

A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art reveals the underpinnings and negotiations for an exhibition (Summer, 1971), more completely than we have ever gleaned before in a catalog, or from hearsay. It comes to us almost as if it were sensitive material suddenly declassified. Readers are given to understand, quite correctly, that the deals, researches, and compromises, all of which usually stay behind the scenes of a show and are now revealed, hold more importance than the art eventually displayed. They compromise the real subject and true interest of the event.

The outstanding feature of the program was its experiment in patronage. How novel for a museum to have dispensed with the gallery system, the erstwhile cohort that had for so long acted as the storage depot and screening agency for new art. And just as unusual was the spectacle of a museum that acted *publicly* (rather than covertly) as a broker between what it unilaterally designated as the patron — the giant American corporation — and the artist. Having secured the prior consent and funding of the patron, the museum directly commissioned a number of artists of its choice to create work with the resources and in the actual plants of industrial firms. Entirely new ground had to be explored in the area of contracts, payments, work allocations, and property rights, for this was an enterprise conducted in the spirit of research and development, whose guidelines had

sporadic courtship had never been consummated. The convenience of the partners was served at a distance. It was under the conviction that he was fulfilling an historical destiny, that the most creative ideas might result, both in art and technology, that Maurice Tuchman, the museum's Curator of Modern Art, conceived of bringing them together, legally, for a special occasion. It was he who engineered the meetings and coddled the sensibilities of the artists and the executives. He, it was, who had to wheedle the "dowries" singlehandedly, and secure the cooperation of trustees and board members of every imaginable persuasion. If advanced science and art, for this one sustained instance, could be kept intimately on tap for each other, the old breach between them might be closed, and the progress which each represents might blend in an emboldened confluence of mutual discovery. It happened instead that everyone got screwed.

For the show even to have been imagined, there were three necessary preconditions. The first was a subsidized corporate economy, what has been called only recently, a "socialism for the rich," replete with tax write-offs, a bull market, hyped-up consumerism, bailed-out cost overruns, limitless credit and expense accounts. In other words, that phase of late capitalism in which there no longer exists any plausible relationship between profits and production, or clear distinction between big private enterprise and the state, because government paternalism has underwritten an increasingly inefficient business system. As described by Andrew Hacker,

waste. All these preconditions obtained in 1966-67, though somewhat less obviously than today. Back then it took a certain genius, whether conscious or not, for Tuchman to have recognized them as the fair signals of go-ahead.

In short, industrial management and art had reached comparable stages of decadence. They acknowledged no goal other than self-proliferation; and they had converted the tolerance of laissez-faire into an apathy in which no project had to be justified if it made work, however marginal, unproductive, or gratuitous.

This is the meaning of the attempt to spur a corporate patronage of art. It is perfectly true that the realization of art is a superfluity, that it traditionally gilds the affluence of the elites in bourgeois culture. But that culture always tended to sanction its art under pressure because art (aside from its intrinsic beauties) was also a form of critique — dissenting, anarchic, at times outrageous. It was to the credit of the bourgeois philosophy, liberalism, to think of that critique, no matter how reluctantly, as useful. If, on the contrary, the corporate mind were to hold durable sway, one would be immersed in an era in which critical reconstruction counts for little, and few people effectively care. How to calculate the opportunities for meaningful change when the typical expedient by which the American system placates the noisier or more unruly members of its minorities is to give them jobs . . . or to commission reports? In that atmosphere, charades of concern and evasions of purpose are the order of the day. Real problems do not make contact with real power, but rather

## THE MULTIMILLION DOLLAR ART BOONDOGGLE

never been established, and whose results could not be predicted. It is impossible to imagine the affairs between any *individual* artist and collector to be as elaborate and protective as those at Los Angeles. The artist became a nominal, if semidetached and temporary employee of a company. His status resembled that of an industrial intern. The museum assumed for itself the role of agent and impresario, rather than conservator, of art. And the corporation had to think for some months that any of its precincts might be used as a studio for useless dreams.

To what purpose were all these innovations fomented? Since the mid-sixties, it had become evident that artists had more than flirted with business and government patronage, but that no genuine rapport existed between the two parties. A case could be made for the sense of the artists' work as a weird celebration of American corporate activity, its effects and often enough, its processes. Yet, a piecemeal and

in *The End of the American Era*, it is a state of affairs in which any vestigial concept of the public interest subsides in the general momentum of indifferent, relentless turnover. . . . The second precondition was the weakening of the radical morale as well as formal conscience of an artistic avant-garde that was becoming enticed by a feckless experimentalism. Despite the war protests and peace auctions, the decrepitude of its social alienation was acute. Many artists did not understand that they had grown to be licentious at the cost of their independence. They wanted the opportunity to create with the help of, but really to fall back on, exotic and costly technical systems, not realizing that the means of production — and hence, control — would forever remain in the hands of the ruling classes who owned them . . . and lastly, the third precondition, correlating with the first two, a psychological confusion about true priorities and needs that springs out of the national dedication to

glance off each other in frustrated deflections because there is no longer any genuine center of response to social stimuli. Art can be accommodated in this situation far more readily than in the past, and count for far less.

Under these circumstances, it was quite proper of the curator not to touch upon, or to touch only lightly, the historical precedents of his project. In no sense would they have legitimized it. The collectivist, synthetic, art-for-people-and-life positions of the Constructivists and the Bauhaus, with their assumptions about the welding together of the economic means of production and the guiding procedures of the artist, could only have been maintained before the advent of a technology scaled large enough to realize them. For the necessary assembly line, communication, and distributing systems were finally to emerge under political conditions blasting any hope that artists could restructure society by their own example. That hope was pitiful from



Rockne Krebs, *Day Passage*, argon, mirrors, helium-neon lasers, 1971.



Newton Harrison, *Eco System of the Western Salt Works* (with the inclusion of brine shrimp), m/m, 1971.

Claes Oldenburg, *Giant Icebag*, m/m, 1968-1971. (Photo: Hannah Wilke.)



the start. But it was engendered by democratic impulses for which artists made huge sacrifices; and, in turn, it inspired the most idealistic energy that resulted in important theory and coherent works.

By contrast, today's artists, living in a Western world of unparalleled prosperity, are as modern in their indifference to socialist esthetics as they are hip with the media. Even if we are generous to the feeble cliques arising out of Experiments with Art and Technology (E.A.T.) or Pula, it can still be said that no present artistic groups have concerned themselves with any rapprochement with the masses by using the machine in lowering art prices or standardizing forms. And certainly the same applies to the artists influenced by or sympathetic to the doctrine of Jack Burnham, which tends to view the history of art as a history of techniques and their consequences. This perspective determines that the electronic methods of modern technology demand a comparable development in art, which must now transcend its handiwork commitment to the work as a physical object — not merely to bear witness to the laser-computer age, but to embody it. Such cybernetics-oriented art pays tribute to certain elderly ideas of progress in that it feels beholden to keep in step with fast-paced science. But since it is thoroughly elitist, upholding no values other than the tedious complication of its engineering, or the amorphous spread of "information," it had to downgrade the Utopianism that kept the techno-euphoria of some earlier modern art in thrall.

Into this disarray of forces, Maurice Tuchman entered with a smile. We can assume that few of the 200 artists he either recruited, or who got associated with his program, shared its official rationale. And this for the reason that there is no rationale to be found in the Report whatsoever: no specific concept of the project's goal, no insight into the artist's relations with society, no grasp of the history of modern art, no convincing argument as to the pertinence of having artists working in manufacturing plants, no statement detailing the public need or the timeliness to current art which the enterprise might graph. Indeed, it was the entirely opportunistic, unprincipled and arbitrary character of the undertaking, made seductive by copious publicity, that lent it a most up-to-date tone.

From the first, it was also to be problematic in structure. The brochure to the prospective sponsors — presumably hard-nosed business types — announces that artists will be selected on the basis of their "expressed interest in specific technological processes," while elsewhere, the exact opposite is stated to the readers of the Report. Artists, known and unknown, of every imaginable idiom, and many nationalities, were approached (excepting blacks, Chicanos, and women). The "Art and Technology" program, therefore, did not mean to chart a particular sensibility, illustrate a theme, or even

provide a heterogeneous survey of going effort. Its *raison d'être* was to provide a series of encounters from which might be furnished promotional benefits for industry, and some exhibit-able art. (To be fair, the museum also thought that artists might get good ideas.) Though the institution matched or channeled certain artists into particular corporations, it cannot be accused of having a point of view or of desiring to stamp any unity on what it had begotten. In this it acted like a private, research-granting foundation, rather similar to the Guggenheim or Ford, but was at the same time accountable for the results and output imposed upon a public agency.

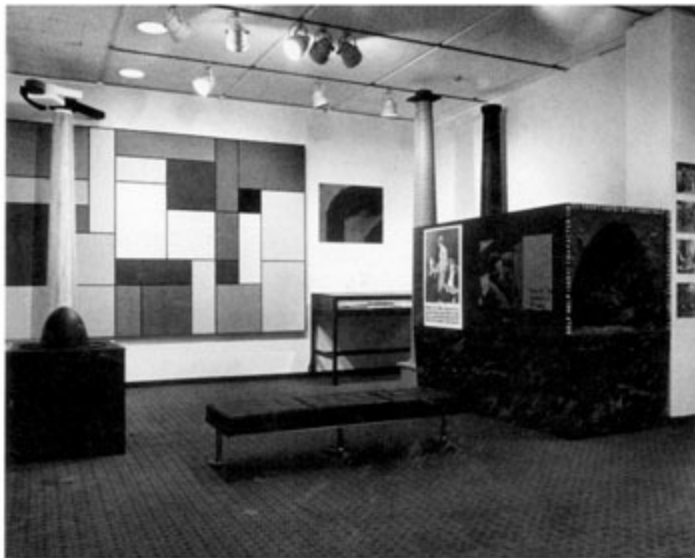
A similar conflict arose out of the notion of art as someone's property. The museum assured its clients that they would have the option of receiving a work evolving, if it did, out of collaboration with the artist (and exceeding in value the amount of the company's contribution). To forestall legitimate grievances of artists that they were obliged to hand over free art gifts to a company, the museum advised them to work in series — not because seriality might be integral to their work, but because they would acquire most of the results. In one of the most delightfully imperious letters ever written by a modern artist, Claes Oldenburg blew the whistle on this duplicity and told Tuchman he would not submit to manipulative arrangements in which he was deprived of tax breaks or a sale, was made to work at reduced salary for three months, and forced to travel coach instead of first class. Jean Dubuffet, for his part, considered himself so patronized that he would rather have contributed his monument at his own expense than be the recipient of payment generously "corresponding to the cost of my cigarettes." At first Robert Irwin seemed to have feared exploitation, too, for he was quite against the production of an object when there was so much to be gained from a purely "interactive" situation at the Garret Corporation. This attitude did not prevent him from hastening to exhibit one of his acrylic pylons in the final show, though it had nothing to do with his project.

As for the "Art and Technology" venture itself, no better introduction to its buffetings can be imagined than the cover of its Report. It purveys 64 photographs of participants — artists and engineers or managers, equally divided. Even the most casual viewer would have no difficulty distinguishing, on the basis of shaggy versus close-cropped, who was who. This difference of mien and style all but announces the general falling out of the collaborators and the ultimate realization of a mere 16 projects. Though theoretically asked to make only modest sacrifices, with tremendous financial inducements, many of the corporations fought shy or had to be pressured or specially gulled by the boondoggle. They had no settled idea, and rather unhappy suspicions about what would be

asked of them aside from money. Nor would the artists have imagined how much red tape, unnecessary channels of control, inflexible modes of fabrication, and stubborn resistance to concept they would encounter when they left the studio for the factory. For the artist, the unaccustomed medium of corporate production seemed to thicken before his eyes into an intransigent glop. For the engineer, the planning of the artist thinned out often into the most hare-brained and ludicrously expensive schemes. There were companies that withdrew because the artist would not meet implementation halfway; and there were artists who wandered for months in the corridors of industrial power without finding people with whom to connect or any appropriate means to materialize their goals, if we assume they had any clear-cut notion of them in the first place. Requests that companies send rockets into outer space or to Mars were turned down. And everywhere there ensued chronic searches for answers, some in good faith, others, often enough, in bad. One remembers John Chamberlain addressing scores of memos to "Everyone at Rand," stating simply, "I'm searching for ANSWERS. Not questions!" and getting back emotional but unrevealing responses. Or the truly witless James Lee Byars, at the Hudson Institute, asking "What's the most important question of the 20th century?" to which the thoroughly humorless Herman Kahn, the Report goes on to say, replied "Well, this question is on three levels. First of all there are cosmic questions like, How is the world created, does God exist and this sort of thing. We can dismiss those."

Predictably, then, the conflict was between literalists and visionaries, between those who would shrink all questions about phenomena to a matter of testing know-how, and those who would expand all affairs of making into pure conditions of being and concept. The two types got along infamously with each other. Even on a workaday level, artists strived to gain more shop latitude for various capers from engineers and researchers engaged in trimming down budgets, gaining executive assent, squelching put-ons and catching up with rip-offs (such as Dan Flavin's at G.E.). Through the portals of Kaiser Steel, Litton Industries, Lockheed Aircraft, and Teledyne, traipsed some of the most playful men of the Western world.

Oldenburg makes the most poignant chart of the internal contradictions of their experience, by pairing off the attitudes and qualities of the artist in the studio and in the collaborative situation: "1. intolerant — tolerant, 8. violent — restrained, 10. vindictive-paranoid — forgiving, 15. drunk or high (looking for sublimity) (custodian of the sublime) — sober (indifferent to the sublime, like airplane pilots) . . . etc." If these opposites are inaccurate, or apply only to the creator of the giant ice bag, it may be because proximity with the factories seems to have pro-



R. B. Kitaj, *Mockup: Lives of the Engineer*, m/m, environment space 20 x 25', 1971.



Boyd Mefferd, *untitled*, strobe lights, electronics, plexiglass, 1971.  
Museum photographer's interpretation of the effect of the Mefferd room.

duced a certain megalomania in many artists ordinarily less obsessed than he.

One reads the Report only to see them behave as would-be magi, con-men, fledgling technocrats, acting out mad science fiction fantasies, such as Jackson MacLow's abominable idea that I.B.M. should construct a vast computer environment "for accepting and feeding out massive amounts of information based on the ecology of the Los Angeles metropolis." It is possible to sympathize with technicians who doubtless were beginning to wonder into whose hands they had fallen, and who had to confront a barrage of ignorant directives and willful misapplication of resources. Here the Report, otherwise extremely matter-of-fact in style, can best be seen as a comedy detailing the clash of ego and suppressed ego, quickly or eventually bringing out the worst in both — that is, accentuating the capricious, the esoteric, and the juvenile in the one, and the philistine and the flunky in the other. The permissive atmosphere in the art world, that which licenses and sanctions the artist's most extravagant conceits, evaporates as soon as his context is changed to one where men are supposed to be doing things seriously and for purpose. Bob Morris, for example, did not gain favor by wanting to construct "an environmental situation involving temperature control systems" with a division of Lear Siegler, which would "bury all this technology right in the ground and have nothing there but a little more weather than was there in the first place

— what miniature gold did for the game this piece might do for the National Parks." If Gemini Director Ken Tyler's idea is just — the idea that the whole project was a species of living theater ("For me the technicians are the stage designers, the set builders, the choreographers and our guys like Claes are the actors."), then it was theater in which technology is typically entombed or sent off into the heavens, a theater in which the disproportion between inordinate means and foolish or aborted results cancels out the drama. Thus, finally, the two parties, the artists and technicians of society, were brought together in a long hoped-for union, only to produce a *folie à deux*.

There were those, of course, who found harmony in realizing mutually comprehensible aims. But the presence of such techno-artists as Rockne Krebs, Boyd Mefferd, and Newton Harrison only highlighted a prime esthetic dilemma of the program. To the entrenched style of the Pop artists and minimal sculptors, industry offered either a more durable and gussied packaging of their efforts, not very interesting in itself, or a surrender to the prerequisites of machines which might entail the sacrifice of intelligible syntax and hard-won control. These artists placed themselves in the position where "conservative" and "progressive" stances held little meaning and much danger for them. For they had allowed an entirely false premise to be imposed upon them, namely that what had been invoked by a will to form was to be furthered by resort to

*electro-mechanical means which could only activate or atomize form.* Sensation and effect would be sorry recompense for the loss of shape and structure.

On the other hand, the type of artist infatuated with technical process would be all the more encouraged, through force of bias, to the sensational, to art as short term entertainment or mystification. Between the option of getting technology out of sight or making it extremely manifest, his choice was clear. He had no vocabulary or style to compromise, but also no point of view to propose or express. The climate of expectancy generated by the show was to penalize both the "straight" and "novelty" solutions to any problem. Pity the artist doomed either to disappoint or titillate. It was Jim Turrell, withdrawing from a project where he had been led by Robert Irwin to perform some cruel experiments in sensory deprivation, who gave the most thoughtful critique of the program. Speaking of a "Pavlovian approach into spirituality," he continues: "We're very physical. When we want to go into the universe, we can't look at a rock, like the Japanese. We have to actually go to the moon. We're so literal. . . . There are actually meditative sciences, or sciences of the soul. We have devices, sensors, alpha conditioning machines . . . we can't meditate without having this thing strapped on us." His is not a complaint about gadgetry as such, but about the illusion that a kind of soul hunger and quest for faith might be literally satisfied by chemical

assistance or electronic innervation. Turrell's is the only voice in the Report to speak against the whole affair as a perversion of artistic values. For there was something metaphorically sublime in modern art's longing for synesthesia which the A&T program makes literally ridiculous, and something consciously liberating in the contest between the artist's mind and hands which the program would now automate.

There was nothing left, when the show was finally installed, but to catalog a list of dismal surprises. The laser beams of Krebs, the strobes of Mefferd, and the mirror projections of Robert Whitman were as imaginatively pointless as they were physically disembodied. And if the availability of new hardware was to invoke any change in esthetic kind, this had not been proved by the characteristic efforts of Richard Serra, Tony Smith, or Jesse Reichek. As for Newton Harrison's rather lovely columnar plastic tubes, radiating color glows electronically discharged from various gases, they gave rare refreshment in the circus surround. Among the others on the roster, derision ruled. Rauschenberg's tank of flatulent mud vindicated Tele-dyne's sporting spirit. Kitaj appears to have enjoyed himself by using Lockheed's Burbank facilities to produce a kind of 19th-century museum of industrial memorabilia. Fahlstrom's "Meatball Curtain" metallized imagery from Zap Comix. Andy Warhol's 3-D photographs of daisies, seen through the illuminated squirts of a rain machine, demonstrated a certain frivolity. There was a certain pleasure to be derived from the thought of the thousands of work hours and dollars expended on these fey and whimsical contraptions. For here the artists wriggled free from their highfalutin methodology by demeaning it. Little enough can be said for the intrinsic qualities of their work; but some credit must be given to its malice. The way the museum installed it, highlighted in hallowed, darkened sanctuaries, approached the ecstatic.

But such ironies were small retaliation for a larger defeat. The show unfolds a bankruptcy of character which time, if nothing else, had inflicted on '60s art. The show was conceived in 1967 and belongs to its decade even though it was terminated only last summer, 1971. As a monstrosity inflated event, it resembled that other white elephant, Henry Geldzahler's "New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970" at the Metropolitan, with the difference that having far less merit, it went further in unconscious celebration of the demise of the avant-garde tradition. In 1967, the American economy could be superficially represented by the term, "all systems go," for the big corporations were enjoying a surge of barely challenged optimism and confidence. In 1971, unemployment, recession and inflation had so decimated the economic prospects of masses, including those in the California aerospace industry, that even the most rabid conservatives realized that capitalism was suffering a possibly

mortal disease. It was then that the art world mounted an enterprise, actually outdated even before it began, designed to congratulate us on our technical prowess and rosy future. Nor was its general foolishness allayed by having been suffused by the quack theories of Fuller, McLuhan, and Cage, the gurus of '60s far-out.

An even more important deficit arises from the political implications of the project. Tuchman writes: "I had expected resistance from artists . . . on 'moral' grounds — opposition, that is, to collaborating in any way with the temples of Capitalism, or, more particularly, with militarily involved industry." Aside from the significant omission of what he himself felt about instigating that collaboration, the fact remains that only one of the artists he approached, Peter Voulkos, objected to it. Now, as he had to admit, most would. Some of the companies involved by the museum are as follows (quotes are from the Report itself): The Garrett Corporation ("has been designing high-performance jet engines for military aircraft"); General Electric ("has its own think tank, called TEMPO, which runs seminars on nuclear weapons"); Hewlett-Packard Company ("radar, guided-missile control"); Jet Propulsion Laboratory; Liton Industries ("builds submarines, amphibious assault ships, and advanced guidance and fire control systems"); Lockheed Norris Industries ("a major ordnance manufacturer since World War II"); North American Rockwell, and The Rand Corporation. In short, it is a rogue's gallery of the violence industries. Subsidized decisively by the American government, they had grown to their present bulk through the business of slaying. The show epitomizes the fact that our most prominent visual artists had been offered an extremely direct contract to be of service to the prestige of these industries (in return for access to various hard and software), and had accepted. During the term of the project, there occurred the My Lai massacre, the Chicago Democratic Convention riots, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the invasion of Cambodia, and the student killings at Kent and Jackson State. While these convulsions were taking place, inflaming the radicalism of our youth and polarizing the country, the American artists did not hesitate to freeload at the trough of that techno-fascism that had inspired them.

It is true that several innocuous and honorable companies had been enlisted into the program. And artists are hardly exceptionable, no more than the rest of us, in being entangled in a thousand everyday complicities with the destructiveness of the American war machine. But there exists a huge difference, that does not require a fine measure, between these involuntary dependencies that will endure short of total boycott or revolution, and active, knowing connivance, freely entered into without pressure or need. By refusing the overture of the Los An-

geles County Museum, the artist would surely not have engaged in any move of political impact. But he would have added his voice to the growing constituency of dissent. He would serve notice that he could no longer be considered a dupe or a lackey.

It is amazing to recall that the museum's policy was to hide nothing from the artists, and that as late as the decision to boost the whole affair by opening it prematurely at Osaka's Expo 70, when everything was practically guaranteed to go on the blink, the participants did not withdraw, even though their work would be seen at maximum disadvantage. And if it was too much to expect them to heed their own interests as artists, they were surely insensitive to the crassness with which they were exploited as enthusiasts of American economic imperialism in an international setting. The world was there to see that American government and industry were perhaps somewhat benign after all, since American artists, members of the intelligentsia, were displaying their knickknacks under official auspices.

The aftermath of this muddle is still in progress. The curator who hopefully hatched it, and catalyzed it with such dazzling energy, has obviously reached the apex of his career, and is being carried upward with very pleasant notices in the press. As for the museum, which for four years ignored the majority of the young, struggling, and talented artists in its own region in favor of pursuing benefices from industry, I only hope it can avoid the poetic fate of going into receivership. The artists, finally, seem woozy, disenchanted with their star system, balking at every little thing. A new generation of them has a bad taste in its mouth.

Ultimately, the Report seems to me like a microcosmic analogue of these recent disclosures about American foreign policy in the Vietnam war—the Pentagon Papers. Both documents offer a candid history of bad faith and mutual deceit, of deepening mistakes and misunderstandings, and, above all, a collision of cultures. They reveal how an organization tried to weld together an alliance between incompatible peoples with radically different interests for the purpose of colonizing a new territory. The theme that runs through the two publications is an impulse to expand the market of American technology, to engage its ever more cancerous resources, despite whatever effect this may have on the quality of human life or the ideals of political liberty. These annals of corporate overkill offer all the excitement of truly indecent reading matter. In them is shown how men lose sight of a rational link between available means and ends, and how they substituted for it a grandiose, self-serving vision which moved towards a failure of credibility, gratuitous waste, the abuse of power, and the collapse of the original effort itself, under the weight of its own misconception. ■