

ART

Don't Bank on It

By Lucy R. Lippard

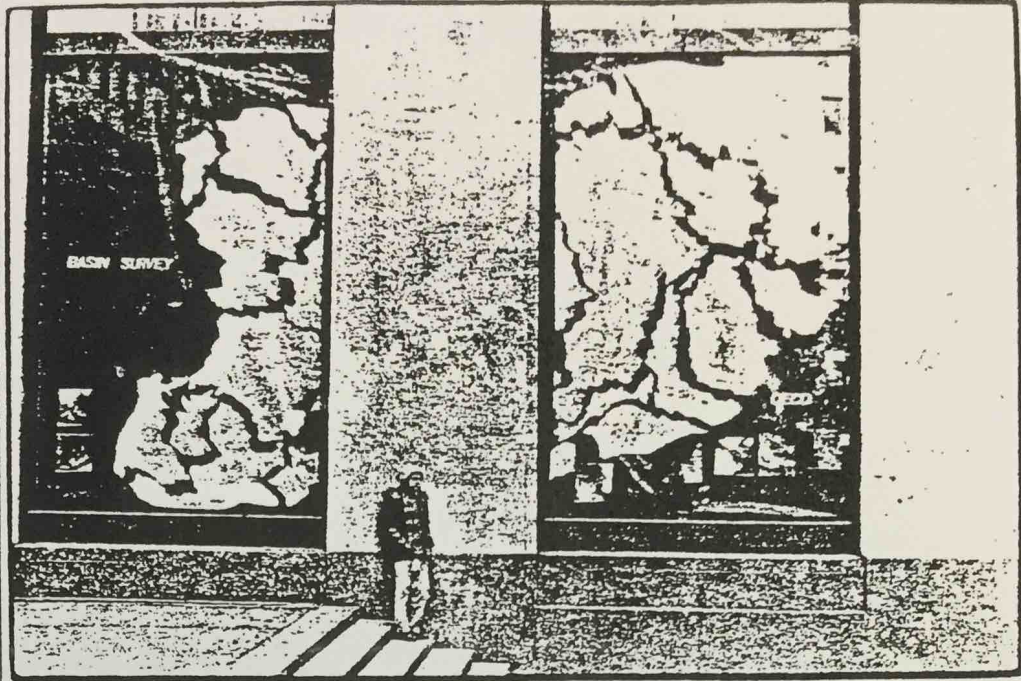
Banking on art is nothing new, but most banks prefer, as one official put it, "abstractions and tapestries" to what they got this month, courtesy of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. "Art Lobby" invited five relatively combative artists to infiltrate the financial district. Peter Fend/Ocean Earth: Construction and Development Corporation (OED) placed striking continental maps over satellite photos in six Chemical Bank Building windows; across Chase Manhattan Plaza, Mimi Smith's elegant scripts on red, silver, blue, and green veils also face out; Lauren Ewing's little red bank-within-a-bank is inside and visible outside; Christy Rupp's two sculpted cows wait balefully by the elevators at the World Trade Center; and some 300 of Jenny Holzer's "truisms" lasted a week before they were removed by the Marine Midland Bank on Broadway.

All artists in the U.S. are in the curious position of living within a system which, if not directly distasteful to them, is at least indifferent to the values on which art supposedly rests. Progressive artists—those with an advanced social consciousness who are trying to integrate their images and their politics—have discovered that "patronie bourgeois" doesn't mean off to the barricades, as this now indicates. Criticizing the system and trying to survive within it because no other system exists is dialectical at best, and self-destructive at worst.

Banks, for instance, are not neutral territory, but they are not monolithic structures either; there is room for a certain amount of ideological movement within the limits of their contradictions. From my own perspective (not necessarily shared by the "lobby artists"), I wonder why anyone would want to show in the lobbies of institutions that support world hunger, an oppressive regime in Poland, a racist regime in South Africa, and so forth. And why would banks want even the mildest "political" art in their lobbies? Who's laboring under what illusions? The artists' illusions focused on the "great opportunity to reach a lot of people"; pedestrian traffic in the midst of Moneyville is heavy, and to some extent cross-class and cross-cultural. I would have thought the banks were justified in the illusion that they are powerful enough to withstand a minor art attack, but then I'm always amazed at the extent of institutional paranoia.

I happen to have a lot of respect for the aesthetic integrity of these particular artists, so what I'm questioning is not their personal but their *impersonal* politics. There is a curious void between object and stated intention, leftist stance and liberal substance, in all this work. It suggests that naiveté and good intentions led the artists to ask for it by walking into the vault. Or else they knew what they were doing.

Lauren Ewing's little pillared building (a red bank) contains a videotape visible through the grating that shows people looking through the same grating and a series of superimposed phrases, such as "currency," "intrinsic worth," "the science of enrichment," or "m = m" (maybe this one is reflected in the rabbit that adorns the back roof peak; the front one has a lion). Longer phrases adorn the outside walls, e.g., "complete with legitimizing machinery, a subuniverse, possible transience, and marginal realities." Ewing's statement



OED's window dressing at Chemical: in which the viewer plays God, and finds that the world is pretty

about her miniature edifices (*the Bank's* siblings are *The School, The Prison, The Powerhouse, The Asylum, The Library*) reinforces the notion of art as neutral ground. She says she is exploring "economics, savings, and the corporate soul. . . I want to deal with gigantic themes, independent of moral judgments."

OED, as a corporation itself, doesn't seem to care who it works for. Its (I hope ironically) pretentious world-remodeling projects recall, but do not really resemble, the work of Helen and Newton Harrison. OED is described as "a group of artists who work in consultation with architects and ecologists to market regional planning models and drawings for business, government, and scientific concerns." It specializes in "earth monitoring" and "earth observations," like an environmental Cointelpro. A concurrent installation by its "Space Force" at the Kitchen is called "Art of the State," and states in multinational-scientific jargon that "the state of the art keeps evolving, developing new image-technologies" and "exchanging views with government officials and contractors." Names are dropped instead of bombs (Doctor this and that, NASA, Satlab Inc, etc.).

Whatever it all means in political terms, OED's sophisticated use of "digital color data," satellite photography (still and televised), projected light, geometric patches of black and white aerial snapshots and color TV is visually powerful. The effect is to let the viewer play God, to view the world's parts as mere patterns provided for our pleasure at a celestial distance. There is no hint of concern with the rot beneath that pretty colored surface, or with any human involvement in the social change purported to be OED's subject. I kept wondering, social change toward what?

Holzer's ambiguous aphorisms ("You are a victim of the rules you live by"; "Most people are not fit to rule themselves") dance a fine line between "far left, far right, and far idiotic," as she puts it. She makes people think, and provides a philosophy of alienation in which to experience institutions. Yet the work is similarly neutralized by its abdication to that same ambiguity. Her anarchic, anti-authority stance is not art for art's sake, but sometimes it is disturbingly close to disturbance for disturbance's sake. At Marine Midland, her conflicting propagandas were slickly lettered on both sides in black on silver, "so they'd look like they came from the bank, and then when people read them, they'd go, 'wait a minute . . .'" The censorship story is that, although

the text was approved earlier, a petition was circulated to remove Holzer's work because an anonymous person was "confused" and "didn't agree with some of the statements." Since that is precisely Holzer's goal, it's a pity she was out of town and could neither fight back nor take advantage of the fertile discussion the controversy could have provoked. When the work was removed, it was damaged, and there is no insurance. A woman in public relations at Marine Midland said to the curator, "This is a financial institution. How can you expect us to have a statement in the window saying 'It's not good to operate on credit'?"

Mimi Smith's four text pieces and accompanying audiotapes are gentler than Holzer's but also more specifically critical of their host. She, too, was threatened with censorship and had to exchange the placement of two pieces because the one near the door was "being read too much." She resisted another move that would have separated two pieces and defused their message about the effects of Reagan's Medicaid cuts on children's health. Smith uses the soothing evening-news format to impart her unwelcome but familiar information. "Money, money, money," is her refrain: "Good Evening, here's the news, money money money. . . Our computer is out. It's one of the risks you take when everything is automated. Money money money. . . I need a job. We need money. I need a raise. Money money money." An employee told her, "It's generated no raises, but a lot of talk." Managerial resistance to Smith's work seems to prove that even in banks, it's as rude to mention money as it is to mention a corpse in a funeral home.

Smith has gotten warm responses to her work from the bank workers and feels it's important for the artist to be around to humanize the art, to make people more comfortable with and protective of it. An elevator man wrote out an enthusiastic statement about her piece because he was asked about it so often, and a sign—"Opus Tedium"—went up on elevator row, a takeoff on the full title of Ewing's piece. *The Bank: Opus Proprium*. Christy Rupp visits her *Cash Commodity Cows* every day, and when I was there a young woman in an elevator operator's uniform volunteered to tell me about them.

Rupp is a dedicated student of the economy and the environment, of "food, farming, and foreign policy." Director of City Wildlife Projects, which disseminates vital information about the urban envi-

ronment, she is an advocate (to oversimplify) of "Small Is Beautiful." She approached the art lobby in full faith and good will. Her experience was sobering. The Commodity Exchange refused her cows entry to their visitors' gallery and rejected any reference to World Hunger—or even to commodities. She had planned a handout and a questionnaire. They were banned, as was the title itself.

In the process, Rupp discovered that although fine or high artists are not encouraged to use such imagery, Madison Avenue and *The Wall Street Journal* are welcome to picture "cash cows" being "milked for money" and other animal images of the financial system offensive to that system when used by an outsider. I would like to think the brokers fear art because of its image power, but probably they just fear the unfamiliar, like all philistines. Rupp's gray-flecked cows (passive consumers covered with TV "snow," their TV-set faces showing images of a food commercial and the prices of meat and other commodities) make an endearingly countercultural statement in that setting. Yet they also look a bit lost in the lobby they've been roped into. They are meek and undersized, dwarfed by the neofascist architecture—which would seem to belie Rupp's political beliefs as to the power of smallness. The meek's inheritance of the earth has never been one of Christianity's most convincing slogans.

So what precisely are these artists lobbying for? Art alone? Any old art? Money for art? Money for artists? Money for working people? Rupp and OED would like to redesign the world, the one along intimate, the other along grandiose lines, but despite their respective visions, their politics remains too far below the surface to make people really think or act. The choice of artists (by Jacki Apple and Frederieke Taylor) was apt as they all know what they are doing and are good at it. But the essence (and impotence) of liberalism is to show all sides of a question and then walk away shrugging: "You choose, it's a free country." Thus liberal, "political" art abandons its audience to the subtle social control of the dominant culture, and the banks know just when to step in. Maybe the subject of this show is finally authority, and what happens when art comes up against it. Who goes for broke? Who can bank on what? ("Art Lobby" at 1 Chase Manhattan Plaza, 20 Pine Street, 4 World Trade Center Plaza, to March 1, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, 269-0320; OED at The Kitchen to February 27, 484 Broome Street, 925-3615.)