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LETTER: Left Bank of the Mississippi

Whenever there's an article purporting to describe the 80s art scene, in which I participated as both an artist and a critic, I brace myself for a "here we go again" reaction. I'll admit I have low expectations. I anticipate someone interviewing a handful of the same, old players and treating their recollections as gospel truth, while skimming over the contributions of so many others. So I was pleasantly surprised at what a good job Cathy Madison did. It's a nicely balanced summary. Sure, Aldo Moroni and Dick Brewer have pretty much become the official media spokespeople for that era, but since they do such a good job in their capacity as community historians, I'm happy to let them.

However, I'd like to throw out another perspective about the relative merits of that era. Here are some of the things I really miss: venues for good critical writing, and a close-knit community that lived and worked in proximity to one another—and that thrived on such criticism. What I'm referring to is two now-defunct regional art mags: Vinyl (which became New North Artscape) and Artpaper, both of which published critical essays, longer articles, and numerous reviews of local shows. And a good two pages of Letters to the Editor—probably the most important part of the periodical, from the perspective of its readership. For a period of time, the offices of these publications were located within a two-block radius of the New French, and served a large community of visual artists, theater companies, and musicians also living, working, and performing within several blocks of the New French. What was the result? A lively, stimulating dialogue that invigorated the community, as well as a place to meet and conduct business. After Artpaper hit the stands, you made sure you were at the New French to talk about it. (Don't ever underestimate the power of a good magazine to build a community, or the power of escalating real-estate costs to fragment a once-thriving one ...)

Here's what I think is better now: exhibition opportunities for younger artists and the opportunities to see more innovative and experimental work that just wasn't visible in the 80s era. Why? Well, if you own a so-called "for profit" gallery that is by nature both a business and a reflection of your aesthetic perspective, it's certainly both your objective and prerogative to show work that you personally believe in and that might also stand a chance of being sold. Nothing wrong with that, it just sets certain parameters for who and what gets shown. Oddly, I think it placed a strange burden on gallery owners like Tom Barry, Dick Brewer, Todd Bockley, Jon Oulman, and Bob Thompson. Everybody wanted to show with them because they were the players who had the "It" galleries that were selling work to the collectors, but of course not everyone's work fit with their individual visions. I think they were greatly relieved when other spaces emerged on the scene. Everyone benefited.

Like Medium West—the brainchild of Jon Marc Edwards and Paige Mankin, and the first gallery specifically established to provide visibility to artists using what they considered to be cutting-edge interdisciplinary approaches in film and video, as well as painting and performance, frequently with an emphasis on the then-de rigueur familiarity with Roland Barthes, Baudrillard, and semiotic/deconstructivist theory. Basically, if you weren't familiar with the concept of The Other, you'd best be showing your slides to an "other" gallery. That's why public reception of the Rifle Sport Gallery was so enthusiastic.

I think the Golden Age of Minneapolis Art is happening now, and that it started many years ago with the rise of spaces that took on interesting and innovative work that was often experimental, media-based, installation-oriented, and not necessarily easily consumable. Work that made you think, often made by artists just a year or two out of school; work by artists that never went to school; and work by artists relegated to the periphery of society. Spaces begun by artists who took the reins and created venues that reflected the perspectives of their peers. And now we've got some pretty darn nice professionally managed spaces, staffed almost entirely by volunteers, where you can always count on seeing thought-provoking shows: spaces like the Soap Factory, SooVac, Franklin Art Works, Midway, Intermedia Arts, Rosalux, Rogue Buddha, the list goes on. (Forgive me, as I know I've failed to mention so many ...) The word "alternative space" seems hardly relevant anymore, as alternative is the norm.

So what do we need now? An art magazine that publishes four to eight reviews monthly with a couple of longer topical articles. Also, somebody to fund it, and a sufficiently masochistic individual with no need for personal time or disposable income crazy enough to be the managing editor. (Any takers?)

Oh yeah, and a bar to hang out in where we can all bitch about the articles.

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