

A Cultural circus on Columbus Circle

By MANUELA HOELTERHOFF

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Slowly, that architectural oddity, the New York Cultural Center (alias the Huntington Hartford Foundation of Modern Art) is recovering from its peculiar birth in the middle of a traffic island 10 years ago. There it stands on the south side of Columbus Circle, a rectangular structure on Venetian Gothic arches, surrounded by clothing stores, hot dog stands and swarms of taxi cabs. An uglier setting is hard to imagine.

The average New Yorker who, if pressed, might be able to point the way to the Museum of Natural History, still doesn't have much of a notion what the thing opposite the Colosseum is. If he ever does, it will probably be due to the transformation that has been taking place, on the inside anyway, during the last few years.

In 1969 Mr. Hartford signed over his non-profit baby to Fairleigh Dickinson University, and it was dutifully rechristened "The New York Cultural Center in Association with Fairleigh Dickinson University." The relationship is a complex one to untangle, but in essence it appears that it is now Mr. Dickinson who is serving as the chief benefactor and running the show as chairman of the seven-member board of trustees, while Mr. Hartford, the A&P heir, is vice chairman and retains a minor voice in decisions affecting his creation.

The director, since 1972, of this reshaped enterprise is Mario Amaya, Brooklyn born but Europe oriented (he lived in London for a number of years editing art and music magazines before becoming chief curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto). Under his leadership, the Center is presenting a new image, occasionally strange to behold, at least for those brought up on the Metropolitan or the Museum of Modern Art.

"Art should be fun, too," declares Mr. Amaya, seated in his luxuriously spacious office. He says he is running the Center like a "Kunsthalle," though some detractors describe it as a "cultural circus." The Kunsthalle, Mr. Amaya concedes, is a German conception that has no tradition in America. Essentially it means scheduling an unusually large number of exhibitions, about 30 a year, of different types. The Center has no permanent collection of its own although a proposal by Mr. Hartford would create a collection of contemporary art loaned by the artists themselves for a given period. Some of the Center's exhibits, such as the Man Ray show planned for November, are organized by the Center and then tour Europe. Others begin in Europe, or for that matter at places like Long Island's Hofstra University, as for example, the 2,000 postcards that will be exhibited in September under the title "Wish You Were Here."

Most of the exhibitions tour the major cities of America and are at times more stimulating and certainly more offbeat

than the more extensive exhibits at the Met or the Whitney. The Center's answer, tongue-in-cheek and rather trendy, to the Met's gargantuan Impressionist show scheduled for this fall, will consist of paintings by William Bouguereau, a French 19th Century artist who is lately returning to fashion. This is pretty funny, at least to art historians, since Bouguereau stood for everything the Impressionists despised.

Also an integral part of the Center, if not necessarily of Kunsthalls, are the Sunday organ recitals, film series and an experimental theater. There is, in addition, a fully developed program for senior citizens, not exactly an overworked concern in this city, which includes the exhibits, a concert and refreshments, all for \$1 on Wednesday afternoons.

At the moment the Center's four exhibition floors are devoted to art in various forms, including a photography show, obscure 19th Century paintings from the Ponce Museum in Puerto Rico and two splendid floors commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Max Reinhardt, the Austrian theater producer.

Finally, on a top floor is something called "The Cabaret in the Sky," where the museum's customers recently witnessed the performance of Miss Jackie Curtis, in a clinging, peach-colored gown. This "chanteuse" had been preceded at the Cabaret by an even more famous transvestite, Holly Woodlawn, Andy Warhol's buckteethed Trash Queen. To make

room for this entertainment the Center had to rip out its cafeteria and replace it with small tables, bar and piano. So now it is probably the only museum with two bars and no snack shop. Those bewildered by drag queens at a cultural center should be reassured that an establishment actress like Geraldine Fitzgerald has also appeared here and the Cabaret continues to cater to a variety of interests.

As for the funding of all these programs, the federal government has been quite generous in contributing towards individual exhibits, laying out \$20,000 for the Man Ray show, for example. Little cash, however, has come from the New York State Council on the Arts or from the city, much to the distress of Mr. Amaya.

That leaves the private sector, the rich, the notable and quotable who turn the Center's splashy openings into hilarious masquerades: Co-Op City bus-set matrons in malachite green eye-shadow, along with more exotic types in bizarre outfits, wandering around slightly stupefied by all the art their money helped to hang and looking for the elusive, charming Mr. Amaya. It's the only cultural event Womens Wear Daily covers in exhausting detail.

These first-nighters, together with the \$1.50 daily admission people, the government grants and the corporate patrons help keep this Kunsthalle going. It may be too flashy at times and not always terribly scholarly, but the exhibits that fly in and out are usually worth discussing and sometimes quite genial.