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ART

STREET ME

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Special to the STAR

If you go this very Sunday afternoon to the end of Cristo Street near the Parque de las Palomas and if none of the guards in the Institute of Culture's undermanned system is sick you may enjoy a wonderful conjunction of art works and activities including the three current museum shows in the area and the "Encuentro de las artes."

At the Encuentro, which is held in the street every Sunday painters and poets gather to publicly do their thing, together with the pigeons in the park and in Cristo Street itself. The artists paint, draw, engrave, explain their works or sell them. Poets scribble or discuss the world or dream of worlds far away, or explain themselves. Strolling musicians and thespians occasionally play from impromptu stages.

You may end up by buying a work or poem, or discussing how to put the world to rights, which is needed. The world needs larks, those usually ground-dwelling birds of song which frolic across the country or over obstacles for sport. Be a lark.

Carlos (Suenos) Ortiz, the present Encuentro sparkplug, tells me he has gotten the supposedly necessary municipal bureaucratic permits to hold the Encuentro for the next six months, instead of weekly as before. I am amazed that artists, groups or individuals have to get permits to do their thing in the public streets and parks of Puerto Rico, even when putting art works up for display — as many of us did in Paris and New York without permits. I believe Mayor Padilla and the San Juan municipal

assemblymen should have to get mental health permits from us artists.

Why doesn't Mayor Padilla officially declare Cristo Street a permanent "Encuentro" ground, open to all artists, poets, musicians and thespians, but never open to politicians, on Sunday. May Fellsa Rincon almost did that in the 50's, but we artists failed her by demanding special facilities and colorful canopies to cover the street. We never showed up in person as now happens spontaneously. The time is ripe.

If Padilla does the above, then his city's residents would know where to go to enjoy or talk about art on Sunday, and many good things could happen on a citizen's way to such a forum. Padilla might even happen to be reelected if he learns to walk with us in the street, unobtrusively, as any citizen does.

Artists like to congregate occasionally on a free unstructured basis such as the Encuentro. Painters tell me they prefer to sell their works cheaply direct to the public rather than most expensively through official and commercial galleries, and the public loves to buy direct from the artist and to learn techniques and reasons behind creations.

Poets have told me they were amazed when people bought their scribbled poems, asking for the poet's signature and asking about his life and world. People do respond even in these austerity months, though the art gallery owners who haven't yet closed up shop and do not believe me. They claim people aren't buying now. What else is new? So the artists are pointing out one way.

As an elder of the tribe, I must

warn poets, and painters too, that on selling art (painterly, poetic or conceptual) direct to the public, they should never let the public believe that they are buying complete rights to each work involved, unless the artist really means it. And in that case, they must keep the faith by not using the same idea or composition again.

As for strolling thespians and musicians, since no physical object can be passed to the public, what's wrong about passing the hat around as strolling minstrels used to do? The public usually rewards any gracious memory.

But you shouldn't believe that you have to buy anything if you come to the Encuentro. It insults the artists if the public feels that way. Artists prefer to see your happy face as you enjoy their works or your earnest face as you ask them questions, no matter how wild or "stupid" the question may seem to you. They do not like you to be calculating or serious as you prepare to select and buy "merchandise." Have you ever watched faces as they prepare to buy? We artists don't like the sly look. Larks never put on any sly looks except when preening in front of their mates, which is not a commercial proposition, but a lover's technique. Be a lark again. Go, even if you have cares and worries especially if you have cares.

I care about structured art shows as in galleries and museums. They too are necessary in our society, though I never heard or know of any case when art galleries made any capital in Puerto Rico. Private galleries come and go, and when they die something dies in the heart of their owners or sponsors and inside

us artists also. I hereby give thanks to Samuel Santiago, Helen Santiago (not related) and so many others like them whose art galleries died.

Structured shows are suspect to artists, especially government shows. In my recent article, "What's Wrong With Our Art Contests," I mentioned that most such exhibits are done out of a sense of duty, as if for history's sake, and as an insurance premium paid by the agency involved for its own stake in social security. Shows are opened with fanfare and photographers capture the social opening event for "history."

However, few individual art works are photographed for a Puerto Rican art record because photographers haven't been so instructed. With an extra roll of film even on opening night the "social" photographers could easily make an art record too. The Institute of Culture, the University of Puerto Rico and the Ateneo have no organized photo records of even the best art works they have exhibited over the years, except for some of the official prize-winners in contests. The biennial record of one photo negative per artist is the property of a private photographer, not the institute.

The above institutions are fundamentally ahistorical and unstructured. Are they merely disorganized? Their excuse is that they are shaped by the geometry of the budget and its priorities, as if they didn't prepare the budget draft themselves.

In the "Encuentro de las artes" on a Sunday, you see the originally unstructured, spontaneous, unbudgeted and vivential "teatromundo", a meeting or artists among themselves and the public, in the



Photographed by Pipo Grajales

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streets, with no official records taken for history's sake, because they are living history itself.

It is still a shame that the "social photo record" of the Ateneo, UPR and the Institute of Culture, good for human vanity and budgetary public relations, is given a higher priority than the "art record."

Another case of wrong priorities as far as art and the public is concerned, is the poorly designed and very poorly budgeted system of guards for exhibitions. Beyond opening night, and except for the UPR Museum and the Ateneo exhibits, many shows at the institute and the UPR are open only during daytime work hours, and many times they fail to open on Saturdays and Sundays, whenever the lone guardians get sick. There is no back-up system of attendants on call. I mean simply guards, not more educated and expensive guides.

The deduction is that most such institute and UPR shows are for the elite, for the "blanquitos," not for working people. Many of my art appreciation students are left out of the system. They are supposed to report to class about current art exhibitions, but consistently, they claim they go for naught, the shows are closed.

So let's go to the existential, *En-cuentro*, the artists' answer to the above problems with the official galleries. No high show expectations are raised by it. You will get to see strictly what happens to be there in that particular morsel of historical time. Maybe only a few artists will show up today, who knows? At times there are many. Come again.

