



Welsh students with an inflatable. Picture by Andrew Tweedie

Blow-up

Stacy Waddy reports on how inflatables bring art to the people

AIR ART has taken off in the past two years. There have been international conventions in Illinois in 1968, Philadelphia in 1969, and the Museum of Modern Art in Paris; and more haphazard recognition here at festivals like Brighton and the City of London. Inflatables vary from Warhol's floating cushions to structures large as circus tents. They are used to make architectural sense and anarchistic nonsense. But everyone who works in them has in common a concern over the environment, and the alienation caused by our super-technology and surrounding hardware. Inflatables, like people, are software.

Inflatables function as a challenge to the status quo—the status quo of museum art, of the art object, of the rôle of the spectator, of architecture's rigid preconceptions, of technological alienation even of the concept of property. Air art is temporary, evanescent, depends on participation, and what it uses is free. It is a direct challenge to the moral petrification of "a place for everything and everything in its place." The people who work in inflatables are confronting the rigid alienating environment and trying to make it less rigid. It is literally subversive art.

At this month's Brighton Festival, the Eventstructure Research Group

used twelve inflatable tetrahedrons, green, red, and gold, to walk on the water. Sealed into air envelopes 15ft. high, Brighton men set off to walk across the sea from one pier to the other, a grotesque and magical ballet as they somersaulted the inflatables to progress. ERG calls them Waterwalks, and their aim is to change people's preconceptions of water, because now it doesn't take a miracle to walk on it.

Jeffery Shaw, a 26-year-old Australian, and Theo Boersema, of Amsterdam, make events all over Europe expressly to realign people and make them less alienated from their own environment. As Jeffery Shaw sees it: "People are helpless in the face of existing patterns, the daily repetition of what they see and can expect to see. It amounts to an illness. Ours are attempts to break down that series, those patterns."

"The existing environment is built on concepts that are geometric over-permanent, overstable, which just don't respect the whim of individual people. It's got so that the world is something fixed, and you are just living in it; rather than that the world is *your* product and something that is directly in conversation with you. We want to show that it is transformable, it is easily moved."

Participation is the key to most air art. And faced by inflatables people's inhibitions seem to break down fast. At the Knokke Film Festival in 1968 ERG provided an airground—a double cone 30 feet high and 36 feet wide—where people could fling themselves. They did. They spontaneously took off their clothes and romped over it until the Casino authorities cut off the electricity. In 1969 one of ERG's projects was a similar dome printed as realistically as possible with bricks, and called the Brickhill. It very directly confronted the rigidity of architecture. Shaw describes it:

"The Brickhill exploded the myth of solid architecture of permanent things. It gave people, in a surreal way, the possibility of *moving* bricks, of moving architecture. It invested you with the physical power to push a building around. But the formal context of most of these things was unsatisfactory. People can get out of it by saying: 'Oh, it's only the festival.' Institutionalised spectacles (parades, festivals, displays) fail because they are carefully circumscribed so as not to allow any interference with the workday routine. The event is out of people's reach—they are given the rôle of passive consumer. We want to work as interruptions. Disruptions."

"We are setting up now a Mobile Event Vocabulary—with money from the Dutch Arts Council, the boroughs, the Staedlick etc.—a sort of van with a vocabulary of materials not to be used as finite objects but as operational equipment at each site. One thing we plan is to construct a water tunnel across the Amstel, where you can walk right across the river because—and this exemplifies the alien environmental planning I've been talking about—the Dutch built a tunnel under the river no expense spared, and it is only for cars. If you are on foot or on a bicycle you have to do a 20 kilometre detour. We hope to work outside the festival context from now on—just turn up and start an event. And one of the places we may be able to is Wales with the help of the Welsh Arts Council and the National Coal Board. We'll just turn up and start."

"An open-ended exploitation of technology's resources becomes evidence for all people that technology is there as an extension of their wills and freedom. Tinguely's self-destructive machines achieve that. For Art is that area of working with matter that is not in the pay of the system. If it is useless it demonstrates an alternative to the relentless system of 'value' and 'usefulness.'"