

Idea vs. Technique

By ANTHONY BANNON
News Critic

Artist Hannah Wilke set up a table for dispersal of chewing gum under the caryatids on the Albright-Knox's Porch of the Maidens. While a tape deck played "Shuffle off to Buffalo," she gave the gum away to youngsters, incredulous at first about such a bizarre practice and even more surprised when she told them to give it back.

"But chew it some more," she said to one child. "It's not soft enough."

When the gum was soft, Wilke folded the wads over, stuck the colorful assemblies to a piece of cardboard and fixed the cardboard on the gallery wall.

The process was called art, part of a July 4 gallery celebration.

Last year at Artpark, a West Coast group of artists buried a car filled with contemporary objects. Heretofore a project for Town Farmers and school children, a Time capsule now becomes an art object, out of sight until 2000.

Also at Artpark, the Robert Grosvenor put down two torpedo shaped black steel pipes, called sculpture. One thought they were left over from a sewer construction.

Dennis Oppenheim made finger prints in the soil, Rockne Krebs worked with bones, Jerry Noe with

The weave of this century's periodic action and reaction, the assents and dissents of diverse art movements is a complicated tracing. But some of its qualities include:

- The use of new media; in fact, the use of any media, including, literally, earth, air and fire.
- A de-emphasis on technical virtuosity, but an increased interest in process and conception; thus, in critic Lucy Lippard's words, "a dematerialization of the art object."
- An extension of 19th Century

drawing, wrote in 1967: "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work . . . When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair."

And Critic Gregory Battcock: "The Idea artists were mainly interested in exploring a new area of esthetic speculation that seemed to represent a dramatic break from the usual activities of artmaking, looking and appreciation. They were engaged in an emphatic rejection of the commercial and consumer aspects in art."

CONCEPTUAL ART is anti-materialistic. It eliminates, or minimalizes, the art product. Conceptual art offers non-symbols for a changing cultural scene littered with quickly-worn symbols. For that reason, then, it often is hard to read and harder to accept.

The conceptual artist is to the art object what the music composer is to a plastic phonograph record.

Conceptual art offers transitory, temporary structures to a society whose own structures seem to change as quickly as the day's news.

CONCEPTUAL ART, then, is a form on the run. It's heyday was in the late '60s and early '70s, yet its influence remains today. It's influence can be read on this page, for instance, where we have realized an idea — a concept — by video artist Woody Vasulka, who presented brief instructions, only.

IN THE TERMS of contemporary art, a newspaper is a fitting medium. Inexpensive and in an issue of 296,000, it certainly presents an alternative to the principles of expensive ownership fostered by museums and galleries. It also offers the challenge of a new medium, a popular audience and the tradition of impermanence fitting a product made anew six times a week, every week of the year.

Newspapers have been used before by artists. Mark Twain, William Cullen Bryant and other men of letters were newspaper editors. Thomas Hardy first published "Far from the Madding Crowd" in the New York Tribune. Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and Ernest Hemmingway wrote war correspondence that is considerable. Tom Wolfe and other new journalists claim to have supplanted the novel with their work of the '60s. And Ad Reinhardt made drawings for PM, New York's short-lived, ad-less newspaper experiment of the 1940s.

Additionally, conceptual artist have taken out display or classified ads and proclaimed the space art. But their work generally has been limited in scope and space.

George Braque and other synthetic cubists used newspapers in their assemblages, as have collage artists. Joseph Cornell used newspapers in his boxes. And poets, too, such as John Dos Passos who drew from headlines and brief stories for his long USA Trilogy.

Those artists put newspapers into their art. Today, in a new way, we are putting art in the newspaper.



LIVELY ARTS
C-10 Saturday, July 24, 1976

son tubing, Charles Simmons with andbags and Jim Roche with clams, onch shells, beech logs, shark jaws and plastic roses. All are reputable artists.

Today The Buffalo Evening News begins a series of artistic works designed for its Lively Arts page.

Art in a newspaper?

Indeed, contemporary art often is indistinguishable from practices and products of the non-art world, and that is part of the art's purpose. What follows here is intended to serve as a brief, partial orientation to the perplexing state of recent art and to propose several ideas about idea art.

ANTI-IRONY in 20th Century art is that as it increasingly sought to demystify the hollowed sanctity of 19th Century art — and as its intentions became more and more democratic — the public answered with ridicule.

"Just because artists and museums proclaimed their objects and events art, doesn't mean that we have to" was one way of saying it.

Another way was in 1917, when the Society of Independent Artists organized a radical no-jury, no-prize show in New York. The French expatriate Marcel Duchamp, a founding member, chose to exhibit a urinal, one of his "ready-mades" he called art by virtue of his creativity in selecting it for exhibit. Duchamp has become a seminal figure in modernist art. But the Society he helped to found rejected his urinal.

A list of popular rejections through this century is easily assembled: Jackson Pollock's action painting splatter technique ("Anybody can do it"), Andy Warhol's pop art ("What makes soup cans art?"), Pablo Picasso's cubist paintings, so named by a critic who was debunking them.

Romanticism which gave sanction to new ways of seeing the ordinary — to include, even, the ordinary object itself.

This century's Romanticism celebrates the deeply personal, the transitory, the capricious and arbitrary. At its logical resting point, then, esthetic considerations are given priority over esthetic manipulations and Duchamp proclaims his life his art.

THE MINIMALISM of the 1960s was a contemporary reaction to all that. Beauty, sentiment, emotion, arbitrary decisions were rejected. In order to bring the work under control, irreducible forms, geometric shapes, single colors were employed.

Minimal artists, such as Ad Reinhardt and Ellsworth Kelly, insist with their work that art must be rooted in truths more durable than the impulsive choices of surrealists and abstract expressionists. With their single note presentations, they also gave greater strength to the viewer's role, inviting him into a more intimate relationship with the work — a relationship which, if viable, required the viewer to fill in the blanks, read between the lines, with information of his own.

(From my experience, there seems to be a lot less audience quarrel with the single color fields of minimalism than with more aggressive abstract expressions. Who can argue with a color?)

The irony of the minimalist position is that the reduction, if carried on, becomes absurd. After a single color, what?

The canvas, the wall, the idea. And the idea leads back to the idiosyncrasy of the conceptualist.

Sol LeWitt, an early conceptualist who last year sent instructions to Hallwalls Gallery here for a wall

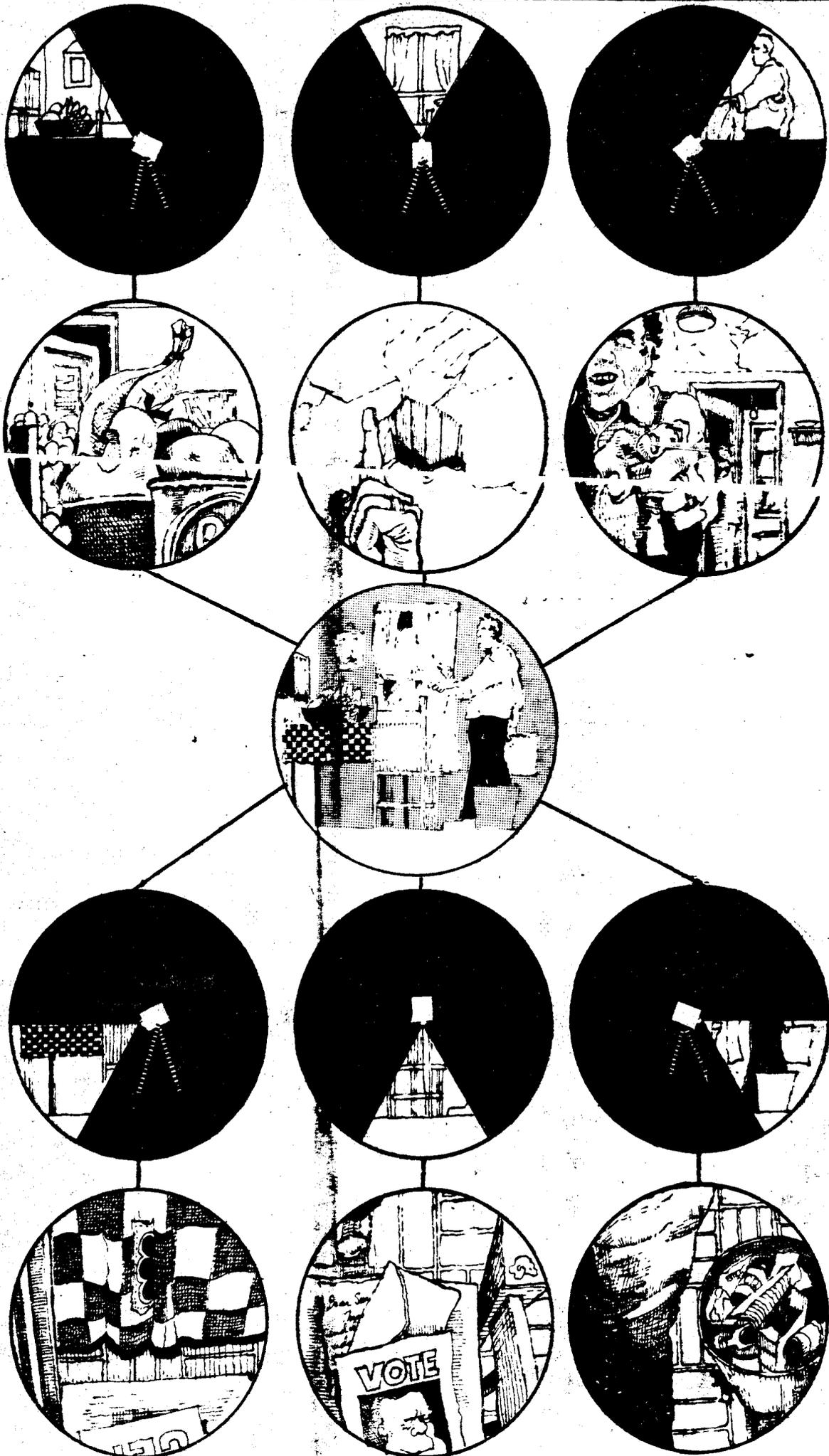
Creative artists are turning to different means of expression. In the interest of providing artists a new opportunity and of providing the reader with insight into the current state of artistic thinking, The Buffalo Evening News will publish artistic expressions on its Lively Arts Page from time to time. Artists will work in co-operation with The News staff members to execute the piece.



WOODY VASULKA is a video artist and Buffalo resident who recently was awarded a grant for an artist's residency at WNED-TV with his wife, Steina. An associate professor at UB, Vasulka's reputation is in complex technical and esthetic innovation.

He believes that "artists of today should provide various models — of consciousness, of electrical systems, of design — which the public can examine, incorporate, reject or establish."

This year, Vasulka has lectured on basic principles of perception and image-making. His concept for The News continues that theoretical inquiry, suggesting the implications of several perceptual choices among many possible ones.



This original work of art made for The Buffalo Evening News is titled "Looking in is an inverted looking out, and looking out is an inverted looking in."

Conceived by Woody Vasulka
 Executed by Dick Bradley
 Co-ordinated by Anthony Bannon