DENNIS ADAMS
BUILDING AGAINST IMAGE
1979-1987

JANUARY 10-FEBRUARY 21, 1987  ALTERNATIVE MUSEUM, NEW YORK CITY
"Kiosk For America", 1985-1986. 26" x 26½" x 30½". Aluminum, steel, plexiglass, duratrans, fluorescent.

Dennis Adams
Building Against Image
1979-1987
Curator: Geno Rodriguez
January 10-February 21, 1987

Library of Congress
Catalog Card Number:
86-72924
Copyright 1986
The Alternative Museum
17 White Street
New York, NY 10013
Tel. (212) 966-4444

ISBN 932075-13-4

This exhibition is made possible by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.


Design, Janice Rooney
Printing, Athens Printing Company
Dennis Adams steers clear of labels in the discussion of his work and in the interpretation of contemporary phenomena. He prefers descriptive rather than prescriptive language. His skepticism is well-founded and self-protective. Every label that his work accommodates-public art, media art, neo-constructivism-excludes the stew of issues, the synthesis of art and cultural sources that generate and animate the work. Most people appreciate the gut-splitting, right-on-the-money one-liner, the message that is hard-hitting but low on residual impact. In contrast, Adams gets to people's nerve-endings, both visceral and cerebral, with more problematic and perplexing itineraries. Each new encounter with a project starts the viewer at a point which is never quite revisited again. A testing, challenging terrain is covered in between the variable origin and an undetermined point of exodus. The route is rarely linear. Adams does not control the viewer's experience and, in fact, he scarcely directs it. He constructs a matrix for a set of images; some are designed and invented and others are selected, borrowed, and extracted from a controversy of the recent past, the language of advertising or some other persuasive source. Like the viewer, the artist also waits for these images to coincide, collide, or cooperate in a dynamic and frequently agitating process.

Adams does not think of himself as a public artist, however, his work discloses an important point about contemporary public art and highlights the reason why discussion has stalled causing a state of critical lethargy. Social observers, artists, and critics are often fixated with the preoccupation that contemporary public art is plagued and diminished by the absence of a shared iconography in the late 20th century. Citizens share no common religion, have few values that could be construed as collective, and have contrasting conceptions of government, patriotism, justice, and democracy. If this were not enough to fuel the fears of those in search of a common frame of reference, issues of judgment, esthetics, taste, the nature and condition of art, the relative value of figuration versus abstraction could not be more disputed. A survey of any major American city shows a free-for-all of recent public art installations covering a predictable spectrum of safe esthetic possibilities ranging from bland formal exercises in abstraction to expressive and narrative pictorial forms. In the face of so much pandemonium it is no wonder that the faint-hearted are throwing in the towel on the public art issue.

In reality there is not a precise set of forms or symbols that can speak to a new public that is more pluralistic, private, and secular than ever before, but it is not a reason for despair and it is also futile to force some consensus on such shifting ground. There is no common symbol-based iconography and this persistent obsession is too often based on a nostalgic, simplified idea of what occurred in public life in the past; monolithic visions and harmonious encounters have been aggrandized. If contemporary citizens do not share a consensus about form and symbol, they do have an understanding of information technology and a mutual experience of the media which has become a new coalescent impulse. There are certain moments of intersection that inform and may eventually shape a new conception of public life and public art. These common points may not be inspired ideals, values, or new ideologies, but they are emerging connections nevertheless. Media, the fast-changing images of film, photography, and promotional texts-the props and propaganda of a commodity-based culture-constitute the episodic encounters that most people experience. These sources of commonality provide one starting place for artists, like Adams, who choose to work within the messy vitality of public settings in order to raise questions about information and thought.

Adams possesses an intelligent and intuitive sense of his time. He rarely talks about "the public"-another label he avoids judiciously. He speculates infrequently about what his work may mean to the many people who experience it. He rejects the idea of "projected needs" and is willing to accept the unknown future of the work. There is a great resistance to setting limits, to fixing preconceptions, and yet Adams is very articulate about the multiple readings his work can evoke. The contradictions and the planned confusions, the illusive order beneath the sense of disjunction are motivating to an artist who chooses to sustain a questioning and self-contradictory position at the very moment in history when turmoil and a need for comfort and relief are sending many towards the most doctrinaire securities and superficial productions.

The resonance and compassion in Adams' work is founded not only in an acceptance of contemporary pluralism but in an historical conception of "public" that ties his work to a continuum, a tradition of productive debate and dissent. In his essay "The Mystery of the Commons: On the Indispensability of Civic Rhetoric," Manfred Stanley examined the role of the public and the common definitions of "public" that have shaped civic action. The commons is a frequently misunderstood idea that originated with the notion of commonwealth, with the balance of common good and goals and the conflicting desires of individuals. Stanley believes that, rather than being a site of compromise and coercion, the commons is an inspired center which has an important purpose in a pluralistic, secular, and industrialized society. It is here that the modern public can revitalize a more classical, pre-Modern concept of collective activity in which some sense of the whole takes precedent over all the issues, ideas, and desires that divide groups. In contrast to more conservative, precautionary readings, Stanley believes that the commons is not a site of breakdown, anarchy, and licentiousness, but is a place for the realization of a participatory rather than protectionist democracy. On the other hand, Stanley is decidedly non-ideological and supports an open concept of rhetoric: "To construct (or represent unknowingly) an ideology is to participate uncritically in the mobilization of ideas for the purpose of social control on behalf of an interest group whose privileges are rendered more credible by means of the deployment of ideas in a manner appropriate to this outcome."

Adams' work embraces both modern conditions with a pre-Modern set of aspirations. He synthesizes both ideas through the use of irony and an inversion of contemporary concepts of the "public". Current definitions of the "public" include the public as market players, as clients, as consumers, or as functionaries. It is these labels that purposefully divide a community. In his work, Adams begins with these points of segregation and employs a formal system and selection of words and images appropriate to these divergent conceptions; he does not search for an illustrative commonality, but waits for the work to disclose one. Through this approach, the isolating layers unravel to expose a common core of curiosity that transcends otherness. Adams uses this disorder to invent an idea of public and public art that supports pluralism, action, and free thought. The viewer is encouraged to confront the complexity of the world, as well as the unpredictability of his/her own reactions.
The public as consumer and client is the point where Adams begins many of his sculptural investigations. He uses the interstitial space of media and advertising to begin his ambiguous, multi-valent narrations. 

People have a genuine need for a social being, a common culture. The mass media can provide this to some extent and can (potentially) fulfill a positive function in people's lives. But advertising seems to have a life of its own; it exists in and out of other media, and speaks to us in a language we can recognise but a voice we can never identify. This is because advertising has no subject. Obviously people invent and produce adverts, but apart from the fact that they are unknown and faceless, the ad in any case does not claim to speak from them, it is not their speech. Thus there is a space, a gap left where the speaker should be; and one of the peculiar features of advertising is that we are drawn in to fill the gap, so that we become both listener and speaker, subject and object.

Adams takes these conventions of ambiguity and intervention in advertising and postulates a new role for the viewer through the use of historical and political images, and fractured texts. This further complicates the relationship of subject-object and sign-signifier. But Adams' work does not begin in complicity and end in desire—the goal of good advertising; through the juxtaposition of sculptural elements and media ideas contrivance leads to multiplicity, to more questions, and to anything but a calculable response. The work is neither didactic nor propagandist and is much more unsettling and unforgettable than the programmed lesson.

The armatures on which Adams suspends and encloses images are elegant constructivist structures. Inspired by the 20th century avant-garde in Russia, in particular Gustav Klucis' (1885-1944) kiosks, constructions, and hand-held agit-prop devices, Adams creates independent environments that radiate tension and movement, which set up the questionable readings that texts and photos provoke. The armatures are constructed meticulously; small details and points of assembly are exaggerated as a textural counterpoint to long, intersecting planes, tipping surfaces, bold colors, and the quality of dynamic forms slipping through space. Adams' constructivist vocabulary appears esthetically autonomous but the forms have particular insistence in the projects he has built and proposed for public places. These projects must satisfy a modest functional program. For Adams, function is deliberately compromised; it is assigned a marginal role in each project. He does not want to create situations of psychic relief. The actual sensation of discomfort signifies the condition of unease that the projects incite on an esthetic and ideological level. This quality in Adams' work is remarkable at a time when many public artists look to functional accommodation as an antidote for an absence of iconography. Adams refuses to forfeit the push and pull of function with meaning. He may provide a podium to stand on or a place to sit, but the authority of the speech-maker or the relaxation of those who wait is not confirmed by the work. This is the issue of function, form, and expression that concerns all Modern design and architecture.

Adams has created both indoor and outdoor installations, but it is the two bus shelters constructed in New York City (a third will be built this spring) that mark a turning point for the artist. These shelters confirmed his interest in and commitment to making art in the most unregulated urban circumstances. In spring 1986, Adams completed his second shelter at 14th Street and Third Avenue. "Bus Shelter II" (sponsored by the Public Art Fund, Inc.) has a red horizontal plane that stretches across the back. This is intersected by an open, aluminum grid. The slender, almost stingy bench is a slash of blue directed towards two large photo panels at the west end of the shelter. On the west side of the panels are blue planes with red-orange words—"RECOVER" and "IMITATIONS". It is not clear what relationship these two words might share or if they are simply random occurrences. On the opposite sides of these panels are photos of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg taken at the time of their arrest on espionage charges in 1950. The Rosenbergs stare blankly and numbly from the back of a police paddy wagon. This event occurred before I was born, and yet I recall this image quite clearly and it was startling to see it in the rectangular field where advertisers normally lease space for Esquire magazine, Seagram liquors, and Calvin Klein briefs.

As he has done with "Bus Shelter I" at 66th Street and Broadway, Adams plans to rotate the texts and photos periodically. It is an art space that still operates by the fast turnover world of consumerism that it occupies. This prophetic, UPI photograph of the Rosenbergs registers a quality present in all of Adams' work. It is not simply that the Rosenbergs are tragic, enduring characters in United...
"Bus Shelter II", 1984-86 situated at 14th Street and 3rd Avenue, New York City, 96" x 1371/2 x 961/2". Aluminum, plexiglass, wood, enamel, fluorescent light, duratrans. Sponsored by the Public Art Fund, Inc.

(opposite page) "Bus Shelter II", rear view
States history; this is an age of short memories and attention spans where the forgetful live in a state of graceless, but comfortable ambivalence. These figures remain neither heroes nor villains, martyrs nor operators of their destinies. In "Afterthoughts on the Rosenbergs", Leslie Fiedler explains why they are such troubled and disturbing characters:

"That the American public should deny the humanity of their enemies is terrible enough; that the Communists should deny the humanity of their comrades much worse; but that two people should deny their own humanity in the face of death is the ultimate horror, the final revelation of a universal moral calamity. For even at the end the Rosenbergs were not able to think of themselves as real people, only as "cases," very much like the others for which they had helped to fight... replaceable puppets in a manifestation that never ends... From the start, they had not been able to find any selves realer than those official clichés. If there is a tragedy of the Rosenbergs, this is it.

Yet despite all this, because of it, we should have granted them grace. The betrayal of their essential humanity by their comrades and themselves left the burden of their defense with us."4

The strange, stark photograph which Adams selected for this busy street corner confirms the many readings and limits of history. In the Rosenbergs’ case, it is clear that time holds no essential truth or route to wisdom, and that history unscrutinized cannot teach in an age when the past depreciates like every other consumer good.

In two other recent projects, one built under temporary circumstances and the other unrealized, Adams provides environments for a person to make public addresses. These are active spaces in contrast to the bus shelters. For the 1985 Art on the Beach (sponsored by Creative Time, Inc.), Adams, with architect Nicholas Goldsmith, constructed a "Podium for Dissent" for a performance by Ann Magnuson. An enormous, grainy photograph of Ronald Reagan, appearing in mid-sentence, was sliced horizontally. The two planes were shifted to create a raised cat-walk, a long speaker's platform, for someone to wander back and forth constantly slicing this media visage. "Ba(bb)le: A Podium for Dissent" (1984) is planned as a 44 foot vertical arrangement of open boxes. One box will provide a speaker's space reached by a slender ladder. The underside of all the box bases have frames for a series of photographs creating a cinematic progression of expression and gesticulation. "Ba(bb)le" remains unbuilt and Adams appears to use this model as a way to further explore the relationship of form to image. One prototype uses images of real estate magnate Donald Trump; another shows the many moods of Ronald Reagan. Here, the face, as captured by the camera lens, signifies many events, many moments, and many possible histories. The faces set up an ambiguity that is non-specific and representative of a cultural ambience rather than a specific episode.

The facial expression as manipulated by media is something that Adams began to explore in the late 1970's. I doubt that there is any conscious adult who does not remember the media blitz that occurred during the kidnapping of Patricia Hearst, her apparent political conversion, her capture/release and trial, and finally, her step back to respectability. The heiress to the Hearst newspaper fortune was monumentalized, martyred, judged, and fictionalized by the press. She was transmutated into a symbolic caricature of national schizophrenia. The irony is that it was the growth of the media and the phenomenal wealth of this newspaper family that made her a ransomable prisoner. In "Patricia Hearst A Thru Z" (1979), installed at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Adams selected 26 facial expressions of Hearst from U. Rl. photographs taken during her convoluted ordeal. Each expression, registering a particular moment during her descent into radical politics and through her return to a quality of life fostered by a willed amnesia, was assigned a letter of the alphabet. On the walls of the gallery Adams arranged these old letters and their new symbols to create a selection of words with no clear conjunction. Each expression recalled a moment of historical lunacy as well as a part of a word creating readings embellished or impoverished by each viewer's memory and interpretation. In "Phaedrus", Socrates speculated that the discovery of the alphabet would create forgetfulness in the learner's souls because the memory would no longer be of use. Adams may be suggesting that these old fears are also new fears.

One of Adams' most ambitious installations involved moving and changing elements-film and sound-to recollect and represent another event in history. The incidents were presented through film footage (factual) as well as the more personal, idiosyncratic tradition of the oral account (non-factual). In "Shifting Theater for a Red, White and Blue Movie" (1980), installed at Miami University in Ohio, Adams created two trapezoidal viewing spaces by constructing an angled, red wall that sliced the space, the screen, and one bench. One viewing area could be reached directly, but the other could be approached only by passage through a narrow corridor filled with the amplified voice of a woman remembering Senator Joseph McCarthy's visit to Wheeling, West Virginia in 1950. The screen showing footage from the Army-McCarthy hearings could not be seen in entirety, and the audio portion changed-the sequence interrupted-by the splicing of the tape and the movement of the viewer through the corridor. This project was a tripartite presentation; no single part of the installation told a complete story and, in totality, all the information seemed inconclusive. It was a vivid reminder of the vagary of unchecked historical inquiry. History has great influence as an operant, manipulative device; how it is inter-
interpreted and used to fashion political rationales remains one of Adams’ great preoccupations. Every picture tells many stories; the inscrutability of history is a challenge to overcome.

Public art is no longer an exercise in icon-making, but it still provides a way to reinterpret issues, to disclose the difference between disinformation and information. Adams’ work does not allow compliance or complacency. In The Uses of Disorder, Richard Sennett attacked the purified community of affluent culture. A great champion of the continued value of a public life in democracies, Sennett challenged the tendency to create a fictional harmony through an avoidance of conflict, a muffling of debate and dissent, and an ignorance of “otherness”. Instead, he proposed a new urban community based on discomfort, conflict, and the enhancement of differences. Through constructed and organized anarchism, democracy would be a participatory system, not a prescriptive institution. He rejects the unified myth. 5 This desire for coherence through conformity is a national obsession that deTocqueville observed 200 years ago and is still in evidence. Those who mourn the false sense of loss of a shared iconography may be registering these purified characteristics most of all.

Adams’ work speaks of and to the disjointed, slightly delirious quality of contemporary life. I agree with Adams; he is not a public artist who works towards some civic objective or esthetic formula that everyone will understand and appreciate. But his work has a very public presence whether it is installed in a museum, gallery, or street corner. His most personal esthetic interests and observations about the culture lead inevitably to issues with universal resonance. This may be why Adams’ work succeeds in ways that self-consciously planned and promoted public art does not. So much public art begins with some general, illusive symbol that only leads, chimera-like, to obscure or banal conclusions. Other public art projects avoid meaning altogether to focus on functional accommodation and amenities. The use of general symbols does not insure lasting meaning, and form and content in subservience to function is simply a bore. In contrast, Adams begins with a specific set of images and forms whose inherent tension reveals the desires and values that connect the most divergent and embattled constituencies. The many episodes begin to create a continuity. It is through the incremental and the multiple that ideas in a pluralistic culture intersect and create meaning. Adams is not didactic, but his work delivers this lesson clearly and persuasively.

Patricia C. Phillips
December 1986

Patricia C. Phillips is a writer, critic and curator. She is currently Associate Chairperson of Environmental Design at Parsons School of Design, and teaches in the M.A. Program in architectural and design criticism at the New School for Social Research. She writes frequently for Ariforum and other publications on public art, environmental art and architecture.

5. Sennett, pp. 66.
"Ba(bb) fe-A Podium For Dissent" (version), 1984. Maquette, 110"x 14"x 18" (proposed height444"x4") plastic, aluminum, brass, enamel, fluorescent light, duratrans.

(opposite) "Patricia Hearst-A Second Reading", 1979, 33 black and white photographs each 191/2" x27" in a constructed room at Artists' Space, New York City.
H. H.: Like a number of artists who came out of the 1970’s, your work seems concerned with deconstructing language in order to subvert meaning. Your particular approach, however, has been to frame this methodology architecturally, specifically in terms of a “functional” public sculpture. Are you looking to develop a public space for deconstructing language as a perverse form of public address?

D.A.: Yes, I’m interested in the public context and the conventions of utility as a decoy—an entry level for staging the vulnerability of meaning in a late capitalist society.

H. H.: What was your first public piece?

D.A.: In 1978, I had an exhibition at 10 windows on 8th Avenue where I alternated media images of Patricia Hearst with descriptive texts. These texts attempted to describe the photographs on either side of them simultaneously.

But in looking back, it wasn’t until 1980 that I successfully integrated architectural space with images and text in an installation I did at Miami University of Ohio.

H. H.: Maybe you could describe exactly what you did...

D.A.: I built a cinema space using rear screen projection to stage Antonioni’s film “Point of Order,” a documentary about the Army-McCarthy hearings. The central element was a long wall that divided the film frame into two distinct viewing spaces. This division was such that two-thirds of the film frame could be viewed from one side and one-third from the other. I had based this on a cropped photograph McCarthy had entered as evidence into the hearings, which of course had been doctored.

H. H.: So you were using the mechanics of McCarthy’s forgery as a way of interrupting the viewer’s field of vision.

D.A.: Yes, but I doubt the viewer would have been aware of this small historical incident. In any case, the cropping gave both the film and the space of the cinema an appropriately paranoid feeling.

H. H.: An extension of the paranoia surrounding McCarthyism.

D.A.: Yes, but the piece was also about a breakdown of that paranoid field, about the fragmentation of information. Even to move between the two viewing spaces the viewer had to pass through a 30 ft. corridor in which I had placed a four track sound system projecting a taped interview with an elderly woman who had heard McCarthy’s first
anti-communist speech given in 1950 at a woman's club in Wheeling, West Virginia.

H.H.: What exactly did she say?
D.A.: She simply reminisced about the day. She remembered all kinds of little details, what McCarthy was wearing, what she was wearing, what they had for lunch. At one point she recounted the discrepancies between the number of communists McCarthy had alleged were in the State Department and what she later read in newspaper accounts of his speech.

H.H.: You seem to be working on a number of levels here. First of all, you're obviously setting up a collision between a cinema history and an oral one. But I also think this piece operates on a psychological level where you juxtapose the political paranoia of McCarthyism with the spatial schizophrenia evident in the layout of the installation.

D.A.: That's interesting, because I have always thought of paranoia and schizophrenia as signs for representation and its breakdown. I'm fascinated with how they form an interchange, as two sides of the same coin.

H.H.: While your using McCarthyism as a model for cultural paranoia, isn't it true that anti-communist sentiment predates McCarthy by several years. One could say McCarthyism anticipated McCarthy.

D.A.: Well, yes, those conditions were already in play with the Alger Hiss case and the Hollywood trials. But it was McCarthy who packaged that paranoia and sold it wholesale to the American public.

H.H.: Tying all the signs together...
D.A.: Exactly, in fact, he becomes a sign for that whole process of ideological staging.

H.H.: Before we continue with McCarthy, I'd like to get back to the Patty Hearst work for a moment. What drew you to her image?
D.A.: I've always had this fascination with America's lack of political consciousness and the degree of excess with which that lack of consciousness often surfaces. What attracted me to Patty Hearst was her role as an empty sign, manipulated by the SLA, the FBI, her parents, lawyers and psychiatrists. It was total schizophrenia filtered through a media blitz.

H.H.: So she becomes a perfect metaphor for the 1970's, a period when late capitalism lost its ability to direct the circulation of signs.
D.A.: Exactly.

H.H.: Do you see McCarthy serving a similar role as a metaphor for the 1950's?
D.A.: Yes, but there are of course differences. McCarthy was a perpetrator of manipulation whereas Patty Hearst was clearly a victim. But they both represent an excess of what is ultimately an apolitical posturing, filtered through the media to the point of exhaustion.

H.H.: And you could also say these two represent not only different periods of recent history, but the degree of perceived ideological direction apparent in those periods. In other words, the 1950's are generally considered highly directed ideologically, whereas the 1970's are seen as suffering from a collapse of that direction. Furthermore, the 1980's are viewed as a period in which that kind of direction has been recovered under Reagan.

D.A.: Yes, but what is interesting here is that both Reagan and McCarthy represent a state of desperation, filled out by excessive ideological simulation.

H.H.: Your saying both McCarthyism and Reaganism are false ideologies in this respect.
D.A.: Yes, while this is perhaps a common perception about Reagan, at least from a liberal perspective, I don't think most people see McCarthyism as a simulation, when in fact, it represented a kind of drainoff of the energy from World War II, that last arena of genuine political signification.

D.A.: I'd like to get back to the Patty Hearst work for a moment. What drew you to her image?
D.A.: I've always had this fascination with America's lack of political consciousness and the degree of excess with which that lack of consciousness often surfaces. What attracted me to Patty Hearst was her role as an empty sign, manipulated by the SLA, the FBI, her parents, lawyers and psychiatrists. It was total schizophrenia filtered through a media blitz.

H.H.: So she becomes a perfect metaphor for the 1970's, a period when late capitalism lost its ability to direct the circulation of signs.
D.A.: Exactly.

(opposite above) Cropped photograph entered into evidence at the Army-McCarthy Hearings, 1954. Photo credit: UP!

(opposite below) "Shifting Theater for A Red, White and Blue Movie", 1980. 9' x 47' x 41'. Wood, wallboard, latex, rear screen, 16 MM film, four track sound. Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.
H.H.: ... Yeah, an implosion, a result of that energy directed inwardly out of a frustration with the no-win situation existing after the war.
D.A.: Exactly, McCarthy was an opportunist, plain and simple. He knew the game of ideology was over. His was the final bluff.

***

H.H.: What led you to constructing bus shelters?
D.A.: I wanted to intervene in the network of mass transit as it represents a system of communication, a vehicle for advertising. I wanted to delay and reroute those conventions and open up the idea of “transit” to its purest connotation as a line of escape.

And then I’ve always had my doubts about graffiti and poster as effective forms of public address. They are too easy to dismiss. I wanted something more tangible, something tied into the city streets, integrated with the urban transit context, yet different.

H.H.: Something with a voice of authority.
D.A.: Yes. My idea was to make a simulation of a bus shelter, include just enough conventions as disguise, then stage another kind of venue.

H.H.: You wanted to provoke a sort of double take?
D.A.: Yes. The shelters first and foremost represent a crisis of identity. H.H.: How do you use the shelter’s physical structure to create this double take?
D.A.: There are discrepancies in the functional conventions of the structures. For instance, in the first bus shelter, the bench is outside the shelter area and the central wall bisects the illuminated image panel.

H.H.: This bisection of the bus shelter’s image panel seems a lot like the division of the film frame in the McCarthy cinema.
D.A.: Yes, it’s the same relationship.

H.H.: But being outdoors do you think it conveys the same paranoid feeling of the McCarthy cinema?
D.A.: Absolutely, I think it’s very paranoid. When you enter the shelter area you’re literally pushed into the image. Also, the angle of the wall reflects the image at night, capturing the viewer between the image and its projected double.

H.H.: It seems to me that by surrounding the viewer with imagery fragmented by architectural bisections and mirroring, you are creating a model for the constant barrage of reflections, refractions, and doublings occurring in the media.
D.A.: Yes, I think that’s right.

H.H.: In the bus shelters the images are always accompanied by texts, How do you relate these texts to the images?
D.A.: The relationship is very disjunctive. I never illustrate a text with an image, or describe an image with a text. I simply put them on a collision course and let them go to work.

H.H.: The bus shelters make strong stylistic allusions to Russian constructivism. How do you see your work relating to that tradition? Is your intention historicist irony?
D.A.: No, I’m drawn to the implications of constructivism more than its look. I’m interested in the style to the degree in which it represented a breakdown in the implementation of post revolutionary collectivism—what Benjamin Buchloh calls their “crisis of representation.” I see a similar crisis relevant to late capitalism.

For this reason I am particularly interested in the work of Gustav Klucis, an important but lesser known figure of that period. In 1922 he designed a series of multifunctional agitational stands for the streets of Moscow. These were intended as podiums for public speaking, loudspeakers for radio broadcasts, signboards for slogans, projection screens for films, and kiosks for the distribution of books. What I love about these works is that, ultimately, they subvert their intention as instruments of communication. It’s as if all this information they provide collapses in on itself. For this reason, in a funny way, they seem more like prototypes for late capitalism than revolutionary agit-prop.

H.H.: But, if I understand your citation of Buchloh correctly, that “crisis of representation” has become the norm in post-modern culture. Klucis’ failure is in fact your point of departure.
D.A.: Yes, exactly.

H.H.: And of course your work hardly serves as agitprop. It’s so politically ambiguous. Is this ambiguity intended to mirror a larger sociopolitical ambiguity?

D.A.: Yes, I think of it as a mirror of late capitalism at large.

H.H.: In the sense that your work does not convey a message, but only a methodology of seduction.
D.A.: Exactly, I want to render that methodology visible.

H.H.: As a critique?
D.A.: Perhaps critique is too strong a word. I want to momentarily stopframe the leveling effect of late capitalism. But I have no illusions about social change. My method is closer to voyeurism.

H.H.: Well, I imagine that more often than not, people who use the shelters want to know what they mean, they react to what you do as if a message is intended. Am I correct in assuming that?
D.A.: Yes, that’s a common reaction. I suspect Americans have this subli-
H.H.: The irony is that you are neither delivering a product nor an ideological message.
D.A.: I think of what I am doing as a kind of pure advertising. I mean the goal of advertising has always been to slow its audience down, capture its attention; more and more successful ad campaigns put the introduction of the product on hold while they draw their audience through seductive layers of images and texts. So I want to take this idea to its limit—toward the obsolescence of the product—the subject.

H.H.: In that sense pure advertising like Paul Virilio's notion of "pure war," is something to be conducted only in terms of its preparation. This is ironic because advertising is based on "campaigns", which is after all a military term.

Nevertheless, because you often use such charged images they often generate real controversy.
D.A.: Yes, because the images I use are so loaded people often have standard reactions. The one that is most curious is the assumption that to exhibit a photograph of a figure or event equals endorsement. It doesn't matter how I architecturally fragment the image. For some people it is all black and white. play begin to exceed their function, encroaching on the images and text they house.
H.H.: That would make sense considering your interest in cinema and architecture. It's funny, that even though these two are arguably our most persuasive cultural forms, the implications of overlapping them have been largely ignored by architects. In fact, signage architecture in general is something that hasn't been sufficiently addressed.
D.A.: Yes, with the exception of the post revolutionary Russian avant garde and more recently Venturi's "Learning From Las Vegas" architects, for the most part, have failed to address signage as an integral aspect of architectural production. It is especially curious because signage is the primary vehicle of our information based society.

H.H.: Given your interest in this direction would you consider working on the scale of a building?
D.A.: No, I see myself as an interventionist, so the prospect of large scale architectural production seems too institutionalized. That's why I resist any notion of public art that approaches urban design.

***

H.H.: We've already discussed how your bus shelters appropriate a voice of authority. But other artists, like Jenny Holzer, who work in public, use given structures such as billboards, which speak with a similar kind of authority. So why do you go to all the trouble of constructing a bus shelter? Why not simply rent advertising space in an existing one?
D.A.: Because, I am interested in how the entire body comes to terms with information, not just the eyes and mind. Recently, Les Levine in an interview said that advertising shouldn't be allowed in subways because people are a captive audience. His point is well taken. The architectural staging of advertising has been ignored, for the most part, by deconstructionists.

H.H.: So you have a particular interest in the psychology of the captive audience?
D.A.: Absolutely. I try to intensify that psychology as a way of revealing it. I'm after a kind of anarchy of architectural production, where the vehicles of distraction are being followed by the vehicles of desire for meaning because of the apolitical fabric of our society.

H.H.: What about on the other end of the scale? Recently you've been building wall reliefs—these would seem to function strictly within a gallery context.
D.A.: On one level I see these relief works as a drawing process for the public works, a smaller format where I can work out ideas. But on another level I'm fascinated with the idea of relief as a fragment, with its relationship to the wall as a severed object.

H.H.: What is the relationship in the reliefs between the images they contain and their overall structure?

D.A.: I think of the images as the subtext of the structures. For me they represent an endangered species, the end of the ideological—a kind of last look at the dead father.

H.H.: In one of these recent relief works, Surplus Goods/Surplus Histories, you incorporated actual transistor radios. Were you conscious of a dialogue with the commodity fetishism evident in the work of Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach.
D.A.: I like the staged quality of their work very much, but I think this relief spins off this idea in a different direction. I offer the viewer a little more than they bargain for-history as a door prize.

H.H.: So history becomes leveled, reduced to the role of a commodity?
D.A.: Yes, I want to frame the danger of this process as it represents the final triumph of late capitalism.

"Surplus Goods/Surplus Histories", 1986. 60" x 120" x 31". Aluminum, formica on wood, plexiglass, 144 transistor radios, duratrans.

Howard Halle is an artist and freelance curator living in New York City. He was formerly the curator for The Kitchen from 1981-1985. Most recently, he curated Uplifted Atmospheres, Borrowed Taste at Hallwalls, Buffalo, N. Y, and co-curated along with Walter Hopps The Brokerage of Desire, an exhibition that opened at the Otis/Parsons Gallery, Los Angeles, and will travel to the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.
DENNIS ADAMS  
Born in Des Moines, Iowa, 1948.  
Lives in New York City.

EDUCATION:  
1969 B.F.A., Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa  

SOLO EXHIBITIONS/INSTALLATIONS:  
1972 Akron Art Institute, Akron, Ohio  
1974 Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio  
1975 Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio  
Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio  
1976 Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, Pa.  
Patricia Hearst-A Second Reading, 10 on 8, New York City, N.Y  
1979 Patricia Hearst-A Second Reading II, Artists Space, New York City, N.Y  
Patricia Hearst-A thru Z, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis, Minn.  
1980 California Two Tone Political Conversion/Confusion Furnishings, California State University, Long Beach, California  
Shifting Theater for a Red, White, and Blue Movie, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio  
1984 Kiosks for America, The Kitchen, New York City, N.Y.  
1985 The Anatomy of a B-movie, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina  
A Podium for Dissent, Creative Time’s “Art on the Beach,” New York City; N.Y In collaboration with Nicholas Goldsmith, Architect: FTL Associates, and Ann Magnuson, Performance Artist.  
1986 Bus Shelter II, Public Art Fund, Inc., 14th St. & 3rd Ave., New York City, N.Y  
Selling History, Nature Morte Gallery, New York City, N.Y.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:  
1974 American Painting & Sculpture Today, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio  
1977 Contemporary Drawing Invitational, Lake Placid School of Art, Lake Placid, N.Y.  
Art Stories, Libra Gallery, Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, Calif.  
Allegoria Dell 'impronta Digitale, Mercato Del Sale Gallery, Milan, Italy  
Great Enlargements, Midway Studios, Chicago, Ill.  
1978 Artwords and Bookworks, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Calif.  
1979 In the Shadow of Marcel Duchamp, The Grolier Club & Franklin Furnace, New York City, N.Y  
1981 Libres D'Artista/Artist's Books, Metronom, Barcelona, Spain  
1982 100th Anniversary Invitational Art Exhibition, YM YWHA, Union, New Jersey  
1983 The Ponderosa Collection, The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio  
Grab Bag, City Gallery, New York City, N.Y.  
Subculture, (The IRT subway trains of New York City), Group Material, New York City, N.Y. Travel: C.E.P.A., Buffalo, N.Y  
Persuasion(s), The Kitchen, New York City, N.Y.  
1984 Hundreds of Drawings, Artists Space, New York City, N.Y.  
METAMANHATTAN, Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown, New York City, N.Y.  
Site Specific Proposals, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.  
Inaugural Group Exhibition, Hand in Hand Galleries, Ltd., New York City, N.Y  
Not Just Any Pretty Picture, part of the multi-gallery project, ”State of Union/State of Mind” sponsored by PADD. PS. 122, New York City, N.Y.  
The Artist as Social Designer: Aspects of Urban Art Today, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, Calif.  
DISINFORMATION: The Manufacture of Consent, Alternative Museum, New York City, N.Y.  
Mass, Group Material, New York City, N.Y. Travel: Hallwalls, Buffalo, N.Y.; Spaces, Cleveland, Ohio; Arts Consortium, Cincinnati, Ohio; Aljira Arts, Newark, N.J.; New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City, N.Y.  
1986 Homeless at Home, Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York City, N.Y  
Liberty & Justice, Alternative Museum, New York City, N.Y  
Cinemaject, City Gallery, New York City, N.Y. (sponsored by The Kitchen)  
The Homecoming, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA. Travel: Five Iowa Museums.  
lost/FOUND LANGUAGE, Lawrence Gallery, Rosemont College, Rosemont, Pa.  
Uplifted Atmospheres, Borrowed Taste, Hallwalls, Buffalo, N.Y  

GRANTS:  
1984 Fellowship Grant, National Endowment for the Arts  
1985 Art in Public Places Grant, National Endowment for the Arts  
Visual Artists Sponsored Project Grant, New York State Council on the Arts

PUBLIC WORKS IN PROGRESS:  
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:
"Contemporary Perspectives 1984," catalogue. Bucknell University, essays by Barry Blinderman, Thomas Lawson, Susan Morgan, 1984, (illus.).
Adams, Dennis. "Letter to the Editor." The New Common Good, April, 1985, p. 3, (illus.).
Taylor, Paul. "Art on the Beach." The Face, September, 1985, pp. 18 & 19, (illus.).
"New Bus Shelter Features a Photograph of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg." The New Common Good, June 5, 1986, p. 5, (illus.).
"The Homecoming." catalogue. Iowa Arts Council & University of Northern Iowa, essay by Eleanor Heartney, 1986, (illus.).
DENNIS ADAMS
Born in Des Moines, Iowa, 1948.
Lives in New York City.

EDUCATION:
1969  B.F.A., Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa

SOLO EXHIBITIONS/ INSTALLATIONS:
1972 Akron Art Institute, Akron, Ohio
1974 Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio
1975 Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio
1976 Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio

PATRICIA HEARST-A
Tenth Reading, 10 on 8, New York City, N.Y
1979 PATRICIA HEARST-A
Second Reading, Artists Space, New York City, N.Y.
2000 California Two Tone Political Conversion/Confusion Furnishings, California State University, Long Beach, California

Shifting Theater for a Red, White, and Blue Movie, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

1980 BUS SHEETER I, Public Art Fund, Inc., Broadway & 66 St., New York City, N.Y.
1984 THE KICKS FOR AMERICA, The Kitchen, New York City, N.Y.

1981 The Anatomy of a B-movie, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina


1986 Bus Shelter II, Public Art Fund, Inc., 14th St. & 3rd Ave., New York City, N.Y.
Selling History, Nature Morte Gallery, New York City, N.Y.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:
1974 American Painting & Sculpture Today, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio
1977 Contemporary Drawing Invitational, Lake Placid School of Art, Lake Placid, N.Y.

Art Stories, Libra Gallery, Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, Calif.
Allegoria Dell 'impronta Digitale, Mercato Del Sale Gallery, Milan, Italy
Great Enlargements, Midway Studios, Chicago, Ill.

1978 Artwords and Bookworks, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Calif.

1979 To the Shadow of Marcel Duchamp, The Grolier Club & Franklin Furnace, New York City, Chicago, Ill.

1980 Reality of Illusion, Denver Art Museum & University of Southern California at Los Angeles, Travel: Honolulu Academy of the Arts, Honolulu, Hawaii; Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; Oakland Museum, Oakland, Calif.; Toledo Art Museum, Toledo, Ohio; University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

1981 Libres D'Artistas/Artist’s Books, Metronom, Barcelona, Spain

1982 100th Anniversary Invitational Art Exhibition, YM YWHA, Union, New Jersey

1983 The Ponderosa Collection, The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

Grab Bag, City Gallery, New York City, N.Y.
Subculture, (The IRT subway trains of New York City), Group Material, New York City, N.Y.
Travel: C.E.P.A., Buffalo, N.Y.
Persuasion(s), The Kitchen, New York City, N.Y.

1984 Hundreds of Drawings, Artists Space, New York City, N.Y.
METAMANHATTAN, Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown, New York City, N.Y.

Site Specific Proposals, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

1985 Homelessness at Home, Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York City, N.Y.

Cinemaobject, City Gallery, New York City, N.Y. (sponsored by The Kitchen)
The Homecoming, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.
Travel: Five Iowa Museums.

1986 Homeless at Home, Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York City, N.Y.
Liberty & Justice, Alternative Museum, New York City, N.Y.

Cinemaobject, City Gallery, New York City, N.Y. (sponsored by The Kitchen)
The Homecoming, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.
Travel: Five Iowa Museums.
lost/FOUND LANGUAGE, Lawrence Gallery, Rosemont College, Rosemont, Pa.
Uplifted Atmospheres, Borrowed Taste, Hallwalls, Buffalo, N.Y.

GRANTS:
1984 Fellowship Grant, National Endowment for the Arts
1985 Art in Public Places Grant, National Endowment for the Arts

Visual Artists Sponsored Project Grant, New York State Council on the Arts

PUBLIC WORKS IN PROGRESS:
The Alternative Museum is a nonprofit organization dedicated to a pluralist approach to the arts and cultural activities of New York City, on a national and international level.

Our primary concern is to present professional exhibits and performances in a variety of media. Particular emphasis is placed on the exhibiting of mid-career artists.

The museum invites participation in its events from other artists, curators and the community. It is the goal of the Museum to build a true Artists Museum that is sensitive to both the needs of artists and public.

Board Of Directors:

Robert H. Browning
Constant G. Constantin
Larry Fabian
Allan Ludwig
Geno Rodriguez
Janice Rooney

Staff:
Geno Rodriguez
Executive Director &
Chief Curator

Jane Farver
Director

Janice Rooney
Design & Promotion

Advisory Board
Visual
Arts Committee:
Michael S. Bell
Mel Edwards
Thea Halo
Manuel Hughes
Jane Kessler
John T Paoletti
Andrev Vejkovic

Interns:
Marcela Clavijo
David Freeman
Amy L. Goldstein

Music Committee:
Muhal Richard Abrams
Billy Bang
William Hellermann
Jason Hwang
Leroy Jenkins
Robert Moran
Phil Niblock
Pauline Oliveros
Bernadette Speach