GOVERNMENT CHEESE
artists' projects

- Jessica Diamond's
  Government Cheese
  Installation at San Francisco Artspace, September 11 - October 27, 1990

- Matias Jaramillo
  Piece designed to relieve the viewer of any aggression he/she might have
  against art, 1990

- Group Material, AIDS Timeline
  Collaborative project for Day Without Art 1990

features

- Of the Arts and Public Money
  By James Lewis

- Confessions of an Image Sleuth:
  On the Trail with Polly Polaroid
  By Kathy Brew

- Reconstructing Carnwath
  By Bridget Manoogian

interviews

- David Wojnarowicz by Kathy Brew

- Jock Sturges by Kathy Brew

- Joe Semien by Kathy Brew

- Ann Hamilton by Maria F. Porges

- Alfredo Jaar by Maria F. Porges

- David Cannon Dashiel by Nayland Blake

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- Glen Helfand on Liquid Eyeliner

- Timothy Porges on Mark Alice Durant

- Buzz Spector on Maria Porges/Jamie Brunson
The best thing I ever got out of CAL Arts was getting really drunk with John Baldessari once; he told me I was too polite. That one phrase set me off in a new direction. The worst thing about CAL Arts was Valencia.
By Nayland Blake

Nayland Blake. Did you find that the differences between a sort of out gay culture and a sort of a mainstream art discourse were kept separate at school? David Dashiell. Yeah. The early to mid-seventies at Cal Arts was a funny period because people were very out, but it seemed to be a thing that was separate in the art school, which is a phenomenon that I never understood.

NB. Was it viewed as an indulgence?

DD. It was viewed as not being... what's the word here that I'm searching for? It's not stringent, but...

NB. Rigorous.

DD. Not being rigorous enough, and as a result, I was gay with my friends, but not in class. There was one man in class with me who was gay, and the difference between the two of us was that the rest of the people in the class knew he was gay but they didn't know I was gay, so my work was supported and his got slammed, and I really think that was the only reason. There was still a lot of homophobia in the art community, in spite of everything that people would think otherwise.

NB. After you left, there was finally a crop of people who were out, who were really addressing those issues and now it seems like there's a whole batch of people that have come out of there. You know, that are out and sort of dealing with those issues.

DD. Their work is activist too.

NB. I mean it seems to me like there's almost been a continual struggle for you to break open the purely structurally systems-oriented sensibility, and to force it into some other way of meaning so that it's not a Sol Lewitt project. It's not like a Vito Acconci endurance tape. There's the next thing that has to happen, a generation of gay men who have actually been taught by a second generation of feminist artists, like Mary Kelly, who are now coming back with work that is involved with the gay sensibility that shares a lot of the same goals and methods as your work.

DD. I have to admit that I'm still very fascinated with that structural approach, but recognize that it existed previously, not only in things like minimalism but in a lot of conceptual work too. During that period, there was still a very phallocentric focus to it.

NB. My sense of it is that there was this sort of opposition between a type of rigor that was associated with a type of purity and a type of maleness, and then a type of emotionally laden content, which was really thought of in a pejorative way. When I say emotion, I'm sure you know what that's like. That's really like a red flag word, and that was associated with...

DD. Sentimentality.

NB. Right. Sentimentality and women's work. And somehow it was not finally as pure, not as male, not as rigorous.

DD. Not as moderate.

NB. Right. How do you feel about those issues now?

DD. Well, I definitely feel that emotion has the possibility to be very powerful but the trouble is dealing with strong emotions without being sentimental, and where to use sentimentality without being at cross purposes with the work. That's why you'll see in the new pieces an element of smariness.

NB. It makes sense. Allegory is the sort of formal system that allows for the expression of emotional states, but not in a humanist way, a more diagrammatic or analagized way. Is there a way that you see that intersecting with some sort of a gay sensibility?

DD. I've always had trouble with the idea of a gay sensibility. There are as many gay sensibilities as there are any other kind. But within the gay community at large, things like the AIDS epidemic have forced us to be analytical about people's emotional reactions, and also with our own emotional reactions. So thinking in terms of a sensibility where we are critical of the world and of ourselves, then yes, it has a gay sensibility. But what's important to me is that the work doesn't hide my own sexuality, and I try to discuss that directly in Incub, Oracle. In the new piece, The Pancretor's Circus, I'm trying to place that stance within the context of something else; to not make it stand out really big, but to put it into a larger context, which in the best of all worlds would happen, where it's part of the world.

NB. Well, talk a little about this most recent piece, specifically about the cyclorama issues.

DD. I had been working on the Seven Deadly Sins, and as you might remember, they were from Bosch's painting which also included the Four Last Things. They were little circular predellas in the corner of that piece, and I wanted to include those, because while I had figures in the Seven Deadly Sins, I wanted the Four Last Things to be of the world, as opposed to of people; to deal with both us and the world around us. The important thing for me, though, was to have it as a landscape that you were engulfed in, that was an artificial, symbolic world. And while you were standing in there, you experienced a play between the unreal juxtaposition of all of these elements being totally out of place with each other, and the illusion of being in a landscape where it really is around you; and also the silliness of it--of having your head in this box. The whole context is to the environment as the Seven Deadly Sins were to issues of disease and the other.

NB. All of their kind put the viewer on display.
DD. Right. They do put you on the spot.

NB. It also seems like a growth in confidence because the first one really relies on a sort of outside authority, and the second one is about trying to establish the authority of your own experience. And then the third one is sort of establishing the authority of your voice as the place, as the constructor of the environment. There's the question of the piece not having validity because it's your life. Rather it allows the viewer to decide on its validity or to construct its own validity within the context of the viewer's experience.

DD. Maybe I am getting more confident.

NB. The cyclorama piece is really remarkably technically proficient. Your hand is no longer an issue in the most recent pieces.

DD. This is what happens when you go to art school and they teach you to be a conceptual artist and you don't paint for ten years.

NB. Exactly.

DD. You don't forget it, but it takes a while to get it back. I also wanted to have a style that was totally hands-off, and I think you are starting to see that in the projections, the computer-generated projections that are around the frame of the Pantocrator, which is something I've just started working with. I think that takes the hands-off look one step further where it literally is untouched by human hands.

NB. That image was very interesting to me. It seemed like there was an interesting combination... obviously Medusa is like the evil mother, the phallic mother.

DD. Right. A vaginal dentata and all that.

NB. Exactly. But putting a male image in the center of that is sort of a doubling, a sort of collapsing through a doubling of the import of that icon.

DD. There were other doublings and collapsings that I played with. One of them was painting on the security mirror. The all-seeing eye of the corner store owner, doing it in black and white and shades of gray, and giving it a bent halo. Instead of having a host of angels, there are just naked bodies lost in space diminishing them of any religious experience; place-holders, as it were.

NB. The other thing that the cycloramas suggested to me was French's Four Ages of Man paintings; they definitely seem to operate within a tradition of nineteenth century high-romantic, high-academy tradition of a movement from opulence to decay. It seemed to me, though, that the animals that are in all of them are chosen from symbol dictionaries.

DD. Right. It was an arbitrary choice in some of them. They weren't specifically for death, but I made assumptions.

NB. What is your ambition for your work in the coming years?

DD. I don't think that far ahead. My usual procedure in the last few years has been to just work and work. It's like seeing how many babies I can make. I'll usually spend a three month period just letting ideas form in my head, keeping the ones most compelling to me. For instance, with this project, I envisioned a cross between a cathedral and a funhouse about the vanity of religion and moral structures as a whole, which takes me back to what we were talking about earlier, reconciling the structuralist and the emotional content of the work, using a kind of emotional standard to critique peer structure in terms of moral constructs. For me, too, that I was brought up overseas and constantly surrounded by my parent's own Protestantism, and the Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu religions all around me. Nothing was ever so strong that it made a total impact, like different dance clubs, one country western and the other rock 'n roll.

NB. But what you realized was compelling was the overall system, developing this life that was about something else, this discipline with yourself. To me that
sounds related in a way to a religious discipline, or again, a search for a system of meaning.

DD. I think what ended up happening is that I started beginning to appreciate that it was a metaphor of the sexual act and extending it as far as possible to delay orgasm. Then, you start all over again, it's all about the build-up and keeping that build-up as long as possible. With religion, I don't know. I think maybe there is a point of seeing religious ecstasy as a kind of parallel to the orgasm, that point of total loss of self.

NB. I guess the thing I'm thinking of more is not necessarily like a religious discipline, a monastic discipline, but the way in which religion in American culture gives meaning to a life. And the fact that one has a relationship to a community and that your conduct is subject to certain rules and the ways in which you, and the extent to which you fulfill those rules, is where you gain your sense of credece within the community. So you know, within the Protestant community there is a certain ethic that goes along with it. And to me, the lack of control is just the lack of the degree to which you control your life in a certain way, you behave towards people with a certain sort of responsibility.

DD. There are parallel rituals. Opposed to a high holiday, you have the Mr. Yeats and the revivals and so on, because for me that's what I'm seeking. I saw L. Ron Hubbard out there on a billboard and I thought about what he had once said at a science fiction conference: "Writing is fun, but if you really want to make money, you should start a religion." And he did. He used his devices as a vehicle for that.

NB. To: "Give me all your money, would you like to take a personality test?"

DD. To this day, I have a rabid reaction when I hear about religious cults. NB. They have so little self-awareness that it's just impossible to believe that anyone could be alive on the planet today with . . .

DD. That little ego.

NB. One of the other questions about a certain gay sensibility is this notion of being able express a extreme emotion while maintaining an awareness that you are expressing an extreme emotion and maintaining a self-awareness. To me that is where I see camp and drag functioning. It's that ritual enactment of a sort of high operatic emotion at the same time that it is denied.

DD. Right. You are mouthing someone else's lyrics.

NB. Right.

DD. And that's why there is that use of other people's structures. I can play within those. There's a real parallel there.

NB. And an attempt to get to very, very difficult content. I mean, the Seven Deadly Sins piece really attempts to talk about the really painful parts of the culture, right now, in terms of people's relationships to their bodies, people's relationship to disease . . .

DD. And people's relationship to outsiders. I think that is going to be one of the biggest battles. We are seeing it right now, certainly with the gay community, and with the handicapped activists.

NB. It also seems extremely like a return of the repressed. Obviously the child is a very complicated and difficult figure right now, because on one hand you have an attempt to make urban children into crack dealers and you can basically prosecute them as full-blown criminals. On the other hand, you have an attempt to maintain this realm of childhood as if it were being besieged by hordes of child molesters.

DD. With the abortion issue, there is the whole notion that the fetus is sacred life and can't be destroyed, yet once the child is born, you have these crack babies. It's a frightening one altogether with the right to lifers insisting that these children be born and then abandoning them because they are sick. It paints in the picture of their absurdity.

NB. Generic question: what would you say is the best thing you got out of CAL Arts, and the worst thing?

DD. The best thing I ever got out of CAL Arts was getting really drunk with the baddest people I'd met that were also up to it and then setting off in a new direction. The worst thing about CAL Arts was Valencia. I had a generally good experience there, but homophobia was a real problem.

NB. You left and didn't work for a while?

DD. I was just stepforded through art school, basically. I couldn't deal with anything else for about three or four years. What really got me showing again was a project called Plaque Journal, a series of drawings about conflicting meanings in the AIDS crisis. After I did them, I heard about one of the first shows about AIDS that was planned. I sent them in and they were accepted. People said they liked the work. That made me feel good about starting to work again.

NB. Do you feel more optimistic about things now?

DD. Yeah, I feel more optimistic, at least for myself. I'm becoming more active. I know in the future I'm going to be participating more. Negatively, I've got the problem of AIDS to think about. I'm not sick now, and I'm on drug protocols, playing guinea pig. If the drugs work then I'll be around to do things; if not, then maybe somebody will hold on to all this stuff, but I don't tend to think pessimistically. I do my work and keep my spirits up, and go out and march and scream "Fuck you" to Jesse Helms and it makes me feel a whole lot better. Yeah, I'm optimistic.