

POLIS #7: A Newsletter of Art Museums & Politics

THE RAINBOW SHOW, at the de Young Museum & other Bay Area Art Museums & Science Museums. Curator: FLG, 1975

NOTE: The primary purpose of THE RAINBOW SHOW was to celebrate the fact that the city's newly united art museums had a whole new view of contemporary art (in particular), and (in general) a new vision of its relationship with the Bay Area community. For many years, both the de Young Museum & the Legion of Honor Museum had a policy against showing contemporary art. They regarded themselves as Old Master museums, and wanted contemporary art to be seen at museums that had this focus. Over a period of four years, I slowly turned the Board away from this stance with a series of small shows of considerable quality. They finally agreed to allow large shows of contemporary art. THE RAINBOW SHOW would be the first.

The Board also had come to agree that the new Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco should have a more open attitude toward the many communities of the City and the Bay Area who had shown little interest in the de Young & the Legion. Those "palaces" were regarded by many as white, upper middle-class playgrounds. There was little reason for poor people, or people of color to visit. THE RAINBOW SHOW would show a different face to the community. In the spirit of "community," all Bay Area museums (art & science) were invited to co-create this Bay-Area celebration of color, light, and contemporary life. The organizing committee that I established and chaired had representatives from the major museums and many community groups – black, white, brown, yellow, red...in other words "all the colors of the rainbow."

Years of planning turned into months of physical preparation under the supervision of Tom Garver. I was offsite preparing THE RAINBOW BOOK. Funding came in from the city, 7-up, and the State of California at the recommendation of Gov. Jerry Brown who asked me to consider taking the show up and down the state inside a RAINBOW TRAIN. The publicity was quite positive. The following article by Jan Butterfield provides a good overview of what things looked like just before the show opened. Excitement ran high as we approached the opening on the Spring Equinox of 1975. A major

feature of the "Rainbow Experience" was walking through a "Rainbow Passage" that ended in a fantasyland over which the "World's Largest Rainbow Hologram" was to glow. Alas, a member of the construction crew (who hated the show) decided to sabotage the show by making a faulty installation of the hologram. The day before the opening, the "World's Largest Rainbow Hologram" came crashing to the ground. It was not a good sign. But...*on with the show!*

THE RAINBOW SHOW broke all attendance records at the de Young. The crowds loved it. And all the "hot" media (radio & TV) loved it. However, not all of the "cold" media of newspapers felt the same way. The San Francisco EXAMINER was not sure just why I did it but he let it pass as a "popular show." However, the art critic of the San Francisco CHRONICLE, Al Frankenstein, hated the show deeply. He wrote about it with unbridled passion, saying (in so many words) that to allow community-based art into an august museum was a betrayal of sacred standards! Multicolored junk was standing next to Rembrandt! The curator should be tarred and feathered! (etc.)

THE RAINBOW BOOK, however, based on the show was an unqualified success in the eyes of many reviewers nation-wide, and in the eyes of over 100,000 people who bought it. (To my knowledge, only Frankenstein hated the book.) [For book reviews, CLICK HERE; http://worldartpress.com/reviews/](http://worldartpress.com/reviews/)

The museum Board had never experienced the kind of criticism that was coming in from the CHRONICLE. They were not sure how to respond, except to get rid of the person responsible for this black mark on the museum's reputation. A year before, I had decided to resign in 1976 after the opening of the Rockefeller show. I wanted to head a new institute that would do cultural planning for museums and universities - a position for which I had been recruited by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Norton Simon Foundation. But with pressure from the Board, I decided to resign earlier than expected. I knew THE RAINBOW SHOW would be something of a social revolution, this expanding of the museum to its wider purpose; but I had not realized so much blood would be shed. After the wounds healed, a number of trustees thanked me for "putting the museum on the right track with the community." Even Frankenstein later apologized saying "I did not understand what you were trying to do." So all was not in vain. Contemporary art became

an organic part of the museum's program, and the museum had a new vision of itself as a social institution whose purpose is to feed the spirit of the community as a whole.

FLG, Winter 1975