42nd Street event

The 42nd Street Art Project, West 42nd Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. July 8-0dober 31,1993

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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

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"Sloppy thinking gets worse over time."

A

times of this famous street as a destination for entertainment and exciting cultural experiences." Because when all else fails, an appeal to "potential" can still be made.

So the UDC approached Creative Time, Inc., the twenty-year-old non-profit organization that has previously sponsored artists' projects in such arena settings as the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage and the Battery Park City landfill, to work something out for Times Square. With the collaboration of the noted postmodern design firm M&Co. and the participation of The New 42nd Street Inc., a group established to restore and recreate the old, historic theaters of the Deuce, Creative Time curated the 42nd Street Art Project.

Artists have been the stalking horses of real estate interests before, to the point where the true locus of the avant garde seems not avant some fabled aesthetic revolution but rather avant the bulldozers. Look at the experience of SoHo and the East Village. Artists move into a marginal neighborhood in search of cheap rents. They improve the neighborhood, making it more attractive to other urban professionals: lawyers, doctors, accountants. As the neighborhood gentrifies, the very artists who made its overnight success possible are often forced out of their
lofts and apartments. They can no longer afford the brave new world they helped create.

The situation in Times Square is a bit different. Artists are not moving in. It is only their artworks that are taking up temporary residence. And artists are not the unwitting pawns of real estate speculators. Here they are willing accomplices. Still, there is in the 42nd Street Art Project the unhealthy aura of a show organized not on aesthetic criteria but with certain political and economic considerations paramount. Showcasing the street without foregrounding any meaningful critical questions regarding its redevelopment. Making easy rather than challenging curatorial choices that might rock the boat. Favoring the decorative over the thought-provoking, to make the show more immediately accessible to a non-art public. Curation by committee, a guarantee that no single, overarching vision will emerge to give the show strength and continuity. Cuteness before substance. Demographics before excellence. A roundup of the usual suspects, often represented by decade-old work. These criteria are not necessarily evil. They merely result in mediocrity. A mediocrity of choices. A mediocrity of juxtapositions. Worst of all, a general feeling of lameness and insipidity that does not do justice to the participating artists, whose work, in many cases, has looked much better in other contexts.

Allow me to voice a disclaimer, before I discuss some of the work. The 42nd Street Art Project is not the sort of show I would ordinarily review. Had my editor not particularly requested coverage, I would undoubtedly have left it alone, understanding that public art is one of those things best ignored unless you have something really good to say about it. I certainly don’t want to be the big bad wolf, and coming down hard on public art is a sure way to look mean. Mean and downright cursed, like taking a stick to a tail-wagging dog. Educational, multicultural, non-profit and anti-elitist, the endeavor of public art is so drenched in correct liberal pieties, so overtly well intentioned, so eager to please, it just about jumps in your lap and begs — no, demands — to be loved. Public art, personified, is like the protagonist of a Phil Ochs song from the 60s, who first enumerates his many good works and enlightened sensibility, and then breaks into the alarmingly insistent refrain: “So love me, love me, love me, I’m a liberal.”

Does public art have a greater need to be loved than its brothers and sisters in the private sector of galleries and museums? Certainly, public art is more convinced of its nobility of purpose and selfless agenda, its liberal propensity to place people before profits and serve the needs of the many rather than any aesthetic elite. This protective liberal halo can also cloak mediocrity, and in the case of the 42nd Street Art Project, pluralism and mediocrity seem to march hand in hand. The multi-organizational origins of the Project feed directly into a Chinese menu, something for everybody curatorial stance: one from column A, one from column B, and so on, until all bases are covered, and no one can be accused of missing a beat. For example: one attention-getting storefront mural, composed entirely of colored bicycle reflectors, recalling motifs from pattern painting and folk art; one lady graffiti artist lending her ghetto social realism to a couple of metal security gates; one cutesy but educational (safe sex) window display featuring costumes made from condoms; a facade of painted showgirl silhouettes and similarly whimsical cheap glitz by a famous fashion designer; and, just in case the piquant diversity of the show is still not apparent, a giant yellow sign designed by M & Co., which screams “EVERYBODY” across the square in huge black letters.

Luckily, a small number of projects on 42nd Street go beyond this “aren’t artists nice, fun people and don’t they do the most interesting things” school of curating. Liz Diller and Ric Scofidio, a team of conceptual architects who often work in the performing and visual arts, have done themselves proud with Soft Sell, a piece that tells us something about the nature of compulsion and yearning
driven to distraction by late capitalist consumer culture. It also comments bitingly on the Deuce’s propensity for tease and sleaze, for hucksterism on the most elemental level, and on the compelling urge to gentrify Times Square. As we pass under the marquee of the Rialto Theater at 205 West 42nd Street, we notice a really big female mouth — huge, glinting red lips that don’t stint on lipstick—projected from the interior onto the glass doors of the lobby. The mouth moves. It talks to us, through a speaker mounted in the abandoned cashiers’ booth. In a sultry, smug tone, it offers us many things for sale. “Hey you,” it says, “wanna buy a sure thing? Hey you, wanna buy a new lifestyle?” Or, for that matter, a winning ticket? a place in the sun? a piece of the action? a sucker to take the fall? Printed on the doors are the words Shameless, Sinful, Savage and Scandalous, words that have often been used to describe the Deuce. But paired with each, displayed on white gift boxes, and periodically visible, are the antonyms Discreet, Innocent, Genteel, Virtuous. Diller and Scofidio are indulging in flip flop, commenting on reversibility: the reversibility of moral condemnation; the reversibility of property values in a soon-to-be-sanitized Times Square; and the role language plays in inaugurating change.

Another piece that seems to know what it is doing on the Deuce is the installation by Karen Finley in the empty Papaya World on the corner of 42nd Street and Seventh Avenue. Painted on the long inside wall, but visible through the plate glass, is a large watercolor mural of an idealized nuclear family — mother, father and child — all covered with large red splotches, which are actually the lesions of a rare form of skin cancer, Kaposi’s sarcoma, which has become more prevalent during the AIDS epidemic. The handpainted text surrounding these figures is shrill and intense, the hysterical prose of self infatuation: “I am a necklace of rubies, garnets and amethyst... I am a speckled wild cat with a coat of rare beauty... Lollipops of cherry and grape adorn me.” Finley’s installation, entitled Positive Attitude, is a species of the ecstatic stigmatic, a startling phenomenon that goes way over the top of everyday experience to push for some ultimate transcendence. The religious ecstatic stigmatic would manifest the wounds of Christ on his or her body as a declaration of true faith. Finley’s interpretation, showing off the stigmata of AIDS, and indulging in an incomprehensible apotheosis of these wounds, reaches out in terror and pain to the possibilities of a superworldly compassion.

A longtime resident of the Times Square area, Jane Dickson is a veteran painter of lower class subjects: amusement arcades, spectral street corners. At 212 West 42nd Street, she has mounted an installation called The Bride, homage to both Marcel Duchamp (Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even) and Cinderella. Executing an arch turn on the old hooker/wife dichotomy, Dickson fills the windows with backlit watercolor on vellum paintings of bridal shop mannequins, their self-possessed poses in stark contrast to the former porn shop that once used the space, Adult Video World. Through a locked glass door, you can still see the empty jack-off booths. A stairway (to heaven?), lined with fluorescent tubes and mismatched pairs of women’s shoes, ascends to a mezzanine, on which a motorized, life-size bridal gown, made of iridescent mylar, slowly rotates in the spotlights, shedding rainbowed glints of color into the prevailing muck. Dickson seems to make no overt judgment regarding the old vs. the new Times Square, the hooker vs. the bride. Like Diller and Scofidio, she is poised on the reversible cusp between sinful and innocent, scandalous and virtuous.

Sculptors John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres have done live plaster casting in the South Bronx for over a decade, a modest, forthright and effective way of integrating art into the community. People from the neighborhood drop by, sometimes sitting for a portrait or photograph, sometimes becoming the subject of a life casting, which becomes a three-dimensional, painted sculpture, either free standing or hung on the wall. In this way, the studio becomes a mirror of its immediate human environment of homeboys, dealers, shopkeepers, mothers, auto mechanics, street people, whatever. Ahearn and Torres have relocated their activity downtown, creating a neighborhood art workshop in the former Blimpies sandwich shop at 219 West 42nd Street. The one and only art project on the Deuce that establishes an immediate physical interplay with its audience, the workshop is also a continually evolving exhibition of this interaction. So while the UDC and its kindred spirits hastily plan various alternative futures for Times Square, Ahearn and Torres are committed to exploring what exists, right now, on the Deuce.

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