

Leaving it to chance

Vital piece flaunts vivid visuals and audacious aural

By **RICHARD HUNTINGTON**
News Critic
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REVIEW

WHAT:

Lawrence Brose's "Cage: A Filmic "Circus On' Metaphors on Vision"

WHEN:

Through Aug. 31

WHERE:

CEPA Gallery, Market Arcade Complex,
617 Main St., Suite 201

ADMISSION:

Free

INFO:

856-2717

Reportedly, the avant-garde is long dead and buried. But if you wander into a certain downtown storefront you will see and hear a fresh evocation of those heady days when artists would willfully embrace chance methods in the fond hope that by enlisting the unpredictability of the universe they would free themselves of the narrow limits of human logic.

The storefront is CEPA Gallery's window on Main Street and the work is "Cage: A Filmic "Circus On' Metaphors on Vision," a video piece for three monitors by Lawrence Brose with accompanying score by Douglas Cohen. This showing is the Buffalo premiere of the gallery version of the work commissioned by Triskel Arts Center, Cork, Ireland.

By now, chance operations have been so long exploited by visual artists and composers (John Cage, the leader of the aleatory pack) that the look and sound of the works produced may share a family resemblance. Brose's visual ferment - ever-changing overlays of cut-through and fragmented images - is exhilarating. But it also has the distant ring of a well-worn genre:

chance-born montages leaping about in a rush of "accidental" confluence.

As firmly composed a piece as you could want, Cohen's complex and active score nonetheless displays similar hallmarks of chance operations. The sounds do a continual, carefully regulated reel among vocal, orchestral, noise and various ambient materials. Far from being random-seeming or arbitrary, Brose and Cohen's work has a particular kind of "finish" to it that we now can only relate to chance-formulated art.

Thankfully, these echoes of the past don't render the work predictable - a most disastrous predicament for chance-made work. "Cage" is a vital piece of work, vivid in its visual and aural details and exciting in its overall galumphing forward drive. I thoroughly enjoyed it - though I think that it would be better appreciated in a setting free of ambient light and bad acoustics.

The strong recall of the past can't help but make "Cage" a bit nostalgic, however. Brose calls it a film "portrait" of John Cage. The presence of Cage's distinctive mug migrating among the imagery alone would reinforce this as an homage to the avant-garde of old. Cage's face - the long space between his nose and upper lip - comes storming through no matter how abstract and fractured it is - is a famous visage tied to a particular time and emblematic of an era of outrageous artistic adventure.

Brose's methods also precisely follow Cage's. The Cage score "Circus On" - actually a set of instructions for making a piece of music - was used by Brose as a way to subject images instead of sounds to chance procedures. Cage's instructions employ a text and a technique he called mesostic, a typically inventive Cagian method for reading through a text vertically down the middle in order to discover a new text. Brose, as the title indicates, used Stan Brakhage's text "Metaphors on Vision."

As Brose says, the video portion of "Cage" is a translation from a score for music into a "score" for video. The work joins other examples of Brose's recent work that give honor to artists he admires from the past. Oscar Wilde, for instance, was resplendently celebrated in Brose's film "De Profundis." For all its surface pizzazz, "Cage," like "De Profundis," is a reasoned and powerful intellectual statement cloaked in the brilliance of one of the extraordinary languages of modernist art.

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CAGE: A FILMIC CIRCUS ON METAPHORS ON VISION
By Lawrence Brose, 2005