

CITY AS FESTIVAL

BY PETER HALLEY

In his complex, varied, and sometimes eccentric oeuvre, Robert Tannen speaks to some of the central issues that beset late twentieth century culture: the nature of creative production in present-day developed industrial culture, the identity of the work of art as a means of addressing cultural issues today, and most importantly, perhaps, what role the artist can play on the contemporary societal stage.

The medium through which Tannen has addressed those questions is an exploration of the cultural and geo-physical character of the city of New Orleans. In his work he has used high school marching bands, surplus fragments produced by the Michoud N.A.S.A. plant, fishing boats, shotgun houses and, more recently, the ubiquitous cinderblocks of security walls and playground construction. Like the writers Walker Percy and John Kennedy Toole — who are in many ways his real compatriots in this endeavor — he has managed to leave aside the nostalgic representations of New Orleans as Fort of the Old South or Railroad Capital of the 20s and addresses its far more interesting contemporary sociology.

Thus Tannen's New Orleans is not a nostalgic and isolated citadel reified by cliché. It is rather a nexus in the larger landscape of the Gulf Coast, with its complex issues of ecology and economic development. Nor is his New Orleans the enclave of an insular, white, middle-class culture; rather, his work opens itself up to the powerful dynamism of the city's many sub-cultures and constituent groups.

COLOR PAGE:

Caribbean Painting

Painted Concrete Installation

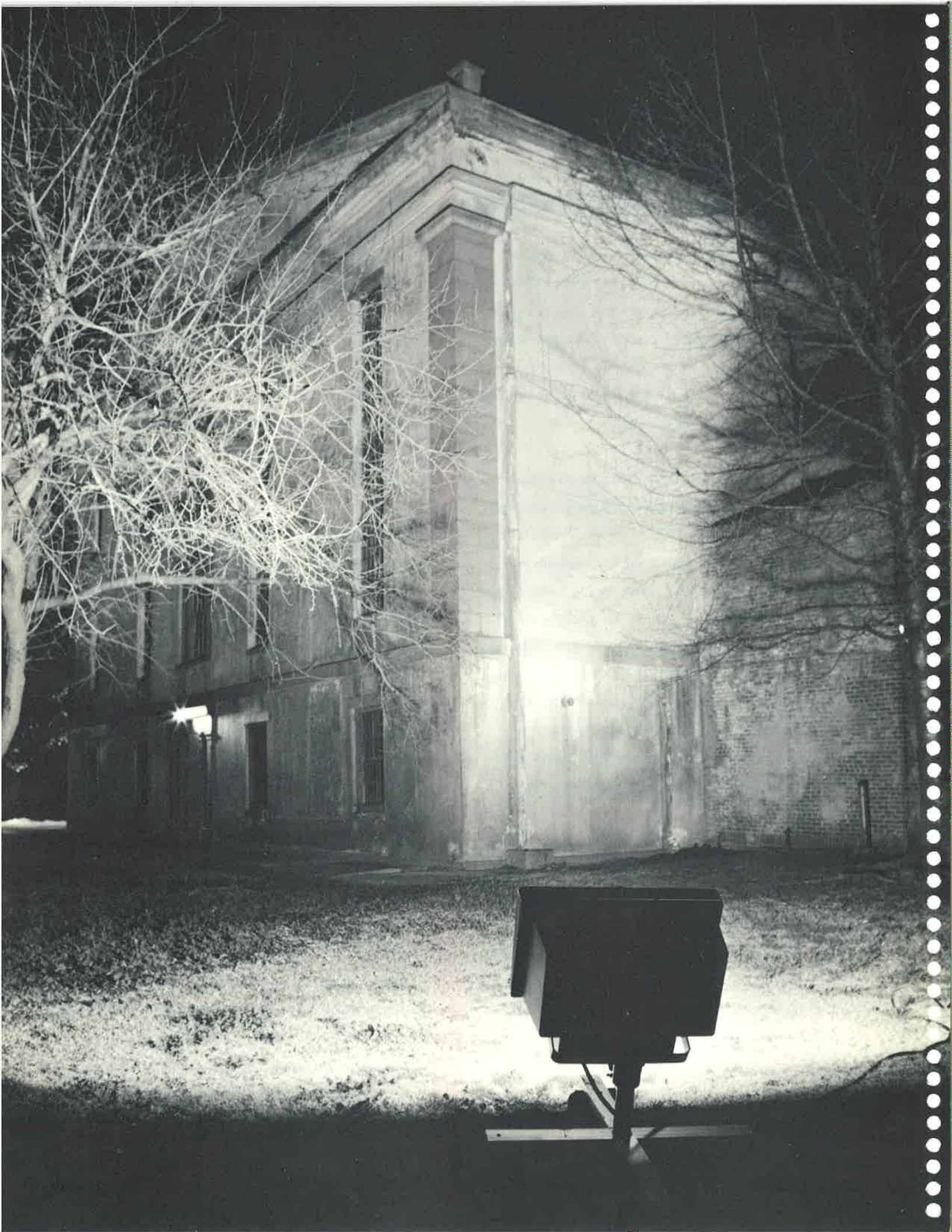
Res Nova Gallery 1989

Photo by Owen Murphy

As the 1990s begin and New Orleans and Louisiana are besieged with problems after a decade of economic depression, rising violence, and growing political success from the opportunistic far right, it is sometimes difficult to remember that the urban culture of New Orleans has a long history of expressing an alternative for American intellectuals to the “false consciousness” of most of American life. That is, if contemporary American consciousness is generally characterized by a passive acceptance of the ideological consciousness created by the mass media, the corporations, and the capitalist engine of consumption, New Orleans seems to have been capable of twisting those ideological messages, of avoiding the rationalization of hyperindustrialism, and of maintaining a society that to some real extent goes its own way outside the lockstep of regimented consumer consciousness.

For the last twenty years, Robert Tannen has been a visual poet whose subject has been this alternative. How does he construct this particular poetry? His work is in fact heir to several other traditions that also strive against the phenomenon of false consciousness.

First and foremost, his approach to materials and presentation is basically derived from the Bauhaus and Surrealist belief that the alienated objects of industrialism can be re-presented by the artist and reinvigorated as part of a more vital social context. The Bauhaus accomplished this by formal reordering — which Tannen emphasizes in pieces like *N.A.S.A. Rejects* and the *Shotgun House* series, where fresh insight into materials and spatial relationships are emphasized. Simultaneously, the strategies of Surrealism are employed in Tannen's work in his emphasis on surprise, the shock of juxtaposition, and humor — as in his ceramic bric-a-brac accumulations, fishing trophy pieces, and his various proposals for large sculptural installations and events. In the artist's own estimation, the primary formal influences on his work have been Brancusi (who was also interested in the idea of the sculptural ensemble) and turn-of-the-century Biloxi potter, George Ohr. These figures coincide nicely with the Bauhaus-Surrealist poles of Tannen's aesthetic approach.



Further, Tannen also comes to his strategies by way of the post-war American school of Experimentalism which his early training and early work reflect. His experiences teaching at Franconia College, his involvement in the New York avant-garde and in the Boston research and development scene during the 1960s, and his work with Buckminster Fuller all reflect Tannen's awareness of the importance of this Experimentalist tendency, which sought to push the pre-war Bauhaus and Surrealist strategies onto a larger social stage where institutions and social norms became subject to the same transformative strategies as objects themselves.

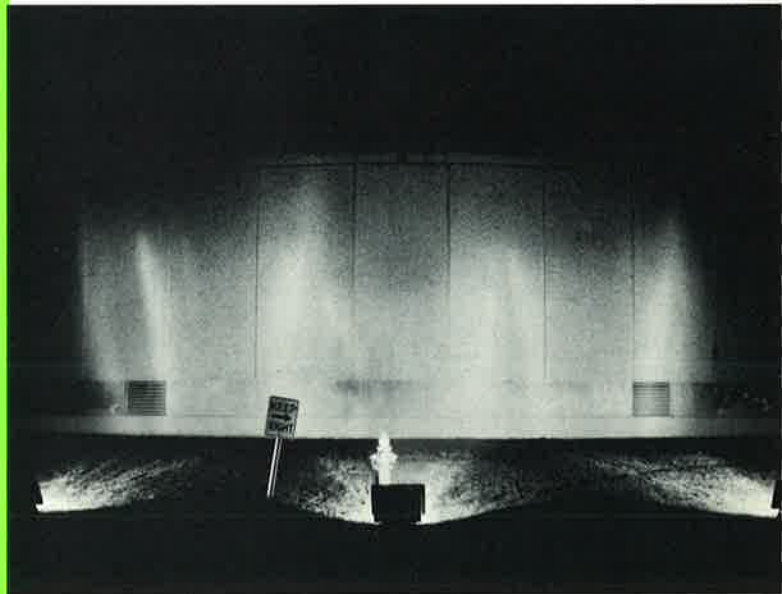
The Experimentalist thinkers of the 1960s might be characterized as consisting of two groups. First, the technocratic visionaries (the movie *2001* embodied this vision) believed that technological change would create the brave new world of the future. Second, the political visionaries imagined a world in which social and psychological strife would be eradicated. Tannen's work, however, constitutes a distinct departure from the simplistic utopianism that characterized both of these approaches. If the utopian visionaries of the '60s imagined a homogeneous world free of traditional problems, Tannen's vision instead thrives on the diversity of culture — including some of its more politically problematic manifestations. For example, his 1977 "re-lighting" of the New Orleans Museum of Art was based, he has commented, on his fascination with his neighbors' security systems.

Tannen relishes such phenomenon as the space shuttle and kitsch '50s sculpture; some of his recent mason jar accumulations are filled with rather formidable looking plastic prescription medicine bottles. The use of all this various material points to Tannen's unique enthusiasm and nonjudgmental reaction to all kinds of culture. All these phenomena have an equal place in Tannen's human cosmology — cultural tolerance is at the root of the cultural democracy that guides his work.

Turning to another aspect of Tannen's oeuvre, it is

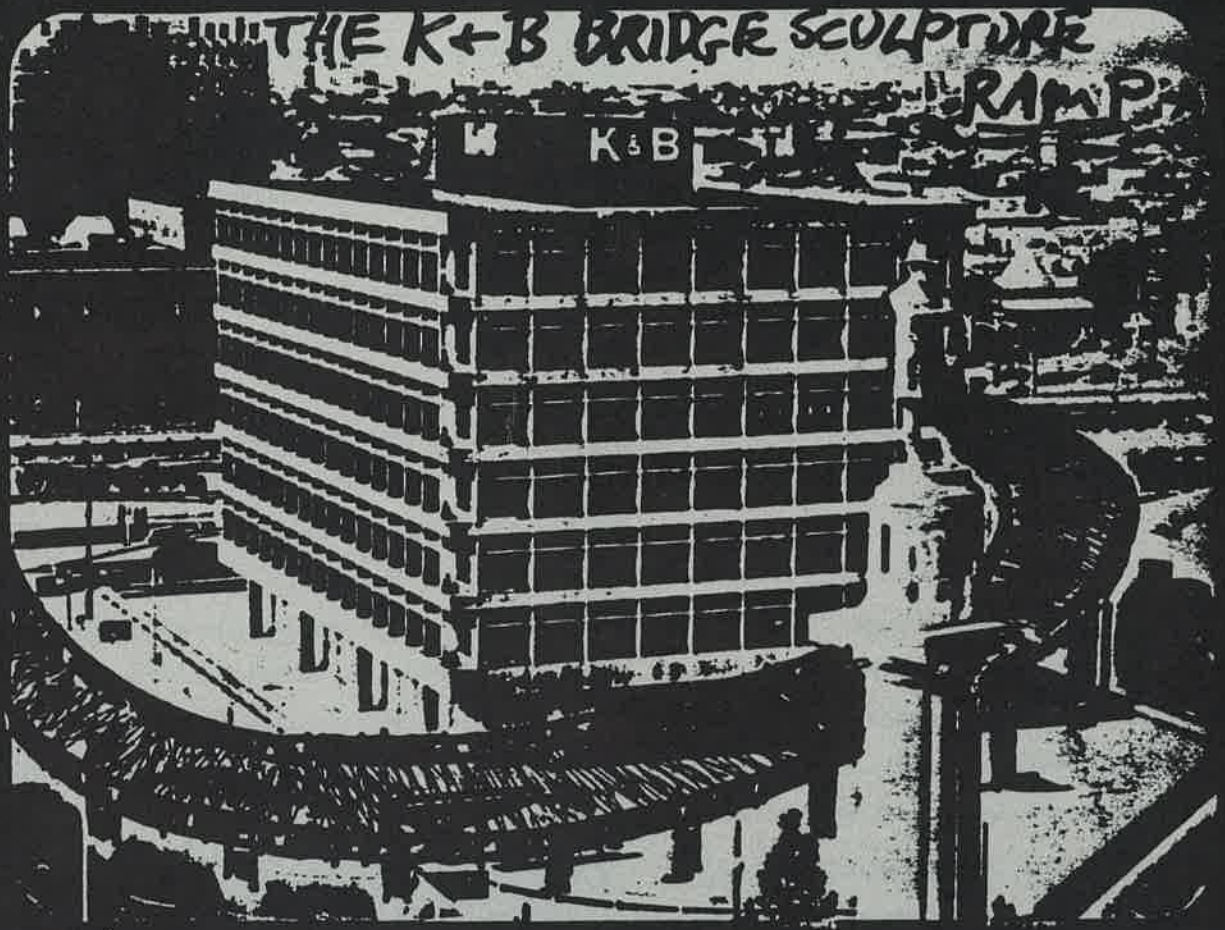
important to note that, among artists working in America today, Robert Tannen has been uniquely active in the sphere of real environmental planning. But it is also of primary importance to make clear that in the last twenty years, Tannen has not been an environmental planner who makes art, but rather always remains an artist who has engaged in planning projects as part of his creative vision, just as we might say that Leonardo, for example, was not primarily a designer of machines, but an artist who undertook such design problems as a part of his general program.

Indeed, the Renaissance analogy can be taken further. While Tannen's art may have a somewhat esoteric presence in the popular consciousness of New Orleans, he shares with the artists of the Renaissance and Baroque an achievement that few artists in the modern era have accomplished — he has actually been an influential figure in the Gulf Coast and New Orleans environmental decision-making process — just as Michelangelo, Velasquez, or Rubens were sought out by



ABOVE:
Museum Lighting
Installation, New Orleans Museum of Art
Artists' Biennial, 1977
Photograph by Tina Freeman

LEFT:
After Dinner Mint
U.S. Mint, Louisiana State Museum
in conjunction with Freeman Anacker Gallery
New Orleans 1976



rulers of pre-modern Europe for architectural, diplomatic, and scientific missions. To eschew the marginal role given the artist in our era is one of Tannen's central goals.

Tannen's largest-scale accomplishment as a planner is his work on the routing of the second span of the New Orleans Mississippi River Bridge. His work on the bridge is in many ways a perfect reflection of Tannen's sensibility. To the casual observer, the second span of the bridge and its exit ramps on the heavily urban New Orleans side of the river are noteworthy only for their mundanity.

In fact, Tannen's more radical proposals were rejected by "prudent-minded" public officials — an eventuality that Tannen accepts with his characteristic Zen-like sense of humor. These included a semi-circular automotive exit ramp that would have wrapped around the K & B building, allowing motorists to view the K & B outdoor sculpture collection. He also proposed a restaurant to be located in the middle of the bridge, whose panoramic vistas of the mighty Mississippi would have been a sculptural achievement of some magnitude. But, in the end, the work of Tannen and his associates resulted in an almost invisible but important urbanistic achievement. The new span and its exits were built with minimum disruption to the historic areas along Camp and Magazine Streets; nor was the slightly faded urban charm that constitutes lower St. Charles Avenue destroyed. A less sensitive and subtle scheme would have caused serious blight to a key area of urban terrain that separates two distinctive New Orleans realms, the Central Business District and Uptown.

Also notable among Tannen's work in planning is his

*K & B Sculpture Bridge
Ramp Proposal, 1977*
Artwork created over postcard
of Lee Circle and K&B Plaza,
New Orleans
Collection of Sydney Besthoff

proposal for a linear Mississippi River National Historical Park. This proposal would unite under one umbrella agency diverse sites of historical, ecological, and urbanistic interest along the Mississippi. This idea reflects Tannen's bold approach to spatial and social concerns, but it also informs us about another source of the artist's vision — the heritage formed by such nineteenth century American artist-visionary-tinkerers as John James Audubon, Samuel Morse, and Frederick Law Olmstead.

Olmstead in particular is a key figure for Tannen. In Olmstead's wide-ranging oeuvre (which includes Central Park, Golden Gate Park, and the Chicago World's Fair of 1893), Tannen finds a model for the creation of complex public spaces of lasting benefit to the community. Through Olmstead's example, Tannen continues the strain of utopian socialism and heroic progressive nationalism of nineteenth century America in his own work.

Despite the diversity of Robert Tannen's activity in sculpture-making, event-creating, and environmental planning, the artist's work as a whole is united by a strongly cohesive statement. To begin with, in almost all of his work, Tannen abandons the idea of the artist as a specialized crafter of objects. He rejects the vision of the sculptor as a specialized worker, except in the casting of bronze, the welding of steel, or some other fabricating craft. Instead, like certain other artists whose work came to maturity around 1970 (Smithson in particular comes to mind), Tannen sees his role as an organizer and combiner of material already existing in the industrial and social realms.

The Italian architect-critic Andrea Branzi has precisely articulated this issue as it arose in architecture in the late 1960s:

"The architect's ability to make use of his rational logic, as if it were free energy made up of a feeling for construction and figurative skill, has made him ready to tackle any problem, so that he has become an invaluable figure in a society devastated by the division of labor, where each member



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follows the biased logic of his own specialization. Thus we come across architects in government, technical management, scientific research, planning, politics, sociology, teaching, fashion, ecology and in general all activities that require, apart from specialization, an overall vision of a plan of intervention.

“...So the project as a potential unification of human technologies became the social model of technological programming; the architect changed from a constructor of artifacts to a coordinator of human and technical resources.”

Thus, Tannen’s role as an artist and sculptor in post-industrial society transcends the traditional role of craftsman in a particular medium, concerned with a specific specialty of cultural production. Rather, through the impulse to creative activity, Tannen envisions the artist as someone who informs society about its complex cultural make-up and reconciles its contradictions. The artist becomes a person who facilitates, through the construction of sites and situations, the creativity and sociability (in the most profound sense) of others. From this, the artist also becomes the person who, from the gloom of an alienated culture, can re-envision the city as festival.

Here Tannen’s perception of the artist’s role echoes Marcusean social theory. Like Marcuse, Tannen’s work seems to posit a world in which the problem of material production — the production of the basic necessities — has been solved by technology and science. That is not to say that problems of want and need do not still exist, but that at the present stage of social development want and need become the result of a repressive society that creates these conditions as a means of ensuring the stability of the status quo.

According to Marcuse, this happens through the creation of the broad phenomenon of false consciousness — the creation

by the media and other sources of information of a range of false assumptions that influence each individual’s perception of his or her best interest. Thus, in contemporary society we become passive recipients of the system’s messages, we are convinced we need things that are chimeras, while our true needs and true self-interests are obscured.

The ultimate goal of Tannen’s work is then to return to us a sense of autonomy about our cultural lives. Through his creation of festival sites, people begin to experience their humanness and socialness in an autonomous way. Through the example of his own creative practice Tannen offers an effervescent paradigm of autonomous cultural decision-making and gently points us toward the possibility of autonomous cultural lives of our own.

Perhaps only an artist whose childhood took place in Coney Island and whose father ran a New York bookstore that was a meeting place for the vanguard artists of the ‘40s and ‘50s could envision culture in this way. Growing up surrounded by the fantastic sights of Luna Park and Steeplechase, two of the leading amusement parks of the era, while his father worked to provide a social gathering point for people interested in ideas, Tannen developed an early feeling for both the intellectual and sensuous possibilities of culture that few of the rest of us have inherited.

This background also gave the artist a rich and unique vision of the city as a place that could yield both discourse and delight. If, on the individual level, Tannen wants to return us to an experience of intellectual and cultural autonomy, on the societal level, his work seeks to create loci of social experience and interchange that the forces of false consciousness have done their best to repress.

As is well known, the post-war American city has become more and more a place of isolation and separation from social intercourse. We are imprisoned in our cars and in front of our TV sets, while the great inventions of urban sociability — the park, the theatre, and even the street and the marketplace wither away. This tendency is not really the result of

technological changes and “progress,” but rather it reflects a specific ideological program. Uninhibited contacts with strangers, the intermingling of social classes, and the expression of an individual’s persona in public are all discouraged.

Tannen’s work — his plans for parks and monuments, the festive and thought-provoking events he has executed to bring people together — reflects an effort to revitalize the city, not as a productive center, but as a place where the liberating phenomenon of social intercourse can take place. Through his vision for the transformation of the city, the artist’s creative vision becomes complete.

How then has New Orleans, the stage Robert Tannen has chosen to play out these ideas, reacted to his oeuvre? Undoubtedly, if Tannen were a European artist working in a European city, his identity with the cultural life of a specific place would have lifted him to international repute as it has for many Italian and German artists who became “favorite sons” (or daughters) on the international art scene. (One thinks of Mario Merz, Enzo Cucchi, or even Joseph Beuys in this regard.) Unfortunately, perhaps, New Orleans has neither the concentration of capital nor the cultural links required to catapult one of its own in this way.

Fortunately however, Robert Tannen, with his intense visionary program, is not the kind of artist for whom a hollow role in the international culture scene is of vital concern. But to see the artist at work in New Orleans, discoursing on the wealth of subjects on which he is an expert, showing someone his extraordinary collection of George Ohr pottery, holding forth on the subtleties of Gulf Coast ecology, or discussing proposals with assorted business people, artists, and even political types, all the while taking in the urban festival around him, is to be convinced that this is what real creative life is about.

Shotgun Temple
L.A. Superdome Site Installation

NEXT PAGE:
Bally Shoes Window Installation
Canal Place, New Orleans

