

The Observer

October 27, 1997

Late for Art School

By Jeffrey Hogrefe

When the renovated and expanded P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center reopens on Oct. 26, Alanna Heiss, the art-world-diva who after 21 years is still artistic director of the space, would like you to think she's reinvented the wheel. Three years after the former schoolhouse in Long Island City, Queens, closed for renovations, Ms. Heiss has installed some of the original P.S.1 alumni (Bruce Nauman, John Coplans and Jack Smith, a performance drag artists best known for the cult film *Flaming Creatures*) plus Julian Schnabel, in separate rooms and museum-style exhibition halls that rival the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art. Ms. Heiss, an attractive 53 year old blonde who combines the talents of a Hollywood producer with the non sequiturs of a Hampton hostess, has also invited hundreds more artists to participate in an attempt to re-create the ad hoc scene that in the mid to late 70's compelled people to travel to P.S.1, then the place to see cutting-edge art.

The new show appears at once to be random and orchestrated and extremely ambitious -- a king of chaos-theory Biennale. None of the organizers can agree on exactly how many artists are participating or how many exhibits there actually are. God help the soul who had to try and make a map of the thing. In an effort to re-create the original spirit of the place, a handful of artists have been assigned spaces unique to the building and have conceived pieces for these spaces -- the attic, the walls of the stairwells, a restroom on the second floor, a janitor's closet on the third. From what I can tell, the artists are by and large extremely earnest, sometimes quite talented, idealistic, energetic, passionate about their work. An impressive number of them are deserving of attention.

Too bad they're being used in a foolhardy attempt to breathe new life into an institution which long before it closed had already been deemed irrelevant, supplanted by countless clones across the river. Remember when the Whitney Museum took young black rappers off the street in the mid-80's and "exhibited" them in its halls? Assigning artists to attics and johns and stairwells is the same thing. No matter how intriguing the ideas, both are contrivances, dreamed up by a curator. The question is, will people take the E Train to Long Island City to go to another museum?

Boys in the Attic

Robert Wogan, a 29 year old artist whose career has consisted of illuminating abandoned industrial sites, appeared at the top of the stairs that lead to the attic of P.S.1. He is compact, ruddy-face guy with blond hair and a lot of energy. Over his black Elvis T-shirt he was wearing a plastic surge protector with a long cord which he's wrapped around himself like a sash. He was greeted by Nari Ward, a 34-year old artist whose career has consisted of turning large spaces, such as a fire station in Harlem, into art pieces. Mr. Ward was wearing cutoff fatigues that ended at his

calves and a pair of work boots. He had a mustache and the beginnings of an Afro. He said that his work was "excited by being left on the fringes." Good thing, considering his placement at P.S.1.

Mr. Ward and Mr. Wogan were sent up to the attic to create something out of it. Their work will be viewed by appointment, because P.S.1's staff considered the space too dangerous (liability problems?) to let people go unaided up the rickety stairway to the attic. But that doesn't bother the artists. Or if it does, only a little. "We're cranking," said Mr. Wogan, "as this is going to warrant people wanting to come up here. One because you are not supposed to. Two, because of the diversity."

Mr. Wogan quit his job to spend a month a half creating a space inspired by the architecture of P.S.1's upper attic. He has never had a show in a gallery--had never been to P.S.1, even--and said that he is just glad to have the space.

Mr. Ward, the more established of the two, has a \$10,000 grant from the Penny McCall Foundation to complete his project and lives on grants and teaching gigs at Hunter College. He had been up to the attic for several weeks and had even begun to sleep there overnight.

For his piece, he has taken bunched-up bits of paper trash from the offices of P.S.1, sandwiched them between plastic strips that are approximately 30 feet long, and twisted it all together in such a way that each bag resembles an umbilical cord or intestine. Then he draped them from the rafters of the 60 foot long attic formerly the quarters of the school's caretaker. (One afternoon, he was seen reprimanding Ms. Heiss' assistant because she had not created enough paper trash for his purposes.) The piece is called *How to Build and Maintain the Virgin Fertility of Our Souls*. Mr. Ward said that is a play on a scientific article by George Washington Carver entitled, "How to Build and Maintain the Virgin Fertility of Our Soil."

Mr. Wogan's work is not as overtly subversive as Mr. Ward's. His P.S.1 installation is actually two projects, both of which he refers to as "sculptures," even though they are not free-standing objects that could be cast in multiples, the traditional definition of sculpture. For his first piece, Mr. Wogan will bathe two of the unrenovated facades of P.S.1 in white halide light, which he promises will make the building "boom like the Empire State Building." Ms. Heiss gave Mr. Wogan the two facades, partly to address community concerns that the corner would be too dark, and P.S.1 raised \$16,000 to light them. His second project is an interesting counterpoint, since it is completely interior. For its execution, P.S.1 kicked in about \$1,000. What Mr. Wogan has done is take a corner of the upper attic, above Mr. Ward's room of entrails, and built a 15-foot-long carpeted tunnel that people have to crawl through before they arrive in a small, shrinelike room.

At the room's apex, he has installed a video screen that will project a recording of him walking through an abandoned hospital building. It will be the only source of light in the piece, which seems part fun house, part womb.

Mr. Wogan, who has never sold any of his art or even received a grant, has been told that his piece will be destroyed in six months to make room for another installation. But he holds out hope that he will join the pantheon of P.S.1 alumni, such as James

Turrell and Richard Serra, and have his work enshrined in the building permanently. "It ain't ever coming out of here," Mr. Wogan said.

Sarah, Destroyer of Worlds

Sarah Sze is a pleasant-looking woman dressed like a J.Crew model whose amiable demeanor belies an unrepresented need to rip open buildings. When she first saw the pristine white gallery where she was to display her art in an exhibition titled *Some Young New Yorkers* she decided that the space was so sterile that she would probably send them some of her floor-to-ceiling scroll drawings. But Klaus Bisenbach, the curator of mini-exhibit, wouldn't hear of it. Ms. Sze, 28, is known for installations that consist of tearing apart architecture and building little environments. "I wanted a space that was a little more derelict," she recalled, "and they were very accommodating. They let me tear a hold in the wall. They just say, 'Go ahead, rip it up, we don't care.'"

This is her debut at P.S.1, and she has two exhibitions going on simultaneously there. She admits that she has no idea who Alanna Heiss was when she was first contacted by the veteran artistic director. Her first work, which she refers to as "these sort of orifices," consists of an installation called *Ripe Fruit South*, that is a two-foot-wide hole in the wall. Once she exposed what was under the wall, she discovered that the entire alarm system for the building was there in what she refers to as a "mother board," by which she means fuses and switches and live wires. In a move that rivals the titillating liability issues of the attic exhibitions, she added water to the electrical installation in the form of a terrarium with a hose and air bubbler. "It is dangerous for the building to have water and electricity near each other," Ms. Sze said with a noticeable pride. She has also added little boxes with ephemera that relate to the site, such as a digital alarm clock, a birth control pill, and a bottle of hand lotion and Tic-Tacs.

Ms. Sze's second piece, *Ripe Fruit North*, is in a janitor's closet in a third-floor hallway, the back of which she has ripped out to expose yet more of the building's electrical guts. "So more electricity," she said excitedly. Naturally she has installed dripping water and plants.

In The Toilet

"At first I was kind of shocked when Alanna asked me to do an installation in the bathroom," said Mike Bidlo.

For his art piece, Mr. Bidlo has taken a black-and-white photograph of the famous porcelain urinal that Marcel Duchamp declared to be a work of art and is wallpapering all of the walls with the image.

Mr. Bidlo had been out there in the art noosphere as a guy who is toilet-obsessed. "I think Alanna was smart enough to know that I was working on this urinal or fountain series for a couple of years now," said Mr. Bidlo, who is 43. "She thought conceptually that this was probably something that would work within the context. I was a little taken back, but then I started realizing that, "Oh it is an interesting place to do an installation." He paused and looked down, and then he pointed to the ceiling of the bathroom and frowned. "Even though architecturally it is very difficult

because of all the beams going crisscross.” Nonetheless, Mr. Bidlo said, he found that when lined up the photographs, they sometimes looked to him like rows of baby bottle urinals or Buddhas. This was a good thing, he explained, since his purpose has been to “subvert the image.”

Artist Ascending a Staircase

In one of the stairwells enclosed in wire cages in P.S.1, Madeleine Hatz was painting directly on one of the old cracked walls. Ms. Hatz is among 13 or 14 or 15 artists (nobody knew for sure) whose work will be cover the walls of the two north stairwells; the exhibition is called *Vertical Painting*. Ms. Hatz’s fresco, which ran up and won two walls of the stairwell, consisted of a series of raised reliefs in fluorescent shades of green. They looked like a topographical forms that had been zipped by a nuclear bomb. There was something sinister about them, as assessment that Ms. Hatz accepted whole-heartedly.

“It is natural and it is artificial-looking at the same time,” she said. “This is something that you see obliquely in parts, and it kind of sneaks up on you.” She pointed to the oozing green colors in the cracks on the wall and said that they looked like malformations she had found in the sidewalks of Long Island City leading o P.S.1. Ms. Hatz who once had a studio at P.S.1, was contacted directly by Ms. Heiss who had seen an exhibition of her paintings last February. “It was enormous work, an enormous amount of work,” Ms. Hatz said of her project, which took two-and-a-half weeks to complete.

Ms. Hatz has been around the block before, and she knows this type of exhibitions represents a calculated risk. She allowed that P.S.1 had lost its steam long before it was closed for renovations. Like the other artists, she’ll have done a lot of work; spent her own money and most likely won’t get paid for her piece. Chances are good that many people, let alone the right dealer or critic, won’t even be able to find her piece. Nonetheless, she had decided to put her faith in the circus. She hopes that the cacophony of exhibitions will create a buzz when it brings out hordes of curiosity seekers. She called back to amend some of the things she’d said in the interview. She seemed concerned that she might have offended someone. “Everyone in the New York art world is going to come to the opening. It is one of the events of the season.” That was the way she preferred to be heard on the subject. Ms. Hatz, like most of the other artists scurrying around P.S.1 wants Ms Heiss’ atavistic opening to succeed.