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by Howard Hussey

Introduction

Curating an exhibit that must deal with the *ephemeral* is a task that requires more than ordinary vision. One must own an intuitive and knowing ability to grasp the complex content of contemporary art. An artist's depth sensibility for commitment is exercised over practically everything to do with the subject of the ephemeral in art. Personal satisfactions are concealed within our voyages into contemporary culture. We expect to become detectives on the scent of that which is purely transitory. Art as a whole is a riddle. Our quarry is the most elusive of any in

all the arts. Site-specific art harbors the ephemeral in a purely generic sense and is inevitably quizzically elusive. All of art is enigmatic.

This exhibition at La Casa Encendida is its most current and independent venue. “On & On” is prodigious and leans heavily on discomfited vision and intellectual tenacity. Although there is no work that lasts for only one day here installed – ephemera instigates changes in the work that affect its daily existence, hence we have artwork that lasts for a brief time only.

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Contemporary art can scarcely ignore the advent of Surrealism or Neo-Romantic art. It is the occasion of this exhibition to document articulately several reactions as have manifested themselves since Surrealism and Neo-Romanticism, inclusive of *Happenings*, which are among the precursors of site-specific art and claims contemporary art, while including the work of the *new past*.

Arguments as to the absolute value of the work of the thirteen artists included in the exhibition are, of course, beyond speculation or conjecture. They represent an authentic Neo-Romantic and Neo-Surrealist revival for which parallels can certainly be found in literature as well as in music, inclusively past, present and future. Actually, music today is mostly a-structural sound.

The work of these artists is, in a singular sense, a newly revealed contemporary art. Their objective is to liberate their work from the confines and formalities of both the academic and the traditional, as well as the scientific, and to release in art (however ephemeral) the wellsprings of

emotional discovery and an intense magnetic drawing power generated by art's capacity for innovation.

There has been brought together here a collection of artworks that wills whatever has never existed so far. But at the same time one should be reminded that all art is one big *déjà vu*. It is possible to sense that the shadow of the past looms over everything. One need not be a utopian who anticipates artistic forms within the notion that artistic things, at long last, ought to come into their own. Some of us knew they would, and they have.

In this exhibition the artists elected...*deliver*. A curator has always the expectation of seeing the unseen, and is naturally attuned to art being logical in the way that dreams are logical. The works offer the onlooker a means to meditate and thus time stands still, like the space in a virgin gallery. Site-specific art is an exacting medium particularly for the technicalities of contemporary music that is mostly sonic and audaciously atonal.

Over time, logicity in artworks has been on the rise. This development has even reached a point where logicity wants to be understood literally, resulting in the appearance of totally determined artworks that are deduced from a minimum of basic materials. Foreign materials are also an exploration into yet untested, unorthodox experiments. A curator cares aggressively about what in art seduces him. He champions creative artists who are compelled by force of circumstance to experiment. This is a balancing act or maneuver of the experimenting artist. Site-specific art is the vehicle chosen for exploring the limits of art. One should not underestimate the weight of history or the issue of cultural globalization.

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*This world, the same for all,
neither any of the Gods nor any man has made,
but it always was, and is, and shall be,
an ever living fire,
kindled in due measure
and in due measure, extinguished.*

— Heraclitus

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Art is the corollary between dream and reality. Illusion is most noticeable in art expression simply because art expression pretends to be illusion-free, while succumbing to illusion all the same. Important critical work in this exhibition has taken its bearings from the histrionics of art

expression. Music has had its share in promoting the illusory character of art, including performance art; piling up stones is a memorial gesture, the presence of the stones touches on the element of the ephemeral.

The emancipation of society from the predominance of material, economic conditions aims at creating a true cultural entity, which has been severely and critically challenged. Seen from this point of view, art expression reflects not only the subject's hubris (!) but also its just complaint about the top-heavy nature of subjectivity. Art is the prime target for human insight and foresight, and encompasses the hard to understand issue of what it means to be a practicing artist today.

Art expression is *ipso facto* imitation. There is a latent confidence in art expression, that, if something is said or shouted out loud, it will become better. An age of silence has settled on art. The silence of art speaks all the more loudly. Art expression is such an enigmatic residual – but only in part. To say something out loud is to put some distance between oneself and the black end of the spectrum, just as screaming helps mitigate great pain. Music notwithstanding, nothing that was ever said fades away completely. Neither good nor bad, neither the slogan of the “next solution”, nor the promises of bliss and reconciliation evoked by works of art.

Site-specific art is a form of aesthetic phenomenology. Everything is employable material from a bottle cap to a ton of oranges or a thousand pounds of raw lumber. Happenings are the precursors of site-specific art, which anthologizes objects, fetishes, everyday implements, and a vast complex of phenomenology – very often there is a theme for the assemblage of disparate

contents, usually metaphysical issues as well as residues of human experience, thought, speculation, all are subject matter for the devotee of site-specific art. A paradox develops here due to too much of the material employed being non-art in origin or in its ontologicality, but that is as it should be. Site-specific art traces the existence of human courage that would otherwise pass into a limbo of undervaluated cycles of human endurance and human habitation on this planet. As an art form, site-specific art is a continuing way of life, a provocative challenge to the illusory notion that life still subsists, calling for ever greater degrees of internal organization. The productivity of the individual artist has augmented site-specific art, not least through collective cooperation; recycling earlier work which the artist is not always aware of. *Meaning*, can never be the epitome of what is being made by the work. The elitist's segregation of the *Avant-garde* is not art's fault but society's. The essential is not above the social. It is of timeless, ever-yielding human value.

Language (art history and art criticism) gives expression to something that enters the stream of future humanity: the inextricability of two separate dimensions, psychic and real, accounts for the paradox of expression in art.

All artistic endeavors seem contingent upon the globalization of culture.

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Music is a radical dimension that is new to art gallery presentation. Music is a latecomer among the arts. *Great* music may turn out to be an artform that was possible only during an ephemeral period of human history. Art is truly modern (contemporary) when it owns the capacity to

absorb the results of industrialization under capitalist relations of production, while following its own experiential mode and at the same time giving expression to the crisis of experience.

Modernism is myth turned against itself. Every element in a supposedly static work is actually part and parcel of a dynamic change. Essentially art is inherently *conceptual*, and subject to the phenomenon of chance.

Authentic art is familiar with *expressionless-expression*, a kind of crying without tears. No work of art should ever be confused with any indiscriminate works of pseudo art. Cleverness has to be sacrificed for compassion. Trying to grasp a rainbow is the surest way of making it vanish.

Artistic effort is always attended by sacrifice and hidden motive. That is why the *sensuous, genuine moment* of art is so important, even while it is riveted to the transitory here and now. A curator's spirit is aggressive and intensely curious, and has always tended to cling to sensuousness; art will not survive if it forgets sensuousness. As a curator, one is hypersensitive and insightfully awake; a curator knows the art public is not *avant-garde*. In contemporary art individual and society are being tied into a knot. We are in a world in the grip of change, in search of new options.

The more *receptive* artworks are, the more they become agents of expression; sexual instinct, feeling of death, physical notion of the enigma of space. The legitimacy of art expression has by no means been destroyed once and for all by the endless manifestations of pseudo art. Granted, the subjects (works of art) cannot and must not express the language of immediacy. But the introverted works of site-specific art can and do continue to articulate themselves through things in their alienated and disfigured form. This, at least, is the idea behind the dimension of

Modernism, which, like the Contemporary and the radical, stops short of absolute revelation. Talents have emerged which respond quite intuitively to given technologies; computerized and electronic music, concrete poetry, and existential chance, pushing them forward to keep something alive that was destined to die...hence the influence of the ephemeral. Art objectifies the ephemeral.

Inner vision and reality leave residues of subject matter and illusion. There arises the phenomenon of the *ephemeral*; that which is left as evidence of the chosen artworks that confront metaphysics and reality. Ephemera are the expression of the relationship of what is visionary and what is real, and *vice versa*. Surprise elements play into some areas of contemporary art, particularly in action painting and aleatory music as well as site-specific art, which is a form of collage (collage with a built-in obsolescence).

In the final analysis, works of art are enigmatic not in terms of their composition, but in terms of the truth they contain. Ephemera reveal the hidden content behind the duality *dream/reality*. No longer do artworks face the viewer's repetitive question, "What are you for?" Instead, they are asked, "Are you telling the truth?", which is a question concerning the absolute. Aesthetics is the sole agency capable of making out what art is. Aesthetics is a jealous guardian of all facets of art.

There are so many opinions about *art* that no one agrees. Art is something that one judges with the emotions, the *art emotions*. Many people have no emotions beyond the human ones, human beings cannot stand very much reality. *Art emotions* are like copper wire; only copper wire

carries *electricity*, other wire doesn't. Art hides something, at the same time revealing it. The reason why there is still art and progress in art is that there has been no progress in the real world. Self-preservation is the strongest case one can make for art.

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The black and gray hues of contemporary art seem to betray an ascetic attitude to color, but in reality black and gray are a negative apotheosis of color. Art's utopia, the *yet-to-come*, is draped in black. The aesthetic goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real. There is the advent of computers being manipulated, so as to grant us new creative vistas.

If works of art (no matter how radical) are to survive in the context of extremity and darkness, which is social reality, and if they are to avoid being given up as mere comfort, they have to assimilate themselves to that reality. Radical art today is the same as dark art: its background color is black. Much of contemporary art is irrelevant because it does not take note of this fact, continuing instead to take a childish delight in bright colors. The ideal of blackness is, in substantive terms, one of the most profound issues behind site-specific art. It may well be that the intense involvement with sound and colors and all the labyrinths of music that are current now is a response to the decreases wrought by *the ideal of blackness*. Site-specific art is a question and not a report.

Artworks respond to this by giving an answer that is non-discursive in kind, because discursive thought is unable to reply. Site-specific art seeks to give an answer, but since that answer is

ephemeral rather than judgmental, it is, in a sense, a non-answer. This accounts for art's becoming enigmatic. The viewer, at any rate, is displaced from his key position as the one who ties existing structures together.

The marriage of illusion and actuality gives birth to the *ephemeral*. All of art registers this primordial chemistry like a seismograph. The key for decoding art's riddle is missing, as is the key for understanding the literary records of certain extinct peoples and cultures. The young have always copied their elders... Inspiration is a form of inherited phenomenology, it is also a limitless form of measure with its roots in the unknowable.

A curator is forever savoring the expectation of auditing the unheard of and witnessing the unseen. Aesthetic experience is the experience of something which *spirit, per se*, does not provide, either in the world or in itself. It is the possible, as promised by its *impossibility*. Art is the promise of happiness, a promise that is constantly being broken.

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Take comfort, you would not be seeking me

if you had not already found me.

– Blaise Pascal

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There is no work of art in this exhibition that does not address, in one way or another, the problem of complex meaning, *number, proportion, measure, position in space-time*. All are

essential elements of site-specific art. Every work of art gives different meanings and expression to the enigmatic nature of art, but all artworks seem to suggest that the answers they give, severally, are like those of the Sphinx. The ephemeral in art is the ambiguity as to whether each artworks' promises are real or deceptive. To solve a riddle in art is to identify the reason why it is insoluble. Appetites winnow excess desire from overly insistent ability.

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Artists should consider having their tongues cut out. – Protagoras

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Actually, artworks, notably those of the highest caliber and as radical, are waiting to be interpreted, site-specific art being no exception. If one accepted the assertion that there is nothing to interpret in art and that art merely has *being*, one would erase the line of demarcation that separates art from non-art. Who knows, maybe even carpets, ornaments and similar kinds of objects are waiting eagerly to be deciphered. In this exhibition of site-specific art most of the art declaims: *I am what I am and I don't pretend to be anything else.* The ephemeral is hidden in such a sweeping assertion.

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Radical Aesthetics

Aesthetics are not something above and beyond art. They have to retrace the dynamic laws of art of which the artworks themselves (however ephemeral) are completely unaware. Artworks are enigmatic insofar as they represent the locality of an ephemeral validity, a validity that is veiled from itself at the very moment when the work of art bursts forth into manifestation. Ephemeral spirits are the enigmas that are the twilight zone between the *unattainable* and what has actually been accomplished. Estrangement from the world is a moment of art. If one perceives art as anything other than strange, one does not perceive art at all. Site-specific art has greatly amplified the irrationality of estrangement.

True ideas rise above subjective intention; the concept of an aesthetic idea promotes works of art to the status of an outlasting and persevering ephemeral *essence*. This is the case when the artist's intention evolves around eternal truths, which are not truths but the recurrence of myth. Is there anything more seductive or more ephemeral than a myth? Artworks are true in the medium of accepted determinate myth. This constitutes the challenge for aesthetics today. Art gives birth to itself more often than we are competitively and ambitiously willing to accept.

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Truth content cannot be identified directly; truth is contained in art's elaboration and inner consistency (*integrity, proportion, clarity*). By way of approximation, we might say, truth content is the breadth or whiff of air that surrounds works of art, in a factual and non-factual sense, "*breath*" being radically different from "*mood*", which used to be an ingredient of art. Matter-of-factness (however ephemeral), the fact that artworks can realize and therefore transcend themselves, does not, of course, guarantee that they are true. *Great* works of art are unable to lie, even when their content is both radical and illusory, as well as ephemeral. They *do*

represent truth because they are *necessary* illusions. This is as true of today's experimental, atonal music as it is referential to site-specific art.

The spell of art is modeled upon the spell of real life. In every mass of workable materials and in every piano keyboard, a work of art or a musical activity, is respectively newborn and ready to make its rationality known. Under the façade of the artist's fanatical self-satisfaction or dissatisfaction, there is a profound sense that culture is shadowed...or superstitious, or a kind of extinct religion, which at one time in history art could not be separated from. Minus religion we must encounter metaphysics, or political art, or reproductions of fine art.

Vision and reality overlap in the idea of truth content. In art, *time* and *space* merge where they perform interrelated, intuitive functions. The crypto-aesthetic paradigm of *idealism* was eclipsed at the start. Artworks in the form of multi-dimensional *thought* and or *sound* hit the nail on the head. Thirteen artists exhibit their site-specific art with pronounced generosity. The key to radical art is its unexpected and enigmatic presence within the yawning space of a gallery.

THESE ARTISTS ARE GREAT INNOVATORS:

MICHEL BLAZY
CÉLESTE BOURSIER MOUGENOT
MARTIN CREED
ELOISE FORNIELES

ANYA GALLACCIO
ANDY GOLDSWORTHY
KITTY KRAUS
CLAIRE MORGAN
TINO SEHGAL????
CHIHARU SHIOTA
ROMAN SIGNER
STEINER AND LENZLINGER
GREGORIO ZANON

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Art is a logical procedure. There were times in the history of art when the relationship between art and mathematics (Egyptian art, Hellenic art) was such a close one that we can speak of art having become aware of its actual schematization in the wake of culture. Mathematical signs do not point to concrete things and mathematical propositions, like artistic propositions (radical or otherwise), are existential life-savers of highly estimable art-making value. Site-specific art has positioned itself into a cultural scheme. There is a danger here regarding too much self-consciousness, partly as a result of working with extremely contemporary materials; ice, strawberries, miles and miles of black wool or string. Ephemera are thus licensed globally. Site-specific materials are always unpredictably available.

Note on the Occult in Art

It must be remembered that painting and sculpture do not have a muse, as does dancing (Terpsichore) and poetry (Erato), and music (Euterpe). Site-specific art claims for its foundations architecture. The muse Urania is one of the nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus (Mnemosyne is the goddess of memory and Zeus is ruler of the heavens). Urania presides over astronomy and mathematics (hence architecture). Without

mathematics, there would be no architecture or music. Egyptian art as well as Greek art of the high Hellenic period understood mathematics in a way hardly conceivable today. No temples, no tombs, no pyramids, no sculpture, would have been produced without a thorough understanding of the occult forces supporting mathematical law... Site-specific art is dependent upon architecture, a pre-existing architecture, say a room (gallery), a street, the gutter, the sidewalk, even a cave, or a flight of steps are all examples of pre-existing architecture. The law of *proportion, scale, measure*, are dependent upon mathematical knowledge – proportion is a law that sets limitations on that which can be built, raised up, and made to fulfill its intention. Site-specific art could not be achieved without a pre-existing architecture. All art is conceptual. (Georges Seurat is a fine and unique example.) Mathematical knowledge invites the ephemeral to arrive on site. Mathematics and the ephemeral are second nature to site-specific art. The patron muse of this exhibition is Urania. We must not take for granted the phenomenon of the imagination as an element in architecture and music. Imagination has a two-fold power. It visualizes and creates. With clairvoyant ubiquity, it floats and flows into the most recondite recesses (architecture) with clear-cut proportion (architecture) and volition. It builds up its own dimension of ephemeral phenomena. But after all, to what awe-inspiring manifestations has Urania the power to bring new vision to the arts of today? The muse, Urania, arrives and supports us, she enables us to experience the eccentric ephemeral components of site-specific art. In how lucid an air, the distillation of content stands out. Urania compels us to follow line by line, square by square, unit by unit, note by note, the very presence of artwork that is purely ephemeral... it will transform itself in time and space as is the nature of site-specific art, an art now on display and for an

ephemeral period of time only. A memory extends the occasion long after the art vanishes. The ephemeral triumphs, we are all EPHEMERA – *here today, gone tomorrow*. But a romantic vapor exuded by the memory of what no longer exists lingers on and on. Causality capitulates to ephemera. Ephemera are rich with innovative resources.

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The ephemeral goes far beyond the mere subject. Ephemera are collective, they are neither pure impulse nor pure form. The subject is a social one. Art is social, the artist is not. What makes a work of art distinctive rarely has much to do with the will and intention of the artist. Again, once more, the ephemeral intercedes with its occult intangibles.

A metaphysics of art today has to center on the question of how something spiritual like art can be man-made. If a tool can be called an extension of the human hand, then an artist is the extension of a tool that is engaged in making possible the transition from potentiality (two-dimensional) to actuality (three-dimensional). We are very often left with a metaphysical problem child wandering, ever wandering in the fourth dimension. Specifically, the question concerns not the work of art in its immediacy, but its content. To ask how an artefact can be true is to pose the question of how *illusion*, which is ephemeral, can be redeemed. Truth content cannot be an artefact. Therefore, every act of *making and construction* in art is an endless endeavor to articulate what is not makeable, namely, *spirit*. This is where the function of site-specific art, as a restorer of historically repressed nature becomes important. The ephemeral is not something unifying but a manifold, for truth content in art is a manifold and not a figurative, or memorized formulation. Essentially ephemera are receptors (ultra sensory and untouchable).

Of all the paradoxes in art, the most central one may be the fact that art finds non-artefactual truth only by producing specific and thoroughly elaborated artworks, that is, through *making*, never by going into the truth with the gaze of immediacy. Every artwork vanishes in its truth content, which is a wealth of ephemera. Works of art are their own standard of judgment. All artworks promise the actualization of their truth content because truth content merely appears and shines forth as an ephemeral essence, an essence inherent in all forms. The presence of form, no matter how ephemeral, generates an aesthetic reality. Not everyone is able to participate in that utterly mercurial *fourth dimension*. Ephemera rules the fourth dimension. Its trademark is transubstantiation.

To see beyond any dream dimension, to see reality with its back turned, to surrender to the aesthetic, is to touch on the enigma of the ephemeral. What we value most about the ephemeral as it is presented here with pronounced curatorial acumen, is its supernatural essence. There is no limitation to that which is ephemeral; music is a model for all ephemeral phenomena. The ephemeral haunts us though we cannot possess it, it finds a place deep within memory, and finally the ephemeral in art exists long after our appetite for art experience in the presence of art, radical or not. Is there an *avant-garde* today?

Ephemera is the muse Urania's *gift* to us, a gift for those who can *SEE*, a gift for those who can *HEAR* and *FEEL*, a gift for those who can *EMBRACE* art that is authentic. The spectator takes away with him the purely ephemeral qualities of a work of art. As in the present exhibition, the ephemeral transcends itself under the aegis of the muse Urania. We sense the mystery of the

ephemeral. We can linger over the mystery... it is intrinsically abstract... it undergoes a process of change... and it gives off an unfamiliar air, almost violently spiritual, of pleasure. The mystery of the ephemeral, lo and behold, with creative intuition, it manifests again and again and its mystery does not melt, neither does it freeze, it just goes on and on...on and on.

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EPILOGUE

A Concise Anthology of Existential and Natural Ephemera

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A Butterfly

(for Olivier)

The three stages of a butterfly's transmutations, from caterpillar to cocoon, to flight. The butterfly lives for a whole day or two and then vanishes. We imagine the moment it emerges in its final winged form. Behind closed eyes we can still see it, butter colored, fluttering all by itself, in the sky blue air.

A Mug of Russian Tea

(for Yara)

The mug full of very very hot tea is placed on a glass smooth table. We drink the tea and find under the mug's circular base a circle of condensed heat and vapor. The circle vanishes from the surface of the table. We can still taste the tea but it is no longer a tangible substance.

The apparition of the circle haunts us. There must be something essentially reassuring about a circle for it to have survived so many millennia. It has a deep reassuring appeal to the subconscious.

The Color Blue

Blue is the most ephemeral color in the scientific wheel of the spectrum. The use of blue fades gradually from the paper because the fierce rays of the sun have bleached it. A white shape is present upon the page; the blue remains indelible within our color-conscious nervous system.

Flowers

Surviving as a cut bouquet, the blossoms exist for a breath of days. The colors, the forms are altered by time even though we add fresh water. The flowers have lived their life; an ephemeral radiance stays on our retina long after the flowers have decayed and dropped their petals.

A Chair

Placed before a window, the sun beats down upon it. Long shadows of the chair and its legs stretch across the floor. In a slowly passing wreath of hours, the shadow of the chair is occluded because the sun, by infinitesimal degrees has set.

Music

(for Carl)

Melodic lines of music linger long after the melody has been heard. We involuntarily hum the tune and become agents for the weightless music to be recalled and to take refuge within us. We have become the music.

The Dragonfly

(for Richard)

It alights on our knee. We have heard the sound of its four wings, like a delicate cellophane wrapper crackling. The dragonfly takes to the air once more but we can still feel its weight, like an invisible toothpick, resting on our naked knee.

Resources Integral

Samuel Beckett – *Derriere le Miroir* (1949)

William Blake – *Poems and Prophecies* (Edition 1890)

Marsden Hartley – *Adventures in the Arts* (1929)

Howard Hussey – *Cornell Collages* (1978)

Howard Hussey – Warren Rohrer (*Paintings*, 1989)

Julien Levy – *Surrealism* (1936)

John Cowper Powys – *Visions and Revisions* (1915)

James Thrall Soby – *After Picasso* (1935)

James Thrall Soby – *Modern Art and the New Past* (1957)

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