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cover:  
Howard Fried **Inside the Harlequin: Approach-Avoidance II**  
(1971) film installation, production still

Deep Skin Excursions:  
Early Work by Howard Fried

curated by Dennis Oppenheim

November 20 - January 3, 1998

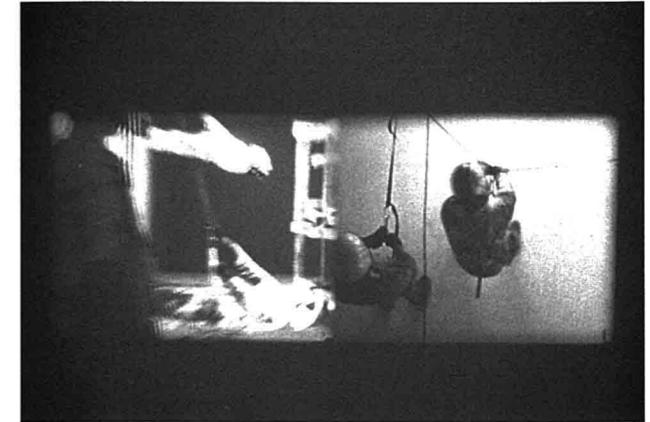


We have always been told of art's capacity to operate on many levels at once... It's almost a cliché... But it is true that some artists are possessed with urges that drive deep into rich strata, lying between beds of other kinds, to make up the structural foundation of a work. Howard Fried started his career at a level of operation usually arrived at only after years of uncomfortable analytical probing. Emerging in the early seventies with several other San Francisco Bay Area artists such as Terry Fox,



**Inside The Harlequin: Approach-Avoidance III** (1971)  
production still, architectural decimation

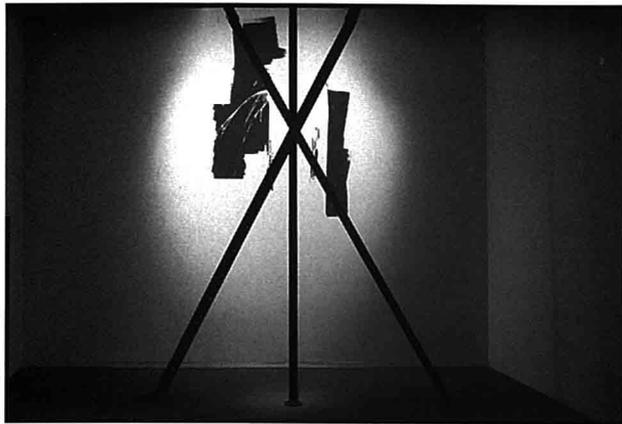
(H.F.) *Inside The Harlequin* consists of two film loops butted horizontally in projection. One is slightly longer than the other causing the juxtaposition of the two sides to be infinitely variable. From left to right the two halves of the piece are subtitled *Approach-Avoidance III* and *Approach-Avoidance II*. They're built on time sequences developed for an earlier film, *Approach-Avoidance I*, in an attempt to give form to and quantitatively objectify that type of conflict.



**Inside The Harlequin: Approach-Avoidance III and II**  
(1971) film installation, cross-over and gravity decimation sequences

Paul Koss and Chris Burden in Los Angeles, Howard distinguished himself immediately by subverting the rich openness provided by early Conceptual art's untrodden fields, with the most excruciating journeys into paradox.

In examining the 1971 film, "Inside the Harlequin," one is effectively seized by Fried's complex system of entry and the extraordinarily ambitious set of problems set upon himself as he literally enters into the "eye of the storm," scaling the walls of a room as if, to even consider the possibility of a valid work, one must position oneself in perfect alignment to it. Fried is correctly placing emphasis on entry, for it is the angled entry that places one's art into a rich territory. No matter how inspired one is, if the territory of operation is undernourished the event created within it will be undernourished as well.



**Fireman's Conflict Resolution** (1982) installation Univ. Art Museum Berkeley, CA

Each of two ladders are thought of as gradients on which one might perform the three basic psychological conflicts; approach-avoidance, avoidance-avoidance and approach-avoidance. Those places where each ladder contacts the floor and ceiling are designated goals. A greased pole between the two ladders assumes a circuit-breaking role. I was unable to attend the first installation at the School of Visual Arts in 1971. Because I had never seen the piece and no photographs of it existed, I decided to reinstall the piece in 1978. In 1971 I had faced the piece against a wall covered with a wallpaper I had made by a drawing technique wherein I positioned my eye just above the point on the paper where it could no longer focus while holding a pen so that it just touched the paper and waited like a narcotized cutting torch until the pen had filled the paper. In one case this took a year and a half. I stopped making these drawings in 1974 to save my eyes.

In 1978, more interested in language signifiers than abysmal patterns, I decided to modify the ladders and poles with a touch of red. Unfortunately I chose paint as the conduit for my fiery red intentions and began acting out a real approach-avoidance conflict with every mark I made. This motivated three additional installations, each featuring two schemes; the one that didn't work, and the antidote which apparently also didn't work. In 1983 I realized I could neutralize the painting problem by transferring that energy, the graphic lust, to the act of greasing the pole, which I had to do anyway. I became more overtly painterly while greasing the pole which, unlike the wall had a conveniently constrained surface like the edges of the paper in my earlier drawings. Unlike drawing, greasing didn't seem like it could lead to blindness.

The early seventies was a period of extreme intoxication for the so-called Conceptual artists. Wide doors were opened for the first time, rich oxygen would rush in, sweeping one along in this constant breeze, engaging the artist, making "breathing easy." At this time, it was rare for an artist such as Fried, in the midst of all this easy spanning of territory, to constantly pay heed to his inner urges and step down into the thicker, more treacherous terrain which became his world of operation.

Of the many noble quests undertaken by an artist, none seems as challenging as the use of art to probe itself. The slow and casual unlayering of the beast, rib by rib, joint by joint, it is in every sense a journey crowded by tunnels, blind alleys, mock impulses and divergent crossroads. Howard Fried's urges sent him into this terrain.



**The Edge of the Forest** (1983) installation

When I installed the Fireman's Conflict Resolution in a skylight well in the University Art Museum in Berkeley I noticed the tops of the ladders were cut off by the line of the ceiling as you encountered the piece from the front of the gallery. Without the distraction of the red paint the crossed ladders looked like a teepee. I completely lost my taste for signifiers. I began to defuse the last of the literal meaning in the piece by uncrossing the ladders and taking the rungs out of one ladder. Now from the front the piece was just a formal statement, while from the side it transformed from literal or literary to formal.



**The Burghers of Fort Worth** (1975) public performance, 16 mm released in 1976

Attempting to recreate the dynamics of art school education where one interfaces with numerous masters almost simultaneously, I took a lesson from four golf professionals at once.

**Pattern Maker, (The First Historical Situation)** (1984) installation

Pattern Maker deals with the behavior-modifying effect of media. In The First Historical Situation rows of chairs are assembled wall to wall in a place that has an academic relationship to modernist art history (the gallery of the Banff Center). Three chaffing dishes with food are on tables in the front of the room. In the rear a movie camera shoots one frame every two seconds. At the end of each day the film is sent to Calgary where it is transferred to video and rushed back so that it can be played back continuously the next day in the foyer of the gallery. There are no posted texts or gallery notes or any other explanation of what's inside or outside the gallery space. This goes on for seven days as do the other two historical situations.



Using a "pushed mind," and holding his breath, he submerges into the pitch black of art making. This is often a journey of no return, as the perverse intoxication provided by the occasional bursts of acknowledgment indicating a positive track, possible riches behind doors, pressures one to keep pounding harder for a view, a clearer view, of that sweet connection that establishes a foundation to an art idea.

It is because this world of operation is known to a relative few that it gives me great pleasure to open it up to more viewers.

Dennis Oppenheim ©1997



**Pattern Maker, (The Second Historical Situation)** (1984) installation, day 3, Chateau Lake Louise, Lake Louise, Alberta (continental breakfast)

The second historical situation happens in a place that has a commercial relationship to modernist art history (Chateau Lake Louise, a resort hotel). The chairs are similarly configured. However, there is no camera so there can be no news. A tape continuously plays The Complete History of the First Historical Situation, which is all the dailies from the previous situation strung together chronologically. The Third Historical Situation takes place in a space that has no relationship to modernist art history, a vacant industrial building in a run-down part of Calgary. There are wall-to-wall chairs, tables with chaffing dishes and food, but in this case there is no camera and no playback. As in the other situations there is no explication of the proceedings released or posted. All three situations are accessible to the public.