new possibilities/1997

problems of contemporary art: possibilities 1

hayter, huber, goodman, mire, motherwell
albers, pae, pollock, rosenberg, rothko

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POSSIBILITIES 1947 / 1997

One functions in an attitude of expectancy.¹

On the fiftieth anniversary of its publication, the magazine possibilities remains a relevant document. Conceived by the artist Robert Motherwell and the critic Harold Rosenberg as an “occasional review,” it appeared only once, in late 1947, and is a testament to their shared belief in art as a manifestation of individual experience. Its four editors—Motherwell for art, Rosenberg for literature, the composer John Cage for music, and the architect Pierre Chareau for architecture—assembled an eclectic assortment of images and texts, ranging from an Edgar Allan Poe essay to poetry by the sculptor David Smith, fiction, criticism, and interviews with modern composers. There were also photographs of a parabolic-arched building by the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, statements by several contemporary artists, and reproductions of their work. The selection reflected no common philosophy or aesthetic program. Rather, as Rosenberg and Motherwell wrote in their introductory remarks, possibilities was devoted to work that embodied the artists’ experience “without seeking to transcend it in academic, group or political formulas.”² Thus the editors deliberately avoided any implication that the magazine was a de facto position paper for the nascent tendency, as William Seitz characterized it, which became known as Abstract Expressionism.

Nevertheless, as both Robert Hobbs and Ann Gibson have pointed out, possibilities did exemplify a certain outlook that, in Gibson’s words, “paralleled some aspects of the developing aesthetic of Abstract Expressionist art.”³ In Hobbs’ view, the affinity was not so much with style or content as with attitude or practice; the magazine and the movement aimed “to catch the freshness of the unresolved.”⁴ Both Gibson and Hobbs cite evidence of a period ethos in possibilities’ non-programmatic structure and emphasis on idiosyncrasy, spontaneity, and the fantastic. As Hobbs has summarized it: “Mythology and magic are of great concern. The cult of individualism is still rampant. Personal vision and individual intuition still count.”⁵ As a result, Gibson concluded, the editors “purposefully sacrificed the cohesiveness offered by a single philosophy, a single medium, or consistent organization in favor of the ‘possibilities’ lurking in the unexpected conjunction of dissimilar elements.”⁶

The current exhibition celebrates the golden jubilee of possibilities by affirming the continuing validity of that approach.

The seven Long Island artists represented in new possibilities were chosen in the spirit of the magazine: they seem to me to share a kinship with those selected by Motherwell and Rosenberg. Cage’s editorial contribution—Q and A sessions among several composers—is less adaptable to the exhibition format, although its emphasis on the necessity of finding a musical language ideally suited to each composer’s own subjective intentions is not without parallels in the visual art rhetoric. Chareau’s architecture component, limited to three views of Niemeyer’s 1946 reinforced concrete church, implicitly supports the magazine’s devotion to non-ideological individuality by illustrating a practical application. To find an analogous recent example, however, one would have to look outside the geographical region to which new possibilities is confined.

What we have here, I believe, is a disparate group of visual artists with several things in common, primarily the deeply personal and highly intuitive character of their various approaches. That is not to say that they use no traditional techniques or deny aesthetic character of their work. The search for possibilities by no means precludes such a creative progression. In fact that very continuity (not stylistic or philosophical, and certainly not theoretical—perhaps spiritual is the most appropriate term for it) establishes the intangible relationships between the possibilities artists and their contemporary counterparts.

In one case, the relationship is literal. Ibram Lassaw, two years older than Motherwell, would certainly have qualified for inclusion in a subsequent issue of possibilities for his innovative, spontaneously executed sculpture was (and still is) a prime example of the materialized “conversion of energy” that the magazine celebrated. As Smith defined it in one of his poems, sculpture is “the fight between the monster Tiamat personification of chaos darkness disorder evil and Marduk god of light,” and Lassaw’s work seeks to resolve that dichotomy. His vocabulary of spatial structure echoes the unseen forces, negative and positive alike, that bind all matter, from atoms to galaxies. Two generations separate him from Nick Micros, who mines deep veins of memory and emotion for the ore with which to forge physical links between form and feeling. He might well say, as Joan Miró did in possibilities, “I regard the past and I work with the future in mind.” With a surreal sense of the absurd, Micros infuses recognizable elements with hidden meanings—veiled, buried, obscured, struggling to emerge from the accumulated weight of conventional human expectations.

Josh Dayton’s ceramic reliefs are similarly ambiguous although less assertive, inhabiting a realm that seems to shift between contour and substance. The “principle and passion of organisms” to which Mark Rothko referred in his possibilities essay is embodied in Dayton’s sensuous clay shards, alien yet strangely familiar, mounted like specimens against textured backgrounds that emphasize their biological overtones. This sense of discovery born of experience,
of forming that is really transforming, is also present in the paintings of Connie Fox and Sally Egbert. In Fox's case, the approach relates to William Baziotes' statement: "Each beginning suggests something. Once I sense the suggestion, I begin to paint intuitively." Her references are jumbled into a kaleidoscopic maelstrom of accumulated information filtered through the artist's sensibility, turning impressions into expressions without violating the process' essential continuum. Egbert opts for a more direct encounter with the painting activity itself, allowing it to guide the evolution of imagery and producing what Jackson Pollock described as the "pure harmony, the easy give and take" of unpremeditated inspiration.

A more deliberate amalgamation of the artist's own history and a generalized level of perception is the hallmark of Edvard Lieber's multilayered collages, which incorporate painting, drawing, photography, and fragments of text written especially for each image. Under the rubric Plural Space, the series investigates a multiplicity of realities, from the concrete world of buildings and recognizable people—among them John Cage, Leonard Bernstein, and the artist himself—to the intangible sphere of fragmentary thoughts, fleeting sensations, and musical rhythms. As the composer Edgard Varèse observed in possibilities: "The nature of the physical world (time, space, matter) is no longer what it was for us in the past," and Lieber, who is also a composer, uses visual art to prove the truth of that claim. Carol Hunt establishes its validity beyond question with work that arises in an electronic matrix—a world where those forces are in constant interactive flux. The collective title of her series, Reflections in Time and Space, indicates her involvement with mirroring but also with musing, contemplation, and the suggestive potential of forms that evolve one from another. As both a stimulus and a means of realizing her objectives, the computer serves Hunt as Stanley William Hayter's automatic drawing techniques served him. In possibilities Hayter asserted that "the use of automatism in exploring the imagination (and in making the exploration available through its echo in other minds) is not a static experience," an apt description of Hunt's graphic animations.

Exactly half a century after Hayter, Varèse, Pollock, Baziotes, Rothko, Miró, and Smith gave the readers of possibilities tantalizing glimpses into the artists' private domain, the creative values they represent continue to have meaning. They are alive and flourishing in the work of the seven contemporary artists represented here, and in all artistic endeavor that celebrates individuality, affirms humanity, delights in experience, disdains conformity, and manifests "the extremist faith in sheer possibility."

Helen A. Harrison

NOTES
2. Ibid.
5. Hobbs, p. 98
6. Gibson, p. 35
7. Motherwell and Rosenberg, ibid.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I want to express my gratitude to Helen A. Harrison, Director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in East Hampton, for organizing this exhibition and for contributing her illuminating essay.

Special thanks are also extended to members of the Staller Center for the Arts staff: Pete Pantaleo and Pat Pickett, for installation assistance; Pauline Cullen, Denise Fierro, Mei Huang, and Stella del Rosario, Gallery Assistants; Elizabeth Garcia, Aleksandra Ikanowicz, Peter Kaufman, Mimi Ng, Young Park, and Xin Quinwu, Gallery Interns; Patrick Kelly, Production Manager, Liz Silver, Technical Director, and Neil Creedon, ATD, and the Technical Crew, Staller Center, for exhibition lighting; and Mary Balduf, Gallery Secretary.

Most of all, I wish to thank the artists for participating in this exhibition and for sharing their work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST
Artists are listed in alphabetical order. All dimensions are given in inches, height preceding width preceding depth. All works lent by the artist unless indicated otherwise.

©1997 University Art Gallery, State University of New York at Stony Brook.
JOSH DAYTON

   Ceramic on linen, 48 x 34”
2. *Balustrade to Mars*, 1997  
   Ceramic on paper and canvas, 45 x 32”
   Ceramic on paper and canvas, 36 x 24”
   Ceramic on paper and canvas, 36 x 24”
   Ceramic on paper and canvas, 45 x 32”
   Ceramic on paper and canvas, 44 x 30”
   Ceramic on paper and canvas, 43 x 27”

Courtesy Arlene Bujese Gallery, East Hampton

SALLY EGBERT

1. *Jackknife*, 1996  
   Oil on canvas, 60 x 72”
2. *Untitled painting*, 1996  
   Oil on canvas, 20 x 20”
   Oil on canvas, 20 x 20”
   Oil on canvas, 77 x 56”
5. *Smoke*, 1997  
   Oil on canvas, 77 x 56”
   Oil on canvas, 60 x 60”
   Oil on canvas, 20 x 20”
   Oil on canvas, 20 x 20”
1. *Not the Man, Not the Tornado*, 1985
   Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 160"
2. *Night Kites*, 1992
   Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 72"
3. *Mondo*, 1993
   Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 84"

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   Computer animation, 12 minutes
2. *Variation 5*, 1996
   Iris print, 20 x 32"
3. *Variation 6*, 1996
   Iris print, 12-1/2 x 20"
4. *Variation 10*, 1996
   Iris print, 20 x 32"
5. *Variation 11*, 1996
   Iris print, 20 x 32"
6. *Variation 56F60*, 1996
   Iris print, 20 x 32"
   Iris print, 12-1/2 x 20"
8. *Variation 56F130*, 1996
   Iris print, 12-1/2 x 20"

Courtesy Arlene Bujese Gallery, East Hampton
IBRAM LASSAW

1. *Counterpoint Castle*, 1957
   Bronze, 38 x 26 x 19"
2. *Topography*, 1966
   Ink on paper, 16-1/2 x 21-1/4"
   Bronze, 38 x 20 x 13-1/2"
   Bronze, 31 x 29 x 22"
5. *Aglaia*, 1982
   Bronze, 26-1/2 x 24 x 24"
   Bronze, 23-1/2 x 19-1/2 x 18"
7. *Untitled (#100)*, 1985
   Gouache and ink on paper, 10-1/2 x 13"
8. *Yellow Field*, 1985
   Gouache and ink on paper, 11 x 14"
   Gouache and ink on paper, 11 x 14"
    Gouache and ink on paper, 9 x 8"
    Gouache and ink on paper, 8 x 9-1/2"

EDVARD LIEBER

A series of seven diptychs, 1993-94:
Charcoal, ink, pencil, acrylic, sand,
volcanic ash, watercolor, silkscreen,
typewriting, pastel on paper, with
collaged photographs by the artist.

1. *Cleaving of Temporality*
   7 x 34-3/8"
2. *Declension of Plane and Shadow*
   22-1/4 x 29-1/2"
3. *Devexity of Syntax and Metaphor*
   22-1/4 x 29-1/2"
4. *Mutability of Silence in Proximity*
   14-1/8 x 19-7/8"
5. *Path to the Isolation of Transitivity*
   22-1/4 x 29-1/2"
6. *Reach of Contiguity*
   14-1/4 x 19"
7. *Temperature of Perception*
   9-3/4 x 13-7/8"
1. *Maquette for a Monument*, 1995  
   Steel, limestone, chiffon, and electric lights, 88 x 36 x 24”
2. *Untitled*, 1995  
   Glazed stoneware, 27 x 18 x 16”
   Nylon, 113 x 64 x 9”
   Stoneware, plaster, fabric, wood, and casein paint, 54 x 29 x 26”
5. *Sheaves*, 1996-97  
   Plaster, wood, and wire, 158 x 50 x 50”
PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

1975  FACULTY EXHIBITION
1976  MICHELE STUART
      RECENT DRAWINGS
      SALVATORE ROMANO
1977  MEL PEKARSKY
      JUDITH BERNSTEIN
      HERBERT BAYER
1978  LEON GOLUB
      JANET FISH
      ROSEMARY MAYER
      THE SISTER CHAPEL
1979  SHIRLEY GORELICK
      ALAN SONFIST
      HOWARDENA PINDELL
      ROY LICHTENSTEIN
1980  BENNY ANDREWS
      ALEX KATZ
      EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
      ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
      OTTO PIENE
      STONY BROOK II, THE STUDIO FACULTY
1981  ALICE NEEL
      55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
      JOHN LITTLE
      IRA JOEL HABER
      LEON POLK SMITH
1982  FOUR SCULPTORS
      CECIL ABISH
      JACK YOUNGERMAN
      ALAN SHIELDS
      THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
      ANN McCoy
1983  THE WAR SHOW
      CERAMIC DIRECTIONS: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW
      CINDY SHERMAN
      THE FACULTY SHOW
1984  BERNARD APTEKAR: ART AND POLITICS
      ERIC STALLER: LIGHT YEARS
      NORMAN BLUHM: SEVEN FROM THE SEVENTIES
      EDWARD COUNTNEY 1921-1984
      CARL ANDRE: SCULPTURE
1985  LEWIS HINE IN EUROPE: 1918-1919
      FRANCESC TORRES: PATHS OF GLORY
      HOMAGE TO BOLOTOWSKY: 1935-1981
      FREEDOM WITHIN: PAINTING BY JUAN SANCHEZ/
      INSTALLATION BY ALFREDO JAAR
      ABSTRACT PAINTINGS REDEFINED
1986  KLEEJE: METAL SCULPTURE
      TOBY BUONAGURIO: SELECTED WORKS
      YANG YAN-PING and ZENG SHAN-QING
      EIGHT URBAN PAINTERS: CONTEMPORARY
      ARTISTS OF THE EAST VILLAGE
      TV: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
      WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT
1987  HANS BREDER: ARCHETYPAL DIAGRAMS
      MICHAEL SINGER: RITUAL SERIES RETELLINGS
      JUDITH DOLNICK/ROBERT NATKIN
      MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE: THE HUMANITARIAN
      VISION
      MEL ALEXENBERG: COMPUTER ANGELS
      STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA: THE WEST
      THE FACULTY SHOW '88
      LEE KRAKSER: PAINTINGS 1956-1984
      EDGAR BUONAGURIO: PERMUTATION AND
      EVOLUTION 1974-1988
      JOAN SNYDER COLLECTS JOAN SNYDER
      ROBERT KUSHNER: SILENT OPERAS
      HERMAN CHERRY: PAINTINGS 1984-1989
      HAITIAN ART: THE GRAHAM COLLECTION
      FIBER EXPLORATIONS: NEW WORK IN FIBER ART
1990  PRINTS BY PRINTMAKERS
      KIT-YIN SNYDER: ENRICO IV
      FANTASTIC VOYAGES
      POETIC LICENSE
1991  FREDERICK AMAT and ROBERTO JUAREZ
      ADOLPH GUTTLEIB: EPIC ART
      THE MONOTYPES OF ADOLPH GUTTLEIB
      THE FACULTY SHOW '91
      NEW TRADITIONS: THIRTEEN HISPANIC
      PHOTOGRAPHERS
1992  JULIUS TOBIAS
      REUBEK KADISH
      CITY:VIEWS
      GEORGE KORAS
      CONCEPTS WITH NEON
      WARREN BRANDT: A RETROSPECTIVE
      JOHN FERREN: IMAGES FROM NATURE
      WOOD
1993  PAPER WORKS
      ROBERT RICHENBURG: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST
      THE FACULTY SHOW '94
      MAURA SHEEHAN: DORA: BIG GIRLS DON'T CRY
      EIGHTEEN SUFFOLK ARTISTS
      PAT HAMMERMAN and BURT HASEN
      ART AND TECHNOLOGY
      PRIVATE ART/PUBLIC ART: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE
      COLLECTIONS OF CITIBANK AND JOHNSON & JOHNSON
1994  JOHN HULTBERG, VINCENT PEPI, and
      EDVINS STRAUTMANIS
      ROGER ARRANDELA WILLIAMS: THE AMERICAN
      TERRAIN
      KEITH SONNIER: ORIENTAL- OCCIDENTAL
      TEXT AND IDENTITY: 12 WOMEN/12 ARTISTS
      TERENCE NETTER: VISIONS AND REVISIONS
      FACULTY SHOW 1997

FRONT COVER: possibilities, 1947--front cover