

## Getting on the Highways: Taking Responsibility for the Culture in the '90s

Linda Frye Burnham

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

--Margaret Mead

This is the outrageously grandiose admonition that hangs over my desk at the 18th Street Arts Complex in Santa Monica. At this desk I manage the complex and in my spare time I co-direct Highways Performance Space, one of the tenant organizations in the complex.

Even in these dark days, as Congress throws its enormous wet blanket across freedom of expression, I like to pretend art can change the world. I keep up this pretense for all the courageous and blindly optimistic young artists who pass through my life, and I keep the sign on my wall because it was put there by my daughter Jill, who, God bless her, wants to follow in my footsteps as an arts administrator and is now general manager of Highways.

In the 15 years I have maneuvered around in the art world, I have collected a lot of hats in my closet. Not only did I found High Performance magazine in 1978 and serve as its editor until 1986, I have also been a critic, teacher, publisher, curator, historian, performance artist, poet, songwriter, fiction writer, producer, presenter, organization founder.

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Linda Frye Burnham founded *High Performance* in 1978 and served as its editor until 1985. She is a columnist for *High Performance*, a contributing editor for *The Drama Review*, and a contributor to *American Theatre*, *Atlanta Art Papers* and other arts magazines. In 1989, she founded Highways performance space with performance artist Tim Miller.

I find at this stage of the game, I am perhaps just as interested in arts organizations as I am in the art itself. What's crucial to me is the notion of creative people gathered together to take responsibility for the culture, to support and learn from each other, and to make something besides money. My friend Susanna Dakin once ran for president as a performance artist and her slogan was "The Nation as an Artwork." We agree that systems, communities and organizations have design, shape and dynamics, just like a poem, a symphony or a constitution.

Throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s I think we all learned a lot about the dynamics of groups from working through the civil rights movement, the anti-war struggle, feminist liberation, co-dependency groups, abortion clinic defense, protest against U.S. intervention in Central America, and now, certainly, the movements around AIDS and homophobia. Those between 20 and 50 are children of the revolution, for better or worse. The alternative arts world is peopled with such children. Our arts organizations are worth paying attention to, especially now that they are under attack by religious bigots in Congress and elsewhere.

### *A Death-Defying Escape from the '80s*

What led me to start another nonprofit arts organization for the '90s is a story of the '80s, with all its excess, grief and overblown dreams.

I founded *High Performance* magazine in Los Angeles because I saw performance art as a worldwide phenomenon of enormous energy, but one that was blowing away in the wind, with no one to document it--especially the work that was being done outside of New York. I was originally attracted to the field because of the vast amount of work being done by women. Feminist artists were doing live work that seemed to me to apply to real life, to my life. The interdisciplinary, multimedia formal and political strategies operating in performance art seemed to me to be far more useful than simple writing or painting or sculpture in examining contemporary problems and situations. For eight years I followed the field, traveling all over the U.S. and Europe, writing criticism and establishing a writers network wherever I could. I made performance myself, published books about the field, helped produce several festivals and temporary artspace, and generally immersed myself in the whole performance idea.

But by 1985 I was fed up with the art world entirely. It seemed to have been swallowed up by the venality of the '80s. The performance field looked swamped by careerists, exhibitionists and publicity seekers. Art seemed to be ignoring the enormous pressing problems of the real world that surrounded me everyday--unemployment, homelessness, waves of refugees from the wars we were waging in Central America. Art seemed to take hold of real world images and dump the meaning out of them until they were beautiful empty symbols.

Artists were side-lining themselves, marginalizing themselves into powerlessness. I was fed up, and I quit the magazine and tried to quit the art world.

What brought me back was the brazen action of a single artist, a performance artist from New York named John Malpede, who established a performance art workshop for the homeless on L.A.'s Skid Row and proceeded to demonstrate with clarity that art saves lives. I was overwhelmed at the magic I saw worked in his LAPD (Los Angeles Poverty Department)--performers and audiences literally transformed into beacons of hope in a neighborhood that sat at the bottom of America's trashpile.

John was a California Arts Council artist-in-residence in a brilliant program that requires artists to create their own workshop projects by partnering with a nonprofit organization. In his case it was the Inner City Law Center. I went to a meeting of other artists-in-residence and met people like Susan Franklin Tanner who had started the TheatreWorkers Project, creating performances with unemployed steelworkers, shipbuilders and immigrant laborers about their lives, their work, their communities and the shrinking of the industrial kingdom that once was southeast L.A. I met a black painter who was teaching painting in a hospital to terminally ill children. I met artists working in AIDS hospices, day care centers, refugees asylums, farmworkers unions. They were doing for "community art" what they had done for avant-garde art in the '70s, using revolutionary formal strategies and postmodernist theories to try to unravel some of the great social knots of our times.

I was rejuvenated and inspired again. As I said in a column in *High Performance* at the time, I was so proud of art again, it was almost like falling in love.

### *The Legacy of Crisis: Act Now*

Meanwhile, one of the most devastating occurrences of the 20th Century was unfolding in America, with most tragic consequences for the art world: thousands of creative people were dying of AIDS.

In 1987 Tim Miller and Douglas Sadownick moved to Los Angeles, fleeing New York with its escalating cost of living and escalating numbers of dying. Miller is an L.A. native who went to New York instead of college and in the process of becoming a prominent performance artist, he helped found Performance Space 122 in the East Village. Sadownick is a fiction writer and journalist who specializes in writing about the performing arts, gay identity and AIDS. They brought to L.A. a performance about their relationship with each other under the pressures of the AIDS crisis and when I saw "Buddy Systems" I saw for the first time the agonies of survival as a gay couple in our times. It touched me on a deeply personal level, and triggered an urgency that made me write them a fan letter--before it was too late, as it were. Since then I have realized that AIDS has turned all of us into activists in many ways: we don't

procrastinate like we used to, especially when it comes to expressing gratitude and affection.

I became fast friends with Miller and Sadowick, and before long Miller and I were commiserating over the shrinking amount of performance space in Los Angeles--a city full of performance artists, as I knew quite well. Because of real estate prices, insurance costs and other economic pressures, by the end of 1987 there was only one regularly operating performance space in town. In January 1988, over a cup of coffee in a Hollywood cafe, we decided to try to do something about it. We wanted to start a space that would specialize in performance and provide a place for L.A. artists to work. We wanted to see a lot of new work from established artists, and we wanted to call forth emerging artists who, we felt, were stymied by the lack of available performance space.

By the time we opened the doors of Highways Performance Space in May of 1989, our agenda had changed remarkably. Instead of making an anonymous artspace that would function like an empty tube through which "art" would pass, we came blasting forth with a manifesto.

In that year and a half we both became extremely politicized. I found myself obsessed with the Iran-Contra affair and U.S. involvement in Central America. Tim got deeply involved with the founding of ACT UP/L.A. (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and was staging performances at demonstrations and protesting government AIDS policies by getting arrested. I was spending my Saturdays defending women's health clinics against the onslaught of the anti-abortion movement, and acting as an administrator for Malpede's LAPD, now a nonprofit organization itself.

In addition we were both touring, lecturing and attending conferences around the U.S. and other countries. We spent a lot of time talking with such innovative organizations as the Border Arts Workshop in San Diego/Tijuana, who were making art on and about the border; and Alternate ROOTS, a network of performing arts professionals throughout the southeast United States who were committed to cultural diversity, artist involvement in cultural policy making, and regionalism--making new work out of the urban and rural locations they call home. ACT UP inspired us to new theories about social activism as well as group process, and Hittite Productions, a black performance company in L.A., was cluing us in to new cultural movement in their community. Constant contact with our own roots organizations, High Performance and P.S. 122, plus frequent consultation with other vital arts organizations like Sushi in San Diego; Artists Television Access, 1800 Square Feet, and Life on the Water in San Francisco; The Painted Bride in Philadelphia; Dance Theater Workshop and Creative Time in New York; The Woman's Building in L.A., and all the others in the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO) kept us in touch with what was going on in multicultural presenting and new arts theory all over the country.

We talked every day for a year and a half. We realized that we wanted to encourage art about social issues, and that we wanted to go on supporting formal exploration, since we knew the value of such experimentation when it comes to shaking up the mental constructs that create and institutionalize social problems. We also knew that we couldn't expect to address phenomena like homelessness, racism, homophobia and sexism without turning to those who are so massively affected by these disorders: women, ethnic and immigrant communities, gays and lesbians, the disabled and recovering, the elderly, the homeless themselves. And most significant of all, we dared to hope that artists from these groups would not only come to work at Highways, but that they would come to join forces and start working with each other, and that their audiences would follow them here and intermix as well.

In our search for space, we found that other organizations were looking too, and then we were blessed with an (anonymous) arts patron who wanted to buy some property in Santa Monica, L.A.'s liberal, pro-art beach community. She hired me to find a property big enough for all of us and devise a plan that would make the place pay for itself. I found a complex of five buildings eighteen blocks from the beach in a semi-industrial area set aside by the city for light manufacturing and art studios and galleries. The sale went through on Halloween 1988 and the complex soon filled up with a variety of nonprofit organizations, including High Performance/Astro Artz, the Electronic Cafe, The Empowerment Project, Community Arts Resources (CARS), Parents International Ethiopia, The Bhopal Justice Project and a number of individual artists studios. We all help support the complex by paying rent.

### *Building Highways*

Our performance space was able to move in by the following spring. We called it Highways because it is located not far from the intersection of Interstate 10 and Interstate 405, and because we knew it was about intersections of all kinds.

The space is 3,000 square feet of lofty warehouse that was home for fourteen years to a design firm, and was just next door to the studio where Judy Chicago and company had created the landmark feminist art history work, "The Dinner Party." There was room for a 1400-square-foot performance area (including space for movable risers that would seat about 130), plus a lobby, gallery, roomy upstairs tech booth, dressing room and "green room" waiting area for performers. We knew that we would have to build a flexible dance floor over the cement for the safety of dancers and movers.

We put out a call for help and the art and theater communities poured forth a wealth of used furniture and equipment that set us up for business. The list of donors represents a history of L.A. people, theaters and artspace.

We walked into this operation without raising a dime, contrary to the general opinion that you couldn't do something like this without raising a million dollars first. What we needed we bought out of pocket. Our fiscal policy was based on low overhead. We figured we had to make at least \$800 a week to pay the rent and expenses, but we knew we would have to run the first year on all-volunteer energy. We decided the organization would always be headed by at least two artists, at least one man and one woman, and never a single arts administrator/executive director, because we had watched too many artist-initiated organizations founder as the artists retired and the business people took over. We wanted to make sure the public saw that we were working artists, and that, as members of the Highways community, we intended to perform in the space ourselves. Our first employees, if any, would be a general manager and a technical director, simply to take care of the details. Tim and I felt we had a lot of expertise in curating, publicity and grant writing.

We wanted to make sure artists got paid, but we knew the healthiest way to turn Highways into a real community of artists was to co-produce with those who came to perform. We would offer artists 50% of the ticket sales, a press release and calls to the press, a splash in our regular two-month mailer/calendar, a box office person and our technical equipment. They would have to provide any extra flyers or postcard mailings, technical operators and designers and stage hands. While this coproduction model is financially difficult, it does give the artists some ownership of the production and a glimpse into the real economics of presentation.

Our manifesto was meant to call forth a special kind of energy from artists in all communities. We called ourselves a gallery for new performance forms and intercultural collaboration.

The Manifesto read:

"Highways is an artists' community dedicated to the exploration of new performance forms. Highways is strategically located at the intersection of art and society. Highways is an interchange among artists, critics and the public. Highways is a crossroads, a place of alliances, a new collaboration among cultures, genders and disciplines. Highways is part of an international effort to articulate and work out the crisis of living in the last decade of the 20th Century."

Before we even opened our doors, my studio at the complex was filled regularly with artists, writers, musicians and creative people of all colors and persuasions discussing plans, talking about the artist as citizen, and reading new work to each other. Always included in these discussions were our first board members, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a Mexican artist from San Diego/Tijuana, and Steven Durland, the editor of *High Performance*, two artists who were not only monitoring, but shaping the new theories of multiculturalism in the '90s.

We talked vigorously about Highways as a cultural center with an expanded vision of the role of art in local, national and global life; an artist-run organization essentially international in scope, with the goals of making visible the diversity of the 86 cultural groups present in southern California. We told each other that we were especially interested in presenting and encouraging artists with their roots in contemporary subcultures of all kinds, particularly those who are concerned with the intersection of those cultures and the vital social resonance of that intersection. We wanted to add to the traditional east-west art axis, a north-south axis--communication with artists in Latin America and examination of their community-based cultural strategies. We talked about an Interstate 5 network of related performance spaces from Mexico to Canada who could collaborate and share the responsibilities of touring for artists, and a similar connection across the southern U.S., an I-10 network.

We wanted a lot of discussion of issues at Highways. From our experience in other organizations, and especially our adventures at the annual gathering of the multiracial Alternate ROOTS clan, we knew that multicultural work would be extremely rocky, and we vowed to create a structure strong enough and flexible enough to withstand controversy. We invented the concept of the "anti-panel" for discussions, since we were very tired of the "politburo" approach to discussions where a panel of experts sits at a table facing the audience and pontificates. We wanted discussions to be circular and to include as many speakers as possible. This image grew out of our secure knowledge that multiculturalism, for us, did not mean two white people opening the door for minorities, and it did not mean charity work for the less advantaged. It meant we were turning to people from other cultural groups for vital information on the crises we found ourselves surrounded by. It would be a learning experience for all of us, an exchange.

### *The First 365 Days*

In the first year we presented more than 250 nights of performance illustrating the goals I have outlined. We both worked for free and kept the space going on volunteer labor while co-producing with artists and sharing the proceeds. In that time we put more than \$40,000 into artists' pockets, most of them local. Newsletters are included in the mailer/calendars we send out every two or three months. We purposely give in-depth reports of both good and hard times because we feel it was important that Highways be seen as a human situation, being dealt with by professionals who are real people with feelings and people who make mistakes. The newsletter, "Traffic Report," has become very popular, especially with our friends who don't live in L.A.

A brief description of our first days gives a good example of some of our curating decisions and their results.

We opened our doors on May 1, 1989, International Workers Day, with a blessing by Malcolm Boyd, a gay Episcopal priest from Santa Monica's outrageously ecumenical church St. Augustine's-by-the-Sea. (A week before the opening, Boyd had collaborated with Tim in a performance at St. Augustine's that had the congregation laughing, crying, and applauding their message about brotherly love.)

In his blessings, joined by many of the artists who were to work at Highways in the coming years, Boyd invited the spirits from all four directions to enter and grace the space. It must have worked because our opening benefit--four days of performances May 4-7, featuring 75 artists--was a great success. Audiences crowded in and responded warmly to performance by artists from the Anglo, black, Asian, gay and homeless communities. We raised enough money to pay the first month's rent, and to pay for the minimal equipment we had to buy and renovations to the space. We were also very excited about the large amount of advance press we received from all local papers and magazines.

#### *Cinco de Mayo and the Rise of Latino Issues*

Among the most interesting events of the benefit weekend was Cinco de Mayo, May 5, in which Latino artists came together from Tijuana, San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco to celebrate Mexico's political holiday and recontextualize it for American audiences. The artists, including the Border Arts Workshop, began the evening by dressing as their various Mexican personae--The Wrestling Bride, the Border Brujo--and leading the whole audience up 18th Street to the local bar, La Pantera Rosa, where we ringed the pool tables, and Ruben Guevara, who was born in the neighborhood, reclaimed it as his *barrio* with drumming and singing.

After some dancing in the restaurant next door, the artists brought the audience back to Highways where they presented a number of individual performances. In a controversial presentation that ran throughout the evening, Elia Arce introduced a recipe for fish stew from her native Costa Rica, then requested help from the audience in slaughtering the fish on stage to put in the stew, which was being prepared in the gallery.

After the performance and in the "anti-panel" scheduled for the next day, this and many other thorny issues raised by the Cinco de Mayo event were aired. Arce's performance was viewed by many as cruelty to animals, giving rise to discussion of the killing of animals for food, "humane" slaughtering, and customs in other countries where animals are often killed in the open marketplace in full view of children. Also hotly debated was the double standard used by some performance critics when writing about multicultural work.

Another issue, raised by VIVA!, an L.A. organization of gay and lesbian Latinos, was the lack of inclusion of gay sensibilities in the Latino evening, and



the paucity of Latino presence in our gay/lesbian festival scheduled for June. We worked hard to reach compromises and launch strong policies for the future.

*Performance Art or Theatre: The Beast Rises Again*

The day before we opened our first full performance run, a two-week stint by the Los Angeles Poverty Department, Highways was visited by inspectors from Santa Monica's Fire, Building & Safety and Planning & Zoning Departments, who perused our license as an art gallery and dismissed it, positing that we are a theater, not allowed in the zone. Much bureaucratic turmoil ensued, though all in extremely good temper, requiring me to write an essay for the city administrators on the difference between performance art and theater. Unlike the experience of most artists dealing with municipal agencies, this turned into a friendly and supportive exchange. The city decided to look into changing the zoning in our area to make room for performance art, and required Highways to make some structural changes in the building.

Nobody could have been more flexible during a period of such stress than John Malpede's gang of artists and homeless people, the Los Angeles Poverty Department, who, as we anxiously waited word about whether we would even be able to open that night, exhibited the dexterity that gets them through the gauntlet of life on the streets. We were allowed to go on with the run, with new piece "Jupiter 35," about Sunshine Mills' fall from a high window on Skid Row and his subsequent stay in the hospital. Mills collaborated on the script and appeared center stage throughout the piece, cracking wise from a hospital bed and wheelchair. This street-level piece is LAPD's strongest and shines with laughter, pain and fright. (The 1990 Los Angeles Festival selected it for a festival run at Highways.) Tom Stringer in the *L.A. Reader* reflected upon "the group's great passion and commitment" and the questions they raise about "the role of theater in our lives." To wit:

"How can theater best reveal what James Agee once described as 'the metaphysical yet very literal faith in unanimity and massiveness of spirit'? As society continues its half-hearted attempts to provide adequate shelter and services for the homeless, certain theaters and theater artists open their doors --and their lives--to this group, providing them, at a minimum, with a performance home. Fortunately the contributions have not been entirely one-sided. As is evident in 'Jupiter 35,' the return on this theatrical investment is the formation of a performance community whose unparalleled belief in the theater's revitalizing power can inspire us all."

Another event that brightened our first month was presented by the TheatreWorkers Project, "Steel Blue Water: The Shipbuilders' Play," written and performed by workers from Todd's Shipyards in San Pedro, L.A.'s seaport. This autobiographical documentary piece looked at the ecology of the local shipbuilding industry, as well as the impact of Todd's on the community and

the personal lives of workers. Director Susan Franklin Tanner and writer Rob Sullivan had workshopped with the shipbuilders to create the piece, firmly grounding it in the community. Then they did a large mailing to a list of labor supporters, so the audience consisted not only of performance-goers, but actual shipbuilders union members. The "second act" of the piece was a discussion with the audience and the questions were pointed and salient--exploring not only the difficulties of the failing shipbuilding industry, but union theory as well, including policies of the theaterworkers union. One audience member who defended the wages of theater technicians was the union sound operator of the performance itself, who talked while he worked the job! We added many new names to our mailing list that night.

### *Making Opportunities for Growth*

We immediately instituted some "mixed bag" evenings for short works by emerging artists and others doing works in progress, called "Car Pools" and "Monday Drivers." Among the artists in our first evening of short works were Keith Antar Mason and the Hittites, Suchi Branfman, Linda Carmella Sibio, and Dan Kwong. This group is an interesting example of how artist relationships develop at Highways.

Of this group, Mason now has a studio at the complex and the Hittites have gone on to create major works here and act as a liaison with the black artist community, bringing artists and new works to us and now working on a conference idea with Highways. Suchi Branfman is a well known New York choreographer whose family lives in Santa Monica and has been a friend of ours for a long time; in June 1990 she returned with a new full-evening solo drawn from a long visit to Brazil, a look at living as a foreigner, even in one's own land. Linda Carmella Sibio also came to develop her first major solo in June at Highways, a gutsy exploration of schizophrenia, using a jungle gym on stage and separating herself from the audience with a 12-foot chainlink fence. Dan Kwong developed a full-length interdisciplinary work that started in a Car Pool, "Secrets of a Samurai Centerfielder," about his triple Japanese-Chinese-American identity, and the work is now starting to tour. Kwong was one of the first artists to respond to our manifesto and has been of invaluable assistance in developing and maintaining our sound system.

### *"Ecce Lesbo/Ecce Homo," Ecce Gay Pride*

Among our landmark achievements has been our annual gay and lesbian performance festival, "Ecce Lesbo/Ecce Homo." Tim and I are always very careful to make sure gay/lesbian culture is included in any multicultural discussion we take part in. We both feel that the gay community is pouring forth creative energies right now, due in large part to the life-and-death crisis it is facing, and the massive effort toward survival it has had to maintain. Some

of our strongest work and most enthusiastic audience response has come out of this community, and gay artists are visible role models for young artists in our community.

The 1989 festival during Gay Pride Month offered a stunning and gritty new work by Michael Kearns, "Intimacies," one-man portraits of six disenfranchised people with AIDS; a searingly funny and sexual feminist monolog by New Yorker Holly Hughes, "World Without End," which broke box-office records all over America; strong afternoons of readings by gay and lesbian writers; "Meet the Mormons" by Les Mormons, Robert Daniels and Curtis York, a raunchy, glamorous and heart-rending reflection on growing up flamboyantly gay in Salt Lake City; a benefit reading for Northern Lights Alternatives by Paul Monette, who has written such powerful poems and a journal about friends and lovers and AIDS; and "Talking About Talking: The Power To Shape the World," dialog between Jewish lesbian Robin Podolsky and black lesbian Ayofemi Stowe Folayan. All these people are still involved with Highways and many were back for the 1990 festival.

One of the most energizing features of the festival was an installation in the gallery where ACT UP/L.A. showed Chuck Stallard's photos and relics of art actions at political demonstrations: pictures of the 1988 Gay Pride Parade in Hollywood and costumes worn by ACT UP members, including a coffeepot and two huge cups bearing the legends, "Homophobia is Brewing"; photos of the AIDS fashion show at the weeklong vigil at L.A. County Hospital to demand an AIDS ward; large drawings of local politicians who have failed to alleviate the crisis, each with the word "Guilty" stamped across their foreheads. The floor of the gallery was covered (and still is) with outlines of fallen bodies, within which audience members inscribe the names of their friends and colleagues who have died of AIDS.

These are only a few of the dozens of exciting projects we managed, on a shoestring and a lot of community good will, to present. We went on to produce other multicultural festivals, such as "I-5 Live," which featured artists from Mexico to Washington and celebrated the Interstate lifeline that joins the U.S. to Canada and Mexico; the Feast of All Souls, a soul-searching look at death and rebirth on the Mexican Day of the Dead and following Halloween and All Souls Day; participation in "L.A. Freewaves: a Celebration of Independent Video, featuring presentations by our Complex neighbors the Empowerment Project and the Electronic Cafe International; a piece honoring Kwanzaa, the African American Christmastide holiday of cleansing and renewal; a wild New Year's Eve party; "Sex, God & Politics," a festival of controversial works in performance and dance; a community Mardi Gras; a multicultural performance art Passover Seder, and a bang-up first anniversary benefit featuring another 70 artists including comedian George Carlin. We also took part in numerous political events such as AIDS protests, anti-censorship rallies and pro-choice demonstrations.

Our second year has included a "Women's Work" festival, second gay/lesbian festival, a benefit for a new space in the black neighborhood of L.A., and the return of the Los Angeles Poverty Department as our part in the L.A. Festival. We've done more than a dozen performance-related visual shows in our gallery, taken part in citywide video, poetry and performance festivals, and Highways performances have appeared on many critics' ten-best lists.

Future plans include the I-10 project: a multi-site collaboration with three other artspaces in Houston, New Orleans and Atlanta featuring four artists (one representing each space) who will tour the four spaces together with performances, the goal being to strengthen ties among arts spaces across the American south. This project is funded through a grant from the National Association of Artists Organizations. Other grants we have received include those from Art Matters, the City of Santa Monica, the National/State/County Partnership and the J. Paul Getty Foundation.

In July of 1990 we were thrown headfirst into the NEA controversy when Tim Miller was named as one of four artists whose fellowship grants were rescinded by NEA chair John Frohmayer on grounds of being too controversial. This action spurred a number of Highways artists to found ATTACK, Artists Take the Action in Cultural Crisis, formalizing the actions of a squad of artists who had been providing visuals, props and performance actions at political demonstrations. Acting in concert with other organizations like the Coalition for Freedom of Expression, we created an Artist Chain Gang motif to illustrate our feelings of having been criminalized for making political art and for using homoerotic imagery. The Art Criminals turn up in a variety of situations.

At this writing we are in our sixteenth month and looking back on a lot of success, but also on almost daily crises that arose to challenge our commitment to our mission statement. Not only had we had to negotiate endlessly with the good City of Santa Monica, we had to see one of our artists through a threatened lawsuit by another artist (both of whom, on separate occasions, impulsively punched holes in our dressing room wall), and there were violent disagreements during discussions, charges of racism, hurt feelings, incipient cancellations and threatened pickets of events, insensitive reviews and other peripheral attacks in the press. We expected most of this, all aspects of multicultural presenting (perhaps we didn't expect them all at once!), for, as Guillermo Gómez-Peña says, you can't heal our wounds without opening them first, and when you approach this work "you unleash the demons of history." One of the things we learned by then was how deep and aggravated are America's cultural wounds and how much anger is seething just beneath the formica surfaces of this country.

But the difficulties were more than balanced by the enrichment we all received from working together to present a picture of cultural democracy.

We learned that we will fail time and again, and only by listening to each other and trying to be flexible will we at least gain the strength to go forward.

We also learned that much of the work being done at Highways revolves around religious and spiritual themes. Reflecting on this trend, we wonder if perhaps this is the natural direction for multicultural work, since many ethnic communities are so deeply rooted in their native religions. In fact, it may be in the exploration of our deepest beliefs that we become the fastest friends and most terrifying enemies. In any case, we asked for it when we opened our space with a blessing by Malcolm Boyd. He called down the spirits. And they showed up.

At this point we feel that we have surpassed what we had expected of Highways. Thanks to the volunteer work of literally hundreds of artists and interested audience members, and the thoughtful critical work of the L.A. arts press, we have a good start on a truly multicultural community of creative, politically active people.

We've looked at homelessness, labor crisis, schizophrenia, Asian American identity, racism, homophobia, spiritual confusion, AIDS, gay/lesbian identity, the Berlin Wall, cultural stereotyping, Globe-O-Mania, capitalist greed, border culture, transsexualism, binational dialog with Mexico, colonialism and conquest, religious intolerance, incest, art and activism, environmental abuse, sexism, rape, aging, disability, sex in the age of AIDS, gang violence, art censorship and the U.S. policy toward El Salvador. And we learned some techniques for enduring controversy and adversity and still sticking together.

For myself, I have changed dramatically. As a result of the interchange at Highways, I am learning to be more culturally sensitive, to de-colorize my language, to understand the richness gay culture has to offer, to listen to the young, and to take religion very seriously.

Even in light of all the adversity and struggle we're undergoing, we know these have been the best of times, and so personally rewarding that I can't resist the temptation to urge the reader to wade in there, act up and start something. Fund it any way you can. After all, the culture is the responsibility of its artists, and if it's a disgusting, depressing mess, it's our own fault.

*Santa Monica, California*



Tim Miller, "Stretch Marks." Highways 1989. Photo by Chuck Stallard.