The Great Society
Winter in Stone Hill

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As spring returned to the Berkshires, the economic downturn was beginning to feel directly here at the Center. We have had three member institutions tell us they will not be continuing in the consortium because of budget constraints, and others are being forced to lay off personnel. The workload in all our departments remains even so far, but I am predicting we’ll begin to feel the full impact of the recession in fiscal year 2009-10, only a few months away. There could be a silver lining to the dark cloud, though; members of the staff have pointed out that with the economy prohibiting institutions from accessioning new work, the focus could well turn to treatments of existing, perhaps forgotten works in their collections. Here’s hoping!

If you have not seen our new website, www.williamstownart.org, please check it out. WACC editor Timothy Cahill, who also brings us Art Conservator, and designer Ed Atkeson of Berg Design in Albany, have orchestrated another literary and visually engaging work of art. Meanwhile, our conservators continue their efforts in New Orleans, with all departments taking part in a comprehensive collections survey for the Louisiana State Museum. The work will continue throughout this year, and hopefully set the stage for treatments in the future. I really don’t want to have to bake brownies and sell them in the parking lot. —Tom Branchick

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The Great Society
An exuberant assemblage from the 1960s leads to an overlooked master

By Timothy Cahill
Art Conservator Editor

Even among the eclectic artworks that regularly find their way to the WACC objects lab—an ancient Palmyrene portrait bust, a satin wedding bodice, Katherine Hepburn’s golf club—this piece stood out. Titled #175 The Great Society, it was unmistakably an artifact of the 1960s, expansive and prophetic, “Lucy in the Sky” meets “Blowin’ in the Wind.” Having lived through the era as a young boy, and wishing I’d more fully experienced it, the work was impossible to pass without stopping for long, enthralled looks.

The assemblage—part sculpture, part painting, part artist’s book—is described formally as an “optical box.” Some 45 inches square and nearly eight inches deep, the wooden box feels even larger, as its complex array of visual stimuli careens through your skull. The work has three glass panels suspended in thin channels one above the other. Including the bottom of the white case, the four parallel surfaces are packed with an assortment of orbs, candy-colored cones and intricately painted rocks; with variously-sized spheres covered in obsessive designs; with calligraphy, cartoonish drawings and political caricature. Interspersed on the stacked layers are a series of small and large optical lenses, magnifying glasses that further fracture and distort the surface. Finally, the sides are covered with whimsical handwriting that itself is punctuated by tiny drawings.

Made in 1969, The Great Society is at once an exuberant ode to psychedelic culture and a send-up of the day’s politics. The title refers to the 1965 social reforms of President Lyndon Johnson, progressive initiatives toward poverty, race, health care and the environment that were overshadowed by US involvement in Vietnam. By 1969, undone by domestic violence and anti-war sentiment, Johnson was gone and Richard Nixon had assumed power. While repeated caricatures of LBJ dominate The Great Society, Tricky Dick lurks there too, a portent of things to come. The work offers commentary on contemporary American values in a free-association poem that runs along the inside lip of the box. “[T]he clean society, the smug society, the preserved society,” it sings; “the germ-free, the slim-lined, the pilled, the shot, the drugged, the eye-closed, the sense-blocked. . . . the running, the earning, money, material, meat, time, time, what about your time, life, life, fly. . . .”

The work is owned by the Mead Art Center of Amherst College, Massachusetts, and was brought to the Center for cleaning and slight repair. It had been bequeathed to the Mead by investor and Amherst alumnus Richard S. Zeisler, a collector of modern art who gave several pieces to Amherst, as well as significant work to the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim, among other prominent institutions. Zeisler, according to Mead director Elizabeth Mead, “lived informally with his collection. He kept the . . . box on the floor of his bedroom, where he would have seen it every day—and where it must have gathered the dust that the conservators . . . removed.”

At WACC, objects conservator Allison McCloskey cleaned a heavy layer of dust, grime and what may have been spilled coffee off the artwork’s myriad surfaces, and reattached assorted loose bits. The Mead museum plans to exhibit the work with the rest of the Zeisler collection sometime in the future.

The appearance of The Great Society in the lab made possible the discovery of an artist who has mostly vanished from American awareness, the German multi-mediaist Mary Bauermeister. Now 75 and living “in the woods,” as she puts it, outside Cologne, Germany, Bauermeister’s career began in the 1950s, when she made her first mature paintings in her early 20s. In 1960, she established Atelier Bauermeister in Cologne, where German artists associated with the Fluxus art movement gathered with the likes of Americans John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and the young Korean video-art pioneer Nam June Paik.

Bauermeister moved to the United States in 1962, attracted by the work of Jasper Johns and, especially, Robert Rauschenberg. She stayed for a decade, then returned to her country to raise her children and continue a career that thrives to this day. Though she is recognized as an important figure in post-war German art, a web search revealed very little about her in English. Determined to “meet” the creator of The Great Society, even at a distance, I was assisted by the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, which had mounted a Bauermeister retrospective in 2004.

In her self-designed home studio, Bauermeister does not use e-mail. Our interview was conducted via fax in February of this year, when I sent a series of 10 questions about The Great Society, her background, philosophy and current activity. She replied by mail with two catalogs and an expansive 15-page handwritten letter, in which she described her life following World War II, her training and early career as an artist, her association with Fluxus and numerous other topics. The full text of the letter can be seen on the WACC website, www.williamstownart.org. Below, an extended excerpt from this singular woman.

Art Conservator: What are the origins of The Great Society?
Mary Bauermeister: In Europe I was a strict non-figurative artist. We, the postwar generation, did not trust anything our forefathers represented. We started from scratch: bombed cities, everything we were made to believe in had been proved to be an illusion. Our grandfathers, fathers, cousins and older brothers did not return from the war, or if they did, they were broken. Broken limbs, broken hearts, broken ideals—for the rest of their lives they were silenced, in a traumatic, paralyzed sense. Now, that was not because they had “lost the war,” there is always a loser and a winner in battle—it was the awakening, the realization of what they had given their lives and taken the lives of others for. The soldiers were not aware of the Hitler regime’s human crimes. Only after the war had they seen the photos of the concentration camps. We grew up in these desperate, hungry times, and
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to paint figures, landscapes, still lives, at least to me and my closest artist friends, seemed ridiculous.

Also, as a child I saw around every living being a colorful moving aura (even around so-called dead things like stones), so when I saw Art, paintings of reality, I missed the color field. Later, when my visionary childhood vanished away through schooling and teaching, when I had to learn the reduced interpretation of the world, I refused. Before I knew it, I resisted the normative dogmas of what one does, thinks, feels, or what one does not. An ambiguity, a multi-dimensional, integral understanding: things are not either/or. They are 1+1=3. Non-dualistic. That’s why, later in my artistic life, I was so happy to have found the optical glasses, which, when put over the written statements in my lens boxes, would distort and change and make relative my statements. They were not meant as absolute truth, they were in-between results of a thinking and feeling process. As I resisted art teaching more-or-less successfully, . . . I followed an inner drive to express what was not yet there, in reality or thought. To make art was more a finding, searching process than a knowing. Then, in 1964, I had my first one-man show in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. . . . At the same time in the museum there was a little show of American art— Johns, Stankiewicz . . . and Rauschenberg’s goat. I was so flabbergasted by this piece, and I knew, where this is called Art, I want to be! I went to [the Stedelijk director’s] office and asked him to buy one of my pieces, so I could afford a ticket to America. He did, and I ended up in the office and asked him to buy one of my pieces, so I could so flabbergasted by this piece, and I knew, where this is knowing. Then, in

Rauschenberg’s goat. I was 

Mary Bauermeister in her New York studio, 1964

atomic, ecological, economic disasters!

All these influences were urgent in the late Sixties. The Hippie movement. The student revolt. The anti-dogma . . . anti-establishment protests. And above all, “Mr. Clean, Mr.Proper,” keep it antiseptic, as long as it’s germ-free: a symbol of moral cleanliness, self-importance, arrogance, hubris. Oswald Spengler, in The Decline of the West. “Can we be saved?” Yes we can, but not from outside. The change has to come from deep within us. These were the thoughts I had when creating The Great Society.

How did you develop the optical box? The “optical box”: a multi-dimensional circumscribing of my interpretation of life. It can be viewed both ways, [hung] on the wall or as a table, sitting around it. With a glass plate on top, and with our daily “cocktail” glasses on top of that, it could maybe give us a hint—a warning. I stopped “political art” when I realized that I would not change the world. I could only change worlds. So I withdrew into the German forest, brought up four children, grew vegetables, got involved with ecology . . . mysticism, meditation, silence instead of verbs—my art withdrew from figurativism and became utopian.

I question myself: What did we artists achieve? Whose consciousness did we touch, enlarge? What did our warnings (in prophetic art) effect?

Why did you leave New York in the early 1970s and return to Germany?

Many reasons: a) The early times, 1960s—when the motive was art, exchange among artists, sharing of ideas, searching—had slowly changed into established movements, results instead of research. Money came into the scene and with it all the vices that accompany money: greed, jealousy, “fences” against the other, protection, security—possession—a “this was my idea” syndrome. The purity and innocence had vanished. b) I realized how important language is in the education of children, and as I spoke four languages, but none of them well enough, I thought it better to bring up my children in my home language. (While I’m writing this letter, I miss so many words and have to use so many superficial expressions from the “braid and butter” language, as I call it when language only circles around our daily life and its needs.) c) The father of my children, and the man I loved, Karlheinz Stockhausen, lived in Germany and only part of the year shared my life in [America], so it was also a personal reason. d) The mystic experience of my early childhood started to return and I needed a refuge which I found in the German forest. (I built my studio there, and it’s from there that I answer your letter.)

Please tell me about the work you’re making now. You obviously still have an enormous curiosity and love for life. How do you nourish that? Until this month, I cultivated a landscape garden, which I created in the city on terraces, roofs, balconies and surroundings of an old Cologne insurance company. This job gave me the income for my life and the education of my four children. (I always fed them myself, so the fathers of my children did not need to support them nor me.) Unfortunately, this insurance company was taken over by [an American firm]. Now the rules of the “new-liberal market” have changed the, until-now, social-market-oriented politics. Quick money, shareholders’ interest, capital has to be served. So my job [and the jobs of many others in that company] . . . the involvement [with others] . . . the caring, has stopped. The atmosphere is of non-trust and fear. Who will be fired next? People who have worked for 20, 30 years in a faithful relationship with their company are being treated like [garbage—rubbish. Until now this word was only used for things, now it’s used to describe people. So your question, what about my work now? I’ve gotten into politics, not with drawings, but with actions. I encourage people to claim back their dignity, regardless of the currency of money.
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Also, as a child I saw around every living being a colorful moving aura (even around so-called dead things like stones), so when I saw Art, paintings of reality, I thought it like stones), so when I saw Art, paintings of reality, I thought it, to New York, to which I transported all kinds of objects, which I hung on the wall of my first New York apartment, as an homage to Marcel Duchamp (who I consider my teacher, and who liked my work very much). I stayed in New York and did many shows, was bought by many museums, and interrelated with the art scene, the artists and the critics. In the United States I gave up my resistance to figurative elements. You cannot illustrate something absurd or abnormal without reference to something else. So surrealism needs realism to play with and against. So I gave into figurativeness, and I also could not resist becoming politically involved—Bob Dylan’s songs, Joan Baez, the political atmosphere—Vietnam War, money, greed, inhuman exploitation, together with a clean, anesthetic morality. The Cold War, the “fellow traveler,” the “yellow danger,” the Chinese, were the evil ones—an enemy was always needed to distract from one’s own shallowness. Pop Art as a warning signal, making banalities the subject of art. From 1968 to 1971 I did several pieces with figurative elements, drawings with political themes and titles, which show my intentions, [including] The Great Fallout Society, 1969, about 10 pieces, lens boxes. The Great Fallout Society, “fallout” equaling atomic waste, and another meaning, our whole Western decadence. Are we as humans, the way we behave, not ourselves the “fallout,” the poison, the mistake of evolution? Are we on the verge of collective suicide? and if yes, why? Is the human consciousness did we touch, enlarge? What did our warnings (in prophetic art) effect?

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