

DOWN TOWN

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Art Lobby

By Stephen Forsling

With its tremendous volume of pedestrian traffic and unusual variety of open public spaces, the New York financial district has long proved an ideal forum for the display of visual art. Through February, Lower Manhattan residents and business employees can "window shop" among four new temporary art installations, each of which makes its own contribution to the already flourishing exchange between artists and the highly mobile downtown public. Entitled **Art Lobby**, the exhibition exploits the large areas of glass on the street level of several bank buildings at or near Chase Manhattan Plaza.

The project, which can be viewed in the windows at **Marine Midland, Chase Manhattan** and the former **Chemical Bank** buildings, is sponsored by the **Lower Manhattan Cultural Council** and is funded with a \$7500 grant from the **New York State Council on the Arts**. Art Lobby represents the joint efforts of Frederieke Taylor, LMCC's director, and Jacki Apple, a visual artist who conceived the exhibition and assembled most of the artists for the window display.

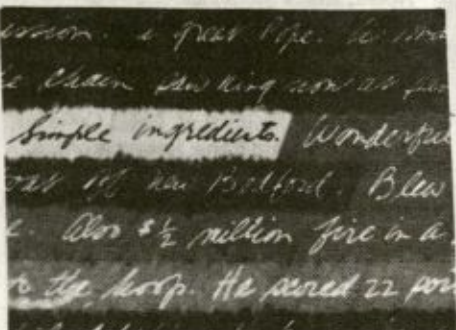
"The plaza is really an enormous stage set, with the surrounding buildings acting as backdrops for a continuously moving audience," says Jacki Apple. "But from the outside there isn't much to look in at except a vast expanse of empty glass and unused space. It occurred to me that the windows in the lobbies of the buildings around the plaza would provide an extraordinary framework—as well as a frame—for the display of art."

The artists included in the exhibition make use of widely varying media and subject matter. Like all effective public art, however, each work is genuinely participatory, inviting a highly personal viewer response. If there is one common denominator among them, it is in the use each makes of information—its collection, dissemination and constructive and destructive potential.

Three of the four artists rely heavily on information in its verbal form. **Jenny Holzer's** untitled work, located in the east window bays at Marine Midland Bank, is exclusively text. Nearly two-hundred fifty truisms, mounted on silver photostats, confront—at times provoke—the passing viewer. Given equal weight and arranged alphabetically, the statements parody popular clichés and aphorisms. They alternate between ominous Orwellian

pronouncements ("Awful Punishment Awaits Really Bad People") and simplistic fortune-cookie sentiments ("Good Deeds Eventually Are Rewarded"). Often the directives blatantly contradict each other ("Children Are The Cruellest of All"; "Children Are The Hope of the Future") and many have their own peculiarly perverse logic that seems, on the surface at least, irrefutable ("Planning For The Future Is Escapism" and "Slipping Into Madness Is Good For The Sake Of Comparison").

"These assertions range from far left to far right to far idiotic," says Holzer. "Some I even agree with." Holzer began composing her "miniature ideologies" a few years ago. Initially her didactic statements appeared on anonymous posters that the artist displayed throughout the city. "People would mark 'yes' or 'no' and add their comments next to the phrases," says Holzer. Exhibitions soon followed at alternative art spaces, including a window display at Franklin Furnace. "I prefer the way the statements function when they face the street," says Holzer. "They place a lot more responsibility on the viewer. I'm interested in the attitudes the statements reflect and in the motivations behind people's behavior. Clichés are carriers of basic beliefs and all of the statements had to sound real to gain credence." Even the ridiculous phrases gain authority by virtue of their direct address to the public. In "There's A Fine Line Between Information and Propaganda" and "You Are A Victim Of The Rules You Live By," both included in the artist's inventory, Holzer wryly comments on her own exploration of dogma and its potentially manipulative effects.



Mimi Smith (detail)

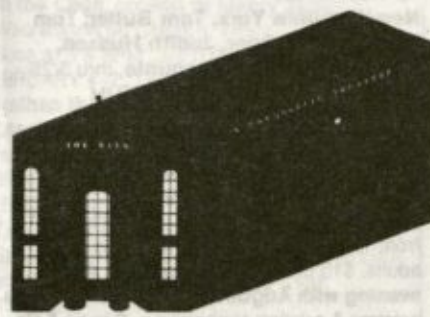
Across Nassau Street in the lobby at Chase, **Mimi Smith's** silkscreen drawings bombard the viewer with words in quite a different way. Smith's subject is television; her theme is its deluge of both important and useless information in our daily lives. On one level Smith's drawings act as a visual demonstration of McLuhan's prophetic observations about the mass medium; on another they function as striking abstract compositions. Four translucent panels depicting huge TV screens fill up entire windows on the west side of the building. Smith, who utilizes the verbal rather than the visual content of television, fills up the screens on the two central panels with a transcript from a six o'clock news broadcast from October 1, 1981—the first day of the federal fiscal year, the beginning of Reaganomics and the initiation of government cutbacks. "Everyone listens and relates to the news," says Smith. "Even people who never watch TV watch the news." Accompanying the TV drawings is an audiotape in which passers-by can hear the news from October 1st along with multiple voices repeating snatches of conversation that Smith picked up from Wall Street watering holes. "technological and

electronic advances have increased market efficiency . . . I need a raise . . . the Dow is down .29."

Smith began her TV drawings several years ago. "I have two children and it seemed as if the television was always on. I'd rarely see it—it was the constant sound of droning voices from another room that finally got to me. People may find a barrage of sound coming from multiple voices confusing in an artwork. It sets up a level of anxiety that we're willing to accept in our everyday lives, since most of the time we're only subliminally aware of it." Smith stresses that audience participation in "October 1, 1981," is purely voluntary, however. "I want my work to fit into people's routines. They can either listen or tune it out—just like TV."

Lauren Ewing explores "economics, savings and the corporate soul" in "The Bank: Opus Proprium," also at Chase Manhattan. An eight-foot-high freestanding wooden structure situated in the center bay on the lobby's south side, the little Bank is a "bogus object" and not to be confused with its big brother, says Ewing. Despite its direct reference to its immediate physical surroundings, **The Bank** is the only installation in **Art Lobby** that is not site-specific. The construction is the latest in Ewing's suite of sculptural projects that focus on social institutions. Other works in the series are **The Library, The Powerhouse, The Asylum, The Prison** (now on display at the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.) and **The School**, which is still in its preparatory stages. "I try to deal with what is," says Ewing. "I want to deal with gigantic themes, independent of moral judgments."

The model for **The Bank** is the Greek treasury, which embodies the concepts of security, stability and steadily growing interest, all of which are traditionally associated with a savings bank. A running text, identifying the bank's characteristics and functions, completely surrounds the structure. Viewers standing at the entrance are drawn inside by two video monitors located in the vault. The videotape, entitled "Text/Vide: Currency and Savings," expands upon the principles of savings and nondevalued currency. Short, cryptic phrases flash across the screen; the ephemeral accumulations in the videotape contrast with the powerful material presence of the surrounding structure.



Lauren Ewing

Ewing is concerned with institutions as microcosms and self-sufficient social units. **The Bank** demonstrates its relationship to the general public and the private person, and exists as a metaphor for both. **The Bank** is "infinitely referential," says Ewing, and in attempting to illuminate, through a multiple approach, all the attributes and apparatus of an institution, the artist readily admits the

inherent complexity of her scheme. But at the same time, **The Bank**, with its familiar architecture, is instantly recognizable. "There's something everyone can connect to in the work," says Ewing. "A bank is part of everyone's known experience."



Peter Fend/OECD (South America panel)

In some respects the most unusual installation in **Art Lobby** is "Global System" at the Chemical Bank building. The exhibition is a venture of the **Ocean Earth Construction and Development Corporation (OECD)**, a firm that combines art and technology in regional planning. OECD is engaged in earth monitoring for the purpose of rebuilding a habitable environment on a worldwide basis. The artists who make up the corporation work in consultation with architects, ecologists and engineers to market models, drawings and multimedia proposals for business, government and scientific concerns. "Global System" was produced by **Space Force**, a service of OECD. Among the artists who participated in the design and execution of the project are **Peter Fend**, who conceived the project, **Wolfgang Staehle, Eve Vaterlaus, Joan Waltemath, Win Knowlton, Glenn Steigelman** and **Taro Suzuki**, the company's exhibitions director.

Two large-scale topographical world maps fill up six windows at the building's east entrance. Beginning with the Soviet Union and ending with Northern Europe, the maps swoop from north to south and then veer north again on an eastward slope—all contributing to an uncomfortable dislocation of one's sense of gravity. The geographical terrain is divided into clearly marked oceanic basin areas, each capable of supporting life with its own food and energy. At the base of the maps are two photo-caption sequences, highlighting two of OECD's current activities: the conversion of marsh wastes into usable sources of energy and the worldwide monitoring of river systems.

OECD considers its designs "too expensive, too large and too potentially lucrative" to fit into the traditional art-institution establishment. The artists who put together "Global System", like Ewing, Smith and Holzer, all work predominantly outside the limits of the gallery and museum network; their work, as represented in **Art Lobby**, provides ample proof of the ability of art to function beyond a closed system in an architectural and social context. "After all," says Jacki Apple, "art doesn't have to be confined to the art world."



Jenny Holzer (detail)