

ART

In Process: Puerto Rico, The Biennial

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special To The STAR

I wanted to write about the art currently viewable along MBA Route No 1 from Rio Piedras to San Juan, from Galeria Guatibiri to Guaraguao, then Guaraguao to Colibri. But I guess I'll have to wait, for a "bride is being disrobed by her bachelors, even," to quote Marcel Duchamp. The bride is the "Fourth San Juan Biennial of Latin American and Caribbean Graphics" and her bachelors are some of my colleagues. I love both sides of the "happening." Besides, I am a "voyeur," maybe the bride will look prettier disrobed!

I said "happening" advisely, for "Art Povera," "Happening," "Habitats," "Process Art," "Teatro Mundo," "Conceptual Art," "Earth Works," "Information Pieces," "Body Works," "Technotronic Pieces" and "Ecological Pieces," are the latest international art vanguard manifestations and Puerto Rico is doing very well at such manifestations, especially with Rafael Ferrer, Colon Morales, Ariel Fernandez and others in the states, and, quite a few in Puerto Rico. Witness the Colibri Gallery "Primavera '74" Joaquin Mercado's conceptual bull with TV, or Domingo Garcia's habitat with graffiti; Ernesto J. Ruiz de la Mata's "happening" at the UPR Student Center in the middle 60's, full of sardonic play and metaphoric suggestion.

Art Povera is a term coined by Germano Celant, the Italian artist and author of a book by that name (Praeger, N.Y., Books That Matter). Art Povera and its subsequent derivations stem from Marcel Duchamp's Dada and other nihilistic tendencies in art. "Art is dead," they say, "Long live the spirit of art! Let's be respirating aspirations!"

Art Povera doesn't mean "poor art" literally but art which uses "poor" or unexpected materials, forms, times and places to say significant things about man and his condition, the

condition of his ecology or theaters action, his hang-ups, his mechanisms both literal or psychological, his many life and technical processes, his informational or conceptual systems, etc., In fact it means anything which dramatizes the human or the earth's and time's condition artfully but using unsuspected resources. Resources can be anything available, including the present Biennial bride and its shaping and management.

The Biennial bride is a very good subject indeed for a good Process or Conceptual Art piece such as was begun by Lorenzo Homar with his information piece of a letter titled "A Matter of Conscience" in the March 21 issue of the San Juan STAR Sunday Magazine. Homar's pioneer shaping effort has been followed by the harder shaping blow of the resignation of five other consultants to the bride, five members of the Biennial Consulting Committee, artists Joaquin Mercado, J.A. Torres Martino, Wilfredo Chiesa, Myrna Baez, and Dr. Agustin Martinez de Andino. Maybe Luis Hernandez Cruz too.

All of them bemoan the fact that the bride's parent, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, asked for an extra dowry from the ancestral uncle, Bicentennial Sam, as far back as August of 1975, and didn't tell them about it at all. They had to read it second hand from the press. They feel insulted. The institute is supposed to stand for freedom of information and expression and yet it didn't tell them first hand about the red-blue-and-white Bicentennial dowry.

They have known about Sam's discreet normal green dowries but this year Sam's Bicentennial colors are offensive, considering our colonial status, like Maggie's drawers on the rifle range or a red flag in front of a bull. Such colors have to be taken down before the bride's wedding on May 28, spirit of '76, and they told the institute about it. But the Institute passed the buck to the great-

godfathers, the institute's board of directors (Enrique Laguerre, Carlos Conde, Carlos Sanz, Jesus Sanroma, Amerlia Guzman de Paniagua and Milton Rua), and they adduced non-executive power, so they returned the buck to the Biennial's organizing committee (Ricardo Alegria, Carlos E. La Costa, Antonio Martorell, Dr. Fernando Monserrate, Guillermo Rodriguez, Milton Rua and Maria de Lourdes Silva. The latter group stopped the buck on Saturday, April 10, by deciding that red-white-and-blue monies are as good as green ones, or as Puerto Rican taxpayer's money and that the bridegroom (us artists and the public at large) should be happy to get such a richly endowed bride, with more trimmings than normal.

Now, I ask you, does a bridegroom care about "extra trimmings" on the wedding night if the bride is disrobed by her bachelors long before? By disrobing I mean discovering the fact for example that the institute is supposed to know this is an election year, to know how artists would react to such a ticklish situation as the bicentennial money, to know that all artists' daily bread is communication and the desire to shape forms in our image and to our desire —and yet the institute didn't communicate on time with its all-artist Biennialconsulting committee about such a thing as asking for red-white-blue money on an election year!

Now the majority of the consulting committee stresses just exactly this lack of communication as the reason for their resignation. Maybe they would have resigned anyway since they are all independentistas. Now we shall never know for sure. As consultants to the bride they should have been told last October about the extra dowry. A matter of simple ethics which could not be covered up by silence or time's passing. Not with the Puerto Rico press. Not in an elec-

tion year. And especially not with artists.

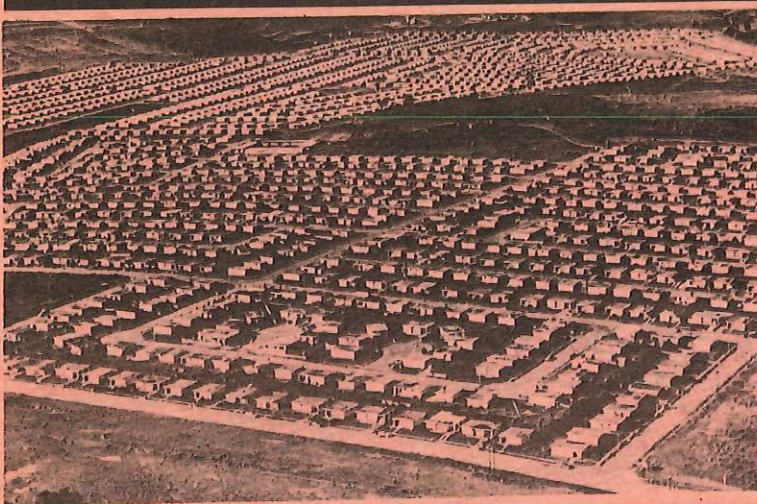
Furthermore, some of the resigning artists tell me they could have helped the institute gather funds in Puerto Rico for the Biennial. I believe them. Now it is too late maybe. It was much less trouble to beg the ancestral Uncle Sam maybe... We prefer situados and coupons always, it seems maybe. OK for rice and beans maybe but not for added cake. We don't have to have cake after rice and beans. Even Marie Antoinette knew better before she was guillotined. She offered cake instead of rice and beans, they say. Maybe.

It is normal that the Establishment should get more chiding from me than the artists involved in the shaping of the Biennial but I have a warning for the artists. The Biennial is Puerto Rico's bride, all of its expenses are paid for by Puerto Rican taxpayers. The red-white-blue dowry is for extras. The bride's dignity and pure heart demands that if her bachelors must disrobe her it better be for shaping love, not for character assassination within or outside Puerto Rico. I am thinking of the upcoming "Encuentro Latinoamericano de las Artes Plasticas" in Cuba's Casa de las Americas. Let's keep the bride's reputation clear. Let's continue our shaping on a professional level as up to now, and let's keep it here!

We have thus sketched the Biennial Conceptual Art Piece now in progress.

They say in France that everything ends in the middle of the bed, especially marital fights. On our national isle everything you have seen ends up in politics or political fights, the Process Art par excellence and our Master Sport.

I prefer bed and the autonomy of art to elucidate problems. But that makes me a purist and specialist therefore suspect in Art Povera circles though I do a lot of earth-work and ecological pieces. I am suspect be-



al, Fire Arts and Rafael Ferrer. Phew!

cause you can't be lily white and innocent pure nowadays, and specialists seem to be stupid about other things not their specialty. Process and Conceptual Art works require universalist minds with black humor whereas I am a mere painter, an object maker of Good Humors. Besides, I like to put un-chic titles to things.

But let's take an ecumenical attitude and enjoy some varieties of Art Povera, especially as expressions of the insular self, during a year of the political Master Game. The borderline between "art" and "reality" has never been completely explained by our philosophers or psychologists so we artists are trying to explore it. Hamlet's syndrome of "to be" or "not to be" is a fake, for man's destiny and Puerto Rico's is to be eternally in the eternal process of becoming, struggling or defying definitions, statuses or legal codes, which are nothing but bridges to "reality." Art is such a bridge. How "real" is it? Is it sufficient that there is color and pattern in it, that the weaving design is rich because we are in the multiple process of becoming? I hope so, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are!

Since many Art Povera works aim at "killing father off," "(I mean, destroying or ridiculing and bypassing the Establishment and its old fashioned ideas about which art materials, procedures and display places are noble or respectable and accepted), most exhibitions of Arte Povera occur in untoward locations to the chargin of most museums and art galleries. Since the movement is quite ecumenical, it includes music and theatricals, too, to the vexation of most regular theaters, concert halls, opera houses and other official show-off emporiums of any of the arts.

Art is assuredly going back to nature, to the people at large, to life itself, to La Ruta and even jails. "To the dogs," claim its enemies who have no redeeming humor, Art is

going on, I say. Before art there was art as life.

Thus, in the name of Earth Works a sculptor will have a ditch dug to precise coordinates on a border of the Nevada desert and to the tune of \$35,000 paid for bull-dozers and photo-helicopters. Since so many of such manifestations are circumstantial, only photos, bills paid and/or videotapes remain as witnesses. That's why video-tapes with or without sound are a lively art medium nowadays. The above ditch was disappearing from the moment it was born, as a reminder of nature's triumph over culture, a reminder of civilizations long since gone by and of man's eternal desire to try anew. It goes back to before the Pyramids and Stonehenge, long before the Mound Builders in the states or Nazca in Peru.

Thus, in the name of Body Works a young girl gymnast will do "maromas" on the polished marble floor of Puerto Rico's Capitol Building, to create a visual, silent metaphor for the business conducted therein, or else, in the name of Teatro Mundo plus conceptual Ecological Art I am tied down to a chair firmly nailed to the ground and three truckloads of cigarette stubs are dumped on top of "the smoking professor" as an obvious visual index or message plus other hidden even oedipal metaphors. Ouch! My emphysema!

I have come to firmly believe that Puerto Ricans have a knack for Arte Povera or Process Art, judging by the surprising ideas of my students over the past 20 years. Our penchant for conceptual Teatro Mundo can be seen everywhere. I remember Tommy Muniz' questioning the Colombian architect who moved a high-rise building intact across a wide avenue "with people inside it yet. Ave Marial!" An epic Juan Bobo candor and simplicity, plus some black humor, plus a sly prankish imagination and enjoyment of the human condition seems to

prepare us well for our daily problems (or we go mad). Thus we create metaphors and myths, visual, musical, theatrical, literary and otherwise, including political "chisme" games and such "information pieces" as the Report.

The Tobin Report was imported, **therefore "neutral."** It was accompanied by an unpublished companion, the fully criollo Echenique Report. Fortaleza produced thus an "Information Piece" on two levels of search and research. They merged into the yearly ritual of "The Governor's Message" with its accompanying Greek chorus of the parties and the legislature: a rite, dromenon or drama in three parts good enough for La Ruta Theater. The only politician who seemed to catch on to what was going on was PIP senator Berrios when he scoffed: "They announced a tremendous hurricane (Tobin Taxes and low-wages) and down came a few rain-drops (the parallel economy and Boys Camps, plus austerity)." Good theatrical sense, Governor! Easy on substitution games. I know it was needed this year....

Of course, art galleries, museums and other institutions (including La Fortaleza with the Tobin-Echenique-Hernandez Colon art entry) have tried to housebreak Arte Povera or Process Art by inviting it inside. Witness in Puerto Rico the Colibri Art Gallery show with Mercado's unhouse-broken real life bull and its TV and air conditioned bull-pen plus droppings. Art Pover can't be possessed.

Museums in the United States and Europe have also tried to domesticate the, uncontainable phenomenon by sponsoring "Ecological," "Systemic," "Technotronic," "Process," "Conceptual," "Documenta," "Teatro Mundo" and similar art shows. One of the art works in one of the famous "Documenta" exhibitions in Germany was numbered so-and-so and consisted of Joseph Beuys if I remember right, a well known German artist

himself in person (Body Work) distributing pamphlets (Information Piece) on his own political ideas at such-and-such a spot on the Documenta premises. By the way, his ideas were neither Nazi, Americanish nor Sovietish but One-worldish. It is important to note that Arte Povera and Process Art is a world-wide artistic manifestation which is neither Right nor Left nor Third-World, but simply human for us humans on Planet Earth. Beuys believes that "the formation of a thought is already a sculpture" and that "the basic premises of prevailing culture must be questioned."

One of the best known and epic artists in this movement is our Rafi Ferrer. He is probably the only Puerto Rican who has been **invited** to so many non-graphics shows in museums and galleries in many countries. And does he enjoy the game! At the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969 he appeared in Condottieri manner and with boots on — and began to splash black, thick, gooey heavy axle-grease against the virginal whiteness of "his" wall. The guards were fit to be tied. They almost called the police before the museum director stopped them. "It's the artist himself creating his Ecological Art. Let it be!" To the axle grease, here and there he pressed hay from one of six bales which stood at the bottom of the wall, and were also a part of the "art work." It was a beautiful piece, white, black, hay gold, steel and sack-cloth. Most ecological, too, because the hay crept up and down the three floors of the museum carried by the public's feet. (God, how I envy his gusto, verve, and nerve! He is a smart aleck, which may be the result of his sibling rivalries and other psychic energies. He is the brother or cousin of two important Ferrers, and has a long history of doing the unpredictable, e.g., killing fathers and brothers off.) Notice how he appropriated an Obras

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In Process

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Publicas cyclon-fenced steep-cut hill on Highway 2 to Arecibo, as his very own ecological art work. I hope he notarized it, for I had wanted it for myself.

In at least three different exhibitions, he has used great blocks of ice. "Boyl!" he says "I am cold up here in the states!" Blocks of ice floating in a fountain for a Museum of Modern Art winter show; an igloo at the Whitney Museum, '73 and four huge blocks mounted on a four-wheeled cart in his Castelli Gallery Warehouse one-man exhibit in 1969 where I interviewed him.

It was at the last mentioned place that he exhibited, lying on the ground, a series of neatly aligned sawed-off chunks from a longish tree trunk. Stacked between chunks were upright Art Forum magazines. I asked, "Were you a sculptor when you did that?" "No," he answered, "I was a respirator-aspirator." (Shades of Marcel Duchamp) I know he officially resents being called a sculptor, which he is, too.

I insisted, "Were you measuring space off? Space alone? Or was it space and time, space and time, etc., or nature culture, nature culture, etc.?"

"Maybe. But actually what is hiding inside the covers of each of the Art Forum magazines you see there are the Pentagon Papers that we stole lately." The Pentagon, of all guarded places, had been stolen from around those days in 1969. Yet he dared say so with such a straight face. Naturally, there was a malicious gleam in his eye, gleam of the myth-maker. If he had been here in December 1975 he would have said the Tobin-Echenique dual reports plus the Governor's messages were hiding in the Art Forums. "Besides those," he continued, "I keep there the latest CIA plans to produce the downfall of Abraham Diaz Gonzalez at the UPR." Or could it now be Castro in Cuba?

The nostalgia of an islander in far-off northern climes shows in many of his works in other galleries and museums. Channeled zinc panels, empty sand pails, hay, nude fluorescent lights, all of them lying on the floor, plus tents or hay or bags covering them, or hanging above, are symptoms of his lonesomeness. "Nostalgia of the Nomad" could be the name of his "Niche" exhibit at the New York Finch College "Art in Process" show in 1960. "Vengeance" could be the title of the giant grease-smeared haystack he dumped in the '69 Whitney Museum "anti-illusion" summer show.

He used to be more of a "Process artist in the late 60's, early 70's, using ecological materials. His 71 "Enclosures" in Philadelphia is typical. Lately he has become more of a literal object maker. In all his works he keeps the rampant surreal humor that was evident in his early Puerto Rican UPR shows (50s and early 60s). Nostalgia has been added to his old fantasy, also boots to stride on snow and ice. With firm assured steps, eyes a gleam, a bundle of nervous energy, he walks everywhere as if he owned the place. He comes in, quickly dominates the situation with his very bright containing mind, then wanders out. Something else is cooking elsewhere "I got sea-

sick going around with him in New York. There was always a something else to be done —no rest, no contemplation Roberto "Bokio" Alberty told me about Ferrer. And Ferrer told me to tell my students at the UPR that if they want to know what art is they should talk with Alberty. Quite a pair. They are two of our best artists. Both began with UPR's Granell in the middle 50's.

Ferrer's last show in San Juan's "Museo del Grabado" last year was another sheer nostalgia piece. It was wrapped around the island meta-history idea: nautical charts, Pablo Klee. Pablo Klee was too evident as an influence in too many of the painted works and would have disowned the lack of exquisite attention to detail and finish which shines in some (not all) of Klee's work. Ferrer's child-like mural for a hospital was very good. So were a few of his graphics and paper masks. But nothing was epic in that show, not even the piragua-vendor. (The piraguero passed out very excellent tasty piraguas, that's all, when everybody expected drug-spiked flavors and other tricks. That's the trouble with famed people: they give rise to great expectations. Ever since his early student days when carried some fitting stuff to Breton and the Paris Surrealists, Ferrer has been running along without pause putting people on with his Art and Reality metaphors and meta-histories of our island nation, the source of his nostalgia.

The true epic quality of Ferrer's work had to be seen at what I call his "Kayaks" and "Totemic Snake and Masks" two shows in New York in October 1974. It is true that the paper bag masks and other hand fashioned objects or artifacts lacked finesse of finish, since he is a man in a hurry. But imagine it. Contained by a priest-less primitive ceremonial temple, walls hung with artifacts, (Oh nostalgia, oh ancestral memories of the Pacific origins of all American Indians! Oh myth of the American Mother Turtle!) there float countless unseaworthy kayak boats at about shoulder level. Silent floating presences in mid air, passengerless, stirless, like phantoms in the Great Void. Even the ocean waters have done and gone. Truly an epic metaphor, especially if created by a Puerto Rican islander, nostalgia rent... after Hiroshima... now in Bicentennial Philadelphia where he is a professor.

May your boots always be as seven-leaguer as they were when you fashioned such a visual myth, Rafi Ferrer! It tells us your island is going on. And on! Amen!

ART IS A FIESTA

To supply a meta-philosophy for the above ramble through Arte Povera and its derivations, I shall quote from Rafi Ferrer's December 1968 letter to John Perreault. It coincided with his three Leaf Pieces (Philadelphia dried park leaves strewn in three art galleries in New York, including cramming an elevator with the leaves to the surprise of unsuspecting users.). It clinched Ferrer's show with Costelli... and stardom: "The emancipation of materials from preconceived functions assigned to them in

the name of a sterile functionalism... is now underway... When the core information received from the materialist investigations reveals that the sustained constants are freedom and truth —then things get even better. At this point it becomes crucial to really understand that 'This earth is all part of moving out into the world!'

A few years ago Romero Brest and his disciple Marta Traba spoke at the UPR about this business of "art moving out into the world." It is the end of "Art" and the beginning of absolute "Reality" of which Mondrian spoke ages ago. He ended up in lineoleums and architectural and typographical designs. Crucified. Rafi Ferrer is ending up as an object maker again, painting them again as when he was a pure sculptor and painter. My speed. Hallelujah!

I never could quite stomach the idea that art is dead, as the French communists claim. Maybe such things as commercial galleries, annuals, or biennials or other salons and prizes are dead, like the antediluvian dinosaurs. They falter nowadays in colonial places like Venice, San Paulo, Cali or San Juan, as in Yugoslavia or Poland. But art serenely goes on as a participatory happening in which the old frontiers between the different arts disappear and an "esthetified society," a communist dream, enjoys and takes part in the great festivities of the arts. As Nietzsche said, "What good are the arts if we lose the great art of the fiestas?"

So let's expect to enjoy the coming fiesta of the Biennial. I should be asked to picket it because it does not include paintings (I am always behind the time.). Carlos Irizarry should be asked to prepare another Body Work for it, a streaking through the Convent Halls. Cecilia Orta should be asked to do her priestess act again as she did once in the Department of Education one of her best and most profound works, a Teatro Mundo piece with Shawoman mystique. Marvelous. The resigning Consulting Committee should prepare a nice "consult Consultants" happening. The whole place is a "habitat" fit for such ludic manifestations and Maria Somoza would be wise to channel all the available energy of the artists, including those who try to shape the Biennial in their image. They aren't trying to kill the bride, only to shape her. Let's go, boys! In love! I hope...

MOVIES

SANTURCE

AMBASSADOR: The Flying Guillotine; The Yakuz
CINEMA 70: Adult Films
CINERAMA: One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
CORTES 1: Mahogany; The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz
EXCELSIOR: Cobra
LORRAINE: Adult Films
METRO: The Hindenburg
METROPOLITAN: The Bible
MIRAMAR: The Day of the Jackal
NEW SAN JUAN: Adult Films
PARAMOUNT: Bucktown
PUERTO RICO: Lucky Lady
RADIO CITY: Breakheart Pass
REGENCY: Dog Day Afternoon
RIVIERA: Aloha Bobby and Rose; Bite the Bullet

SAN JUAN

RIALTO: Adult Films
ROYAL: The Island at the Top of the World; Anonymous Avenger

CONDADO

CINEMA EL CONDADO: The Groove Tube

PLAZA LAS AMERICAS

PLAZA 1: Breakheart Pass
PLAZA 2: One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
GUAYNABO
CINEMA 4: The Hindenburg

CAROLINA

CAMPO RICO: This Time I'll Make You Rich; Anonymous Avenger
COUNTRY CLUB: Earthquake
65th DRIVE IN: The Marseille Contract; The Drowning Pool

FAJARDO

FAJARDO 1: Race with the Devil; Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry
FAJARDO 2: The Ultimate Warrior; The Marseille Contract

PUERTO NUEVO

ASTOR: Mahogany; The Longest Yard
MARTI: Hennessy; Dark Places

LEVITTOWN

LEVITTOWN: Beyond the Door; Terror in the Wax Museum

CUPEY BAJO

CINEMA VENUS: Mahogany; Framed

RIO PIEDRAS

MODELO: A Man Called Horse; Together Brothers
NEW VICTORIA: Three Days of the Condor; Mahogany
PARADISE: Nashville; Don't Look Now
ROOSEVELT: The Longest Yard

BAYAMON

BAYAMON OESTE 1: Doc Savage, The Man of Bronze
BAYAMON OESTE 2: The Strongest Man in the World
CINEMA CENTRO 1: Breakheart Pass
CINEMA CENTRO 2: The Hindenburg

OLLER: Young Nurses; Girls Are for Loving

SANTA JUANITA: The Sisters; Blue

PONCE

PONCE 1: The Sunshine Boys
PONCE 2: Nashville
PONCE DRIVE IN: The Happy Hooker; Once Is Not Enough

RIVOLI: Beverly Hills Cop; Iron Profligate

SANTA MARIA: The Killer Elite

MAYAGUEZ

YAMAGUEZ 1: Dog Day Afternoon

MAYAGUEZ 2: The Killer Elite

RIERA: The Gun Moll

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