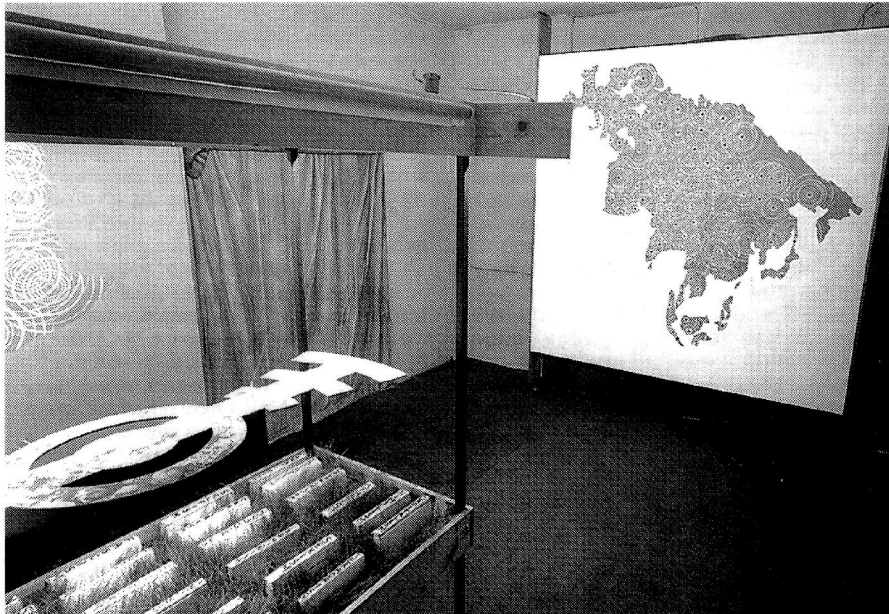


ROY TAMBOLI

Cooper Street Gallery
Memphis, Tennessee

After more than five hundred years of world-wide colonialism, 1992 has offered the planet's more introspective inhabitants perfect occasion to reflect on history and culture. Roy Tamboli's major installation *Pangæans* seems to fall into the midst of this critical atmosphere unselfconsciously. Tamboli's installation was the centerpiece of a group exhibition including two other artists: Logan Rene Broussard and Kenny Smith. The scale of the installation dwarfed the more intimate works of the other artists. Tamboli's work—juxtaposed as it was to the conventionally scaled works of Broussard and the intimate shadow-boxes of Smith—



Roy Tamboli, *Pangæans*, 1992 installation, Cooper Street Gallery. (photo courtesy of the

gained dramatic ground simply by using a different set of conventions than one is used to seeing in even a progressive commercial gallery in Memphis.

The title of the work comes from the word "Pangaea," coined in the 1920s by scientist Alfred Wegener to describe the hypothetical land mass existing two- to three-hundred-million years ago from which all currently existing continents evolved. The word is made of two Greek words *pan*, meaning "all" or "whole," and *gaia* meaning "Earth."

The room housing *Pangæans* was darkened by curtains at both entrances. In the center of the room was placed a table of the sort one sees at nurseries, with an iron structure above it from which plants may be hung. The box-like table top had been filled with soil in which the artist had planted new grass. White books with painted titles on their spines were also planted fore-edge down in neat rows in this little garden.

Each book was named after an "-ism." I list the -isms here so that the reader may know specifically what was included and what was left out:

racism, dogmatism, monism, Maoism, conformism, extremism, imperialism, industrialism, despotism, socialism, negativism, fascism, fundamentalism, elitism, anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, conservatism, terrorism, sexism, communism, consumerism, careerism, selfism, capitalism, nihilism, atheism, colonialism, nationalism, and fanaticism.

One book was even left blank to allow for the unnamed "-ism," so that all bases might be covered. A cut-out image of a crop circle (like those appearing mysteriously in grain fields in Great Britain and Europe) had been hung over the curious garden of "-isms." Photocopied images of children from around the world, including the familiar images of those starving, were collaged onto the surface of the crop circle cut-out. Huge maps of the world's continents surrounded the constructed cosmic island on all four sides of the room. The maps were colorful silhouettes

interrupted by interconnecting waves of concentric circles surrounding points corresponding to the locations of major population centers.

Cassette players were hidden behind each of these painted maps so that four simultaneous streams of sound blended in the room. The layered sound was a morass of music and spoken texts of self-disclosure. The music was culled from a variety of cultures, and ranged from blues to Bulgarian folk songs to Gregorian Christian and Tibetan Buddhist chants. The resulting white noise implied cultural homogeneity. The effect resembled either the universal "Om" or a post-colonialist, mass-media product of capitalist, cultural dominance; depending on the proclivities of the audience. The light in the room came from a sole source hanging over the "-ism" garden and above the crop circle cut-out, one of those grow-lights which emit healthy light for deprived houseplants. The effect of this surreal lighting made the bright colors of the maps and the young green of the planted grass glow hotly, making the room seem like a combination of the deepest recesses of a Spencer Gifts Store and the bunker-like control room in *Star Wars* from which Obi-Wan Kenobi and Princess Leia plotted Luke's progress over the face of the Empire's death star.

What Tamboli's quirky cosmology directly and most obviously addresses is the simple of legacy. The crop circles, from which Tamboli borrowed one of the central metaphors/motifs of this piece, are described as "strange circular depressions, up to 100 feet in diameter" and have been appearing in Europe since the middle ages. The popular myth is that they are landing sights for UFOs or signs—literally—from above.¹ Tamboli seems to take them as a sort of omen, and he applies his own interpretation of that sign directly to the physical representation of the symbol. The collaged images of children, some of them starving, combined with the planted plot of literal earth (which stands for Earth) and with the projections of population explosion plotted graphically on the maps on all four walls (in all four directions) mean that very little of the planet itself is being left for posterity. It is a simple matter of logical conclusions metaphorically drawn.

Tamboli's cosmology seems at first to transcend culture. The cultural homogeneity of the seemingly sourceless sound, as well as its intimate specificity seem to point to a oneness of all things. But there remains a question whether the place the artist creates—from which to view global problems of environmental decay and of population and information explosion—is one of the transcendent subjectivity of Siddhartha sitting and watching the river go by, or the intrusive objectivity of Aristotle and Western Science surreptitiously invoking the spectre of dominant culture all over again. It is difficult to look at those meticulous maps and those literate books and not think of the pigeon-holing, exploring Western Mind probing: here the New World, and there, the environmental future.

Regardless of the cultural relations of its forms, Tamboli's message is not lost. The installation succeeded in sweeping the mind and heart into the uncertain future in light of a dreadful past. It is strange that such a static work should so powerfully conjure the past and future, but as the work itself suggests, these are apocalyptic times.

Philip Paul

¹ Sally B. Donnelly in *Time* vol. 134 (September 18, 1989): 50. and "Field of Dreams," *Omni*, vol. 13 (December, 1990): 67.