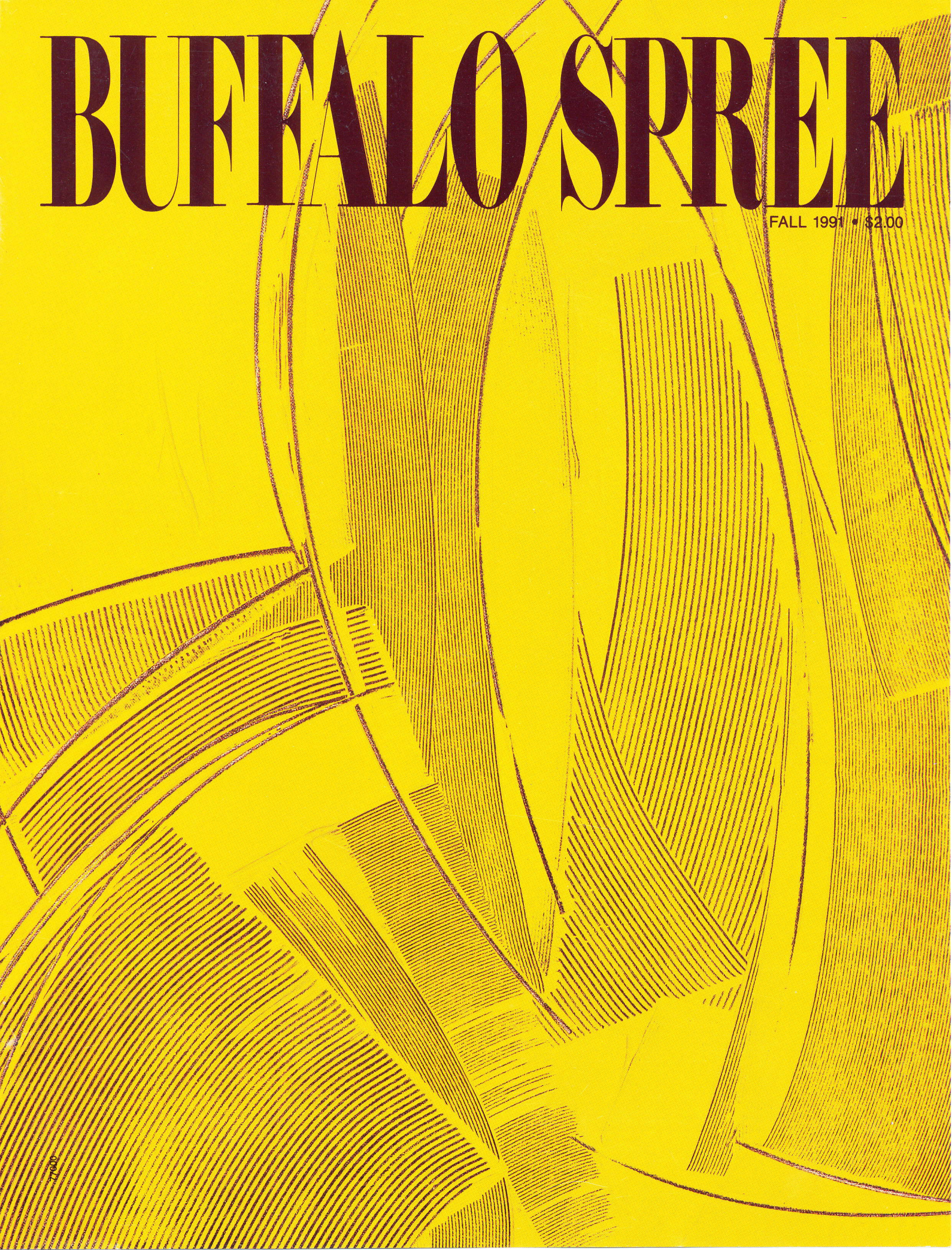


BUFFALO SPREE

FALL 1991 • \$2.00



ART AND POLITICS: A CREATIVE APPROACH

by
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PHOTO: IRENE HAUPT

Picture this: It's February 23, 1991, and you're about to attend a fundraiser at the studio of artist Neil Tetkowski in support of the Arts Council of Buffalo and Erie County. With funding for the arts being slashed all about, there's no doubt that this is a worthy event. It is also an opportunity to see Tetkowski's studio and to check out his huge walk-in kiln, since he is especially known for creating large, dramatically expressive clay discs. We've been a nation at war since the middle of January now, and spending an evening concerned with art seems to offer a positive respite to a heart weary from the world's troubles. What better time to support humankind's creative energies than now.

You can hear the band before you even enter the place, the rhythm of drum and cymbals cutting through the icy evening air with a pulsing clarity. Someone is greeting the guests as they arrive. It must be Tetkowski, his long,

smooth, raven, shoulder-length hair bound with a headband. He has a weird shirt on with a vest over it that has—oh, this brings back memories—a peace symbol pinned on it, and he is wearing a pair of bell bottoms.

Tetkowski's space is divided between a large, industrial-looking studio and a narrow living area, clean and minimal with his works hung along the white painted brick walls. Most are three to four feet in diameter, with rims softly folded, cut, pinched, or wrinkled and surfaces scarred with energetic calligraphic slashes, made possibly from a blade or comb, very much in the Japanese tradition of pottery. In contrast to the boldness of Tetkowski's execution is his use of delicate glazes of rose, pale yellows, violet and midnight blues, which creates a gauzy, lovely transcendent light that seems to suggest distant star vistas of deep space. Some of the works are imprinted with metal objects, such as gears or

chains, while others actually have rusty relics of industry embedded in their surface. The refined quality of the glazes is a dramatic counterpoint to the more aggressive, physical elements of these works, almost as if the fragile nature of beauty and a forceful, physical energy were struggling to co-exist. While we've been looking and taking this all in, things have been happening all around us.

Someone has lit a large circle of vigil candles, in the middle of which sits a large potter's wheel that seems to have a work somewhat begun on it. For the last few minutes the band has been chanting "a love supreme...a love supreme...a love supreme." Everyone is beginning to stand around the candle-lit circle, waiting for something, hopefully terrific, to happen. Suddenly, a man, stripped to his waist, rushes into the center of the circle and starts throwing on the wheel with a vigorous burst of energy. It's Tetkowski, but he's shaved off his hair, and his head and arms are smeared with a vivid, ruby red paint.

Round and round the wheel turns as the artist pushes the clay to the edge, smoothing and building up the outside rim as he works. The clay presents its own formidable resist, for one can see the strain in Tetkowski's shiny, paint-streaked muscles as he forces the clay to conform to his will. An unpleasant unease overcomes one for a moment as the artist's head, bent in intense concentration over the wheel, takes on the appearance of a skull, covered in blood. The audience, observing this scene, is rapt with attention, some with perplexed expressions, while others are smiling and even more are giggling. One can't help but be affected by the energy that the artist is exuding. Tetkowski seems to be finished throwing now, and he's picking up bullets. He actually has a long shell in his hand and, with apparent deliberation, strikes into the clay, creating a long, graceful arc. Again and again the process is repeated until eight or nine fissures scar the surface with their torn, crumbly edges. More bullets are held in hand, then at a sharp, oblique angle, charged swiftly into the piece, some puncturing the surface, then skipping off, others solidly embedding from the energy behind the artist's throw. Moving with the rhythm of the band, Tetkowski picks up a three- to four-foot length of machine gun bullets and, with hands held over his head, marches along the

edge of the flaming circle, grinning from ear to ear, gleefully displaying his wares to the crowd. Unabashed, everyone grins along with him. These shells, along with a shorter round, are then rippled and pressed into the surface of the clay, becoming a permanent part of its being. Finished, the artist steps back from his work, eyes sparkling in the euphoria of completion. The performance is ended, it's 9 o'clock, and later we find out that, only an hour before, the ground war had begun.

Many months have passed, and the events in the Near East seem behind us. Time has not diminished Tetkowski's passion regarding his performance though, which he said was staged, "as a means to express my emotional involvement regarding the ever ongoing crisis. It is not over, all the crises of humanity, man shooting man, it's crazy." By taking a simple creative act and placing it within the dimension of theatre and symbolism, the artist hoped to suggest that the art itself and the action of making it are equally important. He hoped to challenge the expectations of his viewers, and by so doing extend the parameters of their thinking. Tetkowski insists that the performance piece was not intended to take sides; the finished disc incorporated symbols of the three cultures involved in the conflict. The crucifix, the star of David, and the Arabic words for "ground war" were all incised into the work's surface. Rather, he hoped it would serve as a vehicle to present issues for people to contemplate and discuss, and be challenged by. Ultimately, Tetkowski hoped to deepen our awareness of how we all relate to war.

Tetkowski's physical, high powered approach suggests the irony of how positive our own soldiers were about entering into battle, and how positive, though deeply concerned, the American public was, as well. Just as his guests were fascinated by his use of materials, so too were we all amazed by the wonder of the "smart" bombs as they found their targets with unheard of precision. Tetkowski admits to being "entranced by technology" and all its possibilities.

The performance, well thought out in advance, was open to numerous interpretations. The circle of lit candles might represent a Buddhist prayer circle, a sacred place where the high act of creation occurs, or it could suggest a "ring of fire," the point of danger where one

leaps into the void. The artist's shaving of his head might suggest a Buddhist monk, the depersonalization of a military recruit, or even a prisoner. Tetkowski does admit that the shaving was cathartic and cleansing. He had planned to paint his face, as a warrior prepares for battle, but instead covered his entire head and arms, as well. Although the artist usually works at a fevered pitch when he throws, the speed with which he threw the shells cannot help but suggest how death, too, happens quickly. The high that Tetkowski experienced during and after the performance was a stunner and calls to mind the national euphoria that was felt with the blazing success of our airmen and ground troops.

Tetkowski insists once again that his performance was "not about me against the war, but how to

deepen the level of awareness as to how we all relate to war. I'm not a politician, so I'm not in a position to talk about these things, but if a piece of clay can do that, well that's pretty incredible." The finished work is being cast in bronze, as firing the clay is impossible because of the live shells. Tetkowski wonders where the work might end up, who will own it and where it will hang. Those who see it might see only an art object, an artifact free of the process that created it. Yet that is what is so interesting about Tetkowski's performance. It demonstrated that human beings have powerful creative abilities that can be used for a multiplicity of purposes: to create art, to fight wars. It seems obvious where that energy should be applied, but recent history has not proved quite so simple. □