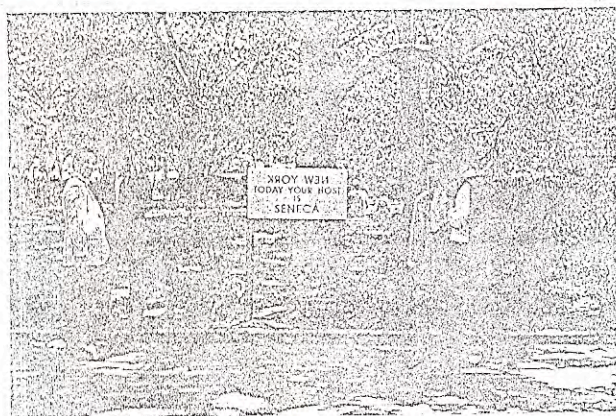


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Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Native Host* series, 1993. Installation at City Hall Park. Courtesy Exit Art Gallery, New York.



by ROBERT ATKINS

With their obsessive focus on social activism, the early fall's art offerings picked up precisely where the spring's left off. *Art in the Anchorage* provided the hinge. A summer/fall exhibition, Creative Time's annual enterprise remained the most talked about contemporary art exhibition until its closing on 7 October. Staged in the spectacular vaulted brick anchorage beneath the Brooklyn Bridge, twenty-eight artists created works for an essentially untitled exhibition that might have been called "Social Malaise." The obvious stand-outs were installations by photographer Jim Goldberg and artist Nancy Rubins. On a cozy looking, life-size house, Goldberg projected slides of home-

less youth and their drawings, which vividly attest to the danger and chaos of their lives. Rubins paid homage to former collaborator Peter Kunz, who recently died of AIDS, with a gargantuan and eloquent work coupling a huge dead oak tree with thirty tons of rubble from their last project, sealed in metal cases. The accompanying live-art series ended (appropriately) on 28 September with a monologue by firebrand advocate-for-the-disfranchised Karen Finley, one of four performance artists whose NEA-recommended grant was cancelled in June by NEA

chairman John Frohnmayer.

That censorship has been a constant in twentieth-century American life is just one valuable reminder offered by the year-long series of events commemorating the centennial of the Judson Church, the activist church that nurtured the development of happenings, Judson dance, and pop art during the late fifties and sixties, and sponsored the 1970 *People's Flag Show*, which was closed down by a local district attorney who convicted the show's artist-organizers for what was regarded as Vietnam War-inspired flag abuse. Yoko Ono kicked off the celebration last season with a still-operative, participatory installation that invites viewers to pound nails into a nine-foot-tall wooden cross as a way of confronting self-censorship. In a ceremony on 12 September that lovingly evoked the history of the church as a former international arts center, Claes Oldenburg unveiled a handsome print that he had made in honor of the centennial. Oldenburg's iconic image is simultaneously a "J," a birthday candle, and a "walking or rocking cross," inscribed with a litany of issues with which the church is involved. Perhaps the most eye-opening aspect of the Judson celebration is the realization it prompts of just how much art has changed in the last thirty years. While some social struggles are ongoing—the church was a pioneer in clergy-supported abortion rights and the treatment of drug addiction—the nature of art itself has been transformed almost beyond recognition. Goodbye largely formal investigations, hello socially engaged themes.

The overlapping subjects most frequently employed by the fall's exhibiting artists are racism, identity, and AIDS. Such themes were sometimes the basis of group exhibitions so large and diffuse that they induced migraine headaches. *Public Mirror: Artists Against Racial Prejudice* at the Clocktower was a forty-two-artist convocation of the good, the bad, and the ugly that inadvertently gave new meaning to the term "discrimination" (or its lack). Not surprisingly, the best works here tended to be of the conceptual persuasion. They included Dennis Adams' photo-documentary light box image from *Reworking*, a Swiss public project of barricadelike stanchions depicting the mostly African and southern European workers who fuel Geneva's booming economy, and Sung Ho Choi's *Now America is Counting On You*, a painting with the title rendered in fourteen languages on a map of the United States.

Queer was a similarly uneven and unfocused exhibition of sixty-four gay and lesbian artists' self-representations at Wessel O'Connor. The remarkable thing about it is that it merely indicated the vast number of artists making homophobic art; dozens of others—from Gilbert & George to Felix Gonzalez-Torres—were not represented here. Had the exhibition been subdivided by generations or by themes such as homophobia and eroticism, *Queer* might have provided some sorely lacking grist for intellectual mills. But that is the problem with so many of these well-intentioned group shows—they do little more than illustrate their titles.

Infinitely more provocative were solo exhibitions by artists-of-color Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, Adrian Piper, and Masami Teraoka. Heap of Bird's mini-retrospective at Exit Art comprised the Cheyenne Elk artist's pastels, paintings, and public projects damning and deconstructing cultural domination. His gift for making language visual was wonderfully embodied in the show's title, *Claim Your Color*, and in documentary photographs of a series of signs seen near City Hall evoking our local Native American past. A typical one reads: "New York Today Your Host Is Mohawk," with "New York" dislocatingly rendered in reversed, mirror-image letters.

Adrian Piper's *Pretend Not to Know What You Know* at John Weber was an ambitious attempt to confront racism via triptychs and grids of blown-up news photographs that trafficked heavily in bleak ironies. The exhibition was undone by both the sophomoric juxtapositions of some of the news or advertising imagery (two images of Nancy Reagan on Mr. T's lap surrounding a photo of a neo-Nazi, for instance) and the Barbara Kruger-esque im-

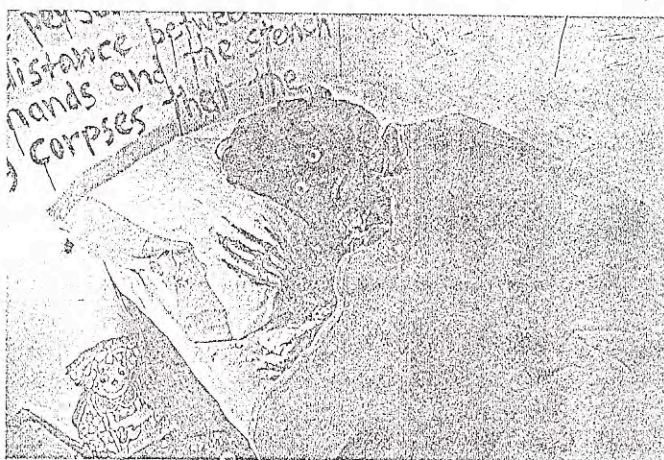
THE BLURRING OF ART AND LIFE THAT PRECIPITATED THE END OF MODERNIST PURITY AND MODERNIST ART ITSELF PROCEEDS AT A SURPRISING CLIP, STIMULATED BY THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN ART AND EXTERNAL SOCIAL CRISES.

sition of the exhibition's title in red type on nearly all of the works.

But if the language-oriented "school" of Kruger, Hans Haacke, and Les Levine has transformed too many artists into the new academicians of the socially engaged, others have fruitfully gone their own ways—Masami Teraoka's extensive AIDS series at Pamela Aechinloss brilliantly bends the late nineteenth-century *ukiyo-e* woodblock style to depict mythological, condom-wielding, Kabuki theater characters who are refreshingly conscious of the perils associated with the realm of the senses.

Cary S. Leibowitz's oddly compelling *Bric-a-Brac* installation on the ridiculous theme of "I'm a nerd and a loser but aren't we all and shouldn't it be O.K.?" offered the wittiest bit of commentary yet on art's current political thrust: a plush pile rug reading, "There are 2 things I need to watch for the rest of my life; my weight and my racism." Coming from an artist who stuffed Stux Gallery full of felt banners, tiny teddy bears sporting T-shirts reading, "I will make a Cubist painting, but right now it is not important," and nude pin-up calendars of himself, this manages not to offend. The often militantly gay Leibowitz (a.k.a. Candyass) may be a Jeff Koons for the rest of us.

The new brand of politically conscious artmaking calls for new perspectives from viewers (and artists) accustomed to dealing only with traditional art objects and traditional art situations. The blurring of art and life that precipitated the end of modernist purity and modernist art itself proceeds at a surprising clip, stimulated by theoretical developments within art and external social crises. To the anonymous creators of *The Lazaretto*, "an installation about the current status of the AIDS crisis" at P.P.O.W. Gallery, it is irrelevant whether their work is even considered art—an astonishing and epochal twist on Marcel Duchamp's invention of the



Anonymous, *The Lazaretto*, 1990 (detail). Mixed-media installation. Courtesy P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.

readymade, which proclaimed that context is content. *Lazaretto's* ad hoc collective of teachers, students, and artists (who, according to the exhibition announcement, "have received NEA funds in the past which they have chosen to [use to] help support this exhibit") created a controversial work indicting the ongoing mismanagement of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, where 143,000 cases of AIDS have been officially reported so far. The viewer entered a black maze papered with shocking statistics and quotes from people with AIDS interviewed for the project, at the end of which were three tableaux: a skeleton-patient in a roach infested cubicle-of-a-room; a raft supporting Jesse Helms, George Bush, and Cardinal O'Connor afloat in a sea of tiny bodies, all produced in a grotesque, Red Grooms style; and a puppet-politician gyrating and bull-shitting in a money-filled box. Perhaps the best thing about this intentionally disturbing and contentious work is that the depressed and/or enraged viewer literally exited into the light—a space filled with information tables supplied and manned by groups such as the Minority AIDS Task Force, the Women and AIDS Network, and the PWA Coalition. Plenty of exhibitions like this one beg to be evaluated on the basis of their effectiveness in

reaching audiences beyond the art world. Is it any wonder that the inexorable (and perhaps politically utopian) direction of current art and theory is to join social activism with the communications potential of popular culture?

On 1 December, the (second) *Day Without Art* will attempt to do just that. Organized by Visual AIDS, the New York-based collective of art professionals, as "a national day of mourning and action in response to the AIDS crisis," the 1990 event will extend into the dance, theater, music, and television communities as well. Bravo cable television will run twenty-four hours of AIDS pro-

gramming, including a *Minute Without Television*, and Broadway theater marquees will go dark. Last December, the first *Day Without Art* marshalled the energies of nearly a thousand visual art organizations, which disseminated information and sponsored activities ranging from educational plays at children's museums and AIDS-informative artworks on public transportation, to a mural painted by Keith Haring and a memorial service featuring Leonard Bernstein. *Day Without Art's* diverse activities provide an outlet for the still-mounting levels of frustration with official AIDS inaction, and have attested to the diversity of response to the AIDS crisis in communities throughout the United States. This year organizers are encouraging arts groups to "buddy up" with AIDS service organizations, especially those serving people of color and women afflicted with HIV infection. While it is not itself art, *Day Without Art* does suggest that effective social engagement may ultimately demand leaving the studio.

Robert Atkins is a contributing editor of *Contemporanea*.