

Detail from Running Man, 1976



In an era that continues to be dominated by formalism Jon Borofsky comes as something of a surprise. Few artists have dared breach the picture plane with personal content since Surrealism. In the last thirty years self-consciousness has largely been limited to the mark-making ethos initiated by Jackson Pollock. Borofsky's art, on the other hand, re-affirms the importance of feeling and subject matter, unabashedly expressed, in art.

Like an observer of dreams, Borofsky sketches his images quickly on bits of paper. In his one-man show of a year ago these sheets formed a good portion of the exhibition. In the MATRIX exhibition Borofsky used an opaque projector to transmit each image to a wall. He then traced the drawing in ink. While a degree of improvisation is involved in this last step, the technique, in fact, preserves the spontaneity of that first moment of creation.

Borofsky's earlier drawings had the aura of intensely felt Dada or Surrealist hallucinations. Projected on a wall the work retains that mirage-like quality, but now has the impact of cave painting. Its discovery, like graffiti, involves us intimately in the artist's psyche. Sol LeWitt, the most important recent practitioner of wall drawings (MATRIX 3,6), suggested to Borofsky that he place his work on walls.

Borofsky's earlier drawings were derived from experiences in his own life. This approach manifests itself in the work in MATRIX where specific symbols are involved. For instance, Borofsky states that a ship stands for his father, the vase of flowers his mother. In so far as his work retains this highly specific, personal iconography, Borofsky recalls the aspirations of Dada and Surrealism. Indeed Borofsky reminisced in the earlier exhibition on this tradition,

coincidentally, when he scribbled the name of a former girl friend called Dada.

The works exhibited in MATRIX draw away from the highly personal quality of Surrealism to some extent. The artist has universalized his personal situations and experiences. At times this is achieved with themes from other periods, for example, the familiar ship at sea from nineteenth century painting. Other images may occasion comparison with early Picasso. This is true when anonymous human beings are juxtaposed with equally anonymous, though monumental, surroundings. The result is a rather eerie atmosphere in which human uniqueness is endangered by the detail-destroying blandness of the background. Indeed the runner, a recurring theme in the work of Paul Klee is swallowed in just that manner. Thus the major development in the new work is that Borofsky has decided to universalize his formerly more personally conceived subject matter, and to draw directly on the wall.

Borofsky has couched his efforts in a conceptualist's apparatus by his use of numbers. Most of his drawings are "signed" with a number which derives from a long-standing habit, counting. When he first began to count towards infinity in 1969, the practice was meditative in nature. Later, individual works were accorded a concurrence in the counting by being given a number. Borofsky exhibited his counting, a 3 1/2-foot stack of sheets, with no other work in one of the first shows in which he participated.

More recently Borofsky "began counting backwards to infinity from zero as well." (By this, Borofsky means the minus range.) He also has been counting less often although he still likes to exhibit the

counting along with other objects. As an art object, the counting has a romantic aspect for the endeavor suggests imagination ad infinitum. Tower-like and obsessive, the object recalls Brancusi's Endless Column and Schwitters's Merzbau.

The fact that the conceptually oriented counting can have a romantic quality is characteristic of Borofsky's approach. He has sought to retain content in his art, but not without authenticating it. The grafting of conceptualism's precision with a Dada/Surrealist orientation is not entirely coercive, however. Rather, two developments are apparent. First, Dada's premises have not been abandoned at this point in the century. Borofsky, like the Dadaists, still believes that the only truths are those which the artist can verify within his own psyche.

Second, Borofsky demonstrates that genuine amplification of Dada's premises is possible. By locating the images within the flow of the artist's mind, a sense of truth or authenticity about these works is strengthened. Within the flow of thoughts, each image has a firm location and basis in time. Thus Dada's assertion that the irrational wanderings of the mind are more true than products of the rational world is supported.

While Borofsky has transformed his earlier, quite personal statement into something more universal, he has sacrificed none of the impact of his work. The art remains incredibly fresh and direct because a charged emotional level is still its most important aspect.

Jon Borofsky was born in Boston in 1942. He received a B.F.A. from Carnegie Mellon University in 1964 and an M.F.A. from Yale in 1966. Since 1969 the artist has taught at the School of Visual

Arts in New York. Jon Borofsky is represented by the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City.

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In 1969, I began counting forwards to infinity from zero. In 1974, I began counting backwards to infinity from zero as well. The stack of counting in the center of the room contains the numbers -6730 to +2,286,110.

The paintings, drawings, and sculpture were done concurrently with the counting. The number on the corner of each work refers to the number I was on at the time of the work's completion.

Jon Borofsky, 1975

Selected bibliography about
Borofsky:

Plagens, Peter. "557, 087,"
Artforum, vol. 8, no. 3 (No-
vember '69), pp. 64-67.

Lippard, Lucy. "Groups,"
Studio International, vol. 179
(March '70), p. 95.

Lippard, Lucy. 955,000. The
Vancouver Art Gallery, '70.

Lippard, Lucy. Six Years:
The dematerialization of the
art object from 1966 to 1972,
Praeger (New York) '73, pp. 68-
69.

Smith, Roberta. Artforum,
vol. 12, no. 5 (January '74),
p. 76.

Lippard, Lucy. "Jonathan
Borofsky at 2,096,974," Art-
forum, vol. 13, no. 3 (No-
vember '74), pp. 62-63.

One-Man exhibitions:
Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC '75
(first).

*Works in MATRIX:

Counting from 1 - 2,350,000
(approximate), began 1969.

Running Man, 1976, ink on
sheetrock wall.

Two Men with Fish, 1976, ink
on sheetrock wall.

Man with the Sword, 1976,
ink on sheetrock wall.

Woman at the Wheel, 1976, ink
on sheetrock wall.

*This list was compiled previous
to a final determination being
made by the artist at the time
of the MATRIX installation.

Selected group exhibitions:
Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC,
No. 7 '69; Seattle Art Museum,
557,087 '69 (also to the
Vancouver Art Gallery,
955,000 '70); Dwan Gallery,
NYC Language Show IV '70;
Artists' Space, NYC '73;
Michael Wyman Gallery, Chicago
'74; Paula Cooper Gallery,
NYC Drawing and Other Work '74;
Fine Arts Building, NYC Lives
'75; Downtown Branch, Whitney
Museum of American Art, NYC
Autogeography '75; University
of Guelph, Ontario Narrative
in Contemporary Art '75.