



Steven Bower, *Water Fountain*, 1999, metal, rubber, 41 1/2" x 15" x 15" (photo courtesy of Lombard-Freid Fine Arts).

#### NEW YORK

From the salons of 19th century France to the white cube of 20th century art, the gallery has been the place which defined art, the place where art was to be judged or against which artists were to rebel. The confines of this legitimate space offered a seriousness certain artists rejected, wanting instead to expand the notion of what art could be and how it could happen. Other artists played upon the very legitimacy of the gallery or museum to create challenging and paradoxical works which question the very notion of the gallery and thus the art it legitimated.

With the self destructing machine of Jean Tinguely, the machine and its function as art, as well as its place in society were all called into question. As machines and technology take more and a more a place in our everyday lives, these questions become more and more relevant.

**Steven Bower's** installation titled "Utility" (Lombard/Freid Fine Arts, February 26-April 3) is made up of a visible network of flexible copper tubing and electrical wires which connect models, engines, a water fountain, a toilet, a punch clock, paintings, a solar collector, etc. The installation transforms the gallery from a sterile white cube to a functioning techno/ecosystem. Within this environment, the toilet flushing causes water to be sent throughout the gallery to places like a mini-dam; the telephone ringing causes the dam to let out its water into a potted plant. Apparently all here is connected, from the mini solar panels to the perpetual motion machine. If the visitor can't put them together, that is another question.

On the walls hang painted landscapes, and amidst the cables and tubing are various models: of the gallery, an observatory, etc. Each invites the viewer to walk into the world they create but finally reveal the emptiness they belie: they seem to pale in the shadow of the larger whole. And that seems to be the point.

We walk from the accepted gallery space into the back room with kitchenette or the bathroom or even the store room, and all are part of the workings of this machine/installation. Bower has not broken with or challenged the traditional notion of the gallery but instead expanded upon it, to an absurd degree. This expansion seems ultimately pointless but has the stink of meaning. One wonders if the

artist is environmentalist or technology fetishist or merely tinkerer.

The visitor to "Utility" is most certainly challenged to put together the many pieces to the puzzle laid out here. It is interesting to note, though, that despite a 30-page catalog which documents the whole show, in all of its parts, the figuring out of the show is the least interesting part. There is more fun to be had by just looking around and playing with the machinations set up, instead of analyzing the deeper and more resonant meanings (boundaries of art and life, ecosystems and power, art as macro-reality, etc.). It is somehow more poignant to see the little dam let its water out into the potted weed (a living symbol of the Protestant work ethic, from the catalog) than it is to wax philosophic about it.

The centrally interesting element of the show is the humility of its aspirations. Whereas the Modernist notion of art was pomp and circumstance, the contemporary view has obviously shifted to a more quiet questioning of certain fundamental principles (and the idea that there are even principles to question). In Tinguely's self destructing machine one could see, retrospectively, the blueprint for Modernism: a loud, cantankerous thing which seemed to offer so much but was designed (in the machine's case more intentionally so) only to destroy itself, leaving few of the utopian dreams it had seemed to promise. In the case of Bower's installation, as with others who work with absurd technology, the question and answer is quite different. The finality found in the work by Tinguely has little echo here. Instead, there is a mystifying emptiness about it. One suspects there is a logic to it. One can almost prove it. Following the trail which runs chaotically throughout this show, one is always a step away from getting the bigger picture. The central problem of this show is that the visitor is oft times not enticed enough to begin to search for the connections or anything at all. But through the playfulness of the installation many are. Either way the search leads to a similar end: a sort of benign confusion which has deeper resonance within the larger global context, one which might make you begin to think about the simple nature of the truly complex (reverse that if you want) in a new way.

Keith Miller, New York