

SIXTH ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION

Artists Space, New York City

10 ARTISTS / ARTISTS SPACE

Neuberger Museum,
Purchase, New York

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by Helene Winer

This exhibition of ten artists who had their first New York one-person shows at Artists Space marks the close of a decade and, simultaneously, the sixth anniversary of the gallery. It provides an occasion to survey not only the art developments of the seventies but also the concurrent changes in its public presentation. It would appear that the artists selected for this exhibition, as well as Artists Space itself, reflect significant aspects of current art.

Artists Space was formed in response to artists' perpetual need to show their work in a receptive context at a time when usual support channels had begun to fail to adjust to the radical changes taking place in art. This situation was, and remains, particularly problematic for artists without established reputations and therefore little access to or influence over established exhibition facilities. Moreover, those changes that have affected the form, content, and intentions of art have not only caused greater difficulties in showing in museums or commercial galleries, but they have even questioned the appropriateness of doing so. The gallery and museum system was devised to show work that is self-contained, permanent, transportable, identifiable specifically as painting or sculpture, in short, art that is relatively familiar within the context of art history. But the art of the past decade has been fragmented, transitory, not limited to the visual

object, and not necessarily painting or sculpture. Like all forms of innovation, recent art has questioned prevailing ideas and values; in addition, this art challenges the long-standing support structures for art.

The number of "alternative spaces" devoted exclusively to the exhibition of new art, their expansion and growing vitality throughout the past decade, confirms the fact that specialized exhibition facilities are required by the nature of contemporary art. Artists develop their work through an active exchange of ideas with other artists, an exchange that takes place privately among artists, but which is significantly broadened when large numbers of artists can publicly show their current production. The dialogue is thus widened to include the entire community of artists--particularly crucial in New York, where that community is especially large--as well as students, critics, and the general audience for contemporary art. Art, like other aspects of contemporary culture, has been subject to an accelerated rate of evolution and the attendant need for expeditious communication. The slow, insular transmittal of ideas, the extended duration between action and reaction, is no longer viable. Artists Space and the other alternative galleries provide a heightened sensitivity to the special needs and quickened pace of recent art developments through their commitment to openness, flexibility, and an exclusive focus on the problems of exhibiting the art of the present moment.

The initial procedures for selecting exhibitions at Artists Space, in which artists chose artists, as well as the availability of the gallery for other events upon request by artists, provided the foundation for the growth of the exhibition programs. The early selection process confirmed two important facts that have determined the direction of Artists Space: first, that the exhibition of art is itself influential to the development of art; and second, that artists are the most accurate barometers and sources of information about emerging art. In order to expand upon that understanding, and taking into account the growing audience for new art, Artists Space initiated group exhibitions in addition to individual ones, and accepts proposals for exhibitions and events, includes film, performances and audio works in its regular exhibition schedule, and has exchange exhibitions with other alternative spaces outside of New York. In addition to artists, other individuals with special involvements with recent art were invited to organize exhibitions. Artists Space has attempted not only to provide exhibition opportunities to artists, but also to take a more active role in identifying, explicating, and supporting art that is genuinely new, usually unfamiliar, and often controversial to an expanding audience.

At the time of their first Artists Space shows in the period 1973-1975, the artists in the present exhibition shared a number of circumstances: each was living in New York, had not had a one-person show

in the city, and had a body of work ready for public exhibition. Each was selected by another artist whose career was already well established. * The additional criterion used for the selection of this particular group of ten, out of the many that showed during that period, was that each has actively contributed to the most visible currents of the art of the later seventies. It is possible that the very arbitrariness of this organizing principle might reveal the common concerns of a period which has heretofore seemed remarkable for its lack of coherence. For while the sixties are identified with such cohesive movements or styles as Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual art, all of which were recognized as radically innovative and demanding a reevaluation of the accepted definitions of art, seventies art seems to have produced no such identifiable direction. Rather, it has been alternately disparaged or praised with a single term: pluralism. But at the same time it has elicited very few attempts to account for all the apparent diversity. The titles of exhibitions in which these ten artists participated suggest the difficulty in identifying the common thread in recent art: "Approaching the Decorative," "Environmental Art," "Narrative," "Images of Self," "New Image Painting," "Small Scale," "Primitive Presences," "Thick Paint."

It appears that the coherence of this period does not lay in the programmatic aesthetics of movements, the formal attributes of style, or the specific characteristic of mediums. The legacy of the sixties has been

one of radical experimentation, particularly as concerns visual artists' use of nontraditional mediums. No longer confined to the historical tradition of painting and sculpture or to its dogmatic rejection, visual artists in this decade have approached their various mediums with a new directness. Even where these mediums happen to be painting and sculpture, they have been free to explore their ideas in individual, even ideosyncratic ways. The resulting art is experienced more immediately and less analytically than has been the case. It seems probable that if we stop focusing on the obvious diversity of styles and mediums, and take a more serious look at the concepts conveyed through them, that the art of the present will begin to be as comprehensible as the art of the recent past.

The ten artists showing in this exhibition all work with subjective or personalized content, expressed through whatever medium is most suitable. The mediums chosen are thus varied and highly individualized. The important variable among the artists is not those superficial differences but the degree of aesthetic distance that is desired and achieved in the work. The extent to which content is objectified and universalized ranges from limiting the content to a specific preoccupation by using reduced formal means; to facilitating maximum inclusivity by devising an open-ended form.

In her highly innovative performances, Laurie Anderson is able to embrace a very wide range of content. The fundamental element is

sound--spoke, sung, instrumental, often electronically amplified, distorted, or otherwise manipulated. Anderson's highly effective theatrical persona is the focal point of the music, lyrics, anecdotes, observations, puns, and other forms of linguistic play and slide and film images and props. The complex web of interconnections established in the performances elicit from the audience an active perceptual participation. Similarly, Anderson's installation pieces usually rely on the spectator's presence or participation for their activation. In both cases--performances and installations--an exchange is set up that requires the audience to mediate the elements provided by the artist in order to complete the work.

Ree Morton, who died in 1977, was also concerned with conveying a wide range of ideas, perceptions, experiences and associations. Her sculptural environments employ words, phrases, painted and drawn images, symbolic markings, and spatial constructions. The work, representational and abstract, literal and symbolic, makes physical and visual what is essentially a literary interweaving of images, thoughts, events, and time. Morton's later works, such as "The Devil Chasers," and "Regional Pieces" rely heavily on the use of celastic, a material that is similar to canvas but becomes soft and manipulable when moistened and hardens quickly as it dries. Used regularly for theatre sets, celastic is similarly employed by Morton to achieve both sculptural and "soft" or natural forms.

John Borofsky presents as universal content, that which is both personal and private. He limits his images primarily to the content of his dreams and specific fragments of information that he has been affected by. The drawings are simply-made renderings depicting people, actions, heads, fish and animals. They retain a sense of being notational representations of the more fully experienced original image. As Anderson's work must be integrated in order to be perceived, or Morton's must be read, Borofsky's drawings ask that the viewer, in order to complete the vision, project their own understanding of the missing details of color, three-dimensionality, or facial features on the image that is provided. The drawings are often accompanied by written captions that identify the content of the dream or meaning of the image. Individually in large wall drawings or in dense groupings of smaller pieces the work occupies or even possesses the space it is presented in.

Judy Pfaff's work is experienced as a moment of frozen animation of related parts within a space. The three-dimensional work is constructed with sections of wood and painted and the floor pieces are of colored and metallic contact paper. Small units combine into larger units that are self-sufficient but combine with and extend into adjacent or contiguous parts. Although the work has no literal narrative content, the geometric elements are near metaphors for action or mood. The work has always been most explicitly a physical and territorial manifestation of

overt energy. The systems that order the space (and Pfaff's use of the human form in stick figures can be understood as one system) often draw on conventions of Constructivism, Cubism, Futurism and such artists as Arp, Mondrian or David Smith. These strategies are so clearly understood as formal devices for choreographing space that they can be admired, out of context, for their demonstrated effectiveness. Before the intrinsic holistic organization in the work becomes clear, the explosive quality of the encounter makes it appear to hold together only through an accident of change.

As Pfaff uses systems of organization to establish an overall spatial dynamic, Lois Lane has co-opted conventions of formal abstract painting to establish a passive arena for the presentation of a set of specific images. The evenly painted all black and all white canvases are divided by transecting and diagonal lines that serve as locations of attachment for painted shapes of clothing, animals, flowers, hands, abstract symbols and collaged magazine pictures. The field of articulated paint that in abstract painting is considered an assertion of formal issues, such as two-dimensionality, is not so much ambiguous as it is an acknowledgement of an optional function. The act of painting becomes perfunctory, a neutral, circumscribed activity that enables the images, separate or in combination, to be offered for the consideration and contemplation of the viewer.

Scott Burton's work is remarkable here for its adamant restriction to bare essentials. It is therefore, exactly what and as it is, whether a performance, a furniture tableau or the recent tables and chairs. Being understood so well as specific, the work is at the same time immediately subject to associations and connotations that bring into question the conventions of art as well of social behavior. The most recent pieces, chairs and table in groupings and individually, are understood as functional while also asserting their presence as sculpture by the fact of the extraordinary perfection of design, scale, material and surface finish. The tableau, such as "Chair Seascape" that presented three chair groupings--a single, a pair, and three--on simulated grass with a backdrop of pale blue curtain, presents the same shifting duality between pure abstraction and explicit and implicit representation seen in all of Burton's work.

Charles Simonds' imaginary model civilizations, and Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt's universe of characters and images exist within parameters that provide for infinite imaginative material to be generated by the artist and then the audience. Each uses construction techniques that are reminiscent of childhood fantasy play. Simonds' miniature dwellings and cities are built of mud brick in configurations that relate to the ways in which the civilizations continue: the linear people leave their past behind them and build elsewhere, the circular people excavate

and reconstruct their city, and the spiral people use the past to build upon. Many of the dwellings were constructed on urban street locations and are therefore, relatively shortlived except in photographs or films made of the projects. Simonds' "Floating Cities" is a futuristic utopian concept of property that is owned but can be moved from one location to another for economic or political reasons. The idea is presented in model form by small painted wood units that can be moved about on a simulated body of water. The physical form of Simonds' concepts are both the result of and the impetus for fabricating histories of the inhabitant cultures.

Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt uses the ordinary household materials of Saran Wrap, tin foil, florist foil, and marking pen in combination to achieve pseudo precious objects. Their vulgar glittering beauty at once makes the pieces plausible as decorative ornaments and disorienting as art works. Lanigan-Schmidt divides his world of images and objects into three levels: the spiritual, the temporal and the extraterrestrial. The most ambitious and compelling is the meticulously crafted religious icons that depict Christ and saints according to the prescriptions of Eastern European Church art. The other work more playfully represents people, rats, jewelry and science fiction creatures. Schmidt's aesthetic is in large degree instructed by his relationship to ethnic working class religious and cultural life.

Both John Torreano and Barbara Schwartz limit the formal elements in their abstract paintings and sculpture to a fixed number. The purpose for each in doing this is similar: they have chosen to confine the number of options in order to maximize their ability to manipulate and control those that are essential to the general intent. Schwartz's sculpture is meant to have a powerful concrete almost ritual importance, while Torreano's paintings project the duality of object and ambience.

Barbara Schwartz uses organic, abstract, non-referential shapes that resemble a variety of natural and primitive forms, from birds in flight and waves to totems and shields. The pieces, generally in series, are either standing or wall attached, and presented alone, in pairs or in groups. There is a constant play of negative and positive that changes and revises depending on both perception and point of view. With the exception of a series of bronze cast pieces and the recent series using paper, the sculpture, or three dimensional paintings, have been made with wire mesh covered with plaster and painted with abstract patterns of vivid color. The artist has control over every stage and detail of the work: form, material, surface, texture, color, pattern and shadow. Each stage of the process elicits what might be considered a completed work, that is then further acted upon.

John Torreano's paintings, as a result of the interaction of scale, shape, color, paint surface and distribution of glass jewels results in a

perceptually ambiguous entity. The jewels, varying according to size, placement, number and color, reflect light in such a way that the actual surface of the painting is somewhat less than fixed. The paintings are primarily rectangles or squares, but Torreano has similarly treated the surface of the spheres and columns (long narrow vertical pieces). The work is fundamentally a formal exercise in perception, and an exploration of the range of effects that might be achieved by various combinations and manipulation of elements. The eccentric presence, however, of the jewels embedded in a surface of rich painted color as well as shapes like the sphere establish the comic seriousness of the work. It allows the artist to investigate the traditional language of painting, introduce a non-traditional element that alters our visual perception and our expectations, and thus indulges both a conservative extension of a tradition and a contradictory irreverence.

This largely experiential and accessible art exists somewhere midpoint in a process that is redefining art. The shift away from the circumscribed art complex, the "art world" composed of curators, critics, collectors, museums, galleries and art magazines will eventually result in a recomposition of the context of art. It is moving toward a broader based context more germane to the changes in art. Changes that began in earnest during the sixties, challenged the established support system to accomodate new concepts and new mediums. During the same period

that these adjustments were made, an eclectic art, such as that represented here, has freely played with past traditions rather than dismissing them. The art emerging now, the art of the next decade, is not looking for support from the once resilient traditional system. From the conscious attack of the sixties, to the relative indifference toward either rejecting or following tradition in the seventies, the process of change falls to a generation of artists that have little expectation from, or interest in, past traditions or their means of validation and support.

* Laurie Anderson was selected by Vito Acconci
John Borofsky by Sol LeWitt
Scott Burton by Claes Oldenburg
Lois Lane by Jackie Winsor
Ree Morton by Nancy Graves
Judy Pfaff by Al Held
Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt by Christo
Barbara Schwartz by Nancy Grossman
Charles Simonds was selected by a group of artists, who had shown
at Artists Space the prior year
John Torreano by Chuck Close