



socialist

SR

review

28/1+2 (2001) \$16

surrealism

in the united states

## EDITOR'S NOTE

### A Thomas Blackman Affair

I heard about the gig through my friend Michelle — a friend, filmmaker, and fellow San Francisco artist. She'd taken me out to dinner the week before as a part of her "feed a starving artist" program, an institution that I desperately needed and definitely qualified for. I was three months behind on my rent, unemployed, and had phoned a number of friends soliciting donations towards my groceries and rent.

"A friend of mine is looking for temporary staff to help put on the San Francisco Art Exposition," she explained, giving me the number. Not five minutes later, I was on the phone to every artist I knew, letting them know about possible work. At eight the next morning I rang the doorbell of a mansion in Pacific Heights, got let in by the maid, and was led up the lush forest-green carpeted stairway to the top study where logs burned in the fireplace. Immediately, I began fielding calls from galleries in Paris, Seoul, and San Francisco, as well as from private collectors and buyers from all over the United States. A few hours later found me down at the site for the Art Expo: Fort Mason, a waterfront wharf district in San Francisco's richest section of the city.

Within days, the acres-long warehouses were transformed into individually designed galleries, costing no less than approximately \$5,000 for the smallest cubicle. Miffed gallery owners and collectors, not invited, whined into my ear; ads were rushed to *The New York Times* to catch last-minute collectors and patrons of the arts. As I worked at coordinating art dealers, Teamsters (who were delivering the art work), and the Chicago-based Thomas Blackman organizers, I also directed private collectors to the San Francisco Art Institute, which was hosting the first-night \$250-per-person opening before the public viewed the artwork. I then shepherded these same select individuals into the personal hands of the Blackman staff who were also organizing an exclusive unadvertised private tour of various San Francisco homes renowned for their private collections.

By Thursday evening, one week into the organizing, my fellow artists and I were rushing about, minutes before the doors opened, tossing pressed linen over the tables in at the entrance. Most of us were working 12 to 16 hours a day because everyone was broke. Just as we smoothed the last wrinkle on the tablecloths, the doors to Fort Mason swung open

and San Francisco's most moneyed, prestigious patrons of the arts drizzled in — diamonds, furs, and booze everywhere. They wandered through the hundreds of galleries, drinking and eating Brie cheese. By 10 A.M. the next morning the general public was admitted.

When not busy finding misplaced Mapplethorpes, or when we'd closed for the day, I'd wander among the galleries. I stumbled across the work of Jean-Michel Basquait — the deceased young artist was as well known for his angry, ghetto images as he was for the exploitation he suffered at the hands of the New York art world. Standing one night in the breezeway between the wharves, I mentioned to one of the night guards that I had seen the work of Basquait. I explained who the artist was, which gallery his work was in. The guard, who like myself was working long hours, said he'd like to see the work but didn't know if he'd have time. We ended the conversation by his saying he'd see if, on break, he could get over there.

By the time the San Francisco Art Expo ended, the organizers and the galleries had cleared over 35 million dollars. I have no idea how much of that went to the artists, as this relationship between gallery and artists is, to put it generously, often contentious and exploitative. I do know that those of us who worked those long hours behind the scenes were paid \$8.50 an hour.

As of the writing of this editorial writer Mumia Abu-Jamal remains on death row, and artist/writer Leonard Peltier is also incarcerated. Who is allowed to be an artist in this country, what is considered art, who benefits, who has access even to seeing art, and what are the consequences for being the wrong type of artists are crucial issues for the U.S. left to address.

*Wickie Stamps,*  
Executive Editor