

# Art/Kay Larson

## TERMINAL ART

“...The show suggests that if the end of the world were to arrive, it would be welcomed first in Brooklyn...”

THERE ARE TOO MANY NEGLECTED artists in this world, and the pressures on them are enormous. Kept out of the museum shows, treated like the most dispensable cogs in the machinery of taste, the more militant have responded for over a century by taking matters into their own hands. (If they do eventually end up in a blockbuster, as Manet did a hundred years later, well, time and fate are notoriously fickle.)

In our era, *salons des refusés* have assumed many forms, from the “back to the land” movement, which tried to circumvent the galleries in the 1960s, to that first blush of guerrilla expressionism, the Times Square Show, three years ago. This season’s “blockbuster *des refusés*” fits into both the grand and the recent traditions: Four hundred artists, more or less (even the organizers are not sure of the total), have spread out through the old U.S. Army Terminal in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn. Within this

125,000 square feet (about five times the floor space of the Whitney Museum) is a summary of everything you won’t find in the next Whitney Biennial: wall paintings, site installations, collaborative projects, hanging kites, palaces of dreams, war protests, gaping paper mouths, and two bombs that sprout real grass.

The show is called “Terminal New York,” and not just because of the site. There is a suggestion of incipient apocalypse here, as though if the end of the world were to arrive it would be welcomed first in Brooklyn. All the suppressed energies that may eventually be tamed to feed the Whitney Biennial are let loose in a building that seems to encourage their expression. This is what the art world looks like before it is weeded, seeded, and preened by ambitious New York City curators. Even if the works themselves are sedate (which some of them are), the context supplies

them with adventurous or ominous overtones. For the young and restless in an “expressionist” generation, the easiest, most dramatic means are best. And as a Dada poet once remarked, “nothing is easier to play with than fire.”

Like all the classic *salons des refusés*, the terminal show is an artists’ event. The idea came from Carol Waag, an artist and graphic designer for the New York City Public Development Corporation, which investigates abandoned buildings for their rehabilitation potential. On the list was the Brooklyn

Army Terminal, designed by Cass Gilbert and built in 1919. Waag saw the building and immediately decided that its scale was right for a mammoth exhibition. Barbara Gary, another artist, was enlisted as director, and writer Ted Castle was brought on as one of the curators. Joined by artist Rhonda Zwilling, last spring the organizers sent out a call for proposals. They got back 600—a figure that should suggest just how many hungry artists are out there—and by winnowing the least mature work got the number down to 150. (It swelled to 400 again when more-well-established artists were invited in, and when others got in at the last moment.)

The mood of the Army Terminal is, in fact, “terminal.” Part of the two-building complex is split by a great eight-story-tall glass atrium, creating an enormous central well that reminds you of the core of Darth Vader’s starship in *Star Wars*. Art hangs from balconies on the atrium walls and spreads out through the vast ground floor, where troops and matériel were once loaded onto ships bound for Europe and World War II. Intimations of war or thoughts about violence are part of artists’ response to that brutal history: Down in one of the catacombs formed by the low-ceilinged rooms, the German painters Rainer Fetting and Stefan Roloff two weeks ago staged a grisly-looking collision between a car and a van. There was something archetypal in the moment. A blue police light flashed like a doomsday beacon, and skull-faced figures smiled down from surrounding pillars, while the violent political collisions of the twentieth century seemed to infest the air like immanent, ugly spirits.

Politics touch a number of the half-dozen-odd coalitions, with evocative names like Missing in Action and Artists for Nuclear Disarmament. The largest, Preparing for War, contains 90 artists and is a show-within-the-show, organized by Julius Valiunas and Robert Costa to depict artists’ fears that the United States is arming for Armageddon.

But political content supplies only a small part of the show’s juggernaut-like impact. Like Everest, most of this work is simply *there*—beyond taste, good or



**Salon des refusés:** The site of the “Terminal” show.



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bad. There are too many artists, and they demand to be seen. And when their work will not fit in the sanctuaries of the major museums, they will take it elsewhere. Goodness, as Mae West might have said, has nothing to do with it.

The urgency of this mood is perfectly described by a slogan I found in red paint against a white wall—also the best work in the show, if you think about it the right way. The artist, Laura Foreman, scrawled it in dripping letters like a Zen koan for this angry generation:

I have  
nothing  
to paint and  
I'm  
painting it.

I'm sure she intended every nuance.

(The terminal, which the P.D.C. is now calling the Harborside Industrial Center, is located in Brooklyn on First Avenue between 58th and 63rd Streets. It can be reached by car or subway. The hours are Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from noon to 6 p.m. through October 30. For directions, during the week call 619-5000 ext. 845.)