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Unearthing Ant Farm: a quarter century after the disbanding of Ant Farm, a traveling exhibition pieces together the history of this group of iconoclastic, media-obsessed artists

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Ant Farm may be largely unknown to the general public, but many people, even those with little interest in contemporary art, will be familiar with the image of 10 vintage Cadillacs half-buried nose down in a field. Cadillac Ranch (1974), which still stands rusting and graffiti-covered in Amarillo, Tex., may be the only indelible image created by this renegade, hippie-era artistic collaborative. Indeed, "Ant Farm 1968-1978," organized by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, demonstrates that while visual punch and graphics were definitely their bag, Ant Farm members were less concerned with manufacturing images than they were with grass-roots political activism that involved the local public and the mass media. Many of their projects were never actually produced and take the form of elaborate blueprints or stylish graphics with explanatory texts that resemble commercial art. Others were so ephemeral as to be inconsequential. The show's co-curator Steve Seid describes their "processual" approach to videos made on road trips as mementos rather than works "polished for posterity."

Founded in San Francisco in 1968, Ant Farm was the brainchild of architecture post-grads Chip Lord and Doug Michels. Over the course of a 10-year lifespan (the group disbanded in 1978, following a studio fire that destroyed much of its work), membership expanded and shrank--according to friendships, changing interests and such things as spiritual sabbaticals in India--but Lord and Michels, along with Curtis Schreier, remained its core. (1) They started out as an architecture and design group, and occasionally they did build buildings, but for the most part Ant Farm's activities belonged to the most experimental art forms of the day: performance, video, installation and environmental art. While contemporaries such as Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman were experimenting with low-tech, body-centered forms, Ant Farm promoted a mod, space-age sensibility and often embraced the latest technologies. From videos and performances spoofing corporate culture and the media to Dolphin Embassy (1976), which promoted man-to-sea mammal communication, Ant Farm's work dealt with critiquing the present and envisioning the future. The collective was also ahead of its time in its multi-tasking, interdisciplinary approach. Graphic design, PR, publishing, teaching and engineering, among other areas of expertise, all came under its artistic umbrella.

Ant Farm projects of a single year give an idea of the group's broad range. In 1972 they designed the award-winning House of the Century, an outlandish home on a lake in Texas that looks like a bulbous nose and eyes, and launched Top Value Television (T VTV, in collaboration with the video collective Raindance) to provide alternative coverage of the political conventions of that year. Meanwhile, in Houston, they created an unusual time capsule for the opening of the Contemporary Arts Museum's new building: a refrigerator ("open door to the American dream") stocked with everything from false eyelashes to NoDoz. The fridge also stored Ant Farm's Videotapes of the museum's opening parties and humdrum scenes of Houston. The catalogue for the present exhibition takes on this diversity one discipline or medium at a time (architecture, inflatable structures, video), and an interview by co-curator Constance M. Lewallen with Ant Farm's three "principals" (Lord, Michels and Schreier) provides a chatty chronology. (The interview's significance as a historical document has been amplified by Michels's sudden death just six months before the exhibition was to open in Berkeley.) While conjuring the zeitgeist so vividly you could smell the patchouli oil, the catalogue unfortunately has little to say about the group's relationship to Conceptual art and other kindred movements of the time.

In its early days, Ant Farm hit the road with a tour of "architectural performances" during which the group unfurled its anti-architectural "inflatables," inexpensive, portable shelters made of vinyl that provided the stage for lectures and "happenings" (read: hanging out, sometimes naked). Anyone who wanted to make his or her own inflatable could buy Ant Farm's Inflatocookbook. The group traveled in the Media Van (1971), a customized Chevy complete with a bubble skylight for videotaping roadside scenery. Influenced by Buckminster Fuller, Le Corbusier and Archigram, Ant Farm explored utopian notions of how communities might

function and communicate. For example, Truckstop Network (1970) was a proposed system of neighborhoods for "new nomads" like themselves who would be connected by television and computer. The system was designed to provide everything Dora electricity and day care to astrology classes. Freedomland (1973) proposed a mall (or "electro-video landscape" in Ant Farm-speak) for teenagers, combining an interior park with shopping and leisure activities--available on foot, but also on television in Ant Farm's precursor to the Shopping Network--all under one big plastic bubble roof. In a farcical non sequitur typical of their work, the structure was also supposed to house the world's largest snake.

More rock band than avant-garde art collective, Ant Farm loved publicity and crowds. Fame came with Cadillac Ranch in 1974, their homage to the tailfin, and their spectacular performance piece and video, Media Burn, staged on Independence Day of the following year. In the latter, the Phantom Dream Car--a customized, bug-eyed Cadillac with a third tailfin protruding from the roof--was driven at full speed into a wall of burning television sets. Their video of the event is styled after news coverage of a space launch, including melodramatic pre-stunt interviews with the spacesuited artists and a speech by "JFK" (impersonated by Doug Hall). The work stands as a symbolic annihilation of America's two most precious and insidious commodities, the TV and the car, and, by extension, an attack on corporate control of wealth and mass-media control of information.

Media Burn was widely covered on TV--which is not surprising, since the audience for the actual event was largely limited to the press. As Lewallen observes in the catalogue, Media Burn exemplifies Ant Farm's "remarkable ability to exploit the very medium they opposed." (2) In a letter to Stanley Marsh 3, funder of Cadillac Ranch, signed "Rip-Off Artists" in their typically jocular manner, they request money (\$1,147 according to their rather anal calculation) to produce "trash souvenirs"--a Cadillac Ranch baseball cap, T-shirt and coffee mug--to help offset expenses. They dug marketing, too.

Their videos best demonstrate how integral the mediated point of view is to Ant Farm's work. "Every style of delivery was plundered: the talk show, the industrial, the diary, the travelogue, the magazine," writes Seid. Videos of their performances never offer straight coverage of the event. Instead, they are highly edited pieces, featuring commentary from eyewitnesses and the performers themselves, along with much behind-the-scenes footage. The Eternal Frame (1975), their meticulously researched yet sophomoric video reenactment of the JFK assassination, includes outtakes and comments from the artists ("puts an end to my interest in it") and spectators ("irresponsible and meaningless" says one high-school teacher). The best part of CARmen (1976), an opera of swishing windshield wipers and honking horns for 35 autos that was conducted in front of the Sydney Opera House by an Ant Farmer disguised as a kangaroo, is their deadpan appearances on several Australian talk shows. Ant Farm became so adept at manipulating the media that their fictitious Sydney mayoral candidate, Ned Telly, finished third out of seven in the 1977 race.

The Ant Farm exhibition occasioned a reunion for the group, who designed the show's documentation-based display as a timeline that wraps, U-shaped, around three gallery walls. It stands as an artwork in and of itself. Assembled salon-style around a green, wainscot-high band are all manner of ephemera from the Ant Farm archive: mounted photographs, architectural renderings, drawings, exhibition installation plans, graphics such as logos and posters, mail art, press clips, photobooth pictures of the artists, collages combining any number of the items previously mentioned along with campy images culled from old magazines, promotional appliques and stickers, and rough-cut video footage on occasional wall-mounted monitors that form part of the collage. Newspaper clippings of epochal contemporary events--from My Lai and Chappaquiddick to the Apollo moon shot and the Nixon campaign--also add to the melange.

Additional rowboat-sized cases offer secondary material, including such items as the 1973 spread in Playboy on House of the Century as a groovy, bachelor pad, the Bruce Springsteen album featuring the song "Cadillac Ranch," car advertisements and posters from movies that appropriated the Cadillac Ranch image, among other evidence of the group's impact on popular culture. Visual relief is provided by a single, towering inflatable, the penguinlike ICE-9 (1971), that dominated the main gallery in Berkeley. It was the perfect antidote to the Berkeley Art Museum's heavy New Brutalist architecture, the very style, coincidentally, Ant Farm set out to oppose with its airy, pret-a-porter inflatables. The beat-up Phantom Dream Car from Media Burn was parked in the lobby. Videotapes played in separate screening room.

By definition, timelines are meant to provide a straightforward, factual unfolding of events. That is not the case here. Instead, the artists created a chronological collage from scraps of non-hierarchical information that requires piecing together by the viewer. Everything you need to know about Ant Farm is there--somewhere. The problem is navigating the ocean of information and deciphering the evidence. True to Ant Farm's subversiveness, the timeline is almost a pseudo-documentary designed to convey their esthetic and spirit rather than coherently track their accomplishments. One especially amusing event is described in a 1970 Oakland Tribune article whose headline reads "Breathing--That's their Bag." It describes a "teachin" at UC-Berkeley in which passersby were beseeched by white-jacketed Ant Farm members wearing gas masks to enter a life-saving inflatable that screens out pollutants. The article sounds so "Saturday Night Live" that one questions its veracity as a newspaper clipping (which it actually is, albeit photocopied with an altered date and image). Since so many of the documents on view are themselves doctored items or spoofs, factuality becomes suspect.

A frustrating effect of this exhibition is that after so much looking and reading, a great deal of basic information--the who, what, when, where and why can remain elusive. My advice to visitors is: take your reading glasses, buckle your seatbelts and get ready for a heady, comic ride through Ant Farm's 10-year sprint into the future.

(1.) Other members included Hudson Marquez, Joe Hall, Andy Shapiro, Kelly Gloger and Michael Wright.

(2.) Constance M. Lewallen and Steve Seid, *Ant Farm 1968-1978*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 2.

"Ant Form 1968-1978" debuted at the Berkeley Art Museum [Jan. 21-Apr. 26, 2004] before embarking on the following travel schedule: Santa Monica Museum of Art [July 2-Aug. 14, 2004]; University of Pennsylvania, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia [Sept. 10-Dec. 12, 2004]; Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston [Jan. 15-Mar. 13, 2005]; ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie), Karlsruhe, Germany [Apr. 30-July 24, 2005]; and the Yale University School of Architecture Gallery [Aug. 29-Nov. 4, 2005]. The 188-page catalogue, published by the University of California Press, includes contributions by the show's curators, Constance M. Lewallen and Steve Seid, as well as Michael Sorkin, Caroline Maniague and Chip Lord. The Ant Farm videos *Media Burn* and *The Eternal Frame* were on view at the International Center of Photography, New York [Sept. 17-Nov. 28, 2004].

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