

Art of the absurd

When, by definition, almost everyone is an artist, almost nothing is art

WASHINGTON — Art lovers are heartened by New York's decision not to prosecute the fellow who put what the police called a bomb atop the Brooklyn Bridge. The fellow, who calls himself an "environmental artist," says the bucket full of fireworks was a "kinetic sculpture." Well, it would have been the "sculpture" had not had a defective fuse.

A British gallery has a new work, "Room Temperature," featuring two dead flies and a bucket of water, in which float four apples and six uninfated balloons. A gallery official says the work left him "amazed by its completeness, its oneness, its apparent obviousness. Yet it had the ability to tease, to make me wonder, and question, to lead me in other directions. Why? This is art and this is water. Have you looked at them, have you actually seen these elements before? Here they are."

Matissse said he hoped his art would have the pleasing effect of an armchair on a tired businessman. Matissse, alas, is not around to meet the artist who fired a revolver at an airplane taking off from



George F. Will
WASHINGTON POST
WRITERS GROUP

Los Angeles, and called his act a work of art. In 1929 Walter Lippmann said art had "ceased not only to depict any theory of destiny but has ceased to express any important human mood in the presence of destiny." But pistol-packing "artists" express a mood: Anything goes.

In 1977, one of Joseph Beuys' masterpieces — a child's bathtub flecked with sticking plaster — was mistakenly used to cool beer during a party at the museum that owns it. But, then, a conscientious janitor would have cleared away the pile of bricks that was a display at

London's Tate Gallery. The bourgeoisie of Hartford, Connecticut, questions the wisdom of spending \$87,000 for 36 boulders which an artist-entrepreneur placed in some green space and called "stone field sculpture."

But an American foundation paid \$300,000 to finance "Vertical Kilometer," a brass rod one kilometer long, buried in a hole one kilometer deep. The same artist also perpetrated "Lightning Field," a patch of New Mexico made into a pin cushion by metal rods. Ah, wilderness: Consider "Spiral Jetty," a curling path of rocks bulldozed into Utah's Great Salt Lake.

Claes Oldenburg, who makes large toothbrushes and other banalities (Philadelphia has a giant clothespin) once said: "I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum." His masterpiece, "Two Cheeseburgers with Everything" (a burrito-and-plaster model of just what the title says), sits in the possession of New York's Museum of

Modern Art.

Roy Lichtenstein (he paints large snipets from comic books) once said his aim was to paint a picture so ugly nobody would buy it. The harder he tried, the hotter became his sales. The avant-garde was a 19th century idea of revolutionary daring in the face of stultifying elite standards of acceptable taste. Pity the poor artist today: Where there are no standards, there can be no avant-garde.

Robert Hughes, Time magazine's art critic and author of "The Shock of the New," says that every five years America's art schools graduate more people than lived in Florence in the last quarter of the 15th century, and that there probably are more galleries than bakeries in New York. But college credit in "art" has been given for photographing 650 San Diego garages, and for spending a week in a gym locker (a work — or act — of art called "a duration-confinement body-piece").

The broadened definition of art to include doing anything, as well as making

anything, is a triumph of democracy: Everyone can be — indeed, cannot help but be — an artist. Hughes notes that Richard Tuttle "was chosen to represent America at the 1976 Venice Biennale with a stick rather longer than a pencil and three-quarters of an inch thick, cut from a length of standard 1-inch lumber, unpainted, and placed in solitary magnificence on the wall of the U.S. Pavilion." Your tax dollars were at work in that display of purely democratic art. Having no content, Tuttle's "art" was immune to the charge of "elitism."

New York City, which evidently has cash to spare, is considering requiring that works of art be purchased for all new or renovated municipal buildings. In an age when sticks count as art, the supply of art is sure to expand to satisfy the economic demand.

In 1915, Paul Klee said: "The more fearful the world becomes, the more art becomes abstract." What can be inferred about the world when art becomes absurd?

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Immigration plan: a first step

American immigration policy and laws are outdated, largely ineffective and sometimes capricious. The Immigration and Naturalization Service has been utterly unable to cope with the flood of Mexicans pouring into California and the Southwest and the boatloads of Cubans and Haitians in Florida.

The Carter administration was never able to push through a satisfactory solution to the problem. The Reagan administration has been working on one since it took office.

Now, the Reagan plan has finally been presented to Congress. It calls for, among other things:

- An amnesty program to allow many of those illegally in this country to stay and to eventually attain resident status.
- A trial "guest worker" program to allow immigrants to work in this country. They would receive no welfare benefits and would not be able to bring their families to live with them.
- Fines for American employers who knowingly hire illegal aliens.
- Authority for the Coast Guard to intercept and return boatloads of illegal aliens.
- Authority for the president to declare "immigration emergencies" during which he could prohibit U.S. boats from traveling to designated foreign countries and establish holding centers for refugees.

We think there is much to rec-

ommend the Reagan policy. It takes into account the changing pattern and character of immigration and views realistically the resulting problems and the possibility of solutions. It is firm and at the same time humane, both to those already in this country and those who are seeking to share in the American dream and are willing to work for it.

We think the "guest worker" plan deserves the two-year trial proposed in the Reagan plan, with a careful eye kept on it, lest it evolve into the "legalized serfdom" some Latino groups fear it could, or lest it be abused and manipulated as was the similar Bracero Program of the 1940s and 50s.

And we think the fines for those employers knowingly hiring illegal aliens are a good idea, despite the criticism the provision is already sparking from western-state congressmen. There are sufficient safeguards built into the provision to prevent the prosecution of any but those who would flagrantly and willfully violate the spirit of the law. Any who would be caught and fined under it deserve their fate.

Attorney General William French Smith was right when he told a congressional hearing that "we have lost control of our borders." The Reagan administration proposals may not be a perfectly tuned solution, but they are a significant step in the right direction.

A most discourteous Democrat

As we have lamented more than once, the tradition of "senatorial courtesy" sometimes covers up some pretty uncourteous behavior by senators.

The case in point this time is Ohio Democrat Howard Metzenbaum. Senate rules allow senators on a committee to delay any nomination that came before that committee — for whatever reason, for as long as they like. Metzenbaum, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has put a hold on the nomination of four candidates for federal judgeships, including one for South Carolina.

Metzenbaum admits that he has no reason to question the qualifications of the nominees. His sole reason for the delay is in retaliation for the Republicans having done the same thing last summer and fall

to nominees submitted by the Carter administration.

"If you play the kind of hard ball you did last year," Metzenbaum told angry Republican senators, "I don't think you can ask for special favors."

We thought it was wrong when the Republicans did it last year, especially when Sen. Jesse Helms delayed the nomination of Richard Erwin to a North Carolina federal district judgeship. We think it is equally wrong now, if not more so. Revenge and retaliation are even shoddier motives than maneuvering for political advantage.

Metzenbaum does no credit to himself or his office by his childish play and is doing daily harm to a federal judiciary badly in need of qualified judges.



NOTE: THE CARTER PLAN IS FIRST PAPER SOURCE

Reagan should steer clear of Teamsters

WASHINGTON — President Reagan raised a few eyebrows by inviting Teamsters President Roy Lee Williams to the White House a few days after the union boss had been indicted by a federal grand jury. This was perceived as a gesture of appreciation for the only support Reagan got from a major labor union in the 1980 election.

But before he gets too cozy with the Teamsters brass, the president might be well advised to read a secret report on the union by the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee. He could spare his administration the kind of embarrassment the Carter White House suffered from its strange relations with the Teamsters.

The bipartisan report shows how Teamsters bosses manipulated Carter's labor secretary, Ray Marshall, and other officials to cover up evidence of either political chicanery or gross incompetence in the government's investigation of Teamsters' corruption.

My associate Clark Mollenhoff has seen a copy of the subcommittee's report, and it is devastating. It makes painfully clear that the Labor Department under Marshall destroyed the effectiveness of its own investigation into the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund.

Teamsters officials have compiled a notorious record for thwarting government investigations into their pension fund. Yet Marshall's Labor Department chose not to use its subpoena powers to obtain pertinent records on the fund's loss of millions of dollars in dubious loans.

Instead, the department asked the pension fund managers for documents under a voluntary agreement. Needless to say, the Teamsters managers were delighted to agree. The agreement left them free to engage in the obstructive, foot-dragging techniques.

"The major shortcoming in the system



Jack Anderson
UNITED FEATURE SYNDICATE

was that it was based on 100 percent willingness of the fund to cooperate with the Labor Department," the Senate report states. "But that degree of cooperation was not forthcoming."

The trustees withheld some requested records, offered documents that were not authenticated or obtained under oath, and finally "made it a formal policy not to turn over any records" at all, the subcommittee reports.

Despite the union bosses' refusal to cooperate — and the Carter administration's strident refusal to force such cooperation — the Labor Department sleuths were able to uncover widespread abuse in the management of the pension fund.

Records indicated that loans had been made to companies on the verge of bankruptcy and to borrowers who had been delinquent on earlier loans — even to borrowers who used new loans to pay interest on their outstanding debts to the fund.

There were myriad other abuses, but when the investigators sought permission for a full-scale inquiry their requests were rejected. The inquiry was narrowed to the question of whether real estate loans had proper collateral.

According to the Senate report, Labor Department officials deliberately stifled criminal investigations, threw up barriers to any cooperation with the Justice Department and illegally destroyed files

when an internal investigation indicated "conflicts of interest, obstruction of justice and sexual misconduct" by high Labor Department officials.

Soft(ball) on communism

In this of all seasons, a Soviet Embassy team has just won a city softball league championship, with a record that looks like a Kremlin election: 10-0.

But before you worry about Russian moles, I should explain that the team has its Kremlin connection at all. It is made up mostly of journalists and other writers with a wry sense of humor. Games open to the "embassy" team captain's exhortation: "OK, comrades. Let's take the field."

On one occasion, the "embassy" captain, novelist Bob Reiss, was called by the security officer of the opponents' firm, who explained that his company did sensitive research and development work for the U.S. government. "You know, we're not allowed to talk to communists at conventions," the security officer said. When he got to the point of saying he'd have to give him a team security briefing before the game, the "embassy" captain finally blurted out a confession. Next year, Reiss told my associate Howard Rosenberg, the team may call itself "the Iranian Students Association."

Watch on waste

It may puzzle those of you who spend hard-earned bucks to holiday in Hawaii, but the Pentagon actually foots the bill for Defense Department employees and their families to travel from their Hawaiian posts to the mainland for vacation. The cost for the Hawaiian contingent's air fares totaled \$608,032 over a two-year period. The Pentagon brass have asked Congress to bid "aloha" to this costly privilege.

At least one person in this world doesn't worry about gaining weight

Diet books have become about the hottest products in publishing. There are currently three diet books on the New York Times best-seller list.

And soon there might be a fourth. I recently interviewed Ralph Peptic, author of the soon-to-be published book: "The Stress and Misery Diet Book."

Peptic, formerly an accountant, used to be a typically overweight American male: 5 feet 11 inches tall, 225 pounds. Now he's still 5 feet 11 inches. But he weighs 125 pounds.

I asked him how he did it. "To begin with," he said, "I had tried all the diets. Carbohydrate diets. Protein diets. Weight Watchers. Pritikin. You name it, and I tried it. But none of them worked for me."

"Then I discovered my own plan, which I call the Stress and Misery Diet. In my diet, you don't count calories. You don't omit this food or that food. You don't worry about eating three small but well-balanced meals a day. You don't even think about what you eat or when you eat it."

That's incredible. How does it work? "The way it worked with me was this:



Mike Royko
CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

One day I came home from work and found a note on the table. It was from my wife. It said:

"Dear Ralph: You remember that piano bar player we both liked so much when we went out to celebrate our last anniversary — the one who played 'our song' and you tipped him \$5? Well, I liked him even more than you did. In fact, I liked him so much that I have moved out and I am now living with him. Best of luck, Norrine."

"That's awful."

"Yes, it was. But it led me to my diet. I went into total shock. I was in a deep depression for weeks."

"Then one day I ran into an old friend, and he said: 'Ralph, you really look

good.' I said: 'I do? But I really feel bad.' And he said: 'I don't care how you feel, I haven't seen you look this trim in years.'"

"So I got on the scale and weighed myself. I had dropped about 35 pounds."

"How?"

"After my wife left me, I was filled with such stress that I couldn't eat. My stomach was knotted up."

"But you've since lost a lot more weight than that."

"Right. You see, just about the time I was getting over my wife leaving me, my appetite was starting to come back, my wife returned. She said she had realized that she had made a terrible mistake."

"I was so happy I started eating again, and in one month I gained about 10 pounds."

"Then she left me again."

"That's terrible."

"No, I didn't feel as bad the second time around. But what really clobbered me were the bills she left behind. I was hopelessly in debt. I was a total, psychological wreck. In two months I had dropped another 30 or 40 pounds. And everyone I met told me how great I looked, except for the haunted look in

my eyes. So I wore sunglasses."

"About that time, my boss told me that my work had fallen off. Of course it had. The stress and misery from my personal problems were driving me crazy."

"But he told me that if I didn't shape up in one month, he was going to fire me."

"So for a month, I worked night and day. I was like a man possessed. I had stomach cramps, anxiety attacks, I hyperventilated and I couldn't eat a bite."

"At the end of that month, I looked like a marathon runner. But my boss didn't fire me. He said I did fine. Except the company went bankrupt, and I was out of a job anyway."

"About that time, the divorce papers came through, and my wife got the house, the furniture, the car, the camper, the kids, and I got the debts and the child-support payments."

"By the time that was over I was down to my present weight of 125 pounds."

"How have you kept it there?"

"By trying to pay off the debts, trying to find a job, trying to stay out of jail for failure to pay the child support and

brooding about being rejected by my wife."

Fine. But shouldn't a diet be combined with exercise? That's what all the experts say.

"Right. And mine gives a lot of exercise. My legs are in terrific shape from nervously pacing the floor for hours."

Is that much exercise?

"It is when your hands shake even while you're asleep."

But if this book is a success, you're going to make a lot of money, and you'll be able to eat again. You'll be able to clear up your debts, pay off your wife and you won't have anything to be miserable about. You could gain weight again."

"I know. And I'm terribly worried about that, too. The thought of all that success is causing me terrible stress. But I think I have the answer to all that money."

What is it?

"I'll worry about my taxes. That'll get me down to 100 pounds."

Good luck.

"Don't say that — it would ruin my life."