

TONY MAY'S GROUP
PROJECTS: VALUES
EMBODIED IN PROCESS
By Valerie Patten

Tony May began his series of group projects at San Jose State University in 1968; his latest group effort occurred in downtown San Jose as recently as Fall 1981. A conceptual sculptor known for his "Variable Constructions," Professor of Art at SJSU, and mainstay of Works Gallery in San Jose since its inception, May has been for some time an extremely interesting, productive, and enigmatic presence in the South Bay. These group projects are a small part of May's artistic output and represent only part of his complex personal philosophy relative to making art. However, they are important not only in understanding his work, but also in the broader sense in which they constitute a highly evolved contribution to thought about process, about values which can be allowed to consciously or unconsciously predominate in process, and the relationship of process to product.

In a group project, the relationships and interactions of the people involved become part of the process of making the "work of art." Additionally, the public context of the sites employed by May's groups provide other variables. It is hard to imagine a neighborhood more disrupted by redevelopment than downtown San Jose. People living in the older sections of town have had to put up with large pieces of unfinished freeway ending abruptly in their backyards, demolished lots, and empty city blocks collecting refuse in their neighborhoods. In this chaotic and humanly depressing environment, May organized the following series of group projects: Snow-cover in St. James Park, 1968; the handmade Adobe House built on a neglected lot near SJSU, 1971; Curtis Place Park, 1971; the Hercules Club, 1972; paintings of historical beds under Guadalupe Creek bridges, 1973; "Rat Lab Mural," on campus, 1974; the Julian Cafe, Julian Street, 1975; the Chiechi House, a restoration project, 1977; the Temporary Tree, SJSU campus, 1979; Billboards, 1979; the "Baby Bentons," hundreds of miniature Fletcher Benton sculptures made out of foam rubber, 1980; "Joining," a fence constructed by joining individually made sections, 1980; and finally the "Laundry Hung Out to Dry," succeeded by the Simulated Topiary Garden, 1981.

How did these projects initially come about? The snow in St. James Park was purchased with money that students got primarily by giving blood. The problem of purchasing, transporting and distributing the snow in the park constituted the making of the piece; the day of snow itself was a sort of Happening for the people who were there. But who came up with the idea?

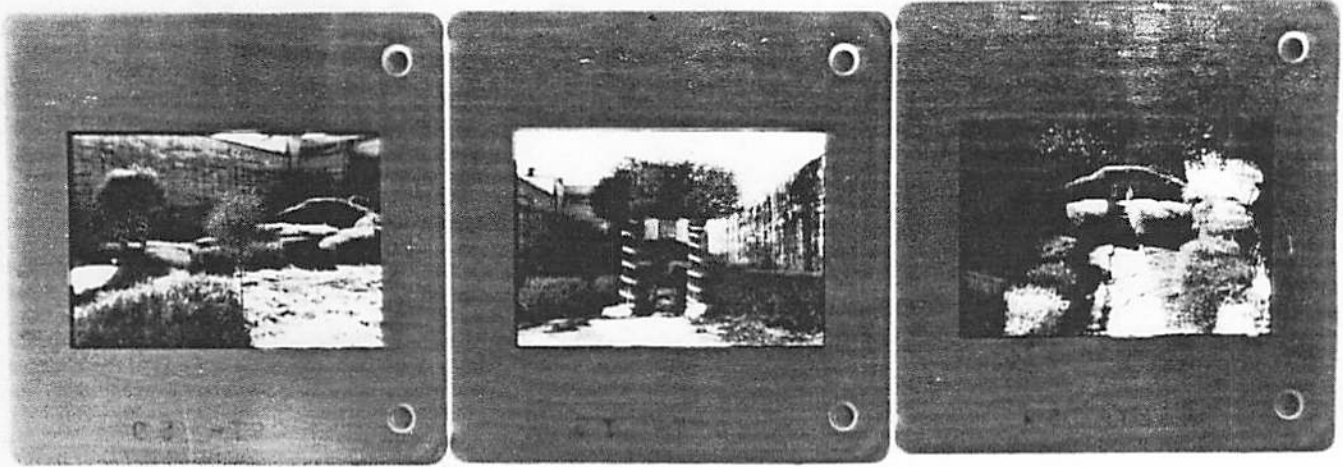
May insists that in most of these projects, the ideas were arrived at through group discussions, "brainstorming." If initially it seemed that May had more ideas about what was to be done than the others, his position quickly evolved in each case from director into something closer to discussion leader.

This occurred noticeably in the Julian Cafe project. May suggested that the class move off-campus by renting some kind of studio space. Once the space was found, however, the idea for the project, the cafe, came out of the group itself. "It evolved in a truly democratic manner," according to Don Button, who had been the teaching assistant for the class. "Tony had no more to say about the idea than anybody else. The idea arose and it was the kind of idea that depended entirely on group collective enthusiasm to become a reality. Almost every person in the class, as a result, came up with ideas of their own that made the project better and better." The space was constructed and painted to look like a cafe. Every decision, including the pattern of the floor, was made collectively. In the end, the piece was a performance within a hand-crafted object: Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner.

The latest group project, culminating in the Simulated Topiary Garden of lyrical and absurd beauty, passed through three stages. May initially proposed that the product "be aimed towards improving or embellishing the downtown." A vacant lot on First Street was chosen for the site, and the idea of hanging out the laundry "to dry" was proposed by the group. "I'm more literal-minded," May said. "I like the idea to be more clear." But when the laundry was hung in place over the ugly, recessed part of the lot, May was won over. "It turned out to be formally interesting." The group went on to remove the laundry, to add to the number of clotheslines until they became a dense interweaving of lines across the lot, and then to cover this net with tumbleweed imported from all over town. May admitted that he had "foisted" this idea on the class: "It came to me in a dream, almost," the soft, multicolored covering of green, brown, red and yellow was disassembled after one day because the police considered it a fire hazard. It lasted until nighttime, however, when a man from the Fox Theatre next door spontaneously offered to shine a powerful light on the surface. After this experiment, the group decided to transform the lot into the Topiary Garden, invoking formal gardening concepts in a researched attempt to transform chaos into order. The sagebrush bushes were already available as material to be shaped into trees, simulated hedges, etc. An "archaeological discovery" was made of part of an old foundation; this was excavated and



Art 177 — Fall 1981



filled in with pathway materials. A bridge was constructed at the far end of the garden. One of the most perverse but happy marriages this project brought about was that of High Culture (in this instance the art of formal gardening) with a whimsical and impermanent conceptual piece created through spontaneous group interaction.

Important elements that surface in thinking about these pieces involve the relationships between idea, process and product. By a definition provided by Robert Pincus-Witten, these pieces can be seen as a form of "post-conceptual theatre," i.e. performance art utilizing words, materials, stories, actions of a behavioral character, and the "phenomenon" of doing a specific act.¹ Although pure Conceptual art disassociated itself from the laborious process of working with materials, May's projects involve craftsmanship. Elements of chance function in the context of spontaneous decision-making as an important part of identifying the work with a life situation rather than with theatre. Chance, the "not preconceived," as May puts it, is a crucial element in assuring that the product would become something unanticipated by the idea.

Anyone who has ever tried to work democratically with other artists on a project knows how difficult it is to learn when and how to compromise aesthetically or ideologically and when not to. In learning this, one must first define one's own values and imagine a way to make them function optimally when meshed with the ideas of others. Occasionally, confusion in May's groups is preferred over any predetermined plan. However, the interesting fact is that this initial confusion is always overcome by the participants themselves. When entrusted with the outcome of a collective venture, they rethink and recreate themselves to deal with the situation. This involves each person in a humanistic dialogue with themselves and the rest of the group, supported by May's attitude. Finally, the outcome of each project sees an element of viewer-participation, recalling the Duchampian idea of the artist as medium, and art as a game between artist and viewer, with the viewer completing the piece.²

In much of May's thinking, parallels with the ideas of Marcel Duchamp abound. One obvious similarity is the humorous, if not mocking attitude apparent towards high culture and the modern gods of science, art, business and journalism. May's "behavioristic performances" can be seen as a revolt against movements such as Minimalism, much as Duchamp's work can be seen as a disgust with Cubism, retinal art and the money

society. Influences and contemporaries of May, including Wiley, Baldessari, Nauman, and West Coast Conceptualists such as Wegman, all share a marked attraction to the use of humor, particularly the pun, another Duchampian device. The preference for life over art stems from Duchamp as well as the Dadaists. May has consistently rejected the role of the artist who has one art-idea and then becomes a machine of production. By maintaining his independence from the marketplace, he has retained his childlike persona and allowed himself a lifetime of experimentation.

May's originality and independence from the influence of Duchamp is evident in the sheer substantiality and range of his work. Particularly in the group projects, divergences become apparent. Duchamp was indifferent to any kind of group activity — when he worked with others he complied but remained uncommitted.³ May's sensitivity to dialogue, his ability to create an atmosphere for groups to function in and to believe in their own viability is radical. Without attempting to influence members of the group in any specific way ideologically, aesthetically, or otherwise, May is able to impart certain constructive principles, as well as collectively and conceptually oriented values. His work has political and social implications without resorting to labels, slogans or positions, for an ideology is always a sort of finite mental product. The didactic usefulness of this type of approach is that it opens up, rather than closes down vistas of art-making ideas. "It is important," says May, "to tread a narrow line between product and idea. Art has to combine elements of the intellectual and the intuitive and it has to result from a process of genuine and instantaneous discovery. It cannot be preconceived. It has to be invented. Art is a process of learning and discovering something, mostly for the artist." As for art's social or political usefulness in communicating ideas, "It's important -- but absurd, and doomed to fail, if simply propaganda. The only way you can make people change their mind is to just show them. One tries to find some little truth, and if one finds it, one wants to convey it, to show it to others, to come up with some happy coincidence that will allow one to elucidate or present that truth to others."

¹Robert Pincus-Witten. "Theatre of the Conceptual: Autobiography and Myth," *Artform*, v. 12 (October 1973), pp. 40-46.

²Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: The Heretical Courtship in Modern Art* (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), pp. 9,14.

³Calvin Tomkins, *ibid.* p. 63.