

By Lucy R. Lippard

I DON'T REMEMBER A SUMMER when arts activists have been so active. In August, around Hiroshima/Nagasaki days, some 70,000 feet of lovingly crafted needlework surrounded the Pentagon, White House, and Lincoln Memorial in *The Ribbon* (see *In These Times*, Sept. 18), and 10,000 artists painted the vaporized shadows of Atom Bomb victims in the streets of 20 different countries for *The International Shadow Project*. A second working artists' brigade went to Nicaragua from the Boston-based "Arts for a New Nicaragua/Artists Call." In Saint Paul, Minnesota, "Artists on the Frontline" held an ambitious festival called "Visions of a Progressive Reality," and more, much more.

In New York's *Loisaida* (local Hispanicization for "Lower East Side"), a series of vacant lots on 9th Street and Avenue C were transformed into the city's biggest and most impressive collective mural project to date—"The Struggle Continues/*La Lucha Continua*" (*La Lucha*), directed by Eva Cockcroft and sponsored by Artmakers and Charas. A block away, *El Bohío*, Charas' Community Cultural Center, hosted a benefit auction run by a professional from Sotheby's, yet, with contributions from big monikers in the art world and its fringes.

With Mayor "Koochie Koochie" Koch tickling the public's fantasies in the mayoral primary (it only cost him \$6 million), we needed the optimism offered by events like *La Lucha's* Dedication Fiesta on September 14. It was a sunny Saturday with casual crowds enjoying, rock and salsa jumping, chicken sizzling, beer flowing, local kids selling the free flyers for a quarter, and even an enterprising open-air barber. Speakers included poet Roberto Vargas from Nicaragua's Ministry of Culture, African National Congress representative Neo Mnumzana from the UN, Charas and Bohio founder Chino Garcia, a "minstrel" performance by Black artists Noah Jemison and John McFee, and passionate Spanish poetry by a neighborhood septuagenarian.

La Lucha's subjects are urban issues, easily connected to self-determination in Nicaragua and South Africa. Some 50 artists worked on the 24 separate paintings, which are dominated by a 40'-square mural classic—a crystal-ball view of a future unspoiled by gentrification, drugs, and malign neglect. The murals range from the predictable to the innovative. Among the most successful were Maria Dominguez's lyrical Latino emblem—mask over skull with twirling flags. Seth Tobocman's graphically brilliant denunciation of police brutality, dedicated to the cop-killed graffiti artist Michael Stewart (unfortunately hidden away in an alley because it was "controversial"), and Kristen Reed's and Robin Michals' *The Last Judgement*.

New mural forms

Reed's and Michals' painting is formally original and politically savvy. It might point a way out of the stylistic rut that has imprisoned even the best murals in the U.S. (though the Chicano imagery of the Southwest also offers exits to visual excitement). *The Last Judgement* is irregularly divided into two horizontal bands—the lower



CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

Hot art in the summertime

by Reed, a field of brilliant green regularly broken by the stylized uniform figures of "businessmen"; the upper by two rows of Michals' drawn heads, highly individualized portraits of international resistance leaders and local community leaders. (After a summer of work, they discovered that their choices were not always the "right" ones, adding an element of life, and humor.)

Where collective murals too often obscure the best of individuals' styles, this collaboration integrated and enriched very different personal styles. Reed's more schematic use of color and semi-geometric composition doesn't jar Michals' almost awkward but meticulously realistic portraits.

The Dedication Fiesta for *La Lucha* was the most seamless community/artists social event I've seen in NYC for years. Interestingly, it attracted virtually no "tourists" from SoHo, New Jersey, the Upper East Side, or even the East Village. Those looking for bargains in black leather neo-expressionism stopped a block away at Avenue B (the line of chic in Alphaville is drawn further east each year; just two more blocks to the river).

Projects like these are ignored in the "higher" art altitudes, although those spheres have nonetheless acquired a certain tolerance for "political art" over the last few years, thanks in no small part to the activities of precisely such progressive groups as those involved in *La Lucha*. Witness the patronizing coverage of *The Shadow Project* by a *Village Voice* critic who appears to have spent some time at one hit site and some more time in a classy Tribeca bar.

Wallowing, appropriately, in double negatives, Gary Indiana asked "but who in that week of media commemoration didn't find him or herself unable to think about Hiroshima?" He came to the simple but irrelevant conclusion

that "if showing what nuclear war would do could solve the problem, the problem would no longer exist"...So let's have another drink and try not to remember.

Indiana also indulged in some marvelously earnest art criticism, judging the stencils that he saw (they were at different sites) as "puzzlingly crude, less than human size, with weirdly proportioned limbs and unnaturally tapered extremities." This from a New Yorker daily exposed to whitewall-to-whitewall expanses of just such mutants, selling nicely, thanks.

Fashionable cynicism

Coverage of culturally democratic projects by people who jeer at their "earnestness," condescend to their "idealism," and would rather not have to think about them is, alas, par for the course. It's easy to be scathing and cynical, much harder to find and envision a silver lining. Activist artists have been agonizing for years now about the need for positive imagery in the face of a pretty negative reality.

What those who deride the impotence of projects like *The Ribbon* and *The Shadow Project* don't understand—because such understanding comes from experience—is that the effect of collective work is intimate as well as outreaching, that consciousness is best aroused by participation, by the act of creation, and worst served by passive distancing, or "objectivity."

"Some of the panels are works of art," said Justine Merritt, the "Denver grandmother" who conceived of *The Ribbon*. "All of them are works of the heart."

"But is it art?" is a question many cultural workers long ago shined on. But it's still fashionable among the insecure, who feel they can't make up their own minds until the expert opinions are in. The real questions are "Does it mean anything to us? Is it well

enough made so that it simultaneously communicates and transcends the narrow interpretation of a sensation of an idea? Does it move, provoke, madden, sadden, or soothe us? Why? How?"

More and more people are becoming "artists." Culture is an expression of every aspect of people's lives, and it has to mean something when thousands of middle-class, previously apolitical people need a public outlet for their personal hopes and fears. The (mostly) women who crocheted, quilted, and embroidered the thousands of 18' x 36' panels of *The Ribbon* to commemorate the things they would miss most after a holocaust are straight America's reply to the nuclear buildup, heirs to the makers of peace quilts and "collages of indignation" of the '60s.

The Shadow Project attracted younger people and artists often working in "guerrilla" forms for the first time. *La Lucha Continua* is a product of the growing, dedicated core of progressive artists; their ages ranged from teens to fifties, and more than a third were people of color.

The Warhol Show

Between them, the *Ribbon* and the *Shadow Project* attracted far more media than the art world's tempestuous teapots—like the much touted "bout" between Andy Warhol and the hot young Haitian-American artist Jean Michel Basquiat, now playing at a SoHo gallery run by an Iranian emigré and former Shah-supporter who had, in an earlier incarnation, spray-painted a slogan across Picasso's *Guernica* in the Museum of Modern Art. The twin posters for the exhibition and an evening at the Palladium show the white-haired boy and the black-haired beau, first with dukes up, then at TKO time. Guess who wins? Remember where you are. White male art supremacy meets the challenge

THE LAST JUDGEMENT, by Kristen Reed and Robin Michals and Basquiat takes it on the check.

Meanwhile, back at the farm and the community garden, artists involved in the movement for cultural democracy are trying to break down the vision of art as a trickle-down commodity from on high. The Alliance for Cultural Democracy (ACD) will be pursuing these goals in its annual conference at Chicago's Wellington Avenue Church, October 11-14. (For info; Allen Schwartz, 2262 W. 119th Pl., Blue Island, IL 60406; 312-388-3871.)

As a member of its Board (which is its sole, and unpaid, staff), I'd like to invite anyone—artist, organizer, educator—who is inspired by *The Ribbon*, *The*

Collective works like the mural project are generally ignored in the "higher" art altitudes.

Shadow Project, *La Lucha*, and similar efforts. The conference's title is "ImaginAction" and its theme is self determination. The sessions are structured from experience to reflection to action. The end product will be the draft of a Cultural Bill of Rights for a country that conveniently claims to have no cultural policy.

As Board member Charles Frederick has put it: "We have recognized that the greatest cultural expression we're all involved in is the project of human freedom itself." To those who don't recognize this as a definition of any kind of art—a particularly warm invitation.

Lucy Lippard, whose most recent book is *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (Dutton), writes on art and politics monthly for *In These Times*.