

Scratching beneath the surface

FINE ART: Hazel Friedman

KARL MARX would have loved **The Way West** (at the Newtown Galleries), and the way two members of the cultural avant-garde have produced succinct critiques of the alienation of labour and ideologies promulgated through advertising. But flippancy aside, Anton Karstel and Minnette Vari do succeed, in vastly different ways, in confronting the mechanisms which determine status and identity, even though responses to their works are not always as they intended.

Karstel taps into South Africa's political and cultural "wall" psychosis, revealing, literally, the bricks-and-mortar process of construction beneath exterior finishes. He has done this by commissioning labourers to build a giant wall shaped like a book cover. On one side are the crude, rough layers of unplastered bricks, while the other side — plastered and painted — serves to camouflage the labour.

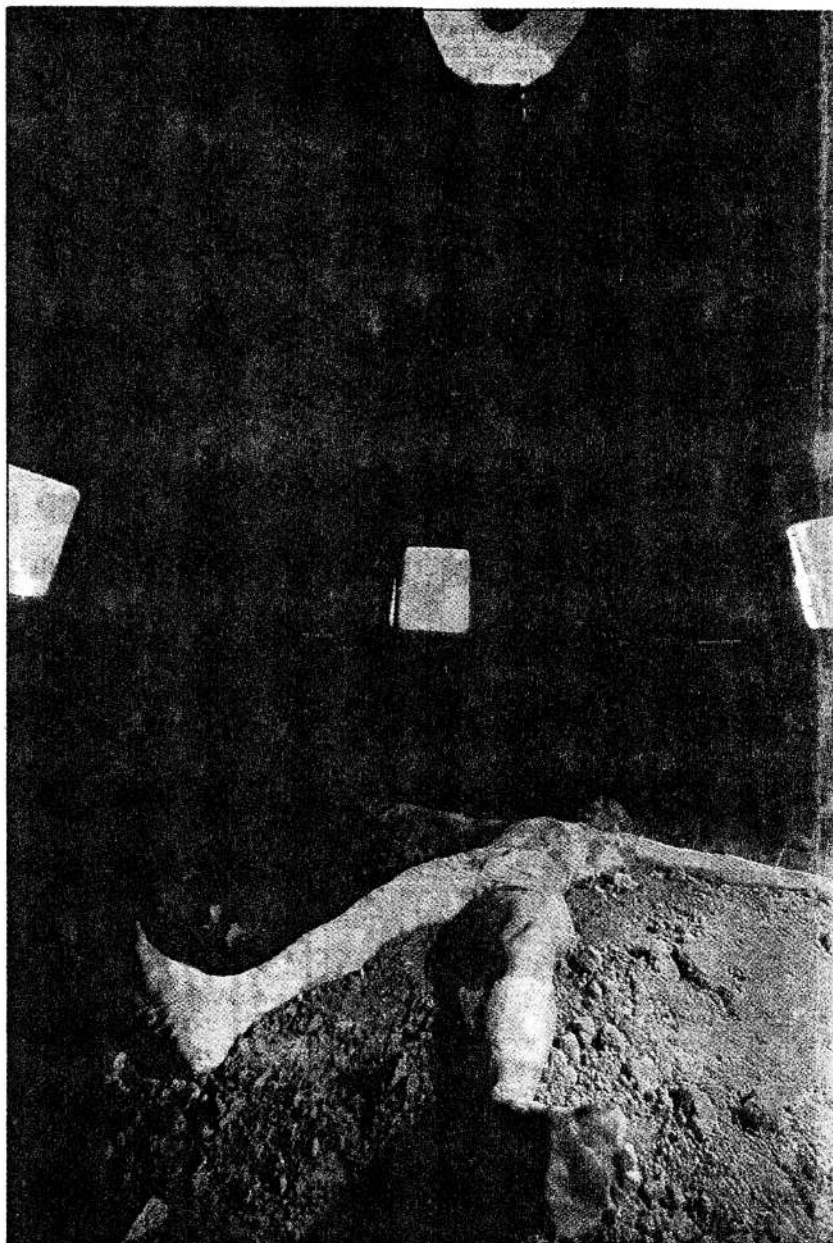
Within the context of the gallery, the wall is no longer simply a wall, but is imbued with the aura of art, forming an integral part of the gallery ethos — either as a display site or, here, as an object of aesthetic contemplation.

Similarly, *Pumpkin House* — a huge installation reminiscent of an igloo — is transformed into a mausoleum, enclosing a cement corpse lying on a bleak bed of soil. There is something insular and disconcertingly anonymous about this work. It cannot be located in the specifics of time or site, and immediate contact with the prostrate form is impossible except through postbox-like slits and narrow windows.

In this work, Karstel comments on the alienation of contemporary society, its inability to stay "in touch" with its own humanity and its reliance on mediated experience. Karstel is intent on distancing or "absenting" himself as much as possible from the work. Yet, whether through selection of materials or the mental editing that accompanies choice of content and display, the artist's mark is inevitably present.

Conversely, Vari literally puts herself into virtually all her works. Taking the "institution" of advertising as a conceptual launching pad, her art attempts to question the surface nature of representation in both advertising and art.

The first of two photographic triptyches consists of digitally enhanced cibachromes mounted to recall typical advertisements at cosmetics counters — sites where display and packaging are of paramount importance. She has deliberately displayed the works as reverse images (the cosmetics logo are back to front), in an attempt to reinforce the "mirror" concerns



Pumpkin House: Anton Karstel's installation comments on alienation PHOTO: HENNER FRANKENFELD

behind the adverts and the way in which counter saleswomen become part of the displayed commodities.

In the second triptych, Vari assumes a chameleon identity by placing herself inside a simulated advertisement, replete with brochures, salescounter and salespeople. In each piece she assumes a different position, behind or in front of the desk, exploring the different power relations between viewer, customer, saleswomen and objects of display.

But, ironically, one remains seduced by the very surfaces Karstel and Vari attempt to deconstruct. The works are presented and lit in

such a way that they suggest connections both in content and form between installations and advertisements. Works that have little to do with one another are suddenly read in tandem.

Karstel's bricks begin to resemble abstract expressionist sculptures and Vari's counter images suddenly evoke associations with Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergère*. Paradoxically, when read in this manner, the works become less aridly intellectual, freed of didacticism and judgment. They simply become surfaces amenable to aesthetic contemplation.

The Way West is on view until May 11