

Paul Kos: Pawn, 1991, 2,500 plastic magnetic chess pieces, steel and wood, 118 by 88 by 1 1/2 inches. Photo courtesy Grey Art Gallery, New York University.

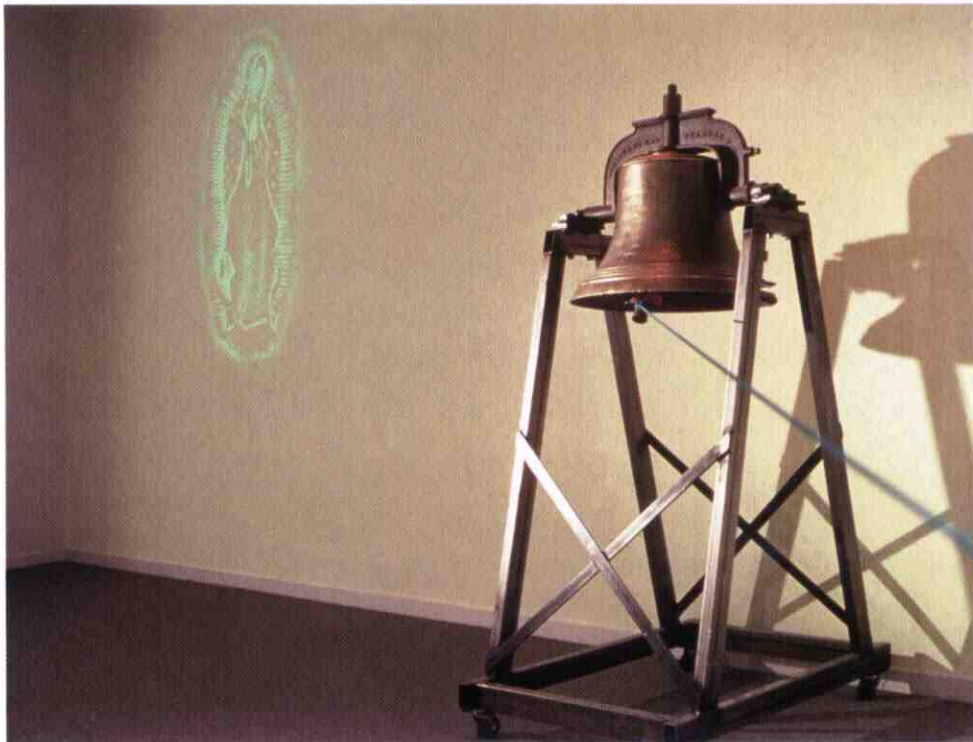
Restoration Play

Paul Kos has engaged, over 30 years, the paradoxes in art and community, temporality and faith, by means of playfully diverse installations and objects. This is the first-ever retrospective of the California conceptualist.

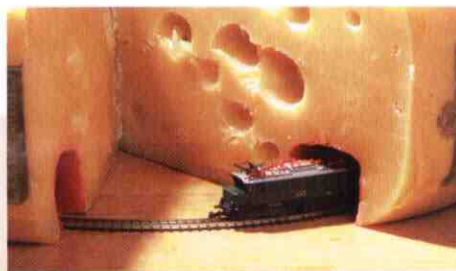
BY JONATHAN GILMORE

Bay Area Conceptual art of the 1960s and '70s often took its cues from events of the East Coast art world. Yet the West Coast movement could be lighter in tone, more playful and less cerebral, than its relatively austere analogue in New York. No one better represents this tenor of California Conceptualism than Paul Kos. Curated by Constance Lewallen of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, "Everything Matters: Paul Kos, A Retrospective" is the first traveling survey of Kos's work (it was recently on view at New York University's Grey Art Gallery and is presently at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego). Comprising a large number of documentary photographs as well as videos and installations, the exhibition ranges over three decades of Kos's work.

Most of the installations occupied their own rooms or niches at the Grey. *Tunnel* (1995), which stood near the entrance to the exhibition, is a large Swiss cheese round placed on one end of a wooden farmer's table. A wedge had been cut out of the cheese, revealing a small toy train going round and round on a track tunneled through it. Visually spare and elegantly constructed, like all of Kos's works, the piece suggests a bizarre form of regularity,



Above, Guadalupe Bell, 1989, bronze, steel, phosphorescent pigment, strobe lights, 168 by 266 by 108 inches overall, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.



a predictability based on always ending up just where one begins. The allusion to a kind of orderliness appears as well in *Just a Matter of Time* (1990), a work hung on a nearby wall. Consisting of 15 working and audible, but unsynchronized, cuckoo clocks placed side by side, each with its hands removed and a real hammer and sickle hanging in place of its weights, the work has a faintly ridiculous, laconic air; at the same time, it

Left and inset, Tunnel, 1995, wood table, cheese round, toy train and track, 38 by 96 by 24 inches. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.



Kos was raised as an observant Catholic, but the religious allusions in his work seem less about organized ritual than his desire to challenge the principle of the disenchantment of art.

seems to point to a deeper theme of individual resistance to totalitarian order, which was, at the time it was made, crumbling.

Although several such installations were placed throughout the exhibition, many of Kos's most original works could be seen only in photographs or videos. The earliest of these, *Lot's Wife* (1969), was documented in three photographs; it represented a breakthrough for Kos, as he turned away from his abstract fiberglass sculptures of the mid '60s to site-specific art meaningful for both its generating process and final form. A tall pillar of stacked salt blocks in a sylvan setting in the Napa Valley, the work metamorphosed, in a gently comic manner, ordinary cattle-ranch salt licks into the Old Testament figure who, in failing to heed a divine command, was herself transformed. It also incorporated a degree of "audience" participation in the form of local Jersey cattle, agents of entropy whose consumption of the pillar gradually returned the work to nature.

This choice of materials indigenous to the setting reflected Kos's interest in earthworks and other contemporary modes of escaping art's commodification. In a similar vein, he transported natural substances to gallery sites to create antiformalist works that made salient the intrinsic properties or tendencies of their constituent materials, much like Richard Serra's thrown lead (e.g., *Castings*, 1969), Lynda Benglis's latex pours or the scatter pieces of Robert Morris and Barry Le Va. In *Sand Piece* (1971), seen in another photograph, Kos dumped a ton of sand on the second floor of the two-story Reese Palley Gallery in San Francisco; while appearing stationary to visitors, the sand slowly sifted through a small hole in the floor. Forming an inverted cone in the ground story below, the work turned the gallery into an outsized hourglass, marking the movement of time even while making viewers aware of their obliviousness to gradual change.

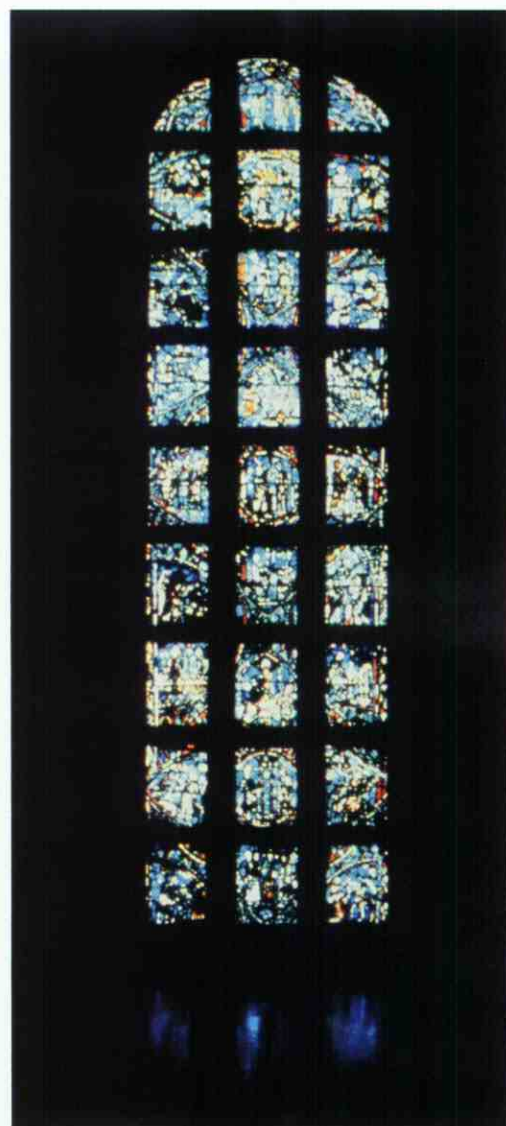
A more aural aspect of the ephemeral had been the focus, a year earlier, of *The Sound of Ice Melting*, in which Kos surrounded two 25-pound blocks of ice with 10 boom microphones as if in an urgent effort to record their liquefaction (the work was on view at the Grey in a single photograph). The title suggests a

Buddhist koan, which would associate the work with the pared-down Zen esthetic embraced by his close contemporaries Tom Marioni and Terry Fox; but the piece was also an early instance of sound art incorporating the notion of the readymade (the work was installed at the Museum of Conceptual Art in San Francisco, founded by Marioni, in the 1970 exhibition "Sound Sculpture As").

In videos of this period, Kos engages in a similarly quixotic attempt at mastering or rationalizing nature: *Warlock(ing)*, 1971, for example, shows him outdoors in a storm, setting small vials on game traps that, when the containers were filled, snapped closed as if catching the rain. Here, as in many of his works, a political connotation arises: the title refers not only to presumptively superhuman powers over nature but also, perhaps, to the U.S.'s dubious military involvement in Vietnam.

Politics are directly proclaimed in the title, if again only indirectly present, in Kos's series "rEVOLUTION." One of these works, from 1970, documents, in a series of color photographs, a performance in which Kos stood on a scale and discharged 375 rounds of shotgun ammunition into a plywood target suspended from another scale hung in a tree. Effecting what he called an "invisible weight exchange," the performance exemplifies the Conceptualist practice of instruction-driven actions. It also suggests the zero-sum character of war, in which the gain of one is always the loss of another. In a more audience-participatory work of 1972, *rEVOLUTION: Notes for the Invasion: mar mar march* (installed in a narrow room at the Grey), Kos affixed several evenly spaced two-by-fours to the floor, between or upon which a viewer had to walk in approaching a video playing on a monitor at the room's far end. Accompanied by the sound of rhythmically tapping typewriter keys, one reaches the monitor only to discover in the video that one's steps have been mimicking those of a little animated figure marching along the edge of a sheet upon which the last three words of the title are being repetitively typed. Like Peter Campus's closed-circuit installations (beginning in 1971) and Bruce Nauman's video corridors of the same era (1968 and after), but in a much more farcical fashion, Kos's installation places the viewer in the role of unwitting performer, thereby invoking themes of conformity and bureaucratic control.

Later works, particularly a series employing the figure of a chess pawn, revisit Kos's oppositional stance. In one of these, *Pawn* (1991), 2,500 red plastic magnetic chess pieces (which Kos has described as representing the military, church and state—there are no pawns among them) are arranged on a steel panel, leaning against a wall, to create an



Chartres Bleu, 1983-86, 27-channel color video installation, 15½ feet high, 12 minutes. Collection di Rosa Preserve, Napa, Calif.

Right, *The Sound of Ice Melting*, 1970, gelatin silver print, 20 by 16 inches, depicting a one-night sound installation composed of 10 microphones and two blocks of ice at the Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco. Photo courtesy Grey Art Gallery.

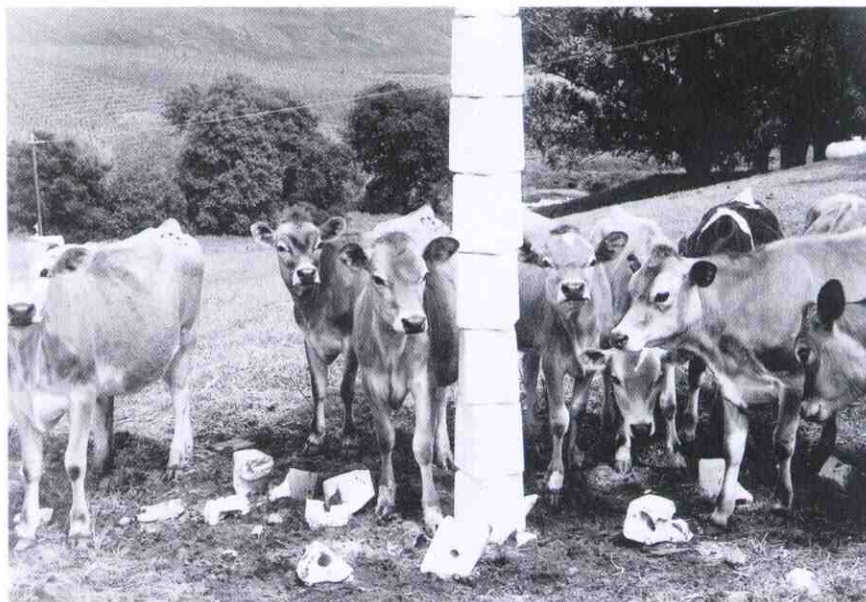
almost 10-foot-high image of a pawn. Although playfully absurd in its portentous magnitude, the work proposes a mordant view of what remains of individual freedom in the realms of institutional power.

The use of the audience as a constituent of Kos's art is exemplified in such works as *Ramp* (1980), documented by a video showing a wide, curving wooden ramp, spray-painted with the black-and-white flecked oven-coating Zolotone to resemble granite, installed in a long, narrow gallery and sloping upward toward a 17-foot-high ceiling. Kos invited viewers to try to ascend the construction, and, while the steep curve made their failure inevitable, the footprints and skid

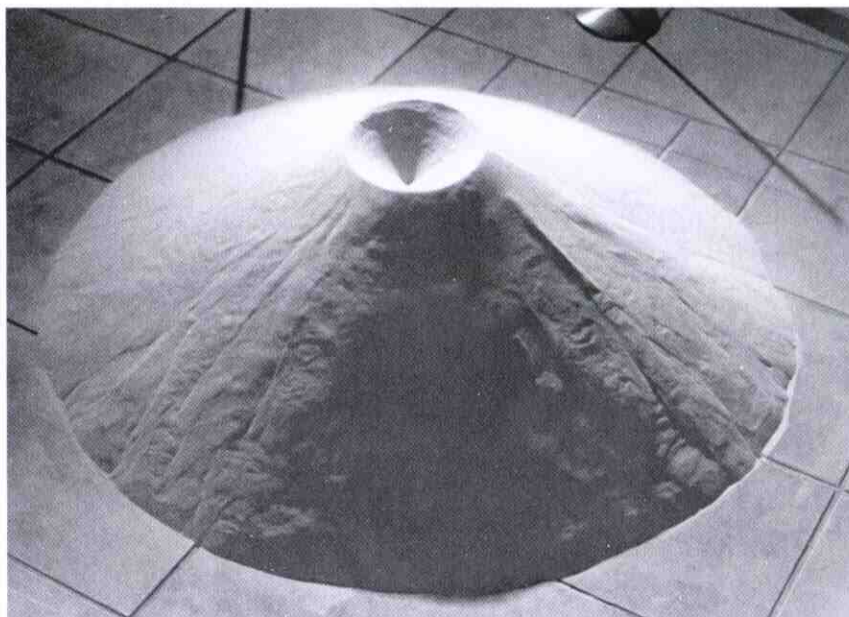
marks they left became part of the work. As Kos described it, the work testified to a universal human ambition, utopian in that it is at once idealistic and unrealizable. (Kos has frequently thematized efforts that can only fail: *Roping Boar's Tusk*, for example, filmed in 1971 in Wyoming, shows the artist as a cowboy futilely trying to lasso a butte several miles away.)

A collective dimension arises somewhat differently in the device of a bell, invoked for its function in calling for a community's assembly. In one aborted work of the late 1980s, Kos challenged the U.S. and Soviet governments to melt their missiles down, to be cast into bells placed near former weapons silos. In a piece on display, *Guadalupe Bell* (1989), a viewer's pull on the clapper triggers a strobe light that illuminates a faint phosphorescent image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the wall—an expression, as Kos has described it, of the aura and folk significance that art lost in exchange for its modernist autonomy.

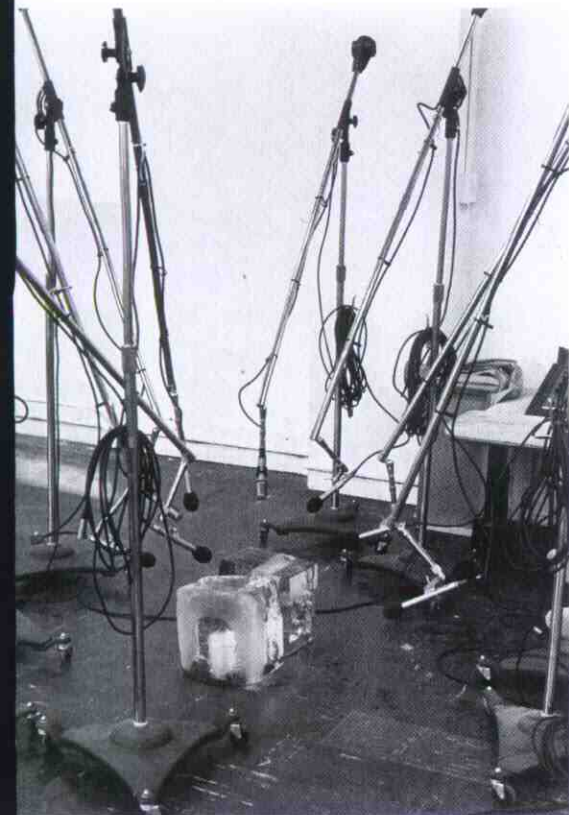
Kos was raised as an observant Catholic, but such religious allusions in his work seem less about organized ritual than the desire to challenge the principle of the disenchantment of art. In his most famous work, *Chartres Bleu* (1983-86), re-created in the exhibition (the original is at the di Rosa Preserve in Napa), Kos monitored the passage of time in shots of a 27-panel stained-glass window in the choir ambulatory of the cathedral at Chartres. Each of 27 monitors, which are stacked in the shape



Lot's Wife, 1969, one of three black-and-white photographs, 25½ by 40 inches, documenting a performance with salt blocks and Jersey cattle at di Rosa Preserve, Napa, Calif.



Sand Piece, 1971, one of two gelatin silver prints, 16 by 20 inches, showing a kinetic work in which one ton of sand slowly sifted through a hole in the floor; at Reese Palley Gallery, San Francisco. Photo courtesy Grey Art Gallery.



of the window, shows a time-lapse video, condensed into a 12-minute sequence, of a different glass panel photographed regularly over the course of 24 hours. Evolving from an extremely bright, nearly illegible array of colors, to clearly defined narrative scenes of the Life of Mary, to almost complete darkness, the work offers a reflection on modes of temporal experience and represents an attempt to reinvest a debased modern technology with a 13th-century medium's charge of the divine. □

"Everything Matters: Paul Kos, A Retrospective" debuted at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive [Apr. 2-July 20, 2003] and traveled to the Grey Art Gallery, New York University [Sept. 9-Dec. 6, 2003]. Presently at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego [Feb. 5-May 2], the show will make its final stop at the Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati [June 11-Aug. 22]. There is an accompanying 144-page catalogue by Constance M. Lewallen, with essays by Charles Desmarais, Ron Meyers and Rachel M. Teagle.

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