatically in a "Times Square Show" advertisement that ran for free the entire month on the old Times Tower's electronic billboard.) There was plenty of sex and violence too, of course. And, like Coleen Fitzgibbon's studies of police sharpshooters pensively stalking their targets, much of the art was politically charged. At the same time, most of the artists were smart enough to understand that the Times Square population scarcely needs to be harangued about the social inequities that it already knows too well.

To most visitors, the "Times Square Show" must have seemed like some crazed, Day-Glo version of the old Ripley's Believe It Or Not Museum. Indeed it was the science fiction, B movies and other attractions of Times Square itself that gave these artists some of their strongest inspiration. Like the new wave music and fashion in which many of the artists are also involved, the art celebrated America's cultural quirks. Such phenomena as media-hyped, sex-starved mass murderers, idiotic television plots, and useless plastic consumer goods figured prominently in the imagery. Found objects, like an 8-foot-tall photo blow-up of a kung-fu Amazon borrowed



A view of the Second Floor Portrait Gallery. Across top, Mimi Gross: Dead Servicemen from Helicopter Rescue Mission. At left, Robin Winters: Portraits of Friends. At right, anonymous painting found in the building. At bottom, Bill Everston: Barricade.



Front entrance to show. At right, sign by Tom Otterness. In window, Taro Yawning, photo-posters by Wolfgang Staehle. Upstairs, partial view of installation by Jane M. Sherry and Aline Lillie Mayer. Photo Teri Slotkin.



John Ahearn and Tom Otterness: Tom with gun, life-size cast of head, painted plaster. Wallpaper, Colen Fitzgibbon and Robin Winters.

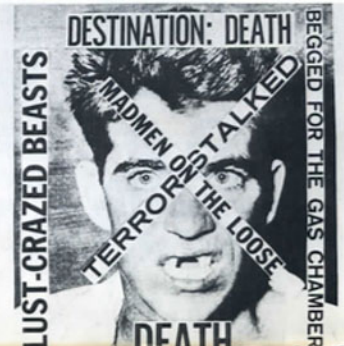
Colen Fitzgibbon: Police With Guns, one of a series of three paintings.



Kathleen Thomas in Wrap/Rap, a fashion show and performance organized by Sophie VDT, Paula Greif and Mary Lemley.



Gregory Lehmann: Destination: Death, photo-poster. Unless otherwise credited, all photos Wolfgang Staehle.



from a nearby movie house, were displayed right alongside the "real" art, with no attempt at differentiation. In fact, with only a few exceptions, everything was installed without any kind of identifying labels, and it was sometimes impossible to tell where one piece stopped and another began. Until a complicated "treasure map" was produced toward the end of the show, it was necessary to talk with one of the "regulars" like artist Bobby G to find out who the artists were and which things were actually done by artists.

Some of the most intriguing pieces, like Andrea Callard's second-hand-only wall clock, and Kathleen Thomas's spiked, rubber-skinned dildo machine, were objects that purported to have some "practical" purpose. Others, like Kenny Scharf's futurized, Star Trek-ked air conditioner, customized the building's architectural idiosyncrasies. But the bulk of the show was overwhelmingly figurative, consisting of a vast number of paintings, drawings, posters and sculptures—almost always unabashedly low budget and crude in construction. It was as if a class at the Art Students League got gang drunk and decided to have a painting party. Colors were garish, and paint was indelicately and hastily applied. The style was sharp and angular. People didn't stop to stretch a proper canvas. Jane Dickson painted on plastic garbage bags. Others, like Mike Glier, went at it directly on the wall. Colen Fitzgibbon's and Robin Winters's *Gun Dollar Plate* posters were pasted all over the wall like wallpaper, and other artists' pieces were pasted on top of them.

There were less than a dozen abstract works out of the hundreds of objects in the show. But even these were funky departures from what one usually associates with abstraction. A patch of wall painted by Samo, the omnipresent graffiti sloganeer, was a knockout combination of de Kooning and subway spray-paint scribbles. A broken-down sink on the landing of the fourth-floor stairway was transformed by California artist Jamie Summers into the most hauntingly beautiful image in the show. Rock salt spilled over the rim of the bowl, and above, jagged wax graphs of the artist's heartbeat were pricked by hundreds of needles. Otherwise, the esthetic celebration of space, light, materials and reduced forms—the hallmarks of Post-Minimalism—were hardly in evidence. The Show was more about communica-



The "Money Love & Death" room. Wall at left, Richard Basil Mock: Hoof-Head Portraits; Candace Hill Montgomery: Idi Amin Plate; Richard Bossman: Three Blind Mice; Scott Miller: Sky Falls. At right, Wally Edwards: Yellow Singer; Tom Otterness: Man With Visible Insides; John Ahearn: Purple Tongue; Tom Otterness: Caution: Coition. Wallpaper at top, Christof Köhlhofer: Billion Dollar Bills; middle, Colen Fitzgibbon and Robin Winters: Gun Dollar Plate; bottom, Christy Rupp: Rats.



Another view of the "Money Love & Death" room. Left, 10 drawings by Colen Fitzgibbon; Janet Ziff: Scissors Painting; Jai Ma: I Am Not An Alien. At right, Christof Köhlhofer: Gun and Cross; Stefan Eins: Fashion Moda Portrait.

tion than perception, more concerned with social than personal issues, and more interested in subject than form. Even though a number of the artists boasted about their ignorance of even rudimentary art history, there were plenty of art-historical models mixed in with the popular culture inspirations. Oldenburg's store and Kienholz's assemblages came immediately to mind, along with Depression era social realism and the Fluxus movement of the

early '60s. The Fluxus influence, for instance, was especially strong in the souvenir shop, which offered an intriguing variety of toy-like, yet horrifying objects. For \$15, you could take home one of Christy Rupp's life-sized plaster rats, or for \$10, you could sample one of Becky Howland's wrinkled, wart-speckled and turquoise-painted *Love Canal Potatoes*. Art-sophistication was behind one of the shop's hotter items, imitation Joel Shapiro painted wood

wall sculptures, also \$15. And Fluxus influence was evident in the way the building was imaginatively recycled to allow maximum interchange with the neighborhood.

It was the Depression esthetic, however, that really set the tone, influencing the imagery, the spirit of group cooperation and even the personal appearance of some of the artists. But in contrast to Depression era realism's heroic view of the worker and its concomitant easy moral distinctions, the imagery of the Times Square artists is ambiguous and disturbing. Gregory Lehmann depicts a madman begging for the gas chamber, and Stefan Eins blows up one of Gary Gilmore's death row drawings for a Fashion Moda poster. One doesn't quite know how to react to Mimi Gross's ceramic busts of the G.I. volunteers who died in Carter's abortive hostage rescue mission in Iran—are they to be honored as fallen heroes or pitied as hapless fools?

In its accessibility and its strongly American subject matter, much of the art in the "Times Square Show" invites comparison with '60s Pop Art as well as Depression social realism. Though the new work is expressionistic rather than cool, and hardly shares Pop Art's campy sensibility and squeaky clean presentation, the "Times Square Show" was in a sense indicative of a major Pop revival. As part of a wide-spread anti-modern revolution that in one of its manifestations had something to do with toppling the Shah, artists both here and abroad are forsaking the international modern style and searching for indigenous imagery. Mike Robinson's passionately rendered paintings of men and women in hot embrace and various sexually loaded



Willie Neal: Willie's Passage, wood sculpture and wall decoration in the corridor between "Money Love & Death" and the Portrait Gallery. Photo Lisa Kahane.

poses are American icons, inspired by movie stills and the dustjackets of trashy novels. They are certainly related to Pop in their subject matter, but in their steamy fervor and crude, hobbyist-style execution on small scraps of Masonite, they are something else again.

Tom Otterness, already notorious for having executed his dog in a videotape screened on cable TV, further exemplifies this esthetic amalgam. Otterness helped shape the character of the building's exterior with his alluring, simply painted signs reminiscent of carnival midway banners. He also added to the tone of the souvenir shop with his threateningly surreal "Otterness Objects." One of the strangest of these was a plaster combination of what seemed to be a gun and a bird. Upstairs, his *Lead Suit For A Nuclear Age* was an A-bomb generation's stark replacement for Beuys's felt. But if there's one artist

who best represents the Times Square esthetic, it's John Ahearn. His luridly painted life-cast heads of ordinary people from the South Bronx are startling images that are hauntingly alive [see *A.I.A.*, Jan. 1980, p. 108]. With his associate, Robert Torres, Ahearn sets up his studio right on the street, engaging the whole neighborhood in the casting process. The heads are strong examples of contemporary psychological portraiture, and succeed in remaining inalterably subversive. No matter how much art world validation they receive, the heads will always be a raw slice of South Bronx life.

In turning away from the international modern idiom to explore their cultural roots and indigenous imagery, black artists were way ahead of the whites. Both blacks and latins were involved in the "Times Square Show" on their own terms, often leading the

Mike Robinson: A Kiss Before Dying, Kitty Foyle, Julie, 1979, acrylic on masonite paintings after paperback cover illustrations. Photo Lisa Kahane.





Anonymous chalk graffiti on walls of the building's fourth floor. In front, Tom Otterness's Punching Bag and (on floor) Ann Newmarch's Bank Mat. Installed by 112 Workshop.

way rather than simply serving to integrate a white exhibition.

Willie (Bill) Neal and Robert Gaines were two of the most interesting black artists in the show, both involved with reworking nature to suit their own terms. Neal whittles branches that he finds in the South Bronx into eccentric shapes which he paints in a lavish array of colors and then sets with marbles. Gaines scours the city for sections of tree trunks and other chunks of wood to which he applies a thickly layered laminated finish. As a result it's almost impossible to tell whether they're real or fake. They look completely natural, yet at the same time their finish makes them resemble '50s-style ceramic lamp bases. The ambiguity is fascinating. Both Neal and Gaines take a utilitarian view of their art. Neal doesn't accept the art-for-art's-sake intent that most downtown artists take for granted. He

The "Times Square Show" was a challenge to dealers and curators of advanced art who continue to feel that the discreet display of a few pieces of art in an elegant gallery is enough.

equipped one of his pieces with a crutch tip so that it could be pressed into service as a cane, and described how another one of his reworked branches could be used as a coat rack. Gaines's business card advises that his sculpture is for sale or rent for window displays.

Some of the other black artists in the show, such as Joe Lewis and Candace Hill Montgomery, are much more conscious of the contemporary art idiom, using it cleverly to present their own messages. Montgomery's collage/painting of a struggling black man strung up against a tree was one of the toughest images in the show. Its bolted-together plexiglass frame, suspended from the ceiling with heavy gauge chain, seemed to imprison the piece, adding even more weight to the image. She effectively transformed the cool vocabulary of Minimalism into a seething expression of anger.

The racial interchange was the show's major breakthrough, but it was the sexual issue that was the most controversial. A number of the women in

and around the show take what might be called a post-women's lib stance, in which aggressively sexual fashions and suggestive imagery are viewed as symbols of women's power over men. Eva De Carlo's *Love Nest*, stocked with Vaseline, a Tampax disposal box, garter belts, mirrors, and more, was raw and suggestive in the extreme. A few of the show's feminist visitors were horrified by some of the work and didn't hesitate to make their anger known.

Whether or not the "Times Square Show" was pre-lib or post-lib, it did represent the breakthrough of a truly post-modernist art. It proposed not just a change in imagery, or even structure, but also a change in intent. Most of the art in the show had a concrete rather than an abstract purpose—be it entertainment, sexual expression or communication of political messages. In contrast, something like pattern painting, which has been heralded as a post-modern manifestation, is really just a holding pattern for modernists in search of a new way to paint.

The show's success in breaking through the gridlock of the contemporary art marketplace demonstrates how much presentation—the "marketing"—of art works and art ideas affects their meaning and their perception by the public, and how important it is for artists to take this into their own hands. A large group show of the Times Square artists at an institutionalized "alternate space" wouldn't have had half the impact, and probably would have neutralized its esthetic. The "Times Square Show" was a challenge to dealers and curators of advanced art who continue to feel that the discreet display of a few pieces in an elegant gallery is enough. But it was even more of a challenge to artists who think that their work stops when a piece leaves the studio, and who leave its presentation to others. Art must come to be marketed with the kind of imagination displayed by this exhibition's organizers—not simply in order to reach the general public, but to cut through the glut of mediocre material and touch the art audience itself. □

1. The "Times Square Show" was organized by a core group that included John Ahearn, Scott and Beth B, Andrea Callard, Colen Fitzgibbon, Matthew Geller, Alan Moore, Tom Otterness, Cara Perlman, Ulli Rimkus, Mike Roddy, Mike Robinson and Christy Rupp.

Author: Jeffrey Deitch is an investment advisor who received a 1979 NEA art critic's fellowship.

