

SOMIA

NUMBER 9 \$2



Collective Experiment

PHILADELPHIA - Twenty years ago, the Painted Bride Art Center was a gathering of six unpaid artists in a storefront on South Street, a low-rent, run-down bohemian neighborhood. The storefront had been a bridal shop, so the artists, (who were, among other things, painters), dubbed it the Painted Bride.

It started mainly as theater; then dancers, musicians, poets and visual artists joined the collective experiment. And when the audience forgot to come, the performers went to them, moving into the street, gradually building a reputation for persistence as well as quality.

Among their South Street experiments was a 1976 performance marking the bicentennial: playwright Lanier Robertson's *The Insanity of Mary Girard*. The piece dramatized a pregnant woman's erroneous imprisonment in 1790, a dark moment in local history.

In 1982 the Painted Bride went north. Renovating an old elevator factory on Vine Street, the new Bride emerged as a tidy, fully-equipped theater. Since April 1988, it has also housed an extensive gallery. (This combination of gallery and performance space invites comparison with San Francisco's New Langton Arts and The Lab.)

Emerging local artists such as Dan Loewenstein still frequently produce work in the Bride's multiple spaces. Often, established companies (like Berkeley's Paul Dresher Ensemble or Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater from Glover, Vermont) develop and premiere work at the Painted Bride.

In 1987, Schumann orchestrated a group of 15 Philadelphians -- mostly non-theater people willing to experiment -- creating *An Uneasy Equilibrium of Societies in Stamford*, a performance exposing the oxymoron "urban renewal." The company improvised scenes around a newspaper article about gentrification. Schumann then arranged the scenes into a collage of dance, oversized flat cardboard puppets and social commentary.

The Painted Bride has embraced Schumann's idea of Cheap Art, art that "defies, ridicules, undermines and makes obsolete the affluent-society economy." Every month, the Bride's Cheap Art Cafe offers all comers a chance to create art from ordinary materials.

In this era of political conservatism, the Bride's programming reflects a range of ethnic identity and political purpose. 1987's Voices of Dissent festival featured artists grappling with political oppression, and 1988's Adelante! Latin Arts festival represented the growing Latino community. This year's festival will be Kuumba, "A Celebration of Afro-American Creativity."

The Bride hosted Philadelphia's first centralized AIDS and the Arts festival in the fall of '88. In three days crammed with performances, discussions and exhibits, the Bride celebrated survival and community activism. The Persons with AIDS Theater from New York City offered its moving collage of stories, and Philadelphia's Danceteller performed *Beyond Forever*. For the audience it was a chance to go through and past mourning. The festival diffused the helplessness arising from fear and disinformation.

Interdisciplinary artists regularly test new work at the Painted Bride. The center is one of 10 regional administrators for the Grants Program for Interdisciplinary Artists, a

National Endowment for the Arts/Rockefeller Foundation program. The Bride was chosen because, with funding from the Pennsylvania Council for the Arts, it had established a similar program in 1984. Now it's the GPIA's center for artists in the mid-Atlantic.

Program Officer Steve Gerba distributes grants of up to \$4,000 to support "work that is innovative: challenging expected boundaries, testing new ideas." He says, "Mixing disciplines opens up the entire process . . . with those who have a whole different perspective."

In 1988, Terry Niedzialek designed a cryptic but visually striking performance piece, *At the Corner of Error and Perfection*. The work combined Niedzialek's "hair sculptures" with fractured video narration and a costume that, as she marched stiffly across the stage, served as a film projection screen.

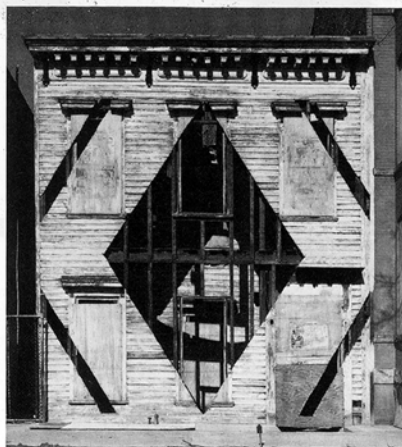
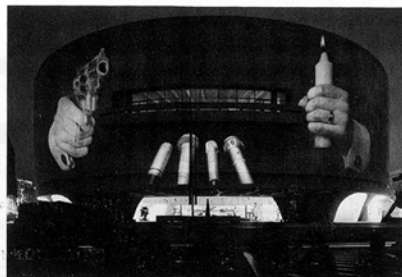
Beginning next year, GPIA grant winners will be eligible for funds to further develop and tour their work. With the GPIA money, emerging artists have a means to start, a forum for feedback, conferences with established artists. Spiderwoman Theater, Underground Railway, Meredith Monk and Philip Glass, as well as international artists such as London's Kaboodle Theatre Company and Argentina's Teatro del Sur have performed here.

The Painted Bride seems to have struck that precarious balance that makes financial and artistic survival possible, tapping a young audience which expects a challenge as well as entertainment.

-- Carol Burbank

Ephemeral Markings

WASHINGTON D.C. - The nation's capital is a bastion of conservatism, in the arts as surely as



Above Top: Krzysztof Wodiczko's projection art on the exterior wall of the Hirshhorn Museum. Above: Art Attack's winter 1989 project was the deconstruction/reconstruction of an old house soon to be demolished.

in government.

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, almost alone among the federal city's proponents of the new, nurtures experimentation and evolving ideas. Its "Works" and "Directions" projects, which feature short-term installations of works in all media, represent the innovation of curator Ned Rifkin, who appears determined to ensure that the Hirshhorn does not become merely a repository for contemporary work. The Hirshhorn's support reveals its dedication to the creation of history, rather than, exclusively, its retention.

The Hirshhorn's most dramatic nod to the ephemeral was Krzysztof Wodiczko's projection onto its exterior wall, which overlooks the National Mall, for three evenings last October. The image was simple and powerful: one huge hand pointing a gun at the onlooker, the other holding a lighted candle; the faceless confronter separated from the confronted by a bank of microphones. Wodiczko has projected images in public places throughout Europe and the United States. The haunting, terse "picture" he presented in Washington is among his least intricate. For this city, the idea of art which disappears is revolutionary; the idea of art which disappears and yet remains is mystifying. In an atmosphere now accepted to be charged with ghetto street violence, Wodiczko's cryptic messages assume a dimension that wasn't perceived before statistics -- and journalism -- got out of hand. The projection lingers.

The Hirshhorn's strong institutional base limits its claim to a full adversarial role, but an event of this kind and stature places the museum in sympathy with the arguably "renegade" activities of a four-artist cross-disciplinary collective, Art Attack. The group originated in Los Angeles and moved to Washington in 1981. Its tenets are broad. The artists seek "exposure and interaction with the general public" and to "encourage temporary public art." In doing so, they evidently intend to remove what is identified as art from the rarified atmosphere of cultural edifices.

If Art Attack's purpose is agitation, then it agitates cheerfully. The group's initial impact was created by "Five Islands," notable for bringing a row of disheveled metal sculptures to a roadway island in one of the city's most unassuming, middle-class neighborhoods. Other projects evinced similarly off-beat aspects. By way of contrast, Art Attack's winter 1989 project, the deconstruction/reconstruction of an old house on a block on Massachusetts Avenue that is about to be demolished and redeveloped, expresses a distinct purity of both statement and attainment that tempers the action's comic edge. Art Attack now behaves as though its ephemeral rationale must be accepted widely.

Art Attack has enjoyed great public success. Significantly, its ends have been understood to a degree that the Hirshhorn projection has not. By turning a forlorn house into a piece of transitory public sculpture the group continues to play comedy, but it has moved into the realm of seriousness. This is comedy with a subtle stamp.

-- Patrick Finnegan

This Ain't No Hollywood

KOLN, WEST GERMANY - The independent Filmhouse scene in West Germany seems to be