

Art: 'Engaging Objects,' Audience Participation in Cultural Zoo

By MICHAEL BRENSON

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, 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 Finkelpearl 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.

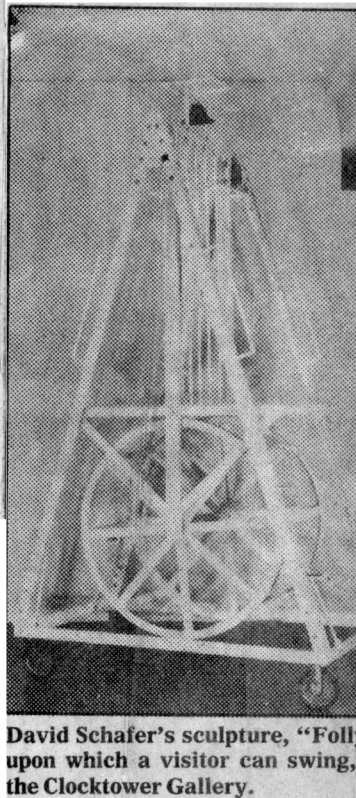
The problem with the show lies in the claims that are made for it. Before Modernism, and even in most modernist art apart from Minimalism and Formalism, artists worked with a sympathetic understanding of the needs of the public. From the beginning of the century many artists have been fascinated at one 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 Habernicht'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.

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.



David Schafer's sculpture, "Folly," upon which a visitor can swing, the Clocktower Gallery.