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Bad Ideas

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by Elaine O'Brien Photos by Jesse Vasquez

The extraordinary career of Sacramento regional artist Stephen Kaltenbach has been a subject of rediscovery for the cosmopolitan art world in the last few years. His place at the center of the New York avant-garde in the late 1960s and the postminimal conceptual art he produced then and has produced since are now receiving serious international attention. Locally, however, Kaltenbach remains something of a famous unknown. Like a statue in a traffic island, he is a Presence most people here have seen only in part. What Sacramentans know best are the salient works on public display: the artist's mesmeric painting, *Portrait of my Father*, high point of the Crocker Art Museum's contemporary collection, and his disquietingly tranquil ruin, *A Time to Cast Away Stones*, at the Sacramento Convention Center. The enigma of Stephen Kaltenbach is partly the phenomenon of the prophet disregarded at home, but beyond that, mystery is intrinsic to his best art and paradigmatic to the historically significant conceptual production, which relies on the viewer's curiosity in a fundamental way that his traditional paintings and sculptures do not. The first Sacramento exhibition of Kaltenbach's conceptual art, *Nuclear Projects and Other Works* – forty major pieces from the four decades of his production – opens at the Verge Gallery on January 8. Sacramento's newest and most intelligently spirited contemporary art space, Verge provides the spare, minimalist theater this art requires. The show will surprise local Kaltenbach fans who expect his art to be beautiful, display masterful skill, and make a statement. Nothing in *Nuclear Projects* is meant to do these things, at least in any traditional way. Many are commissioned works not fabricated entirely by the artist, who makes a point of leaving the traces of other makers. No object in the exhibition aims to please the eye alone or prescribe meaning. Instead, they challenge the viewer to seek a possible disclosure of secrets and discover his or her own meanings. In this art, it is the viewer's response that defines the work and determines its success. Only a playful ease with unease can yield pleasure and possibly reveal the complexity of an artist whose work is elusive on



principle. The so-called anti-aesthetic strategies evident in *Nuclear Projects and Other Works* were developed and theorized by Kaltenbach and other conceptual artists in the late 1960s. Every critical issue of art today is rooted in the aesthetic and political reassessments of Kaltenbach's generation. His importance in art history derives from the ongoing influence of conceptualism – in one way or another – on every major artist who followed. Conceptual art has many global points of origin, but it emerged in New York out of Kaltenbach's milieu as a reaction to the formalist critical paradigm that dominated the late modernist art world in a way inconceivable today. In the context of worldwide youth protest and liberation movements, these artist "sixty-eighters" appropriated the radical strategies of the historical avant-garde, above all Dada and the trickster methods of Duchamp already in re-play by the 1950s in movements such as neo-Dada, Gutai, Nouveau Réalisme, and Situationism.

Kaltenbach moved to New York in 1967 after finishing graduate studies at UC Davis under Robert Arneson, William Wiley and Robert Mallary. By 1968 he was showing in a series of groundbreaking New York exhibitions that *Nuclear Projects and Other Works* brings forward. The famous 1968-69 exhibition *Nine* at Leo Castelli curated by Robert Morris with other icons of contemporary art such as Richard Serra, Eva Hesse and Kaltenbach's grad school classmate, Bruce Nauman, included a rug-shaped felt floor piece by Kaltenbach that came with instructions that it was to be arranged, and re-arranged everyday, by the gallery owner. Castelli's arrangement, Kaltenbach recalls with a smile, was "just perfect." For the historical 1968 Dwan Gallery *EARTH WORKS* exhibition with Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, Dennis Oppenheim, Walter de Maria, and Carl Andre, Kaltenbach exhibited three proposed artworks: mock blueprints doubtless inspired by suburban California landscaping, one of them titled *Earth Mound for a Kidney Shaped Swimming Pool*. In 1969 Kaltenbach showed in Harald Szeemann's *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle, Berne, Switzerland and London; and in 1970 he contributed six works to the breakthrough international exhibition, *Information*, at the New York Museum of Modern Art. At this point the artist vanished from the New York scene and moved back to Sacramento.

Kaltenbach's explanations of why he disappeared from the center of the art world just as he reached the top, so to speak, are various. There were conflicting desires to leave New York, but he sees the move back to northern

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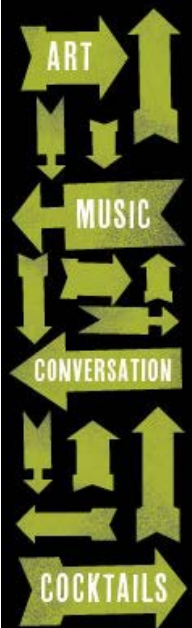
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California in 1970 as a conceptual art act much like those he had been performing in New York. The claim is persuasive. "Relinquishment," an *Artforum* reviewer recently observed, "is key to understanding Kaltenbach's work and its dissolution, even disappearance." As a professor at the School of Visual Arts in 1968 and 1969, for example, Kaltenbach had his students "carry out my streetworks for me by doing anything they wanted to do in a specified area." The same premise is behind the anonymous *Artforum* ads the artist published at this time. Two ads from 1969 were mock/sincere prescriptions: "Build a Reputation" and "Perpetuate a Hoax." These ads are word-works that specifically targeted the *Artforum* audience and effectively participated in the conceptualist project to multiply doubt, but they also evidence Kaltenbach's heightening ironic self-objectification. In much the same way, a performance piece from his last New York year "disappeared" his artistic identity in a series of nine easel paintings done in the style of a Sunday painter. With a haircut and suit he played at becoming another kind of artist, and, looking for "the worst gallery I could find in my own name," displayed the paintings in a little room at Lord & Taylor's department store. To Kaltenbach, leaving New York for Sacramento was essentially the same kind of art action, but "more untried." "I was trying to make it my life," he said. What's more, he expected to be "found" soon enough by the New York art world. The disappearing act could thus be seen as one of the "Bad Ideas" of extreme ego that Kaltenbach's art explores: absurdist dialectics of "success" and "failure," egotism and self-negation.

Nuclear Projects and Other Works displays many of Kaltenbach's "Bad Ideas" (i.e. "ideas about playing God") including 25 of his cryptic Time Capsules. The ongoing series of mock (almost) self-immortalizations began in 1967 soon after he arrived in New York and can be interpreted as theoretically consistent with the artist's disappearing act three years later. Minimalist containers with unknown content sealed inside, the Time Capsules are mostly machine made in metal – copper, gold, aluminum, steel – some rusted, some highly polished and reflective, offering a Brancusi-like range of color and finish. Other symbolic materials, like ABS thermoplastic, are also used. The Time Capsules are shaped as cylinders, cubes, and rectangular boxes scaled to the human body. Machine made and engraved with a few carefully-chosen words in the manner of grave markers, they connote (for this viewer) fatality and an attitude toward high aspiration as tragedy and farce. Both the *Broken Obelisk* by Barnett Newman (cast steel, 1963) and Bruce Nauman's *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* (cast iron, 1967-70) come to mind. Four large Time Capsules are inscribed with directions to open them before Kaltenbach's retrospectives at prestigious art museums. "OPEN BEFORE MY RETROSPECTIVE AT THE TATE IN LONDON," one instructs. The others are to be opened before his retrospectives at the Staatliche Museum in Berlin, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Pompidou Center. Two paired five-inch circular aluminum capsules bear contradictory and mock (almost) self-deprecating text: "BURY WITH THE ARTIST" is partnered with "NOTHING OF VALUE." There are small square capsules of rusted steel, each with a tiny hole like a faux camera obscura and engraved with descriptive text – "INVERTED OBSERVER," "FUGITIVE IMAGE," "KLEINES KLOSTER" (little cloister) – that seems incongruously poetic for the industrial medium and minimalist style. Other (eight-inch) cube-shaped capsules – each an individually numbered "object for investigation" – are tricks for the eye; appearing to be heavy metal like the rest, they are made of foam. Kaltenbach says he hopes that "someday someone opens one of these," but it is with a smile of amused certainty that he predicts that no museum conservator will ever open a Time Capsule. Several of them have passed their opening dates. Oberlin College, for one, has yet to follow the directions on theirs to "OPEN AFTER JAN. 1. 2000 A.D."



While the Time Capsules move between subjectivity and objectivity, between the art world and the real world, other "Bad Ideas" in the Verve exhibition work on a more objective level as a critique of human hubris, its destructive capacity. The enigma of *Nuclear Projects'* circle drawings is that of visual puzzles, their secrets less opaque and autobiographical than the Time Capsules. The nine-inch circles mean radically different things at first glance than they do on closer study. The whole order of meaning shifts. A smiley face on a black ground, for example, turns out to be a desperate Dr. Strangelove plan to "retarget the world's arsenal of ICBMS to blast two ovals on the moon during the first quarter." A drawing of a soccer ball is actually a project for iron cladding the sun, and a soap bubble is a representation of the Biosphere.

The Verve exhibition, like the works in it, is like a secret told after four decades, revealing Stephen Kaltenbach's central place in the late 1960s cosmopolitan art world and his four decades of brilliant conceptualist production. To the current generation of concept-based artists for whom strategies of appropriation and relational art and the free circulation of ideas are paradigmatic, Kaltenbach's relevance is obvious.

4 Trackback(s)

- Aug 3, 2010: [Art Picks, August 2010 | Midtown Monthly](#)
- Oct 11, 2011: [Fountain: Time to Cast Away Stones ~ 13th & K « Pedestrian Art, Sacramento](#)
- Jun 30, 2012: [Fountain: Time to Cast Away Stones ~ 13th & K](#)
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