

## Topics

# Ars Longa, Carter Brevis

## The White House Step

It was Hippocrates who, around 400 B.C., observed that life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting, experience treacherous and judgment difficult. His words were called to mind last week by a little performance in Washington.

On Tuesday, President Carter told his aides that to save the Treasury \$3 million he was planning to veto a bill to hold White House conferences on the arts and humanities next year. On Wednesday, he signed the bill. He had had impressed upon him in the intervening 24 hours the fact that a veto would annoy Representative John Brademas, the measure's main sponsor, who also happens to be majority whip in the House. A backlash by the whip was not appealing.

We were a little surprised that the man whose march out of Georgia was preceded by banners proclaiming him to be a reader should have had doubts about the worth of conferences on the arts and humanities. But, then, he may simply have learned from Hippocrates or Dylan Thomas that art would endure even without the sanction of the White House. As for his change of heart, that no longer came as a surprise. Mr. Carter seems lately to have discovered that judgment is difficult and has reversed quite a few positions, from natural gas to the neutron bomb. Indeed, the President is living proof that the absence of experience, too,

can be treacherous. Still, we like to think that the turns and shifts are evidence that Mr. Carter is a good learner, as well as a good reader, determined to make the most of his fleeting opportunities. As the polls must grimly remind him, a President's political life is short and one of the ways to lengthen it is to let the whip have its way.

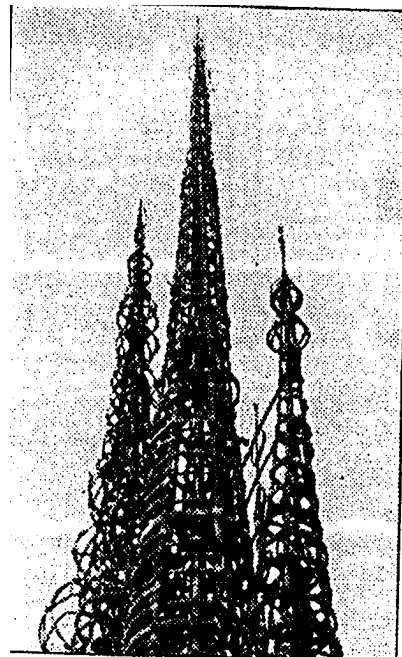
## A Vernacular Vision

It wasn't just the fruits and vegetables that were drenched in the recent California rains. The downpour also soaked the Watts towers, that eccentric architectural phenomenon that has become a major tourist attraction in Los Angeles. Simon Rodilla's curious ad hoc collages of steel and pottery and glass were first adopted by the art underground, but they soon moved high up on the list of folk art fanciers and have been taken, seriously in recent years by devotees of high art. The colorful, motley towers have attained a kind of surreal glory and international fame.

Now the rains have weakened the concrete that holds the "jewels" to their frames and there is danger that they will fall away. Art lovers are pleading with Los Angeles for maintenance and repair.

The widespread concern has a certain poignance, since Mr. Rodilla built his towers as a solitary—if, to some,

crackpot—gesture; they were a spontaneous act of private vision and a completely useless labor of love. He simply craved beauty and found a way



to produce it from shards—the broken bits and pieces of china and glass that he turned into a rich mosaic, vernacular version of art for art's sake. Long viewed as an oddity, the towers are now seen as an architectural and cultural resource. It will just take a bit of grouting; you can't rain out art.