

A conversation with Robbin Henderson, co-founder, Southern Exposure

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

In 1974, Robbin Henderson was among the twelve residents at Project Artaud who started the artist-run gallery that would become known as Southern Exposure. Henderson had the first exhibition in the newly renovated space, and although she left Project Artaud six years later, her involvement with the gallery continued until three years ago. Currently she is a practicing artist and director of the Berkeley Art Center.

Artweek *Do you remember the atmosphere in the art community at the time you started Southern Exposure?*

Robbin Henderson It was a time of tremendous ferment. There was a lot of money going into downtown arts, to things like Davies Symphony Hall, the opera and ballet. The political art community got together and agitated for money for the non-elite arts, and that's when the neighborhood arts programs were established. It was a time of a great opening for the arts, before the economic hard times really hit. There was a lot of creativity, optimism and confrontational politics.

AW *What was the space like when you first moved in?*

RH Empty and charred. It had belonged to a dancer and had a nice wooden floor, but there'd been a very bad fire and it took so long to get any insurance money that the dancer moved out, leaving the space empty. When the insurance money finally came, Project Artaud used it as a downpayment on the building and didn't repair the space. So we—the twelve of us who founded the gallery—agreed that if we could have it and use it rent-free, we'd fix it up. Project Artaud needed to use space in a public way to validate its nonprofit status, and the owners agreed. We called the gallery the American Can Collective, because we'd all lived in the American Can building.

We did a prodigious amount of work, heavy work like sandblasting soot off the ceiling and replacing all the windows that had been broken by the heat. Some of the hard work was just getting along. We all had this

idea of wanting to have a cooperative gallery, but we didn't all get along very well. As a feminist, I was always at a loggerhead with one frankly macho guy. We found ourselves one day on the top tier of the scaffold, painting the ceiling, just the two of us. We managed to cooperate for the larger purpose.

AW *How would you say the gallery has changed since those early days?*

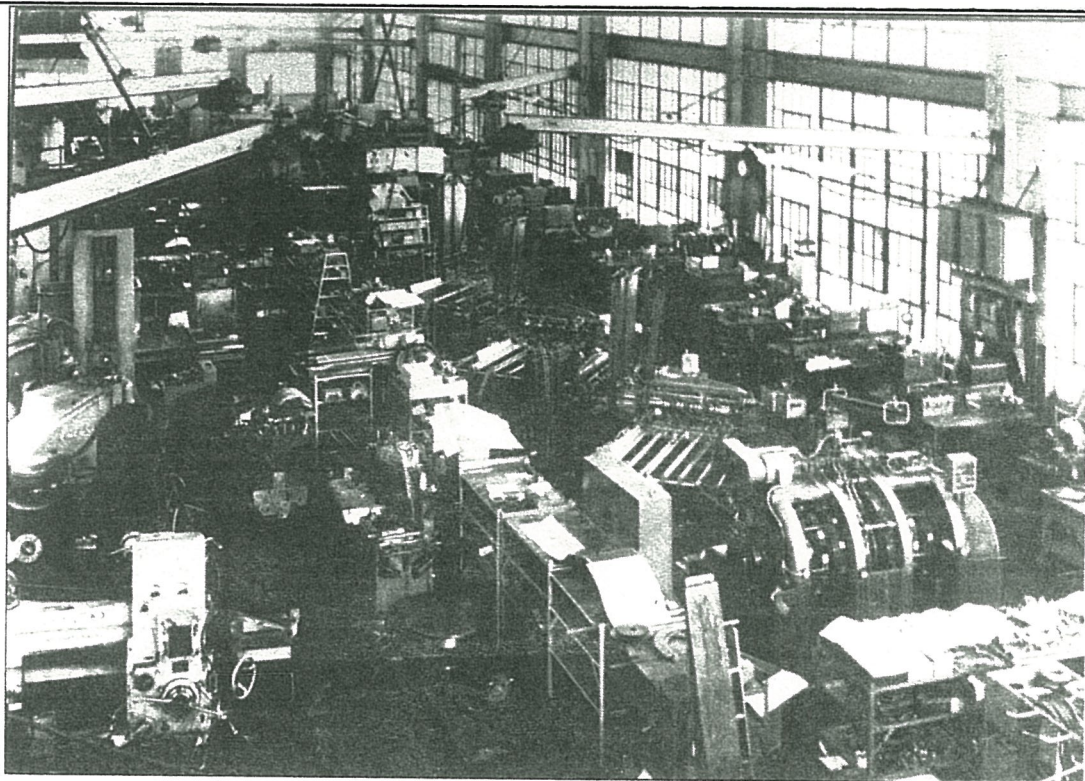
RH It's become an institution. I remember how hard we tried to get a listing in *Artweek*. Every time we called, the editor—we were willing to pay for the listing and so forth—she would say, "No, we only list institutions that have regularly changing shows of museum quality work. Your gallery doesn't measure up." We also fought to get federal and state money that never came through. After we were rejected for an NEA grant, I wrote to ask why and found that the places that did get grants—80 Langton [now New Langton Arts], Ant Farm, The Museum of Conceptual Art—were the hipper spaces that were more conceptually oriented. We were scruffier and more eclectic. People began to take notice of us only after we showed Alice Neel's work. That's when we got the critics to come down and see what we were doing.

AW *How did Alice Neel come to show at Southern Exposure?*

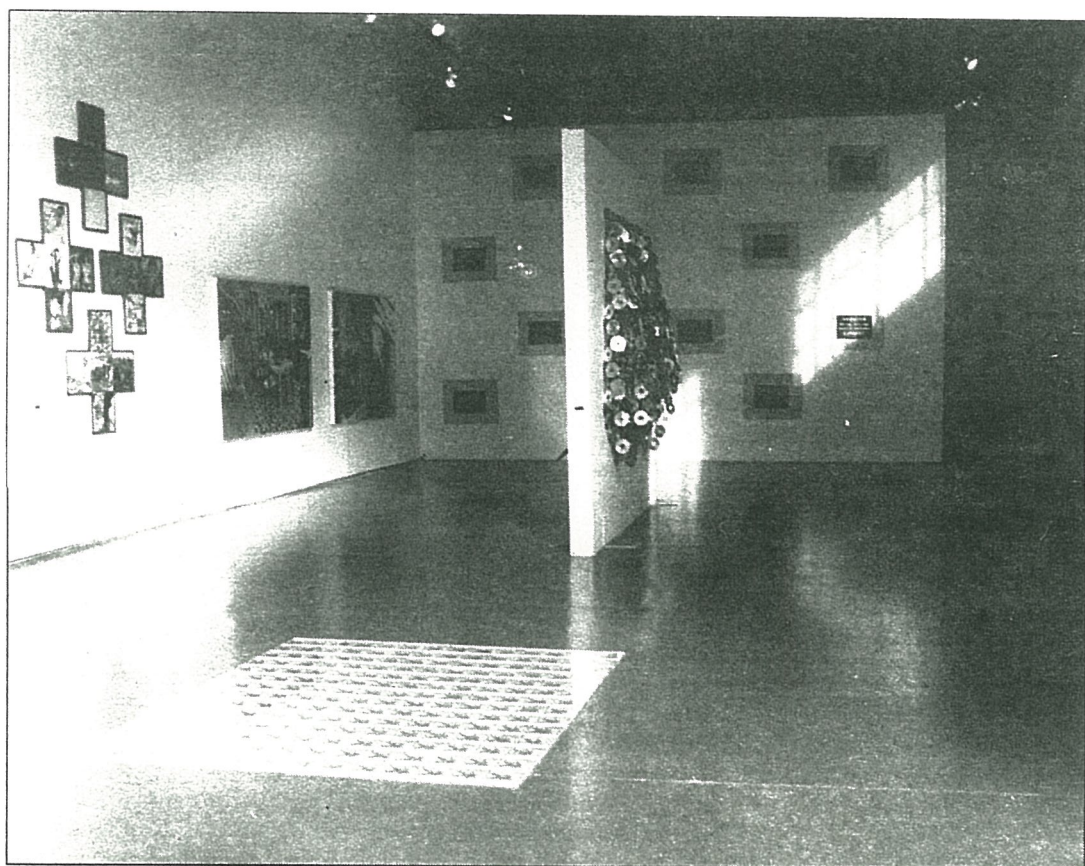
RH One of her sons was a good friend of ours. It was right when she was starting to get a lot of attention, and she even came down for the opening. It was because of Alice Neel that we had to change our name. We didn't have a telephone at that time, so many people who wanted information about the exhibition mistakenly called the American Can Company. They became aware that we were using the name and took us to court. Rather than engage in costly litigation that we were sure to lose, we changed the name.

AW *How did the "scruffiness" give way to institutionalization?*

RH A lot of it was economics. There were a whole bunch



Above: The American Can Company, ca. 1940s. Below: Rex Ray, *Monster Truck Rally*, installation in February/March 1994, at Southern Exposure, San Francisco.



of little alternative spaces that started in these years. As well as 80 Langton and Capp Street, there were a number that have disappeared. They could not survive the eighties without doing massive fundraising and having a paid staff. When we started, many of us were working at very marginal part-time jobs, making just enough money to live and do our work. As the eighties approached, we had to work longer and longer hours to survive. All the people who might have been volunteers couldn't exist marginally any more.

AW *Why do you think Southern Exposure was able to make that transition when so many other spaces didn't?*

RH First of all, they didn't have to pay any rent, a tremendous expense they didn't have to worry about because the members of Project Artaud supported them. The other thing is, for many years volunteers continued to run it. There were a lot of people who lived in Project Artaud and kept it going, people like Ken Cooper, Laurie Anderson, Sherrie Feldman, Anna Murch, Bob McHenry and Diana Krevsky, among others. I'd like to acknowledge them, because I think it's a shame that more people from the early years weren't included in the Twentieth Anniversary Exhibition.

AW *I've heard it said that alternative spaces now have more*

alternative sf

clout than galleries in building artistic reputations because they are perceived as making decisions based on artistic interest rather than salability. Would you agree?

RH That makes sense to me. Because the alternative spaces are part of the artist community, showing there means that you've been accepted by your peers. I've always thought that artists should be making curatorial decisions because they know the most about art. ❖

Meredith Tromble, a contributing editor to *Artweek*, is a painter who also does art commentary for KALW-FM.