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# A Museum Where the Signs All Say: 'Please Touch'

By Jon P. Kraushar

NEW YORK—Tucked away on one of the city's most chic streets is a little museum dedicated to the end of the stuffy art exhibit.

It's called the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (29 W. 53d Street) and its director, Paul J. Smith, admits with a grin: "Some things we do would give other museums nightmares."

What distinguishes Contemporary Crafts from nearby establishment biggies like the Museum of Modern Art is Smith's philosophy that the audience should participate in every exhibit.

"We really believe the viewer wants to become involved in art," he says. "Too many museums have the precious attitude that art is purely intellectual observation."

In a current show, "Citysenses," the public is being drawn toward an appreciation of the city environ-

ment. Artists Marilyn Wood and Jim Burns have created a list of activities called "Scores" for viewers to perform outside the museum.

These include touching concrete walls to experience their rough, grainy texture; "seeing" city objects like pipes, hydrants, and mailboxes with one's fingers; skipping down the street to "find open space to expand in"; imitating people's walks as a way of getting involved with other passers-by; and watching traffic signs as a study of the city's visual stimuli.

Back inside the museum, the audience relays its experience on tape recorders, long strips of butcher's paper set up for painting, writing pads and in arenas devoted to talking, dancing and acting out.

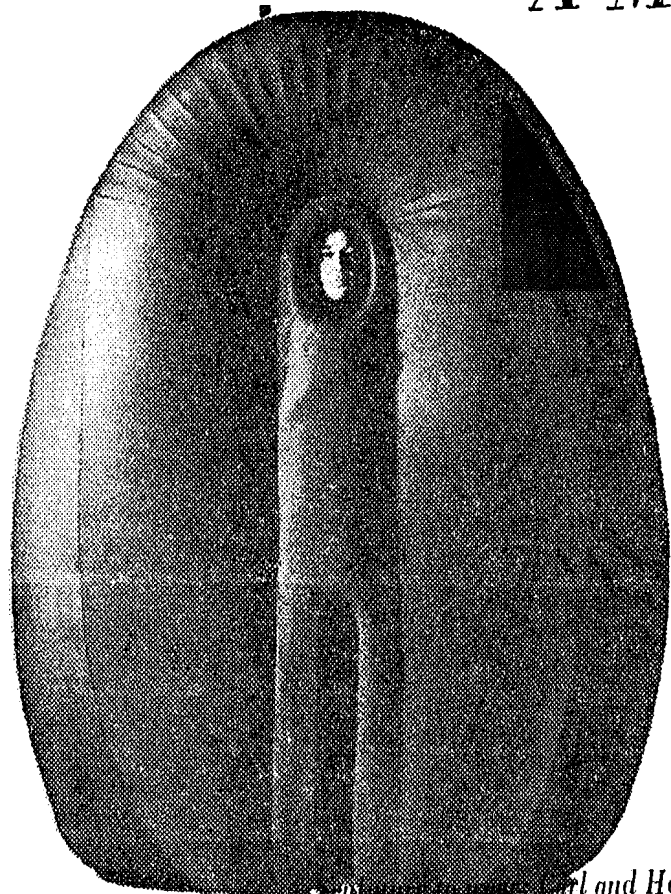
At the end of the day, the most interesting public contributions are put on display.

It's all a sort of consciousness-raising session, an effort to heighten awareness and expand the perceptions of city dwellers who—through overfamiliarity or preoccupation—have become oblivious of the diversity that surrounds them daily. It is, in short, an effort to lift the curtain of habit, to encourage city dwellers to really see, touch, hear, smell, explore and value their 20th century environment: glass, steel, and concrete; objects, textures and spaces.

See MUSEUM, F3, Col. 1

*A city to experience: Following the "Score" of the museum's current show, "Citysenses," a participant undertakes "a tactile investigation of one place on a block."*

*A freedom to feel: Dancer Marilyn Wood, creator of "Citysenses," follows a direction in one of her "Scores" to "find an open space to expand in."*



*Participant in scores: Carl and Heidi Bucher's apparel sculpture can function as object-sculpture when it's not being worn.*



# Please Touch the Art

MUSEUM, From F1

"It's really beautiful," Smith says. "People do get involved. Maybe it's the power of suggestion or the stimulation of being in the right situation. We never force the public to do anything. We leave room for a person to activate himself.

"The key point," he says, "is that the public will create the exhibition."

"Citysenses" is the second part of a three-stage project of the museum called "Acts: A series of Participatory Exhibition/Events for Total Involvement."

The first show featured inflatable apparel sculptures designed by Swiss artists Carl and Heidi Bucher and worn by actors and dancers specially hired by the museum.

The last show, running from May 21 to June 6, will be an extension of the body costume idea. The public will be invited to dress up for an apparel ball at the museum and the entire affair will be video taped on a daily basis.

"In this series," says Smith, "there's definitely an overlap with the theater. That's why we're calling it 'Acts.' You're the actor in it — you're the participant."

Smith has been running shows with an emphasis on audience participation for the past seven years.

"I merely want to bring people to a greater sense of awareness," he says. "This is a push-button era. Less and less people are using their hands to make things such as birds chirping and Our body has become pulled apart. We merely want to create a place where people can come to appreciate their senses through art forms."

Implicit in every exhibition is what Smith terms "play-happenings."

"When you become an adult," he explains, "it becomes unacceptable to play the spontaneous games that children play. It's got to be organized sport.

"But play is a form of expression that shouldn't be

*Paul J. Smith, director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts: "The public will create the exhibition."*

lost in adulthood. Part of playing is sense relaxation, and sense relaxation is what interests me."

In one show last year called "Contemplation Environments," the public was invited to play and meditate at the same time.

There was a moss-lined booth designed by Ralph Hawkins where you could ponder your future while electronically consulting the Ching, an ancient Chinese guide to life. USCO/INTER-MEDIA of Cambridge, Massachusetts exhibited upholstered fiberglass chairs which were sound chambers and less people are using their hands to make things such as birds chirping and water running.

Also on display were Plexiglas columns containing stroboscopic crystal waterfalls and a circular platform that sent warm air showers on the person who entered.

At another show called "Amusements Is," people had a chance to sample all sorts of artistic toys, including a musical tower that played "Carnival of Venice" each time a ping pong ball was dropped down it from the museum mezzanine.

"There's an ethical aspect to this," Smith adds. "We make it clear to industry that we're involved in education—not in exposing their products. We acknowledge that the exhibits can have side effects advantageous to industry, but that's not our primary focus."

When Smith first began his audience participation shows he admits that not many major corporations were interested in funding the museum.

"But when they saw the success of our shows they changed their minds," he says.

The Plastic exhibition has traveled across the country for two years, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors. The Paper show has gone to Chicago where it enjoyed a long run.

"Some of the things we've exhibited have gone on the market," says Smith. The fiberglass chair that doubles as a stereophonic sound booth has been manufactured. Several of the avant garde industrial designs have appeared in furniture: one example is a beanbag chair that molds to the shape of the body.

The Museum of Contemporary Crafts is operated under the auspices of the American Crafts Council, a national organization dedicated to "enhance, encourage and preserve the individual creative thinking so basic to craftsmanship."

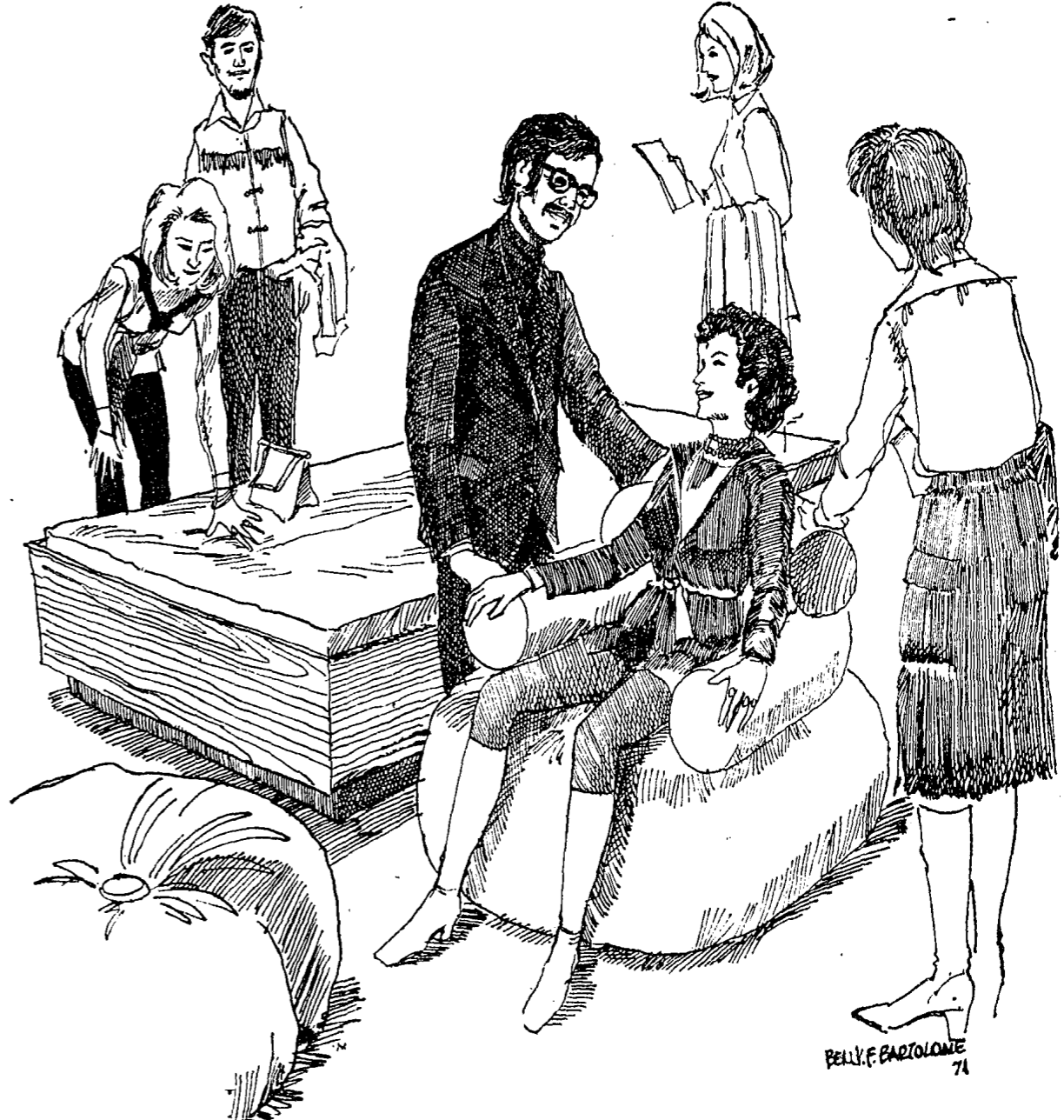
"We're dealing primarily with the contemporary scene," says Smith. "The things I do tend to be more experimental activities."

The ACC is sustained by its membership (approximately 30,000) and by contributions and funding.

Smith says many of the shows at the museum are put on with the help of industry.

"It's the lifeblood of our existence," he says. "There are dual interests involved. We want to educate the public; the artist would like his work displayed."

Industry enters the picture by providing material—such as in a show called "Plastic" and in another called "Paper."



*Several avant garde industrial designs exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts are now popular furniture designs, such as the waterbed and bean bag chair.*

"The artist/designer/craftsman is bound to have an increasingly important role in our lives," Smith says. "I believe that as more and more people become exposed to new ideas they will create a demand for them."

He hopes the Museum of Contemporary Crafts can play a role in enriching life environments — especially in a n - m a d e environments such as the home.

"I think by operating on an involvement level we're getting some of the fractured parts of society together—the artist, industry and the public. Hopefully, we're creating a new platform to negotiate on."

The museum is open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday. Admission is 75 cents.