

09.08.06 Artforum - William Pym on a new venture in Philadelphia



Left: Megawords' Anthony Smyrski. Right: Philagrafika's Caitlin Perkins with Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks Curator of Contemporary Projects Robert Wuilfe.



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Story by William Pym

With the scent of 500 sticks of Nag Champa floating down the wide pavements of Society Hill, the Philadelphia art season got off to a weird but ultimately heartening start on Wednesday evening. An unusual assembly of forces old and new had come together with the noble ambition of presenting a weeklong event with surprise and a bit of heat as the city cools. Sponsorship came from Philagrafika, a new umbrella organization engaged exclusively in the promotion of printed matter with enough brains and funding to merit international ambitions. The art, a video and sculpture installation occupying the entirety of Powel House, an immaculately preserved Georgian manse once inhabited by Philly's Revolution-era mayor Samuel Powel, was made by Dan Murphy and Anthony Smyrski, a tough local pair who have received much praise of late for Megawords, their free, advertising-free, self-funded magazine of explanation-free pictorial poetry. Strange bedfellows already, the two parties' elected bed was nuttier still, for this was not at all the sort of vibrant urban environment in which these young Philadelphians thrive. It was an unusual pooling of resources, and nobody, least of all the organizers, knew quite what to expect.



Left: Artist Steve Powers and author and publisher Mattathias Schwartz. Right: Megawords' Dan Murphy

Joining mobs of kids from the neighborhoods where the artists came up were a spread of shore-tanned downtown art players and delicate older ladies in fluffy tweeds who are probably Powel House regulars, all of whom mingled in several rooms of white-cake-frosting sconces and polished Chippendale decorated with wobbling disco lights, priceless VHS dubs of Fox's Cops episodes showing crack-epidemic mayhem in a local corridor now comfortably bohemian, or silent 8-mm rock footage so blown out that it was impossible to tell if it was the Exploding Plastic Inevitable or a garage of local nobodies. The pruned garden was crammed with a cellular mass of a dozen dirty tents, suggesting very well organized campers. It was a compact distillation of high and low city flavor, and as I stepped out for air I passed a prissy sign announcing the "special art exhibition" at the national landmark's entrance. "How about this neighborhood, huh?" asked the laconic Steven Powers, in from New York to support Murphy, his longtime graffiti acolyte and sometime assistant. "Needs a Starbucks."

The panel discussion at the center of the event helped the crowd sort out how it came to be. Moderated, in theory, by Shelley Langdale, the Philadelphia Museum's associate curator of prints and drawings, the roundtable essentially amounted to a string of political tirades. Alex Baker, contemporary curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, did a bashfully Red rant on the co-opting of youth culture, citing corporate sponsorship of ANP, a hip art quarterly, as proof that "there's no safe sector under capitalism. Everything is grey. But Megawords is proof that there are solid ways to navigate it." The ghosts of American freedom fighters stirred the room. "Printed matter like this is the beginning of something, not the end," explained ascendant local photographer Zoe Strauss. "It is the beginning"—a long pause—"of doing whatever it is you want to do!" The packed room came close to cheers, then settled for a polite, well, nothing.



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Left: Alex Baker, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Right: Espers' Meg Baird and artist Kate Abercrombie.

By the end of the long chat the panelists were loose and confident. Smyrski got tangled up and laughed his way out of an exchange with an old dear in the audience about what he meant when he said “we were trying to do something cool.” Murphy, whose main financial racket is carpentry, asked another, bluntly, “Do you want to know what we do for money?” as she nervously beat around the bush about how the magazine was supported. The elastic tension between young artists and old audience, both bemused, began to lend the event a real surreal feel. Powers reined it in and wrapped up with measured words about Philadelphia and the terrain, aesthetic and concrete, trodden by all the artists on the panel. “If you want to see rock bottom, man, I got a place for you. If you want to see the best the world has to offer, it’s the price of a subway ride away. That’s what Megawords is about. There is a heartbreakingly beautiful current that runs through this city, and it is not in the upper echelons.” It may have been a little difficult to get behind this point in the room in which George and Martha Washington danced their twentieth wedding anniversary, but he had their collective ear, and for the length of an evening it did seem that everyone was keen to work together. Hours later I bumped into Murphy in a bar with his girlfriend and the Nag Champa man, who apparently goes by the professional name of DJ Nag Champa. “I’m real happy, man,” he opened up. “I kinda wanted things to get ugly in tent city but, you know, I think it went real well.”

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Left: DJ Nag Champa. Right: Artists Chi Kim and Ben Woodward with Atari Kim-Woodward.