

ANT FARM, THE MOVIE

Space, Land and Time: What If, Why Not? The Underground Adventures of Ant Farm (Directed & Produced by Laura Harrison & Beth Federici)
www.antfarmthemovie.com

by Celeste Williams

Ant Farm, showing at festivals Fall 2010. Premiering at last year's Cinema Arts Festival Houston, *Space, Land and Time* has the subtitle *What If, Why Not? The Underground Adventures of Ant Farm*, which better describes this film's exploration of the group's significant contribution to pop culture.

Directors Laura Harrison and Beth Federici trace the career and friendship arc of the core Ant Farm group—Chip Lord, Doug Michels, and Curtis Schreier, along with diverse colleagues and friends—as they tune out, turn on, and trip together through the counterculture of the 1960s and early '70s. The genius of Ant Farm lay in their ability to identify, codify, and eventually claim as their own quintessentially American iconography, whether Cadillacs, televisions, or the future as portrayed through the space race.

The filmmakers do a thorough job of documenting the gamut of classic Ant Farm works, from *Cadillac Ranch* (1974) and *Media Burn* (1975) to the lesser known but significant *House of the Century* (1972) and *Eternal Frame* (1975), primarily through their editing of Ant Farm's own archival video and the addition of clever animations to the original illustrations.

Although several Ant Farm members originally trained as architects, Lord makes it clear that in the 1960s, unless one were willing to embrace what had become petrified corporate modernism, the alternative for fledgling architects was to completely reinvent the field. At that time there was a great interest in structures that could be quickly erected, utilized, then dismantled, often in connection with music concerts or “happenings.” With first parachutes, then inflatable structures, an organic, fluid, and oftentimes floating temporary architecture was used to create incomparable, ethereal spaces. While this foray into portability was influenced by Jack Kerouac's 1957 *On the Road*, the group's nomadism was also tied to concepts of temporal architecture, such as *Instant City* (1969–70), envisioned by the English group Archigram.

Through cooperation with groups like this and their inventive, tongue-in-cheek publications, Ant Farm attracted an inspired and passionate roster of supporters who would sponsor their most iconic

works. One of their strongest early interactions with a client came out of the commission to build the *House of the Century* for Marilyn Oshman Lubetkin in Angleton, a small community south of Houston. In a pre-digital era, with little building experience, and by sheer force of will, Ant Farm tapped the innovative approaches to building provided by Richard Jost and Peter Eichenlaub to execute a full-scale model of a house whose architecture really belonged to the 21st century.

One of the film's most controversial moments comes in the segment presenting the dramatic work *The Eternal Frame*, presented here as a cathartic “Stations of the Cross” for the media age. This video recreation of the famous Zapruder film of President Kennedy's assassination, with the ride through Dallas's Dealey Plaza faithfully reproduced by Ant Farm right down to Michels's dressing in drag as Jackie Kennedy in a pink pillbox hat, is a record of one of the seminal events of the 20th century. It is heart-rending at times to see the raw emotion on the faces of people as they witness this reenactment of the seemingly “made for TV” assassination. A crowd grows, some people are weeping, and even the police stop traffic to help. The few frames of the Zapruder film repeated on an infinite loop, sequentially reenacted, convey Ant Farm's amazing ability to hone in on the key events that make up our national identity.

The strength of the movie at its most authentic lies in the firsthand testimonials of both the members of Ant Farm themselves and their clients, who still are firmly with them 40 years later. In the film, Marilyn Oshman discusses the intriguing ideas and drawings that engendered her supporting the *House of the Century*, their first fully realized building. But the ebullient and eccentric Texas millionaire Stanley Marsh III practically steals the show; his kooky personality mellowed a bit in the years since his *Cadillac Ranch* commission. This singular work, a row of Cadillacs buried at an angle, nose first, in the desert along Interstate 40 near Amarillo, still attracts the

public today, indicating the enduring interest in unorthodox art projects in Texas.

Less effective in the film, although somewhat necessary for its continuity, were the myriad academic talking heads, as if the blessing of the New York establishment was really necessary to validate the work. Considering that *Cadillac Ranch*, *House of the Century*, *Eternal Frame*, and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston's 1972 *Time Capsule* occurred in Texas, and Michels was a faculty member at the University of Houston College of Architecture, it is refreshing to have the commentary of the Art Guys, Houston artists who claim to be the spiritual successors to Ant Farm's unorthodox methodology.

The “elephant in the room” of this film goes by the name of the Dolphin Embassy. Schreier hints at the demise of Ant Farm as a group at the conclusion of the film when he speaks of Michels's Rockefeller grant for the Dolphin Embassy, later adapted into his Blue Star project, which involved research into interspecies communication through the observation of dolphin and whale pods. Shortly after receiving the grant, a disastrous fire in the Ant Farm studio at San Francisco's Pier 40 forced the group to reassess their collective future. Eventually several members settled into careers in an arena they were frequently drawn to as artists, taking positions as university academics. Michels's pursuit of dolphins and whales in their own environments would be cut short by his untimely death in an accident in Australia, forever closing the chapter on a possible reunion.

Architect Jennifer Siegal of Office of Mobile Design does an excellent job of wrapping up, describing Ant Farm's effect on the art and architecture community and providing ample evidence of their ability to discern trends far ahead of the curve. Many years later it is satisfying to see how the technology has caught up with Ant Farm's visionary take on architecture and to observe the fully built fruition of this legacy.

Space, Land and Time: What If, Why Not? The Underground Adventures of Ant Farm is not just for those yearning for a nostalgic trip, but definitely offers something to young architects seeking inspiration today. 🚐

An image from the documentary showing the Clean Air Pod performance at Sproul Plaza, University of California, Berkeley, to highlight environmental consciousness on the first Earth Day.

