

An Alternative (Not an Echo)

By Kay Larson



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SYLVIA PLACHY

Jon Borofsky's "Motor Mind" at Artists Space

The 10-artist show that glows in the vast airplane-hangar-moderne Neuberger Museum in Purchase is a success story of the first order. The work looks gorgeous, and the artists—Judy Pfaff, John Torreano, Barbara Schwartz, Charles Simonds, Laurie Anderson, Jonathan Borofsky, Ree Morton, Scott Burton, Lois Lane, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt—more than merit the exposure. There's a story within the story, though, and it's contained in the second half of the exhibition—a small group of drawings and projects at Artists Space in New York. There the identical artists are being shown under the purgatorial conditions by which they first came to the attention of the art world, and finally to the glorious Paradiso of the Neuberger. All 10 were launched in Artists Space's dour quarters at 105 Hudson, back when the work looked rough and too far ahead of its time, back when the ideas were more like promises and a show was a gamble for both artists and institutions. This Anniversary Exhibition is a summation not just of six short years, but of the necessity behind alternative spaces—the usually ugly, usually out of the way, always poverty-stricken little art-showing places that have rewritten the history of the decade.

At Artists Space, typically, the show looks smallish and rather grim, confined to one or two minor pieces by the artists who come to life in the halls of the Neuberger. On Hudson Street **JOHN TORREANO**, for instance, is represented by a few truncated wall pieces encrusted with his usual mix of glittering glass jewels and thick, deadpan pigment. It takes the huge white expanses of the Neuberger to make those beveled edges and constructed surfaces work as objects, not paintings, forcing us

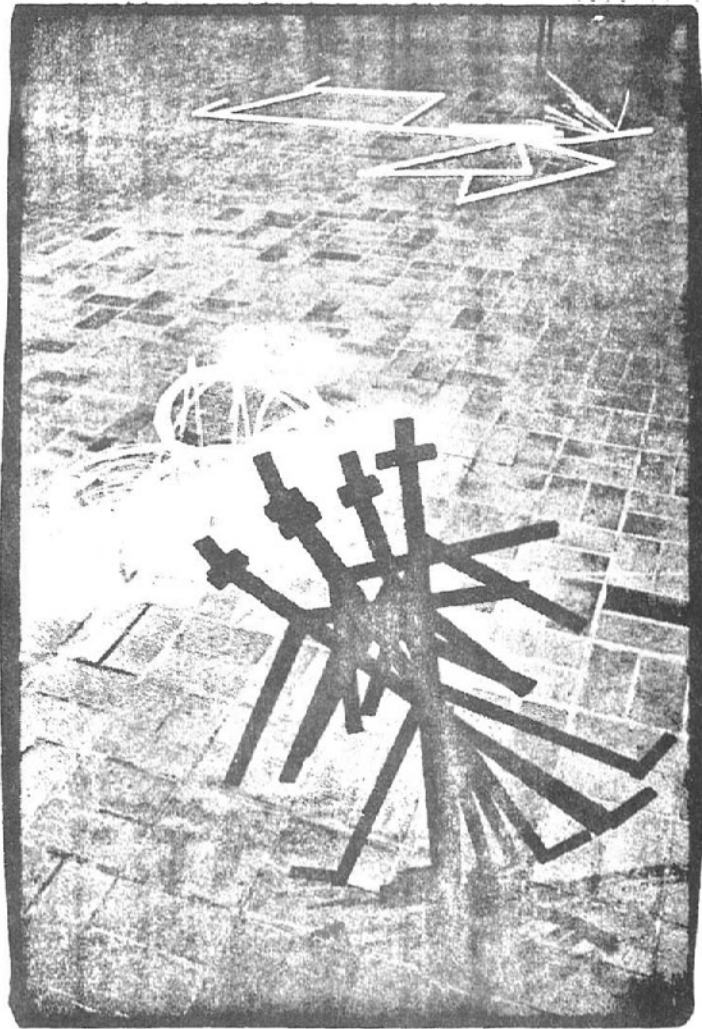
cont on next page

finally to see them in their sculptural role as aggregations of opposing principles. **BARBARA SCHWARTZ's** tondos and propellerlike flaps look similarly half-hearted and wan when seen singly, but at the Neuberger they can accumulate in sufficient numbers to begin gyrating on the wall. And **JON BOROFSKY's** Artists Space painting of a woman with a spinning bit of metal on her forehead (called *Motor Mind*) is a funny but minor study in the series of drawings from the dreams that led him, at the Neuberger, to cover the foyer ceiling with a giant fish engulfing the space like a hallucination via Michelangelo.

It's not that Artists Space engenders bad work—quite the contrary. The anniversary show owes very little to the Neuberger and very much to the place where these 10 got their start. But alternative spaces suffer under real physical and financial constraints; their funding is usually public, and unless they find a warehouse like P.S. #1, their space is usually less than good work demands. Balanced against these limitations is their unique historical position. They arose in the era of long hair and self-help and were (are) laboratories for anti-commodity art, for performance and new music, and for artists determined not to be subdued into saleability.

That "anything goes" sensibility works ultimately to the artist's advantage. **JUDY PFAFF's** drawings at Artists Space hint at a subtle and original mind but didn't prepare me for her stunning tour de force at the Neuberger, where she took over the walls and floor like Patton swallowing up Rommel, cutting her garish bits of plastic scrap into a Steinbergian nonsense-vocabulary—a "plastic language"—of squiggles, noodles, squirts, and stick figures. The room is aswarm with an amazing ensemble of unrelated parts, and visual puns are thicker than Shriners at the free liquor bar, invoking Giacometti, Duchamp, Robbie the Robot, Fred Astaire, Archipenko, John Travolta, and God (who rides a glitter cloud over a crucifixion scene).

In the next room is the best **SCOTT BURTON** I've seen: an enormous conical "round table" that rests on its pointed head in a gargantuan aside on formalist balance (and gross eats?). Who would have thought Burton's furniture could be droll? **TOM LANIGAN-SCHMIDT**, has also made a "cheese on wry" in *47th Street Block Association*, an enclave of social historicizing that covers a whole room at the Neuberger with "medieval" icons crafted of colored cellophane and aluminum foils, stick-on linoleums, Christmas-tree



Judy Pfaff's tour de force at the Neuberger

lights, and in the center a tinsel shrine bedecked with rats in gold foil ("original sin"). Schmidt is the only one whose piece at Artists Space is equal to or better than the Neuberger's—the ethnic art references are somewhat reserved, like an immigrant's dining room rather than a church rec room.

With such drama surrounding them, **LAURIE ANDERSON** and **CHARLES SIMONDS** look a bit lusterless; not the artists, but the pieces they chose are at fault. **LOIS LANE** and **REE MORTON** had the misfortune to be in rooms adjoining Judy Pfaff's, but stepping out of the screaming clutter into Lane's room, with its black, soulful, self-absorbed puns on image and form, made me remember how much I like her diffidence.