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Going Public

A NEW SERIES OF EXHIBITIONS ASKS, "WHAT IS PUBLIC ART?" ■ BY MARK SANDERS

That huge statue overlooking downtown Sarasota irks the hell out of some people. If you've driven down Tamiami Trail along the waterfront, you know what I'm talking about: a replica of the famous V-J Day kiss between an American sailor and a nurse. It's 26 feet tall. It's unavoidable. And to some, it's not art at all.

It also happens to be the centerpiece of this year's Sarasota Season of Sculpture, an annual event featuring public art at and around Marina Jack. Most of the exhibition's sculptures are abstract, measuring only a few feet in diameter. By contrast, this mega-statue, titled "Unconditional Surrender," is definitely not abstract, or small.

"It is bullshit," says Tobey Albright, curator of "What is Public Art?," a new series of exhibitions taking place in and around downtown Sarasota this month and next. He's not speaking just about "Unconditional Surrender," but the entire *Season of Sculpture* exhibit. A 24-year-old Ringling School graduate, Albright might be easy to dismiss as part of the small (yet increasingly vocal) opposition to traditional public art displays — or, for that matter, traditional art of any kind.

Admittedly, Albright's own work, performance pieces he orchestrates with other artists, is more progressive and challenging than a 26-foot-tall photo replica. In conversation, his words flow like a grad-level visual arts textbook. He's a serious artist. And he hasn't much tolerance for kitsch.

You can understand why Albright and the statue don't see eye to eye. But that's missing the point. Albright is anti-*Season of Sculpture*, not because it falls short of his own aesthetic standards, but because it "doesn't feel like these projects are really doing anything," he says. "There's no social interaction."

And in his view, we deserve better than that. "What is Public Art?" is his answer. For the next couple of weeks, "WIPA?" takes to downtown with public art displays you won't find sitting idly near the water. Fact is, you won't find this exhibition sitting idly anywhere, since it's all performance-based and therefore intangible. "We're using unorthodox strategies and questioning the notion of what public space is," says Graham Coreil-Allen, one of Albright's collaborators and himself a recent college graduate.

Coreil-Allen heads up a few "What is Public Art?" pieces. One, titled "Bicycle," takes place in an alley on Palm Avenue. The concept is simple — participants are invited to follow various paths marked by safety flags and lines in the dirt — the effect being that of an improvised road that didn't



BATMAN BLUES: Mt. Awesome (aka drummer David Curran and Batman Chris Bohatyritz) during a parking lot performance.

exist before. (Two other pieces titled "Pedestrian" and "Automobile" follow a similar theme.)

Coreil-Allen says that some performances have the businesses' or landowner's permission, others don't. He admits that, in some cases, no one would dare let him perform, which begs the question: Why even bother asking? In other situations, however, the sheer joy of spontaneity comes into play, and not even the artists know beforehand where the performances will take place.

I got a firsthand glimpse of this last Friday. The scene: Whole Foods Market. The perpetrators: Sarasota rock duo Mt. Awesome (aka David Curran and Chris Bohatyritz). The victims: anyone who happened to be in the parking lot on this sunny afternoon.

I ran into Coreil-Allen, a slim, artsy kid who was obviously excited about the gig. He interrupted our conversation in mid-sentence, saying simply, "They're here." I turned around, and Bohatyritz — clad in a full-length Batman costume — stood near the rear of a cargo van, jamming out blues chords on an electric guitar (run through an amp with a cigarette-lighter adaptor) while Curran played a tiny drum kit. Grocery store customers instantly became spectators at the concert, the likes of which seldom (OK, never) happens around here.

There was a communal "What the fuck?" vibe going on, big-time.

Most everyone here seemed to enjoy the performance, which clocked in at roughly five minutes. "I love it," said one lady, a Quebec City resident visiting Sarasota. As she boarded the parking garage elevator, she added, "It makes the city feel alive, and it provides a diversion."

Within seconds of finishing the last note, they were gone. "We do one song, then we leave," said Curran, disguised in a wavy brunette wig and fake beard.

The scene was repeated at each of Mt. Awesome's three stops that day. Next was Sarasota Skatepark, where they played to a comparatively indifferent group of skateboarding adolescents. It's not as though they didn't like the music, which resembled Captain Beefheart's bluesier side, heavy on the melody. The kids here weren't particularly interested; neither the music nor Batman were enough to make them stop skating.

Final stop was the Hollywood 20 movie theater, sitting smack at the heavily populated corner of Main Street and U.S. 301. Because of limited parking and a glut of traffic, the van had nowhere to stop. So the guys improvised, pulling over at a parking garage off-ramp. They got out. Played.

Security asked them to leave.

"If they got clearance from the property owners, they might do better," said Craig Clarke, president (and on-duty officer) for Cameron Security Services, whose beat is this parking garage. Clarke didn't exactly tell Mt. Awesome to leave; he just tapped Bohatyritz on the shoulder and pointed his finger. That was enough. Show over.

"I had no problem with him telling us to go," said Bohatyritz. His sentiments echo those of Albright and Coreil-Allen, both of whom say that respect for property owners is paramount. "Ultimately [What is Public Art?] won't inflict any permanent damage," said Coreil-Allen, adding that they aren't hurting anyone, nor anyone's property. It would dilute their artistic statement anyway, and certainly would make Sarasota less receptive to spontaneous art displays.

These guys aren't the first to take an atypical approach to public art, not even in Sarasota. Kevin Dean, director of the Ringling School's Selby Gallery, counts at least three recent projects, with a fourth one to be undertaken later this school year. "We did [New York artist] Marjorie Strider," he said. "We did one of her foam pieces, multicolored foam coming over the roof of the gallery. There were sailboats sailing on top of the foam. That stopped traffic."

Public art isn't solely the domain of university types such as Dean, Albright and Coreil-Allen, either. Virginia Hoffman, chairwoman of the city's public art committee, is quick to recall Artarget, a self-described support group for alternative visual artists in Sarasota that welcomed both self-taught and formally schooled artists.

"That was 18 years ago," she said of the coalition, noting that what these kids are doing now reminds her of those days. "It's nice to see another group picking up the mantle," she adds, "and I imagine people should be welcoming it."

Dean agrees. "I like the idea of nontraditional public art," he said. "The basic problem with public art is that you get used to seeing it there, no matter how provocative it is at first."

"What is Public Art?" is, by contrast, something that won't exist after it happens. Which, for those who hate the idea of living with a full year of "Unconditional Surrender," is relief indeed.

"What is Public Art?" concludes with a panel discussion at 6:30 p.m., Fri., Dec. 9 at Mack B Gallery, 711 Osprey Ave., Sarasota. For more information, call 363-9025 or visit www.mackbgallery.com.

MARK.SANDERS@WEEKLYPLANET.COM