

**International Festival of Group
Art, Abattoirs 89**
Marseilles, France
Fall 1989

"Festival International de l'Art de Groupe—Abattoirs 89" featured site works by over 17 art groups from Eastern and Western Europe, as well as the American group Art Attack. The organizers of the event, members of the French art group Lezard Plastic, chose the slaughterhouse of Marseille, until quite recently in full operation, as the site for the installations. In addition to a colloquium on group art and an exhibition of photographs of the works in progress, there was an all-night opening on October 12 that included fantastic performance and musical works. This was the second international group art festival; the first one was held in 1987 in Kassel, Germany as a parallel event to Documenta in which several of the groups, including Lezard Plastic, Art Attack, and Zzot from Yugoslavia, also participated.

Group art, or collective art, is an unusual phenomenon in the United States, an accepted one in Europe. The concept of the atelier, with a well-known artist having a team of artists working for him, has been prevalent since the Renaissance. Artist groups may have evolved directly from this tradition, or simply from the necessity of team work and skill-sharing needed for large scale three-dimensional work. The feature most foreign to many American artists working in the modernist tradition is the evolution of a single group identity where the resulting work is wholly integrated and cannot easily be dissected as the combination of individual styles. This contrasts with the concept of collaboration, as known in America, when two or more individual artists join efforts for a particular project but do not build an identity on that basis. Even the re-emergence of collaborative teams such as Oldenburg and van Bruggen, the Starn Twins, Gilbert & George, and the Poiriers, or in a younger generation Jones and Ginzler or Erickson and Ziegler can be traced to the experience of pairs, where being life partners or relatives forms an important basis for working together. The romantic vision of the artist working alone and expressing her or his individual spirit, vision, and thought, is shattered by the larger collective process.

Yet within the group setting, variation in approach can range from the intense collaborative efforts to arrive at a seamless finished piece that has been worked on, discussed, argued about and finally agreed upon by every member of the group, the aim of Art Attack and Zzot, to the group whose members work more disjointedly to form one piece, as does Wielkapolska. As with any group, politics and diplomacy can be demanding, and disputes on everything from finances to aesthetics are inevitable. All the groups irrespective of approach or nationality will readily agree that group dynamics can be trying, yet they remain committed to group art. Though the individual members may change over time, the group continues.

Financial considerations are particularly pressing for American groups since currently, granting agencies do not accept group proposals, even though the concept of group productions is comparable to the performing arts where abundant funding exists. In Europe, these financial limitations on group art are considerably less stifling, and beyond that, opportunities for exhibition and even gallery representation are more common. For example, the Ghislaine Hussenot

Gallery in Paris, which carries the best of the international rising stars from Jeff Wall to Christian Boltanski, also shows the work of the French group IFP (Information, Fiction, et Publicité).

The Marseille Festival helped to document and promote this form of expression, and to create an international network of information and exchange on collective creation. Due to the 1989 Bicentennial Celebration of the French Revolution, the organizers proposed that the artists reflect in their work the evolution of ideas in the last 200 years. Since we are approaching the end of this century, the centennial of the industrial revolution and of modern art (marked by the first modern work by Cézanne), and the centennial of modern sculpture, the works would be a depiction of our times, its passions and morals.

The response of the invited groups both to the theme and the site were varied. The Israeli group, Leviathan, hung jet bombers and large black swastikas horizontally over the concrete floor which they had painted white; this piece had a blatant political motivation for which the slaughterhouse was symbolically appropriate as the backdrop, while avoiding a visual correlation with the space. The Polish group Wielkapolska responded to the theme without making direct reference to the site, by creating an unusual interior living space. The three artists worked individually on sections of an interior space of disjointed furniture, often roped together, animals, clouds in the sky—metaphors to express their concerns with the personal lives, goals, and ambitions of people.

The French group ZUR (Zone Utopiquement Reconstituée) reacted literally to the slaughterhouse itself, its functions and activities, by creating an interior space within the interior space of the building. They laboriously built a small, almost round polygon—a dome-covered chapel, with a curved hall as the entryway, a chapel to the cow, complete with a stained glass cow and the diagram for its slaughter, a central pool with water dripping from above, and an altar piece to the cow, a remembrance for the mutilated victims, an insistent and moralizing conscience. The interior space removed the viewer to a place of retreat, quiet and calm, while maintaining a critical edge.

The Yugoslavian group Zzot, whose members range from animation designers to sculptors, was one of the largest. Taking an old slaughter cabin, they placed cut glass and mirrors along its insides, reflecting the interior and exterior, bringing the viewer and light inside into a somewhat enigmatic juxtaposition, and literally creating a "cutting edge" work. In addition, they had pre-

pared and shipped from Yugoslavia a zootrope, for which they had built on-site a large polygon with circular viewing holes to look at the images created by Zzot members.

The work that most closely reflected the theme of Revolution and at the same time responded visually to the site was the piece by the four member group Art Attack, using materials found on the site, appropriated and restructured. In their work, seven large steel triangles, composed of carcass racks, the surfaces ground down to a new shine, the hooks blackened with the remains of gore, were carefully poised on one sharp point, tilting slightly backwards, each attached to a hydraulic press and placed in a staggered formation, aggressively confronting the viewer. The new order, whose power base was constituted by reinterpreting the old, appeared in formation, ready to advance, ready to be propelled at the viewer or hurled toward the future, ready to strike. A deep, slow, eerie, rhythmic sound emanated from the first partially destroyed pillar. Remnants of the earlier supports, the inner bars, were clearly visible. Another, unevenly coiled bar, hung vertically from a motor attached to the overhead tracks of the slaughterhouse, scratched the naked bars of the pillar in an uneasy rhythm. Powerful, straight-forward, coherent, confrontational, transparent, the work left the lingering, haunting sensation of past events, a perceptive political statement in this year of the Bicentennial celebrations of the French revolution, namely, that implements of the old order are put to a different, yet still ambiguous, use in the new order, an inescapable, but not always apparent part of revolution. The coherence of this work also points out that group art need not be a more-or-less haphazard collection of individual voices, but rather can represent the very essence of an avant-garde approach to contemporary art, four artists creating a single unified work, each investing their very best creative efforts.

It is to be hoped that such a festival will one day be planned in the United States, bringing together American and international artist groups. In the United States this approach to art, the group view, represents the truly avant-garde, an approach that will likely become more accepted in this decade.

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