The rooms at San Francisco's Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens have never gotten over their first public exposure with Renny Pritikin's installation of In Out of the Cold *(October 12, 1993-December 5, 1993), the show he devised and carried out at the outset of his distinguished tenure as Chief Curator there. No one since has so firmly and adventurously taken Fumihiko Maki's perennially daunting airplane-hangar-like galleries in hand—unforgettably setting telling combinations of works up the walls in towering arrays. This was a show that meant something in that unbeatable way when a curator's ideas (permeable as Renny's were then and still are) and the art works he confronts actually affect, rather than simply decorating, one another, thus enlivening the conversation for everyone, including the curator himself .*

B.B.

The Salon at Mission and Third

There was a healthful porousness "In Out of the Cold," the inaugural show at the Center for the Arts in San Francisco's new Yerba Buena Gardens. This salutary effect followed partly from the ample breathing spaces of Fumihiko Maki's building, empathetic to local drifts of light and scale, and partly from the way the presentation of the show itself, which was about duress and empathy on a global scale, by turns acceded to and smartly modified the givens of Maki's largesse. Playing fast and loose with sociopolitical myths and positionings of the past half-century (and in some cases, more), the show gathered to its complex theme an amalgam of contemporary art works and historically charged non-art oddments. One could, for instance, turn from the ironic gauds in Ralfa Valentin Gonzalez's depiction of mariachi *conjuntos* in heaven and hell to the earnest pallor of a plaster replica of Tiananmen Square's Goddess of Democracy made in San Francisco by Chinese political refugees and feel ever more happily inclined toward what the show's accompanying catalogue text calls "the refusal of dualisms."

Permeability was the message of the two most visually bountiful set pieces on

view—beekeeper-artist Mark Thompson's funerary vault of translucent, beeswax-coated plexiglas blocks and Gregory Barsamian's strobe-animated spin cycle of helicopters turning into angels and back again. These two works also happened to bracket everything else by dint of appearing respectively first and last in the main body of the exhibition. Thompson built his chamber floor-to-ceiling within a specially partitioned, windowless anteroom at the top of which one of Maki's many skylights provided both a light source and a point of passage for the comings and goings of 30,000-odd constituents of a beehive nestled in the rib cage of a waxed-over bull skeleton reclining on the floor. The interior tableau, inspired by an ancient Egyptian rite of symbiosis and renewal, was visible through narrow apertures lined with wire mesh at about waist level. Approaching this sanctuary by way of a slight jog just inside the first main gallery, you immediately caught a seductive whiff of raw honey. A tape of Yugoslav peasant farmers' vocalese, imitating bird and bee sounds, augmented the feeling of murmurous aspiration Thompson set into play as the exhibition's keynote.

No less literally highminded was Barsamian's imagery of airborne metamorphosis in the final gallery upstairs—even if it was all an illusion produced by a series of small clay sculptures tilted out on wires attached to a motorized disk hung from the ceiling. (There were in fact just one helicopter and one angel, plus a dozen or so transitional shapes between. but the intervening elements whizzed by so quickly that you saw them as contiguous phases in a single time-lapse unfolding.) Perpetually whirling and flickering in the otherwise dim room, Barsamian's spectacle put a cap on the restorative intimations of Thompson's piece, both morphologically and in terms of prolonged delight.

As it was, "In Out of the Cold" arrived relatively unheralded amid the more general buzz accompanying the public unveiling of the Yerba Buena architectural complex as a whole, which had been fitfully in the works since 1980. (The plan for some such complex dates back to 1964, when the immediate neighborhood, long

known for its dim bars, X-rated theaters and pensioner hotels, discomfitingly near to the financial district, was slated for large-scale cosmetic overhaul.) Sheathed with corrugated aluminum and affording glass-wall views of the world outdoors. Maki's sleek, low-slung shed sits on one corner of the redevelopment expanse, at the busy intersection of Mission and Third streets.

Because Yerba Buena and its environs continue to be linked to the downside of human vicissitude (a short walk still gets you to the epicenter of desolation midtown, at Mission and Sixth), it's fitting that the Center be geared to become an arena of debate over what most pertinently constitutes serious contemporary-arts expression in the city. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's imposing new building, directly across Third Street, is scheduled to open next January. Already speculation is rife as to what this face-off between two major visual-arts institutions with sharply divergent curatorial agendas will mean. The museum has so far acted, with impeccable logic, as a showcase for institutionally manageable museum-type art—granted that the type comes now in ever more variously recognizable configurations and shades. Contrariwise, in the words of Yerba Buena's Renny Pritikin who, as artistic director for visual arts, masterminded "In Out of the Cold," the plan at the Center is "to balance the availability of institutional authority to groups that have in recent decades begun overcoming inequities on the political level." Since Pritikin came to his present position from 13 years as a director of New Langton Arts, arguably the most vivacious of the Bay Area's many enduring alternative venues, it's assumed that his balancing act will entail greater civic prominence for the often raggle-taggle and/or overtly political kinds of art to which he's been committed by long practice. Certainly, nothing in the present show was inconsistent with that assumption. The question hangs as to the makeup and numbers of whatever more general audiences Pritikin's normally attitudinal, avant-garde-ish offerings will draw. (During its first, admission-free week, the Center had some 50,000 visitors: thereafter, the attendance figures

tapered off, though remaining respectable, thanks in part to large numbers of senior citizens dropping in from the immediate neighborhood.)

The rationale and, ultimately the prevailing meta-esthetic for "In Out of the Cold" was Pritikin's. The title satisfied the need for a heading pliable enough to cover an awesomely comprehensive thematic premise (mainly, a hither-thither sifting through the manifold cultural implications of the Cold War and the seemingly irremediable chaos that has followed) as well as to get a grip, pincer-fashion, on the quasi-encyclopedic range of things Pritikin and his assistant, Rene de Guzman, chose to exemplify it. To claim, as did one of the promotional brochures, that this range amounted to "a snapshot of . . . diversity" seemed both true and overly modest. But a certain modesty was one of the show's overall strengths. The selection reflected the ambition to be world-class while holding to a pre-dominantly local-artists base. Roughly 60 percent of the 35 artists involved live in the San Francisco Bay Area, the remainder having been pretty well drawn from far and wide. There were, as the critic Jeff Kelley put it, "immigrants. a drag queen, a twin, a Native American Vietnam veteran quadriplegic, famous artists and lesser known, old and young, a Christian artist, and the spouse of] a descendant of the Romanoff family line"

Contending with the 25-foot ceilings of the galleries on the first floor, Pritikin stacked a number of his mixed-media wall groupings from the baseboards upward, suggestive of a latter-day salon. In order to adjust the scale of the architecture to suit that of its contents, he also built into the main hall's vastness a central cube of contrastingly compact proportions with doorways for entering four separate ethno-specific installations by Betye Saar, Hilda Shum, Carmen Lomas Garza and Lyle Ashton Harris. Elsewhere in the same hall, in a headlong surge of presentational glee, Pritikin made a wall of wonders, led off at one end by Andrei Roiter's sculptural glosses on the shabby production values of Soviet surveillance and propaganda systems and terminating 44 feet away with George Legrady's interactive CD-ROM

archive of his family's life in Hungary under Soviet occupation. In between, the eye was set free to bumble among the tilts and gibes of Jerome Caja's exquisitely tacky, bite-size, nail-polish-and-eyeliner paintings and the multilingual plaster hand signals of Thet Shein Win's *Urban Mudra*, or else to zoom aloft to one of Manuel Ocampo's enormous retablos (this one declaring "Adios" to Church, State and the recently deceased TV actor Herve "Tattoo" Villachaise, as well). Immersed in the overall array, you could feel at every point the onward tug of a big idea being put forth swimmingly. The resolute curatorial focus had the virtue of calling other, even bigger contexts to mind; thus, a feeling for what or who was missing—kinds of art, artists and the issues they would raise—was implicit in what was there.

"Cold" in Pritikin's terms meant, to begin with, the Cold War, understood in retrospect as an infernal centering device issuing forth, on either side of the superpower divide, a tundralike glaze of cultural uniformity. The ideological succinctness in Cold War alignments, together with the maniacal excesses of the arms race, was tidily sent up by Paul Kos's 1990-vintage row of 14 gray-painted cuckoo clocks (retroactively prophetic, with their hammer-and-sickle pendulums, of the dissolution of the 14-member Eastern Bloc) and Chris Burden's grid of 50,000 nickels topped with matchsticks, constituting *The Reason for the Neutron Bomb* (a nickel and match for every Warsaw Pact tank aimed westward in 1979, when Burden made the piece). Tellingly, Kos's and Burden's by-the-numbers orderings shared the first gallery with a vitrine bearing irregularly shaped relics of recent history: shards, one each, from the Berlin Wall, Muammar Qaddafi's bombed-out home, and a camera shop set ablaze in the 1992 Los Angeles uprising. From there, in the seepage from militant dualities and their no-less-anxious after-math, Pritikin envisioned the eponymous chill extending readily over fringe areas of what he calls "dislocation, diaspora and exile," to which are consigned those who don't fit any mainstream cultural scenario, whether of the latest overriding nationalism or the countless splinter ideologies we're left with

as old-time allegiances flake apart.

The world Pritikin describes in his catalogue preface is a fearful mess in which "identity . . . is problematic, at worst fractured, impure, imposed, constructed of signs, and at best mobile, hybrid, multilayered and complex." Signs of displacement—habitual to the art world and to the streets around the Center alike (in the 1970s Pritikin himself lived close by what is now the Yerba Buena site)—are alluded to briskly in the catalogue, but in the exhibition proper they appeared in force, pointedly in Elaine Badgley-Arnoux's collaboration with people living on the South-of-Market streets to produce a wagon-train circle of shopping carts, each covered with paint-spattered canvas and holding a placard inscribed with a personal tale of survival against heavy odds. (Despite official policy to the contrary, San Francisco police had begun confiscating carts from the homeless in early October, just before the show opened.)

Pritikin's thesis, with its glimmer of promise, was neither heavyhandedly put forth nor, finally, as half-baked as it might have seemed. (During the latter half of the 1980s, for instance, anyone could have noted the synchronicity between the developments of perestroika/glasnost and American institutions' embracing, however haltingly, of art works characterized as "oppositional" along with, eventually, their "multicultural" equivalents.) If the title's prepositional phrase "In Out of" was meant to suggest that some assuasive power might be at hand, Pritikin made a stab at describing at least the mental conditions that could qualify for a more survival-apt future. He writes of a political world "now better understood as a complex and ever-changing ecology of interdependencies" and follows through, speaking to his own purposes: "This exhibition . . . presents work that addresses a reformulation of political and cultural boundaries without employing outmoded models..." To replace the "outmoded," Pritikin fixed on the sculptural mold as "the epitome of mischievousness…simultaneously a positive image, a negative image and a third

thing…the unexpected alternative." As it happened, this ethos of "the mold itself" could be seen as the guiding principle for Pritikin's curatorial handling throughout. The felicity of Pritikin's own curatorial handling showed in subtle blendings-cum-recapitulations of typology and theme, as well as in occasionally shrewd softenings of standard institutional framings. There were in fact many molds, literal and implied, whichever way one looked, from Cherie Raciti's hydrocal body-part casts to the glove forms Betye Saar used to represent the migratory spirits of the African Diaspora and the surgical trays and cast-urethane antlers of the Korean-American conceptualist Michael Joo.

Given the regulating pressure of a historicist theme, the show's miscellany kept a fairly constant momentum. Within a multiplex of rhymes and cross-references, each work "read" well enough into the next that there was no opportunity for any single piece to assume exceptional importance. The word on the street was that, even if you didn't have a taste for this kind of theme exhibition, the Barsamian and Thompson pieces were worth inspecting. Further plaudits went to Legrady, the Korean-American conceptualist Michael Joo and Alfred J. Quiroz (whose *Novus Ordo*, a map-mural caricaturing just about every identifiable head of state, served implicitly as a logo for the entire show). Beyond those, David Hammons's *Black Star Line*, a massive painted-plywood star connected by a green-tinged hawser to a cleat, exerted an outright *force majeure* that was otherwise absent (presumably because unwanted) in the art on hand. There was consensus about which works succeeded, but no agreement as to which works were discountable. In terms of visual appeal alone, very little looked all that great: obviously, "greatness" in a show that revels in egalitarian demographic vistas would be some kind of gaucherie. Some pieces made their points and nothing beside, while almost all appeared high on provisionality and insouciant about questions of high-art status. In terms of sheer getting-down-to-cases, Stephanie A. Johnson's installation of post-office boxes as sites for direct, if anonymous, monetary exchange

took the prize for candor. Its instructions read: "In the spirit of Ujaama, take a dollar if you need one; leave a dollar if you have one. Dollars collected will be given to children for art." (The piece raised some $1,500 for children's art projects by the closing day.) The most elegant-looking sculptural object as such turned out to be a gold-plated missile-guidance system on loan from the Air Force Museum. There was no abstract art at all. (If, as the story goes, the success of "American-type" abstraction was a sidebar to Cold War politics, then some sign of it—at least in the form of an ironic commentary—seemed warranted.) Some thought the assembled works erred on the side of mildness. But the more or less consensual artists-and-curators' non-aggression pact with the Center's anticipated audience could be seen to jibe with whatever few, faint tingles of clearheaded pragmatism might be detected along the current geopolitical spectrum. Here Pritikin made his agenda plain: when asked about the decision to keep the show relatively tantrum-free, as against the scorn-and-scold barrages of other similar "identity" shows, he took the question as a measure of professional responsibility: "Multiculturalism is not the enemy," he told me. "Sloppy curating is the enemy."

Cumulatively, the facets of Pritikin's thesis allowed for a dazzling mingle of short- and long-term memories: the Cold War lasted nearly half a century; there were histories alluded to in the show which reach back hundreds (and in the case of Thompson's "Egyptian- room, thousands) of years, and still others that find their inceptions within only the past decade or so. By my calculations, the median age of the artists was 42, which yields an average birth year of 1951, or right about the time the terms of the Cold War era had settled into place.

Bill Berkson, 1994

Original published as "Report From San Francisco," Art in America*, June, 1994; and again in Bill Berkson,* For the Ordinary Artist *(BlazeVOX, 2010).*