

Ring! Whirrrr . . . Is it art or just a facsimile?



Facsimile photo by John Gonsky

Henry Hedin Leonard's set of portraits was among the many art works listed to the exhibit at the U. of I. at Chicago Gallery 400.

By Mark Caro

The phone rang twice. Click. A low whirring sound began to emanate from the machine, like the slow opening of a haunted house door. These were the sounds of art being created, 99¢ style.

"Let it go, machine," said Karen Indek in the dimly lit corners of the dimly shaded paper company forward.

"It has to be born, Karen," chided Mary Min.

One came there long pages of an ending of a railroad station, each lighter and less muddy than its predecessor.

Take these flimsy pieces of paper, take them onto the white wall with steel prodgers, and you've got Facsimil, the subject of an exhibition opening Friday night and running through Aug. 17 at the University of Illinois at Chi-

Art Institute and U. of I.'s fax exhibition puts the nature of creativity on the line

cago's Gallery 400, 400 S. Peoria St. The university's School of Art and Design and the School of the Art Institute, in their first collaboration, are sponsoring the show.

The exhibition is not fax art's first public display. Last November, David Blockney presented 144 sheets from Los Angeles to England that, when assembled, depicted a tennis game.

Wait. A fax machine can create a facsimile of art, but what if? On that sticky paper? With everything in black and white? In the drawing of a new age of disposable masterpieces? Will artists start marketing themselves

like magazines, transmitting new works weekly for bulletin-board exhibitions in homes and offices?

Min, a board member of the School of the Art Institute's national alumni association, said the concept of the exhibition after buying a fax machine for her neon graphics business last October and realizing the ease of communicating images. "I just got so excited that someone in Florida faxed me a drawing," she said.

After getting an OK for the show and convincing Minolta Business Systems to donate a fax machine, a photocopier and lots of paper, Min and Indek, Gallery 400's director, sent fax transmittal sheets to 11,000 alumni of both schools. The gallery began receiving faxes on July 2 and will continue

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through the Friday evening opening reception. The two are opening the show with a low-tech, typical exhibition. "Anyone can do this," Indek said. Added Min: "For this show, what comes out of the machine goes on the wall."

At least that's what they were saying before Wednesday evening, when Indek arrived to find about 200 art works that had been faxed overnight. That raised the submissions to the 400 to 500 range.

Indek said the longer-distance submissions, that far have come from Madrid. She claimed to be

going crazy from the constant phone calls requesting the fax number or inquiring whether an art work had transmitted properly. "They don't trust this thing," she said.

The submissions include reproductions of photographs, architectural drawings, wood collages, cartoonish sketches, montages of words and pictures, political masterpieces, whimsy.

Judith Kagan, an Evanston-based artist, submitted a piece featuring only words: "Learn to live with ambiguity," printed 100 times in two columns on each of 10 pages. Kagan, a painter and sculptor, said she is particularly intrigued by the transient nature of fax art.

"I like the idea that I wrote one sentence, repeated it, the original in the computer does not exist, the original on paper I destroyed

after faxing it, and the work of art—the fax—will fade. It's a contradiction to what we expect art to be—this process thing. It really isn't," she said. The mortality of faxes is due to their thermal paper, for which Indek estimates a shelf life of about six months. "That's something that appeals to my sense of the bizarre: self-destructive art."

Fax art doesn't present problems for a gallery trying to raise funds: They won't find any other philosophical questions comes to mind. "We've all talked about the concept of original," Indek said. "Which is the original?"

The answer, in a sense, lies with the artists' intentions. Some already faxed copies of previous works. Others created works specifically with the machine in mind. Wayne Duggan of South Euclid,

Ohio, transmitted a fax drawing of a silhouetted pig jumping a kangaroo. Instead, Calkin synthesized. Instead of faxing it directly to the gallery, he sent it to about 20 "semi-randomly selected fax numbers" with the accompanying note: "Please add to, replace or comment on this image, and fax to the gallery's number."

In a letter to Indek, Duggan explained, "A fax machine is an electronic communications device; this implies wires, so per, then long-distance telegraphy."

Carolyn Hissel, a Chicago freelance art director, sent a piece called "Primitive Fax Art," which features her hand printed over a rocky surface.

"The fax reminds me of when the camera used to use the rock wall as an art medium," she said. "Even though it's high tech, what you see is primitive."

Chicago artist Julie Richman, creator of little post books, adapted her art to the fax by dividing each page into four sections and filling each one with an abstract or cartoonish drawing. After being faxed, the sheets could be folded to create a little book.

"I thought, my goodness, this is a terrific idea," said Richman, who had rarely used the fax machine in her home.

"One reason I started making little books I want to use art of all the walls and make it accessible," she added. "This takes it a step further because the others could be as easy as the number of fax machines there are."

She stopped to ponder the commercial possibility. "How would you sell this? Would someone with a fax machine say, 'I want to buy this, and then I would fax it?'"

Chicago-based painter Joan Fabian said she has been busy preparing her own gallery exhibition—which normally would provide her with submitting art somewhere else.

"I found it kind of interesting being able to fax my art to one exhibit while I have my work opening in another," she said. As a curator, Indek said, "I love the anonymity. Generally I work with an artist when they come in for a show. I deal with their personalities, their habits."

She also appreciates not having to insure all the works and ship them back. So what does one do with a fax art exhibition once it closes? Indek said the pieces will be photographed for archival purposes.

And the "originals"? "Mostly they will be recycled."

Mark Caro is a Chicago freelance writer.