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ART REVIEW : TECHNO-FEST OPENS ART CENTER

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“TV Generations,” the inaugural exhibition for Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition’s new downtown facility, kicks up a storm of swirling dataflakes.

A multimedia techno-fest incorporating the efforts of 51 artists, the show converts LACE into a noisy arcade where the theme from “The Jetsons,” the crack of firing guns and the profoundly insincere voice of Madison Avenue drones on ad infinitum. On the evidence presented here, one is forced to conclude that media are bad voodoo indeed--hardly a shocking revelation to anyone who’s done any reading on mass communications.

Curated by L.A. artists John Baldessari and Bruce Yonemoto, “TV Generations” is a rousingly entertaining--if uneven--survey with impeccable production values.

Though rather bloodless in temperament, “TV Generations” is a smashing curatorial success in that it commits itself to a specific point of view and opts to explore one body of thought concerning media rather than pay lip service to a handful of related ideas.

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So, don't attend "TV Generations" expecting historic TV moments, MTV, high-camp nostalgia or TV evangelism. In fact, one need not even deal with television to be a TV Generation artist; all that's required to join this club is a high degree of fluency in mass media.

This powerful language system is often put to questionable use, so it comes as no surprise that much of the work here is of a political nature; the themes of optical deception and the mind-numbing effects of too much information crop up repeatedly.

A central premise behind "TV Generations"--and Post-Modernism in general--is that mass media demystify the world and dull our capacity to experience things in a deep, visceral way.

Psychologists warn that they convert reality into a montage of meaningless surfaces of identical texture, tamper with our ability to fantasize and distort our sense of space and time. Our ability to discern between a reasonable facsimile and the Real McCoy is diminishing, and our sense of "now" is out of whack because real time is constantly being invaded by past recordings of art-directed perceptions of how the future might be.

This line of thinking reaches critical mass in Appropriationism, a Post-Modern sub-cult espousing the theory that there already exists far more images than we need, so there's no need to invent new ones.

Creative expression becomes a matter of cannibalizing the past, selecting images and re-presenting them. Hence, we find an abundance of recycled imagery here: Richard Prince's photograph of a magazine ad of a man joyfully consuming a soft drink; Cindy Bernard's photographs of TV news; Dennis Ray Balk's montages of anti-war imagery.

War among tribes of the global village is another recurring motif of the show: Doug Huebler offers a mixed-media parable about equality and discrimination, while Max Almy's video installation suggests that although Reagan's "Star Wars" manifesto champions outer space as the final frontier, chances are good that it will be the final frontier man will rape.

All is not doom and gloom in the modern world, I'm pleased to report, and some of the works in "TV Generations" are funny, beautiful or both. Jim Shaw offers a truncated, autobiographical history of the world that tosses everything into the blender, from the Bible and Mad magazine to Norman Rockwell and Ed (Daddy) Roth. Erika Beckman's color photographs have the gauzy beauty of a Steven Spielberg movie, while Jim Casebere's black-and-white photographs are perhaps the slickest trick in the show. His gorgeously lush pictures appear to depict romantic locales--a mysterious sea cave or a back alley in Tangiers. What we're seeing are, in fact, pictures of tiny models that Casebere sculpts out of plaster.

Of 51 artists included in "TV Generations," only two present straight videos. Bruce Nauman's "Good Boy/Bad Boy" involves dueling monitors delivering monologues about guilt, fear and mundane human activity, while Peter D'Agostino's "Double You (and X, Y, Z)" addresses the themes of language and physics. The most thought-provoking part of this complex piece is a monitor that is blank but for the word *touch*, which is targeted dead center. The TV screen, source of countless commands, has never issued this particular instruction before, and we don't know quite how to respond. The passive way we interact with television is so deeply ingrained that to reach out and touch the screen seems virtually impossible.

Equally thought-provoking is a photograph by Dede Bazyk titled “More Flat Than Round,” which depicts the profile of a nude native woman whose face has been obliterated with nail holes and scribbles. It’s a striking enough image, but it’s the title of the piece that makes the point that mass media have transformed the world from a round idea into a flat picture. Chalk one up for the written word, which limps alongside its electronic brethren, bloodied but unbowed.

Which is not to imply that “TV Generations” attempts to send the written word out to pasture; 17 of the participating artists are represented by written works published in the exhibition’s excellent catalogue.

The remaining four artists contribute live performances, the first of which was presented by Perry Hoberman on Tuesday. Hoberman was artistic director for Laurie Anderson’s soon-to-be-released concert film, and his work is rooted in mixed-media magic much like Anderson’s.

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“Out of the Picture” is a dazzlingly artful escapade in three-dimensional imagery (yes, each audience member was issued a pair of 3-D glasses), but midway through Tuesday’s second piece, titled “Dead Space/Living Rooms,” Hoberman seemed to lose his sense of direction. This young New Yorker is unarguably a technological wiz, but he seems to lack a sense of the proper organic shape his work should take. The narrative line of “Dead Space/Living Rooms” (which was fairly abstract to begin with) tended to wander off on aimless tangents, leaving the audience with optical fireworks and not much else.

The performance series continues with “Tammy’s Nightmare” by Ann Magnuson tonight at 8.