

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

The New York Times

ART: 'ENGAGING OBJECTS,' AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL ZOO, by Michael Brenson (May 30, 1986)

"ENGAGING OBJECTS: The Participatory Art of Mirrors, Mechanisms and Shelters" is one of the more unusual shows of the season. The subject is what Tom Finkelpearl, the coordinator of the Clocktower Gallery and curator of the exhibition, calls "audience-activated" art. What this means is art that is set in motion by our physical presence or movement - like sitting on it, talking into it, rocking it or wearing it.

The show is like a cultural zoo. Dean McNeil's vacuum cleaners lie inside a cage writhing like snakes and grinding like a pneumatic drill. Turning the switch of Aimee Rankin's music box theater called "Bliss" is the signal for lights, smells and opera. Bill and Mary Buchen's "Sonic Maze" is a homemade pinball machine in which the ball bounces off xylophones and bells. Activating Nam June Paik's video screen means making noises into microphones. The exhibition definitely does not offer the hallowed silence of a museum.

One of the aims of the show is to suggest the number of artists interested in engaging the audience in what they see as a more direct and equal way than traditional painting and sculpture. "The invitation to participate," Finkelpearl writes in the catalogue, should make viewers "more aware of the uniqueness and subjectivity of their response to the work."

"Within parameters set by the artist," he says, "the viewer becomes a creative force, discovering and inventing a work for himself."

There are 18 artists in all. Robert Smithson is represented by a 1964 kinetic piece. Vito Acconci's "Stretched Facade" - one of several works using mirrors - consists of a large face shaped like a funhouse boat with seats in the mouth and eyes. Accompanying the show, in an almost-adjacent gallery, there are works by Stephen Barry, one of Clocktower's studio residents. In his "Sirens" we whiz back and forth in a chair,

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

overlooking a whirlpool-like maze, listening to siren-like sounds and looking at two modern-day sirens, a young man and woman, beckoning with their eyes and puckering their lips on screens in front of us.

The piece that Finkelppearl describes as the most "technically sophisticated" is Myron W. Krueger's "Interactive Environment." It is a computer-based work in which our image activates visual and audio programs on a screen and speakers. As we move our fingers through space, we create images and sounds. In one of the programs, called "Critter," a creaturely presence appears alongside us on the screen. We can move it about and make it jump, but we can not catch or control it.

The problem with the show lies in the claims that are made for it. Before Modernism, and even in most modernist art apart from Minimalism and Formalism, artists worked with a sympathetic understanding of the needs of the public. From the beginning of the century many artists have been fascinated at one time or another by the idea of a more perfect union between art and viewer. To suggest that serious artistic consideration of the public is new, or to argue that physical participation can establish a relationship with the public that is more honest, more complete and more respectful of its "uniqueness and subjectivity" does not make a lot of sense.

What the show reveals is that art depending upon our physical participation in order to function tends to have little imaginative substance. As entertaining and clever as the objects in this exhibition are, they tend to stop the imagination, not inspire it. The most engaging objects are those that do not depend upon our physical involvement. Like some of Mark di Suvero's sculptures, Wenda Habenicht's "Shy Man's Throne" and David Schafer's "Folly" are both sculptures on which we can swing. Both have a scale that makes us want to swing on them in the first place.

Liz Phillips's sound installation, "Sound Syzygy" - which with Buky Schwartz's video-and-sculpture installation called "Pink Roof" makes the upstairs gallery the most effective corner of the show - fills up space like sculpture. It picks up sounds - all sounds - through sensors and turns them into beeps and pings and music. Because of the way it makes us aware of space, aware of our relation to a particular space and aware of sound as something that affects us whether or not we hear it, it is the most effective piece in the show.

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

The exhibition, sponsored in part by the David Bermant Foundation, is at the Clocktower, 108 Leonard Street, through June 15. Hours are Wednesday through Sunday, 12 to 6 P.M. Also of interest this week: Houston Conwill and Milton Komisar (Alternative Museum, 17 White Street): Houston Conwill is a sculptor with a distinct sensibility, a willingness to take on big themes and a strong sculptural sense. In his installation called the "Passion of St. Matthew," dedicated to the late artist Ana Mendieta, he continues to work as inclusively as possible. And he continues to aim for work that can somehow both accept death and turn our attention to a wide-open future.

Conwill's ambition is unmistakable. He works on the floor and wall, on a large and small scale, with words and images, and with a variety of materials. This installation brings together tribal art, American Indian art, poetry, mythology and religious art - particularly as Conwill saw and experienced it on a recent trip to Rome. His archetypal circles and arches are covered with dirt that also suggests his need to combine the most general and the most private: the dirt was gathered from Roman tombs and from the tomb of someone in his family.

But "The Passion of St. Matthew" is still the work of a young artist. The large wood circles on the wall, filled in with grids and partly covered with peeling latex skins, have a sculptural authority that the arch and broken circle on the floor lack. There is a consistent confusion between aspects of the work that can be experienced sculpturally and aspects that exist only conceptually or as symbols. Rather than controlling and pacing every detail like a master storyteller, Conwill prefers to offer us material with which we can build our own stories based on the theme. But that is a sure way of diminishing any story's power. And Conwill's stories are ones we want to hear.

Milton Komisar's computerized light installation, "Light Seed," works well with the Conwill piece. It is structured around 10 Plexiglas rings suspended close together and parallel to each other in the darkness. The way the light bolts through the rings suggests states of mind: it is as if all the feelings we might have in the course of a day were transformed into light and then compressed into a 20-minute cycle. The rings may light up together, or one by one. The Plexiglas web may explode with energy, or doze off. It may seem to trap forms, or wrestle like a spider with its prey. The work has an elemental quality that light installations do not often have. (Through tomorrow.) John Monti and Mary Carlson (Curt Marcus Gallery, 578 Broadway, near Prince Street): John Monti builds

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

striking vertical plywood constructions and paints parts of them black. The sculptures link a number of traditions, most noticeably Tribal Art and Constructivism. Monti is also trying to bring to deceptively simple sculptural shapes the referential breadth that has been characteristic of recent art, and the brashness that has been characteristic of New York art since World War II.

The works in this show reach out in many directions. They may sit on the floor, hug the wall, unfold into space and stretch toward the ceiling. Just as important to their scale is the shifting points of view. Like few other frontal sculptures that cannot be seen from the back, they both change and retain their integrity from the sides. For example, from the front, "Snit II" suggests the hieratic immobility of Max Ernst's "King and Queen." From the sides, however, the arabesque line is closer to the movement of Picasso's bulls or Matisse's acrobats. The inventiveness and complexity of these works does not diminish the totemic aspect but strengthens it.

Like Monti, Mary Carlson works in wood, which she may coat with paper and Plexiglas and then paint a single color. Her four wall sculptures are compact and dramatic. They can seem both pressed against the wall like a bracelet and pushing out like a wave, both pinned against the wall like an taxidermist's display and trying to wrestle free like an emerging butterfly in a cocoon. In all four works the vitality and tension are impressive. (Through June 7.) Robert Mason (CDS Gallery, 13 East 75th Street): This is Robert Mason's first solo show in New York. The English artist's expressive and insistently autobiographical works are done in oil paint, charcoal and sometimes pencil on museum board. In each one we find the artist searching for the family he lost at an early age, and searching for himself. Sometimes his family may show up in the background. Sometimes they appear in the form of mementos. Often Mason fingers and questions a carnival mask as figures in 17th-century Dutch paintings finger and question skulls.

The expressionism of the paintings suggests Francis Bacon; the light and shadow brings to mind the Italian Baroque. Although Mason himself is present and nude in almost every work, he seems rarely, if ever, exposed. He is more absent than present, existing primarily as someone preoccupied with what eludes him. The better the work, the more abstract it is. In some paintings, the spotlighted figure against the darker, sometimes ferociously painted background is like a collage. If there is a lot in the painting of these works that is appealing, however, the repetition of the artist's image is not. It gives the works a literalness that no amount of Hamlet-like meditation and imaginative paint-handling can get beyond. (Through tomorrow.)