

# Soul Food for Thought at the Kitchen Table

MONA DA VINCI

**DENNIS OPPENHEIM, Recent Works (The Kitchen, 484 Broome St., through Oct. 4):**

Sometimes while viewing "conceptual" art I feel like a translator of an alien art form from another world, beyond the two-dimensional, personal world of appearances. I begin to wonder if it's any longer interesting for conceptual artists to test or try the audience's preconceived notions, anticipations, expectations, or perhaps more simply, patience or tolerance level. With most conceptual artists, their presentations wind up getting bogged down with an overload of technological "objects," simultaneously plugged in and blasting away fragmentary, disconnected raw data. When the artist has been overwhelmed by the automatic impact on all the senses, generated by sophisticated audio-visual equipment, the result is an explosive release of electronic energy that disintegrates both the conceptions and the cohesiveness of the artist's given presentation.

Because I admire the work of Dennis Oppenheim, these opening remarks concerning several of the possibilities of aesthetic failures due to "technological trauma," evident in much conceptual art employing the use of multi-media equipment, seem on rather safe ground. Oppenheim's prolific exhibition of recent works now at the Kitchen, channels our energies (and his own) in so many different directions at once, that it's hard to



Oppenheim's new installation at the Kitchen

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tell if he's putting on a mini-retrospective, or again offering to the viewer a unique, new challenge.

One of Oppenheim's major abilities is the almost perfect way he adapts his work to the particular space where he shows. It appears though, that he experienced quite a few difficulties in arranging his works with full force in the "Kitchen" space. One enters the smaller, darkened outer room first, and is greeted by a TV monitor placed on the floor. The color video tape being shown on the monitor, is an overhead view of a man twirling a naked little girl around and around by holding her arms. The images gradually speed up and become abstract until the spinning motion of the connected bodies demonstrates an apparent centrifugal force. The form of the child takes on the properties of a satellite, about to break away from the denser form of the man spinning rapidly about the central axis. The video tape effectively captures the velocity, the astronomy and the forces acting on moving bodies in space.

In the same room, Oppenheim is showing three separate projections, side by side on the wall, of his color film, "Whirlpool." The middle projection is being shown sideways. All three scenes together have a certain alogical, sequential order that works visually quite well, only because the film is a documentary of Oppenheim's aerial spiral made

by a skywriting plane in 1971. The outer circumference of this smoke-spiral measured over a mile. he gave instructions to the pilot by radio from the ground, and filmed the event from a plane and the ground. One observes the snake-like spiral from many angles. From above, the form casts a strange, moving cloud-shadow on the deserted terrain below. The ground views show the spiral formation taking shape from the imperceptible skywriter's ethereal drawing. An art form emerges that totally abandons the "ground" or the paper for a smokey, atmospheric line drawn in mid-air. The finished spiral floats off into the expanse like a magnificent Indian smoke-signal.

Oppenheim's new installation in the Kitchen's larger space consists of two of his morphological, small figures seated at opposite ends of a low, seventy-foot-long formica table. The table has seven ten-foot sections marking off surface color gradations ranging from black, gray, and beige, to white shades or tones. The figures wear cloth suits and have plaster heads, one white and one black, although they look like twins. Oppenheim considers the figures as surrogate performers for different aspects of himself, and they do resemble his facial features. The white figure sits at the white end of the table and the black figure sits at the black end. Both face a table microphone and their moving, hinged mouths are

activated and controlled by speakers connected to an audio tape. The figures appear to speak directly into the mikes and their voices are amplified by external speakers. The dialogue spoken by Oppenheim imitates the groovy jive-talk of a black man (which he spoke as a child growing up with his black friends in California). The black figure voices an accusatory stream of shooting statements across the vast distance of the color-barriers that separate him from the white figure.

Oppenheim's little figures, like the ancestor figures in primitive cultures, constellate the theme of the "double-motif," or shadow complex, where irrational forces aim to usurp the status quo by forcing an interchange of identities between the black side and the white side. The black voice bombards the white figure with threatening, irrational elements, with the sounds of drums adding to the tension. Forced to sit and listen to his black double, the white figure's mouth begins speaking exactly like the black man. It seems as though the dark, other side is absorbed into his "lilly-white" head by the osmosis of sound finally getting under his skin.

Oppenheim's new installation has flaws which he is more acutely aware of than anyone else. As one of our best conceptual artists, he's grappling to shape, analyse and understand the personal and social implications of his piece as a new

challenge he can't avoid or ignore. Whatever formal and structural corrections he decides to make are indispensable procedures, based on maintaining his integral awareness of the experimental nature of the art. He can then powerfully encounter the actual thrust of the prevailing cultural shifts operating at the present time, once he has thoroughly examined and sifted through the subjective factors implicit in this new work.