

A Biennial Checklist: Art, Drinks, Checkbook

By LINDA YABLONSKY

THERE were no direct flights from New York, the exhibition had only a smattering of new work by the 53 artists involved and the title was far from promising. Despite all that, a legion of 900 top collectors, curators, museum directors, artists and dealers from across the country came to Site Santa Fe last month, for the opening of "Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque," the art center's fifth international biennial, which is on view through Jan. 9.

They were there to see the art, of course, and to support the exhibition's curator, Robert Storr, in his first independent venture since leaving the Museum of Modern Art for New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. But overwhelmingly, they were there to see one another.

Only a few weeks earlier, the same crowd had been in Switzerland to attend the Basel Art Fair. From Santa Fe, they would be heading to museum and gallery shows in Aspen, then taking off for more events in Pittsburgh, London and Cologne. "In the art world, we really don't think we're experiencing a place unless we do it all together," said Paul Morris, the New York dealer who represents R. Crumb, one of three cartoonists in the biennial. "Next year," he added, "we may be in Jerusalem."

At the center of this pack are wealthy patrons who enjoy traveling together, often in their own planes, to far-flung art destinations. Some take chances on untried artists; others embrace challenging work by well-established names. But all keep abreast of one another's choices. A purchase by one can inspire further interest from others, directly affecting the artist's market and stirring up greater critical discussion. Wherever they go, they are always shopping, even at ostensibly non-commercial venues like Site Santa Fe.

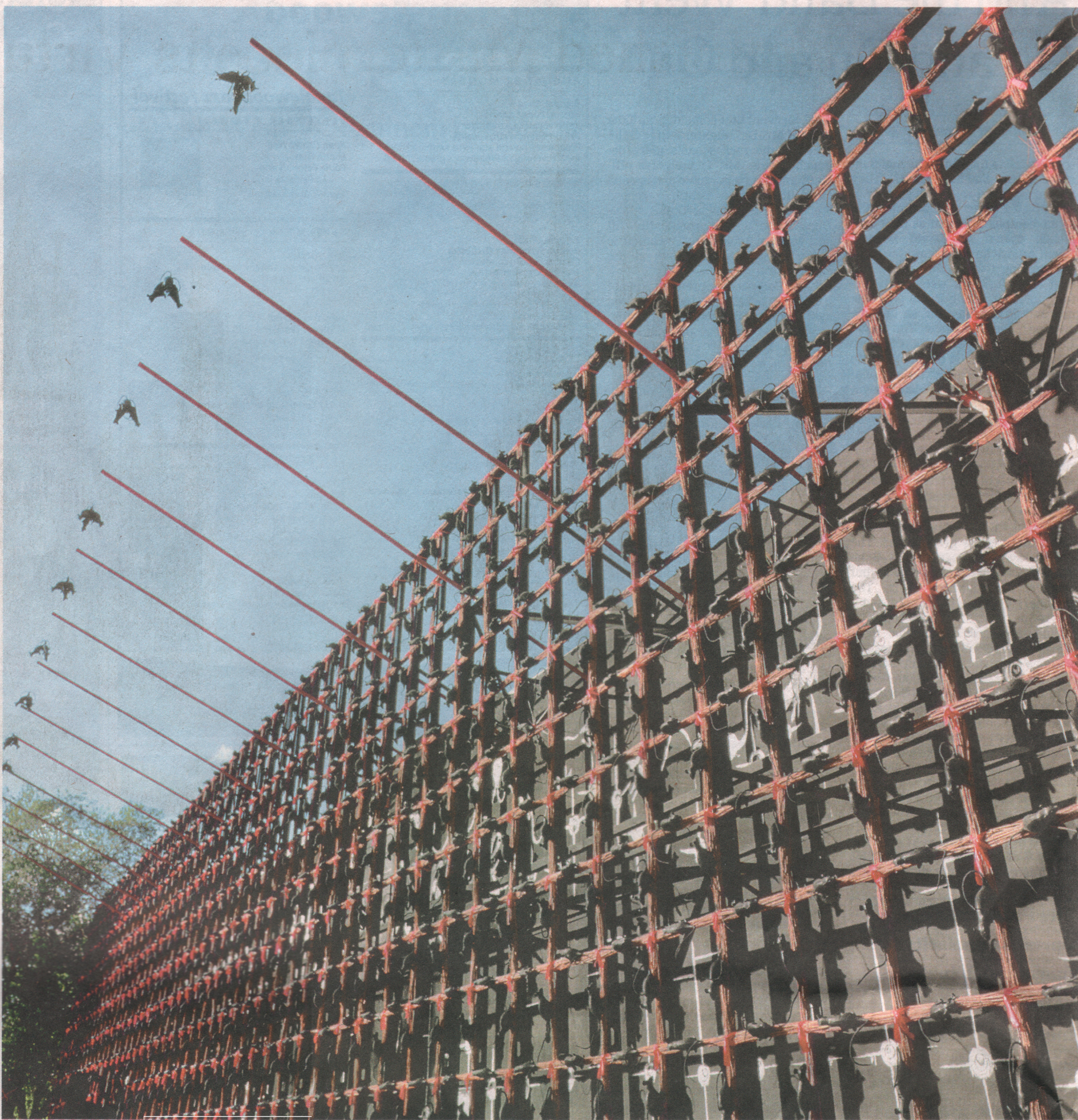
Throughout the biennial's opening weekend, business was going on behind all the many scenes. At the initial cocktail reception, held in a tent, Shaun Caley Regen of Regen Projects in Los Angeles nearly sold out "Repeater Pencil," Raymond Pettibon's first feature-length video animation, a DVD that came in an edition of 10 costing \$20,000 each. Standing in the exhibition hall itself, a former beer warehouse by Santa Fe's old rail yards, Mr. Morris found buyers for several drawings by Mr. Crumb. ("If a work is in a major exhibition, it's like product placement," he said.) The following day, two prominent collectors found their way to the Dwight Hackett Projects, a gallery in a former foundry at the edge of town. Each bought a figurative bronze by Bjorn Amelan, a New York sculptor who was having his very first show.

Over the last few years, some of the country's most active collectors have begun building second and third homes in order to show their enormous holdings to best advantage, or installed them in "public" spaces open only by appointment. Such collectors are frequently asked to loan important works for museum shows. Owing very little art and no real estate, I am not among them — but I do have "Doubles," a photographic diptych made by the filmmaker John Waters, and I was flattered when Mr. Storr chose it for his show on the grotesque.

The piece juxtaposes two images shot from films on television, and contrasts a glamorous Divine (the cross-dressing actor who starred in Mr. Waters's early films) with a disheveled Elizabeth Taylor. I never found it particularly grotesque. But coming upon it at such a prestigious show filled me with a sense of importance. That surprised me almost as much as the indignation I felt on discovering that "Doubles" was not reproduced in the catalog. "Sounds like you've got the bug," said Carol Eckman, a New York art dealer. "You could be a real collector."

Over the weekend, local patrons and promoters guaranteed visiting art dignitaries a full social calen-

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Herbert Lotz

An installation by Kim Jones including steel, cedar and rubber rats is in "Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque," the fifth biennial at Site Santa Fe.

dar: numerous dinner parties, including one thrown by Louisa Sarofim, president of the Menil Collection in Houston, and Mary Porter, an active arts patron, at their adjoining homes; "Don Giovanni" at the Santa Fe Opera; a soak in the hot tubs at Ten Thousand Waves; a private tour of Georgia O'Keeffe's ranch; the opening of Linda Durham's new gallery; a show of Franz West sculptures at James Kelly Contemporary; an open house with the Aspen-based collectors Burt Lies and Rosina Lee Yue; or a salon hosted by Dianne Straus, a private dealer who represents Mr. Waters in Santa Fe.

The main event was a gala dinner at the El Dorado Hotel to benefit the biennial (which cost \$750,000 to mount). The air-conditioning malfunctioned, however, and 500 sweltering patrons, who paid \$500 apiece, were served "grotesque" appetizers of irradiated-green sorbet topped by what appeared to be eyeballs and entrees of fish or chicken that arrived either overcooked or nearly raw. Many people left before the petit four dessert.

Mr. Storr was in heavy demand all weekend. After leading a V.I.P. group on a walk-through of the exhibition, he took the collectors Agnes Gund, the former president of the Museum of Modern Art, and her husband, Daniel Shapiro, a lawyer, with Jamie Niven, Sotheby's vice chairman, on a private tour, pointing out the felicitous placement of a Jasper Johns with an Alexander Ross, or a Tom Friedman and Mike Kelley. Being grotesque — that is, dark if not quite gross — not all the pieces were easy to behold and none were new.

Outside the hall, the veteran New York dealer Max Protetch was one of several visitors who expressed

disappointment. "This was a very intelligent theme show," he said. "But a biennial for me is a venue for a lot of new art in more unusual settings." Mr. Storr had defined the grotesque as an entity in a constant conflict with itself; at times it sounded like an apt metaphor for the art world itself.

Something very new indeed was taking place at the Santa Fe Art Institute, where a strangely affecting event called a "Tune(In))" had been organized by the New York pirate radio group free-103point9. Cameras planted throughout the building sent live feeds to monitors in a room where small audiences were listening — through headphones plugged into FM radios — to live transmissions from computer-sound artists responding to the videos.

"It was so quiet it was hard to believe we were at a public sound event," said Christian Marclay, a biennial artist. "You didn't know if anyone was listening or what they were listening to."

"Listening," he added, is "a lot more private than looking."

At Site Santa Fe, however, looking was frequently private, too. On Sunday morning, Michael and Jeanne Klein, of Houston, gave a brunch to show some 60 collector-friends the spectacular new house they built to showcase their collection of paintings, drawings, photographs, sculptures, videos and ceramics by an astonishing array of high-profile artists. The house, a modernist box made almost entirely of glass, was designed not by a famous architect but by a relative newcomer, Mark Dubois, of the New York firm Ohlhausen Dubois. It sits atop a hill offering panoramic views of the Sangre de

Cristo and Jemez mountains. The backyard is basically Colorado.

Art determined part of the layout, particularly a vaguely trapezoidal room by the artist James Turrell that opens to the sky, appearing to anchor the house and lift it all at once. A hanging lead sculpture by Richard Serra folds around the edge of an interior wall like an oversize black storybook. A long blue lintel of a canvas by Ellsworth Kelly dominates the living room.

Among the guests at the brunch was Joel Wachs, a former Los Angeles city councilman who is now president of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts (the primary patron of the Site Santa Fe biennial). During his years in city politics, Mr. Wachs said, he devoted 25 percent of his annual income to buying art. After some years, whatever new art he bought, he gave an equal amount already in his possession to the Museum of Contemporary Art, where he is a founding trustee. He now buys with its needs in mind. "That's how museums build collections," he said. "They have to rely on gifts, and we as collectors have a duty, a responsibility, always to give something back."

Claire Dewar, a Dallas real estate broker visiting the Kleins but new to their circuit, recently made her first art loan (a photograph by the young Brooklyn artist Anthony Goicolea) to the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. She didn't quite miss it. "It freed up a wall," she said happily, "and started me buying more."

After the brunch, the entire crowd returned to town for a sold-out lecture by Mr. Storr, who officially ended the weekend's festivities at the historic Lencic Theater with a simple but very particular word to the wise. "If you don't know what to do with art," he said, looking around the theater's ornate, Western-Moorish decor, "it's probably grotesque." □



Eric Swanson



Jennifer Schlesinger

Left: Works by Richard Tuttle at the Tai Gallery in Santa Fe, N.M.

Above: The "Tune(In))" event at the Santa Fe Art Institute.