

Endorsement of Alternative, 2 an avant-garde museum, in Mr. Barthelme's memorandum of July 10, 1961¶

Not long before Donald Barthelme moved to New York and became known as one of the most exciting, innovative, and important writers of his time, he lived in his hometown of Houston and served as the director of the Contemporary Art Association, known today as the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.¶

As a board member and eventually as acting director, Barthelme's ideas for the museum made waves that rippled out through the institution's subsequent development. Not unlike the stories readers would soon encounter in *The New Yorker* and in his first collection, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, Barthelme was not afraid to shake up forms, decentralize authority, or to merge high art and popular culture at the museum.¶

As early as 1959, Barthelme appears in the CAA's board meeting minutes, where he both contributed to and defended copy for a museum brochure outlining an expansive vision for the museum's future. At the time, the CAA was stuck between its 1948 foundation as a volunteer-driven art association and the model later created by its first professional director, Jermaine McAgy. Although Houston had one of the first non-collecting museums dedicated to showing the work of contemporary artists, the CAA, without funding and a withdrawal of de Menil support, housed in a small A-frame building, its board being called to resign, volunteers disengaging, and supporters polled about whether the museum should persist, the board understandably considered whether the time had come to fold.¶

Finding new space within the impasse, Barthelme proposed that the museum become itinerant, expand beyond visual art, and diversify its activities and scope. The unsolicited proposal he authored with Herman Goeters outlined an interim period in which diverse programs—including music, theater, and film, “plus something on the walls”—were presented around Houston by volunteer chairmen

with curatorial control. The museum adopted the plan as its official “new direction” and announced, “The Board of Directors looks forward to an exciting new season, fully aware that this excitement has something of the feeling of a high wire act done without a net.”¶

Barthelme spoke fondly of his time at the museum and its influence on him is evident in stories such as “The Dassaud Prize,” “The Balloon,” and “The Flight of the Pigeons from the Palace.” In a 1976 radio interview with Judy Sherman and Charles Ruas, Sherman asked Barthelme, “Were you writing while you were in Texas?” Barthelme responded, “Yeah, yeah, oh yeah, but not, you know, not particularly well. I couldn't figure out how to do it for a long time. And then finally I sort of began writing things which I thought weren't too terrible—and...that really happened at the time that I was working for the museum.” Barthelme downplayed his own influence on the museum, however, claiming that he landed there “more or less by accident” and only because “the place was in ruins.” The archives tell a different story, illustrating Barthelme's habit of writing unsolicited proposals and staging backstage trickster maneuvers; board minutes witness Barthelme simultaneously dismantle and reconstruct bureaucratic language as cover, while he authored a new course, role, and alternative future for the museum.¶

Beginning with her 2014 exhibition “Incommensurate Mapping,” curated by Dean Daderko, Houston artist Carrie Schneider has traced Barthelme's influence on the CAA through board minutes in the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston's archives. Schneider also draws upon the Barthelme Archive at the University of Houston's Special Collections, as well as images from Barthelme's work in *Forum* and his collage stories, to recast our understanding of Barthelme and the museum—as institution, project, medium for artists, and malleable platform for cultural life in the city. Compiling these primary sources in a collage account, Schneider's work invites us to reconsider Barthelme's tenure with the CAA, suggesting Barthelme's influence was a precursor to the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston's storied days under the directorship of Sebastian “Lefty” Adler and Jim Harithas, not to mention the importance Barthelme placed--at the CAA and in his writing--on a multiplicity of voices, making space in the margins, and the need to test words and images alongside the institutions that endorse them.¶

SEE PAGE 328 FOR IMAGE FOOTNOTES#

The Museum also plans to stage its annual Art Auction, Art Rental show and Modern House Tour.

CAA

Eventually, if the Contemporary Arts Museum is to serve the community adequately, the scope of its operations must be increased to encompass a permanent collection, an art school, a library and reading room, slide and photograph collections, and circulating exhibitions. These projected developments suggest a museum structure flexible enough to accommodate such activities and ideally one that would itself be a vital example of contemporary art. A museum building and a budget substantial enough to support such a range of activities are necessary aspects of the Contemporary Arts Association's growth. They remain very much in the realm of future plans. We mention them here merely to make the point that such plans are being formulated, and that every contribution to our present operations also projects the C. A. A. toward this future.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS held at the Contemporary Arts Museum

Tuesday, December 8, 1959, at 4:00 P.M.

A. Fund raising and development. Mr. Bruhl read the text of the brochure which will be mailed at the initiation of the campaign. It was again discussed at length, Mr. Bruhl being particularly concerned by the last section which describes an ideal museum for the future. He stressed that the CAA must make definite plans to cover its present expenses, that the aim of the campaign should be to take care of the immediate problems and that the building fund must be repaid before any plans for improvement can be formulated. Mr. Barthelme said that the brochure must give definite plans for the future as an incentive to present support and that there is no real conflict between immediate needs and plans for the future.

George Pierce, Mr Morris gave the report on development, as worked out in consultation with Mr Cronais and Mr Barthelme. There are at present five museums for contemporary arts in the country. Three are located in the New York-Boston metropolitan area, two are in Texas. Our ultimate goal would be to achieve a balance of interest by increasing the importance of the C.A.A. According to this general plan the "Past, Present and Future" brochure would be revised to include four parts: 1. The purpose of the association. 2. This year's activities. 3. Membership. 4. Hypothetical museum we would like to achieve, should we be able to raise \$1,000,000 in the membership drive. It would be aiming for the most in the hope of achieving excitement.

Mrs McAshan objected that the C.A.A. has not proved itself yet this year and that to put our aims so high would hurt us because they are unrealistic; Dallas tried it last year and failed. Mr Barthelme said that there is no correlation between Mr Morris's short tenure and the amount that the Museum should drive for. The question is at what point the goal we are driving for should be given, and psychologically this should be done at the beginning: a concrete program must be presented and this being the beginning of the second decade since the association was organized, it is a good time to present what has been done and what is planned. It was decided that no definite amount would be mentioned in the brochure, but simply that a definite goal for the next ten years would be presented.

EVERYTHING REFLECTS WELL ON OUR CITY
 OUR AUDIENCES ARE AMAZINGLY PERCEPTIVE
 THE STRING SECTION HAS A BROKEN HEART
 WE CHEER IT BECAUSE IT IS OUTSTANDING
 GULLS SMASH INTO THE GREAT GLASS WINDOWS
 I HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE OPTIMISTIC, MORE SANGUINE



DONALD BARTHELME
 Attended University of Houston

Barthelme Named by Museum

Donald Barthelme, for four years editor of the University of Houston's prize-winning quarterly Forum, has been named acting director of the Contemporary Arts Museum.

The museum's board of directors announced Thursday that the appointment is effective immediately.

BARTHELME, a former Houston Post reporter who lives at 819 Harold Ave, resigned from the board of directors to accept the acting director's position. He had been vice president of the museum and had been on the board since 1959.

He had also been chairman of several exhibits at the museum.

Barthelme, a native of Philadelphia who attended the University of Houston, was one of the principal designers of the museum's new diversification program. The program was adopted by the board last fall. It places equal emphasis on all forms of contemporary expression.

WHILE HE edited Forum, It published articles by David Riesman, John Kenneth Galbraith, Norman Mailer, Walker Percy and Jean-Paul Sartre. He also published the work of such artists as Leonard Baskin, Jimmy Ernest, Robert Andrew Parker, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.

He asked ourselves: How can we improve the show?



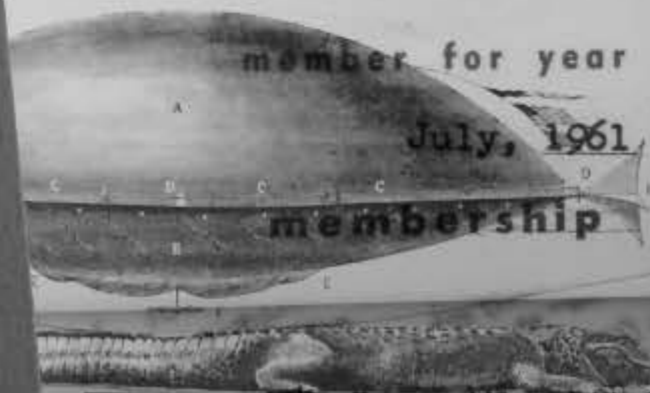
He auditioned an explosion.

contemporary art
 association of houston
 Mr. & Mrs. Donald Barthelme, Jr.

member for year ending

July, 1961

membership card

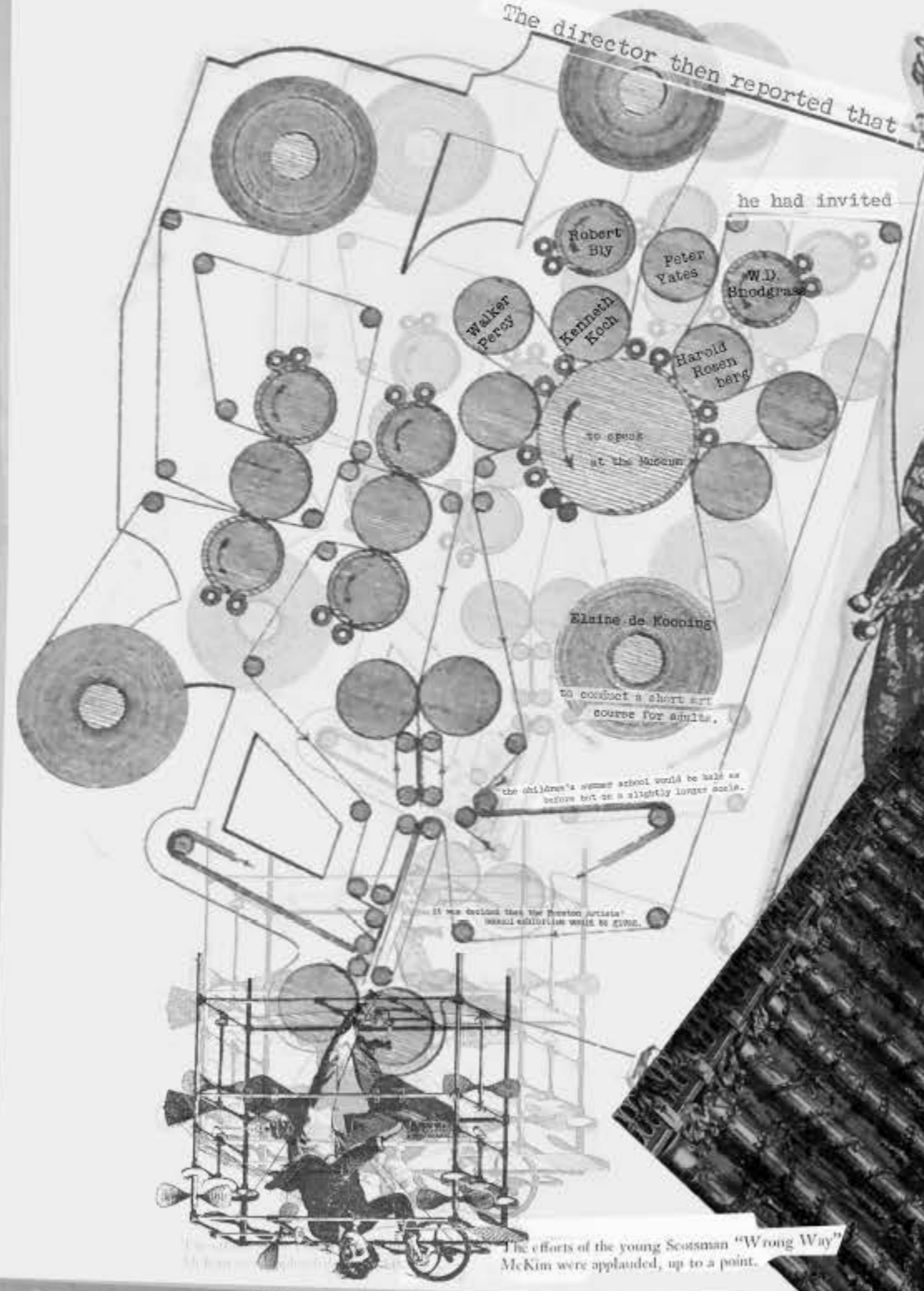


no mention should be made publicly that CAA considers this an interim program, but instead publicity should be slanted in a positive manner as presenting an entirely new concept for CAA. Other members agreed.

proposals for future activities, which were discussed by the board. He then read a list of

The director then reported that

he had invited



The efforts of the young Scotsman "Wrong Way" McKim were applauded, up to a point.

He then read a list of

Mr. Barthelme then said that 50 acres of ground near Adicks were available for

a summer festival which could involve such things as

the Claes Oldenburg

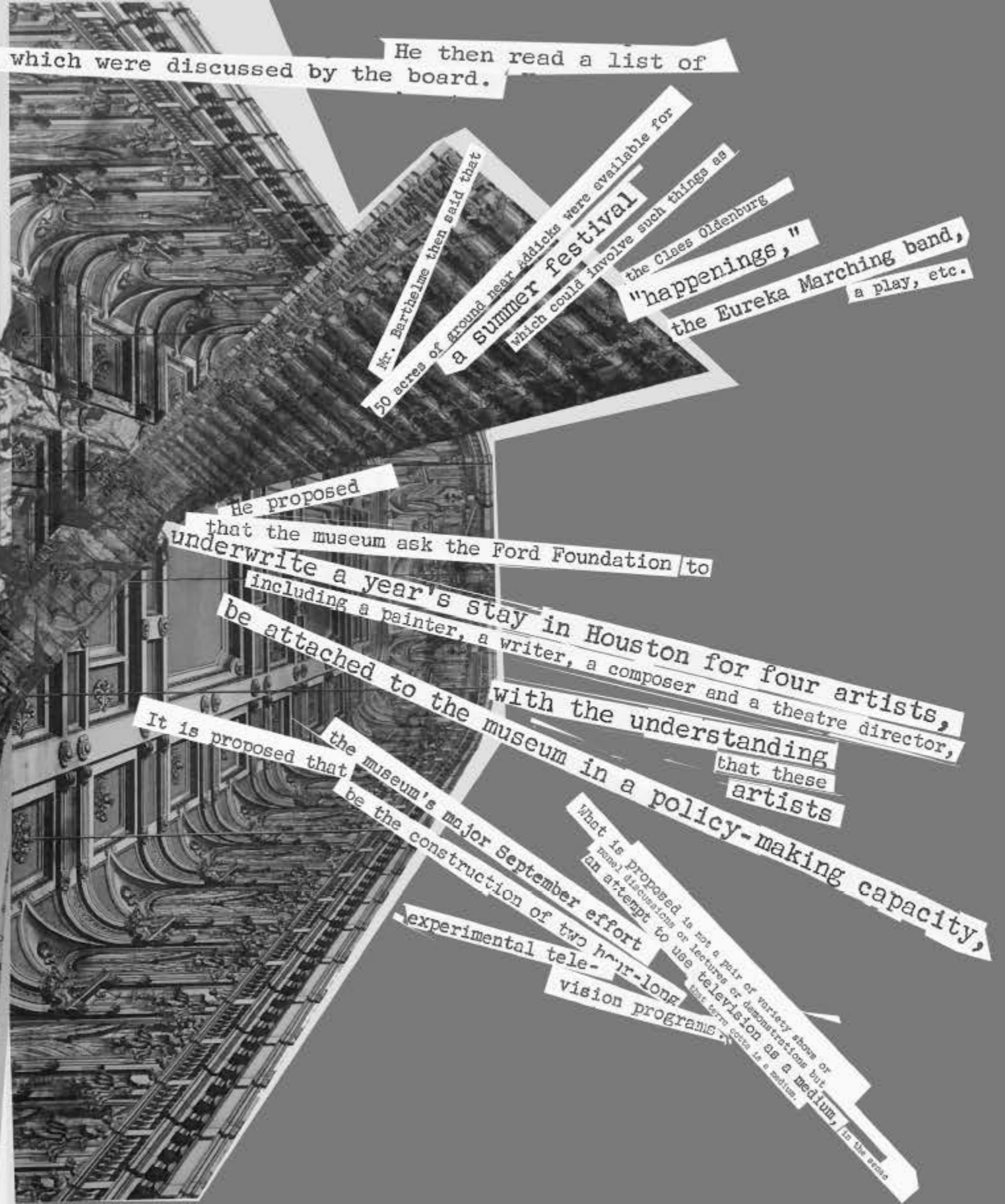
"happenings,"

the Eureka Marching band, a play, etc.

He proposed that the museum ask the Ford Foundation to underwrite a year's stay in Houston for four artists, including a painter, a writer, a composer and a theatre director, be attached to the museum in a policy-making capacity, with the understanding that these artists

It is proposed that the museum's major September effort be the construction of two hour-long experimental television programs

What is proposed is not a pair of variety shows or panel discussions or lectures or demonstrations but an attempt to use television as a medium, in the sense that term costs in a medium



A baby blue Styrofoam chrysanthemum. An auto hubcap, brand unrecognizable. A hideous jukebox. Paint-by-number pictures of lambs, sans paint. An unbelievably ugly plastic chair. A giant-size Vaseline jar. An imitation shrunken head. A plaster "flamenco." Reader's Digest. Official Detective. Ricky Nelson Magazine. A TV antenna. A whiskey decanter disguised as a Greek vase. Bunny rabbit decals. Big Bonus stamps. A gilded baby shoe coin bank. Klutchdenture adhesive. Plastic-bright artificial fruit. TikiJoe's Luau Kit. A plastic red rose in pseudo crystal vase. Three (bad) reproductions of Gainsborough's Blue Boy. An "obscene" ashtray. A large Coke bottle. A box of All. Half-ceramic, half-wooden totem poles. A toy machine gun. A plastic soldier's helmet. "A roseate and gaudily commercialized" badly-printed stuffed head of Christ. A copy of the American flag printed out of register on flimsy plastic.

2406 Yorkum Boulevard
Houston, Texas
June 29, 1980

Board of Trustees
Contemporary Arts Association
6945 Fannin Street
Houston, Texas

Dear Members:

On receiving a statement concerning renewal of my membership in the Contemporary Arts Association I at first thought I would ignore it, but then decided that before doing so I would see the current exhibition. I have now done so; I will ignore the statement, but not without comment.

The exhibition "New American Artefacts" is a horror, but less because of the objects themselves than because of its meaninglessness as a museum exhibition, and in particular as an exhibition by this particular museum with its limited area and money.

One can see similar collections in any shop, from Woolworths to Neimans, in many homes and public buildings, but the "selective eye" automatically rejects or ignores them. The question is of how that eye can be developed, which this smug and rather snide exhibition doesn't forward at all.

The real problem as I see it, however, is that this exhibition begs the question of this museum's contribution in other exhibitions during the year to the development of a selective eye, and of the heart, head and spirit which should go with it. Has the quality of the previous exhibitions been such that the contrast is obvious? I think not. If so, one could permit the small joke of this exhibition. I think rather that it is a waste of limited space and time and money in a year of exhibitions which have done little to delight or to instruct.

And it is later than you think, in a city which daily grows more full of "New American Artefacts", whether any museum can successfully improve popular taste may be a moot point, but one could provide an oasis. That the main function of a museum of fine arts is to provide access to the wonderful seems hardly debatable.

Sincerely,

collins



If I know how a set of brass knuckles feels on Heidi's left hand it's because I bought one once, in a pawnshop, not to smash up someone's face but to exhibit on a pedestal in a museum show devoted to cultural artifacts of ambivalent status. The world enters the work as it enters our ordinary lives, not as a worldview or system but in sharp particularity, a tax notice from Madelaine, a snowball containing a resume from Gaston.



we did The Ugly Show as the obverse of the good design show



worth doing I think



I don't think it closed early I think what did happen - we had to take the flag out



we put a pair of brass knuckles in its place



— 7" —

It is difficult to keep the public interested. The public demands new wonders piled on new wonders. Often we don't know where our next marvel is coming from. The supply of strange ideas is not endless. The development of new wonders is not like the production of canned goods. Some things appear to be wonders in the beginning, but when you become familiar with them, are not wonderful at all. Sometimes a 75-foot highly-paid monster will raise only the tiniest frisson. Some of us have even thought of folding the show--closing it down. That thought has been gliding through the hallways and rehearsal rooms of the show.

However the new volcano we have just placed under contract seems very promising...



MEMORANDUM: 10 July 1961

On the question of the future of the museum, I believe the Board must make what amounts to a radical choice. On the basis of recent experience as acting director as well as previous experience as a board member, I would locate the choice as being between these alternatives:

1) If what is desired is a museum in the traditional sense, going about its business in traditional ways, then an extremely well-known professional director (a "name" director) is mandatory. A museum of this kind, offering traditional museum exhibitions and services, cannot attract sufficient money to make itself worthwhile without him. Such a person would of course be valuable in many areas other than fund-raising; fund-raising, however, cannot be successfully carried on without him, given the history of this organization and its present state of development. The experience of the Houston Symphony, which has successfully employed this approach for some years (Efrem Kurtz, Stokowski, Barbirolli) is relevant, as is that of the MFA.

The corollary is of course a new building. The building itself will attract money, as the MFA discovered with Cullinan Hall, as well as attracting public interest and enthusiasm. With a name director it would be easier to get a new building; with a new building, it would be easier to get the right director. But one or the other is absolutely necessary, I believe, if we wish to grow in this direction, in the direction of the standard museum.

2) The alternative, in my view, is an avant-garde museum. The CAA began as this sort of organization, bringing contemporary art to a city where there was no contemporary art. Now, when the larger museum has a famous modernist at its head, we can hope only to supplement or footnote his efforts if we continue with the kind of program we have presented over the past ten years. This does not mean that the CAA might not "successfully" continue showing contemporary art as it has in the past; it does mean that to do so, in the terms in which past exhibitions and other offerings have been conceived, is inevitably to duplicate in most ways what will be offered by the Museum of Fine Arts and other groups.

An avant-garde museum on the other hand, would enter areas the MFA is not likely to deal with, in a sense cannot afford to deal with. These are also, I think, the most exciting areas, and those which the CAA is most nearly equipped to handle. (By avant-garde I do not mean, for instance, 90% of what was done by this museum last season.) Nor would a new building (or a new director) be precluded by this choice. We would gain a direction, a working philosophy, and a sphere of influence or activity that would be both uniquely ours and needed in the community.

Donald Barthelme

FOOTNOTES: Source image attribution for collage spreads by Carrie Schneider in *Endorsement of Alternative 2, an Avant-garde Museum, in Mr. Barthelme's Memorandum of July 10, 1961*. Pages 226-235. Left-right, top-bottom.

1. Contemporary Arts Association Introduction

Contemporary Arts Association brochure 1960 featuring copy written by Donald Barthelme, Jr. as a CAA board member.

"Five museums for contemporary art" and defense of Barthelme's copy imagining the CAA's future, excerpt from CAA board meeting minutes December 8, 1959.

Barthelme's text from collaboration with Jim Love, *The Rook's Progress* 1987, box 29, folder 11, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.

Explosion from original layout of "The Show" 1970 collage story which became "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" published 1971, box 28, folder 3-4, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.

Barthelme CAA membership card 1961.

Blimp and gator collage elements from original layouts of "The Educational Experience," Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, box 27, folder 3, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections. "The Educational Experience" was published in *Harper's Magazine*, June 1973 issue.

"Barthelme Named by Museum" article in *Houston Post*, March 23, 1961.

2. State of Museum Pivot

Excerpt from (unadmitted) CAA board meeting minutes Tuesday July 12, 1960.

"Four alternatives" and Barthelme's informal proposal introduction excerpt from CAA board meeting minutes September 27, 1960 with ink bleed from 1976 flood of the CAMH.

Lionsuit illustration from *Forum* 1958.

Excerpt from Barthelme and Herman Goeters' formal interim program proposal presented October 11, 1960.

Statesman and shrew collage element from "The Emerald," 1979 collage story, Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, box 27, folder 5-8, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.

3. Barthelme Directorship and Proposals

"No mention should be made" and official adoption of Barthelme's proposal from CAA board minutes October 11, 1960.

Twirlyman collage element from "The Educational Experience," Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, box 27, folder 3, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.

Writers hosted at the CAA. It is difficult to definitively attribute individual programs to Barthelme because he piloted a curatorial model of volunteer chairmen with creative control over programs in

areas such as jazz, film, theatre, and music. However, writers who spoke at CAA during Barthelme's tenure were more likely by his sole invitation, his invitation of Elaine de Kooning is documented in the board minutes, and he mentions the CAA hosting Buckminster Fuller when Robert Morris was director in a "Playing with Petrol" interview with Charles Ruas and Judy Sherman from the Winter of 1976, available at Clocktower.org.

Wrong Way McKim collage element and caption from "The Dassaud Prize" 1976 collage story page proof, Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, box 29, folder 5, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.

Interior collage elements from "The Educational Experience," Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, box 27, folder 3, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.

Selected excerpts of Barthelme's program proposals as recorded in the CAA board meeting minutes 1960-1962.

4. Ugly Show Reflections

CAA's registrar's list from *New American Artifacts (The Ugly Show)* as appears in Kevin Cunningham's "L'Éclat du Hazard" *Gulf Coast* Volume IV Number One: A Tribute to Donald Barthelme Spring 1992.

Background mylar plate from original layout of "The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine" 1971 children's book layout with artwork, Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, box 26, folder 1-15, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.

Screenshots with typed captions featuring Barthelme's reflection on the 1960 "New American Artifacts: The Ugly Show" exhibition he organized, from 1982 panel on the CAMH's history and future proposals "Dreams and Schemes" exhibition moderated by Ann Holmes, from the CAMH's archives courtesy of Daniel Atkinson.

Response letter to "The Ugly Show."

Photo of "Not Knowing" typescript and as it appears in the UH Special Collections Helen Moore Barthelme Papers series 3: box 3, folder 4.

5. Volcano Memorandum

Original layout from "The Show" collage story 1970, published as "The Flight of the Pigeons from the Palace" 1971, Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, box 28, folder 3-4, University of Houston Libraries Special Collections.

Memorandum from Barthelme to CAA July 10, 1961. The endorsement of this memorandum was recommended in the CAA's Budget Committee's 1961-1962 report, circulated and accepted at the August 15, 1961 CAA board meeting. This line item is where these collage works take their title.

All CAA board minutes were originally viewed in the archives of the CAMH thanks to the assistance of Misha Burgett and access granted by Dean Daderko.