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65
HAROLD BLOOM
BARRY SCHWABSKY

68
HELMUT FEDERLE
THEODORA VISCHER

72
FROM HELMUT FEDERLE'S JOURNAL

74
THE GAZE OF ORPHEUS
KLAUS OTTMANN

76
A CONVERSATION
DAN CAMERON

79
ASHLEY BICKERTON
SHAUN CALEY

83
**AN EYE ON THE EAST:
 RUMANIAN ART TODAY**
RADU PROCOPOVICI

87
CONCEPTUAL SUPPLEMENT
MARY ANNE STANISZEWSKI

118
FLASH ART REVIEWS

131
SPOTLIGHTS:
**KOSUTH, CHIA, FÖRG, IRWIN,
 KLINGELHÖLLER, KOSSOFF**

A CONVERSATION

A SALON HISTORY OF APPROPRIATION WITH LEO CASTELLI AND ELAINE STURTEVANT.

DAN CAMERON



ELAINE STURTEVANT, DUCHAMP'S EAU & GAZ, 1970.
ENAMEL ON METAL, 6" x 8". COURTESY BESS CUTLER GALLERY, NEW YORK.

Leo: Let's pinpoint not my vague awareness of your existence or the fact that we had common friends of great calibre, but when precisely, the precise moment when I really saw your work and when I got interested in what you were doing. Now appropriation as they call it is very fashionable. At that time it wasn't. Let's see how I was struck by the fact that here was somebody who was doing, or re-doing in her own way, the work of important people like Johns, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Lichtenstein...

Elaine: Stella.

Leo: Oldenburg, and why?

Dan: That's something that interests me too.

Leo: Why did she do it? How did this idea occur to her. It was really at the time an incredibly original idea. It was quite amazing; although now you are used to it. At the

time when she appeared we were also used to the fact that artists like Marcel Duchamp for instance, did very extravagant things. I think that some of this spirit was communicated, God knows how, to our friend who sits here, and that she then proceeded to try to do paintings by Jasper, or others. I think it was as faithfully as you could do it?

Elaine: Yes, as close as I could. As exactly as possible.

Leo: So that they would be really, if you didn't know, if you looked at them as close as possible, that this was a work by Oldenburg or Jasper Johns or Andy Warhol.

Elaine: Yes.

Dan: The scale was identical.

Leo: Now, one thing that struck me there was that she succeeded better in doing the things that were more difficult. You couldn't really quite get the spirit of Lich-

tenstein as you did with the much more difficult spirit of Jasper.

Elaine: Well you have the question now of imposing energy into something which is so readily transformed. You see now, Lichtenstein is so structured and so graphic in terms of re-doing it. To impose that energy into it is more difficult than when you are working with a more difficult technique.

Leo: So anyway, I remember this very clearly and I wanted on this occasion to state this fact after so many years. So what else can you say? I own a work of yours which is constantly under my eyes. It is the fried egg of Oldenburg's.

Elaine: In the frying pan. I think maybe that was the first time you actually encountered a whole body of my work, when I did *The Store* with Claes Oldenburg. You came down, and you bought something. You chose the egg and the frying pan.

Leo: I saw that there was a difference between yours and his.

Elaine: There is indeed.

Leo: I recognized it. So anyway, you did what you did and you tried to reproduce the thing as best as you could.

Elaine: Not as best as I could because that implies something different, as closely as I could without copying it. When you copy something it becomes something else.

Dan: I think Duchamp is a good place to start because Duchamp used the example of the cubists in Paris partly as inspiration but then his work was a reaction against that. Now, I think of your work as being inspired by the pop generation, but in a way you were also trying to make further statements or perhaps...

Elaine: I think that's very accurate. There were many factors: Duchamp was of course experiencing tremendous popularity at that time. There were many younger artists who were in great admiration of his work, whereas previously, Duchamp was a background figure, I'm talking in the broader sense...

Dan: One of the many cubists...

Elaine: Yes, and I think that certainly his concern with trying to redefine what we consider art was a very big factor in terms

of my own work. But there is also the factor of if you go back before the pop artists, you have the abstract expressionists, who were obsessed with the idea of creating a new imagery, and it was really an obsession to create something new. And then when you had the pop artists, and they came up with incredibly startling, forthright, dynamic imagery; it was a further step in that direction, but it was still concerned with imagery. That seemed to me rather flat, because it's limiting if you are only involved with creating an image.

Dan: I can think of one artist, Gretchen Bender, who appropriates artists of this moment. In that way, she's somewhat similar to what you are doing.

Elaine: Well that came about because in order for the work to function, you had to recognize the work immediately. This is why I would use the same size, the same scale, the same materials because with the initial viewing of that work, you had to know it was a Johns by Sturtevant. There could be no confusion in your mind that maybe it was someone else, or a de Kooning. You had to know who that particular artist was. So of course you'd take these fantastic painters who had very strong images, and they'd function for me.

Leo: There is one point that I want to make here. Weren't you anxious when you were doing this about how your subject would react to it? Weren't you afraid that they would be very, very angry, even mad at you?

Elaine: That certainly was a factor. It was kind of terrifying work to do.

Leo: I can imagine that.

Elaine: It was really terrifying work to do. My first Warhol was a flower, and Andy was aware of my work and gave me the silkscreens, so that was already known. Jasper or Rauschenberg, who did indeed not know what I was doing—I kind of operated on the premise that you knew what you were doing, and you knew you were right, and you understood what you were doing, so that it would be eventually comprehended by them. Although, you got various reactions. Dan and I were talking about Claes Oldenburg who was one of my biggest supporters and who theoretically understood the work. Then I did his *Store*, and he became enraged.

Dan: Because it was different when it was his own work. He felt that attachment.

Elaine: But you know, when you have a theoretical and intellectual understanding of something, it's interesting how powerful the emotions can be. He just totally wiped out the idea because the reaction was that strong. In most cases the artists understood intuitively what I was doing and felt strongly that it was right.

Leo: But anyway, to come back to the beginning. You did something that was very new and very original. Nobody had



ELAINE STURTEVANT, WARHOL TWENTY MARYLINS, 1973. SILKSCREEN ON CANVAS, 95 1/4" x 60". COURTESY BESS CUTLER GALLERY, NEW YORK.

done it before but now it is being done in various ways. Some artists come to mind that perhaps do the thing that you didn't do. They just copy their subjects. Somebody called Bidlo, when you are in front of a Pollock done by Bidlo, you really are fooled, you think it's a Pollock. That's something a bit different. Is it copying? He does it so well, it goes beyond copying.

Elaine: Yes, that's a possibility.

Leo: Then another one who did something quite amazing, also incredibly well, that went beyond the original artist's work, though not because of Pollock in this artist's case, is Phillip Taaffe, when he did those paintings of Bridgit Riley. What he did was obviously inspired by her work, but I should say that Bridgit Riley never did paintings that looked as good as his.

Dan: Exactly, they looked the same but they felt completely different.

Elaine: That sometimes happens to me. People will say that a work looks better than the original. Then I say, that's totally wrong, it's not supposed to be better. Believe me, that's way off the mark.

Leo: Well I don't think Phillip Taaffe wanted to do paintings that were better than Bridgit Riley. He just thought that he had found something that was an interesting approach to doing not exactly *tromp l'oeil*, the great master of this was Vasarely.

Dan: Are you still working with contemporary figures?

Elaine: I never like to talk about what I am currently doing. There are many reasons, but mainly I feel that if you talk about it, you take away a lot of the energy.

Dan: I do want to get on to the idea that appropriation is perhaps in many ways an extension of pop. A lot of appropriation artists actually had their beginnings in conceptual art, but they acknowledge that pop was their biggest influence. I know both Mike Bidlo and Sherrie Levine have talked about Warhol and the immense influence his work had on them. I think that what you are doing, and what you were doing in the 1960s, has something to do with pop.

Elaine: Definitely.

Dan: Can you talk about that relationship?

Elaine: I think it has to do with the concern for imagery. And that enormous feeling that you had to somehow manipulate a painting, or in terms of Stella, to manipulate what a canvas was, what shape a canvas could be. Those are all the steps to changing our idea of what is beautiful and what is art. With the stronger artists, like Lichtenstein, Warhol, or Rosenquist who were so bold and so clear, it was immediately visually consumed. You didn't have to ponder, you didn't have to talk about painting techniques. It was just there and it could be consumed almost immediately.

But it did involve either the same involvement with the object or with the content of the imagery. I found that a little dull. I don't mean dull in the sense of boring, I mean there had to be a wider place to go than either the concern with manipulating the stretcher or changing the concept or the idea of what was beautiful. It seemed to me to be limiting. There are a hundred million ways you can do that.

Dan: You were describing how pop seemed concerned with the image and you were going to connect it to your interest in the image.

Elaine: Prior to pop art the abstract expressionists were obsessed with imagery. Then you had pop art which came through with this fantastic bold, immediately visible imagery. Then you had people like Stella who were taking canvases and putting them in different forms. I wanted to paint in ways that involved different images and issues.

Dan: Those issues being...

Elaine: Those issues being in terms of the total structure of painting as we know it. For instance, if you are only involved with imagery, this means that the structure of aesthetics is totally stagnant. That is impossible in view of the fact that there are all those theoretical sources which have developed tremendously, so aesthetics themselves had to be changing too. To find a way to use an object that would not present itself as an object, that would at the same time talk about the structure of aesthetics as the idea, that was what I was going for.

Dan Cameron is an art critic and curator living in New York. He contributes regularly to Flash Art.

C O N T E N T S



93
CABRITA REIS, CROFT, SANCHES
ALEXANDRE MELO

75
ANXIETIES OF INFLUENCE
DAN CAMERON



96
BEING POSITIVE IS THE SECRET OF THE 90s
ERIC TRONCY



82
LARRY CLARK
MIKE KELLEY

100
U.S. PAIN
FRANCESCO BONAMI



87
JEAN-LUC VILMOUTH
FRANÇOISE-CLAIRE PRODHON



90
LANDSCAPE POSTS/POST-LANDSCAPE
ISABEL CARLOS



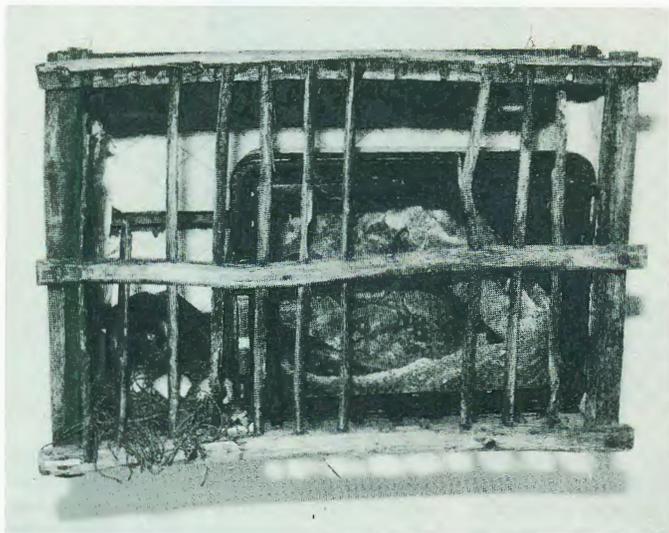
103
SEAN SCULLY
ADRIAN DANNATT



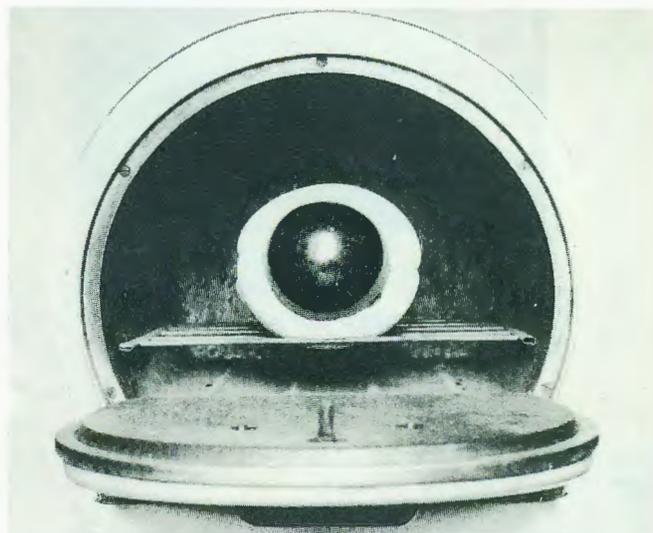
ANXIETIES OF INFLUENCE

REGIONALISM, ARTE POVERA, AND THE COLD WAR

DAN CAMERON



RICHARD SERRA, ZOO CAGE II, 1966.
MIXED MEDIA, 50 X 72 X 44 CM. INSTALLATION AT LA SALITA, ROME.



RICHARD SERRA, BAKE'ER MAKE'ER II, 1966.
MIXED MEDIA, 40 X 40 X 43 CM. INSTALLATION AT LA SALITA, ROME.

"THE WORK INVOLVES A PLACEMENT OF JUXTAPOSED MATERIALS FOR THE SAKE OF THE IDEA: THE PROJECTED SEXUAL METAPHOR. THE CONCERN IS NOT WITH THE MERIT OF ANY PARTICULAR AESTHETIC OBJECT. THE WORKS ARE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND OBSSIVE. MEDIUM IS MIXED - ANIMALS ARE USED AS SEX. CONTAINERS AS SEX. EXPERIENCE AS SEX. MY AMBITION IS TO PRESENT A DAISY CHAIN."

RICHARD SERRA, GALLERIA LA SALITA, ROME, 1966.

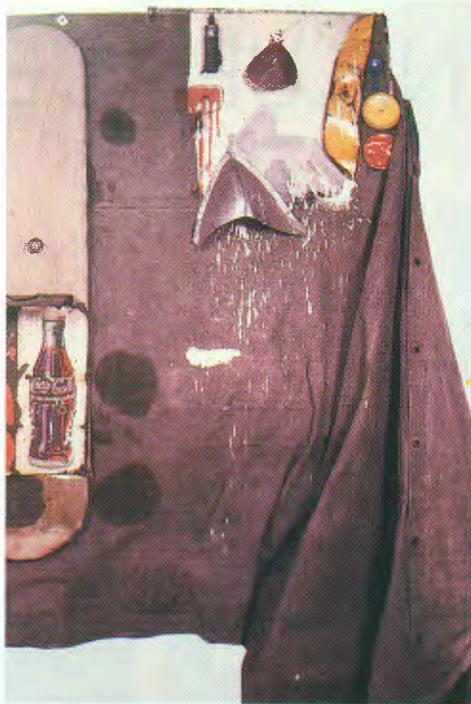
In the November/December 1987 issue of *Flash Art* a text on Arte Povera appeared, authored by the Roman critic Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. In this essay, which must be considered as one of the first critical attempts to reexamine certain aspects of the critical and historical premises behind Arte Povera, Christov-Bakargiev questions whether the identification of certain artists with that movement has as much critical bearing today as it did originally. Instead, by placing Arte Povera along a historical spectrum of activity that begins with earlier attempts to negate

visual form and ends with the intertextual subjectivity of the eighties, she effectively weakens that movement's claim to the special historical status it has enjoyed since the early seventies. In this text I hope to shed some light on the cultural and sociopolitical motivations behind the grouping of these artists together, and to discuss the possibility that, far from being a specifically Italian phenomenon, Arte Povera was simply the regional manifestation of an international tendency which was remarkably consistent, whether examined from the perspective of Paris, Düsseldorf, New York, or Amsterdam. The point, then, is not to reexamine the works or the artists themselves (as Christov-Bakargiev and others have already done quite admirably), but rather the conditions which made it necessary for Arte Povera to be viewed in the way it has been. Hence, the more important considerations here will be the cultural atmosphere leading up to this development, as well as the activities taking place both within and outside of Italy at the time.

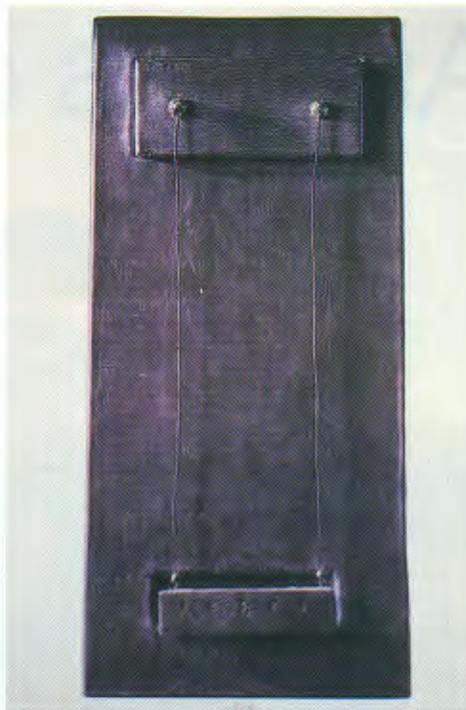
From its somewhat obscure origins in Rome and Turin during the lofty heights of the midsixties, Arte Povera has become one of the more familiar turning points in

the official doctrines of contemporary art. Most of the key figures identified with the movement are now well accepted as international artists on their own, which means that they have also, since they shed the group identity that invariably goes along with such a poetic—and political—epithet. Because there is no longer any critical mandate for such a movement to exist, the threads which once bound the Arte Povera artists together (albeit quite loosely) can now only be discerned with the somewhat dubious medium of historical hindsight. Even from the short range perspective of a quarter century, however, certain issues relating to the nature of Arte Povera start to beg for clarification, while others can only be speculated about. The respective outcomes of the official version of that history and a more skeptical variation may well be the same—Turin may still end up, any way you consider it, as the city with the densest population of major living artists in the world—but the path taken to get to that point might turn out to be significantly different.

One of the first points to be made here is that little, if any, agreement currently exists between critics and historians today as to precisely what constitutes a move-



ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, DYLABY (DETAIL), 1962.



ROBERT MORRIS, UNTITLED, 1964. LEAD AND WIRE, 62 X 28 X 5 CM.

ment. Groups of young artists currently seem to rise up together as much as they ever did, sharing various characteristics of style between them. Once they are accorded a certain degree of recognition, however, the general tendency is to deny that a connection ever existed in the first place. Removing for argument's sake the trappings of worldly success that accompany such a phenomenon today, we can appreciate that much the same tendency occurred with cubism or futurism, with the ultimate price of taking responsibility for one's work being a denial that the efforts of one's contemporaries really made a difference. In the case of movements following World War II, however, a marked difference can be noted between the group manifestation of avantgarde forces in Europe versus those in the U.S. For American artists—particularly those identified with abstract expressionism—the tendency to join forces was in large part a product of the enormous isolation felt by anyone working with progressive cultural ideas at the time. On the other hand, European efforts at realizing a group aesthetic—the Nouveaux Réalistes, the Zero group—ended up being either transient or overly nationalistic, unable to withstand the regional differences so recently hammered home by the war.

There should be little argument that the roots of Arte Povera can be found in this immediate postwar cultural situation, where the most obvious point of contrast with both wartime and the era between the

was that the United States had suddenly entered a historical moment in which it was to serve as the dominant economic, political, and cultural force in the world. In comparison with the overstimulated American economy, the physical and moral devastation wreaked by the war in Europe was so great that despite massive rebuilding campaigns on every front, bad blood between rival political factions in many of the countries that were brought into the war against their will—France, Italy, and Spain—produced a tension that, for years to come, would make it very difficult for other meaningful kinds of interchange to take place. The reconstruction of Europe was not necessarily impeded by such forces, but it was pursued under the baleful glare of nationalistic differences that persist in influencing people's thinking even to the present day.

Such observations do not mean, of course, that European art of the fifties was in any way less interesting than its American counterpart—merely that a two part process was taking place which changed the nature of cultural relations between the two sides of the Atlantic, thus sowing the seeds for the emergence of Arte Povera during the next decade. On the one hand, as has already been stated, most of the best European artists (until Beuys) tended to scrupulously avoid all but the most tenuous associations with other artists, preferring instead to work in relative isolation from one another. On the other hand, evidence of American cultural influences across Europe became so pervasive throughout

the fifties that the U.S.A. was a shared reference point in much of the European work created during this period—even when it was conspicuous by its absence. To take a typical example, the most characteristically European trend of the fifties in philosophical terms was existentialism, which preached a largely fatalistic and antimaterialist approach to life—in other words, the polar opposite of America's postwar preoccupation with classless consumerism. It is more for this reason than any other that the American writers and artists who were in turn most influenced by existentialism—the Beat generation—almost immediately came to declare themselves exiles within their own country.

On the cusp of the fifties and the sixties, a stylistic transition was taking place in the international art community which began to pave the way for enhanced cultural interchanges between Europe and the U.S. The new tendency was presented as a form of realism, a term which had not found currency in the artistic vanguard since the World War I protest-oriented work of German artists such as Otto Dix and George Grosz (the official art of the Nazi and Soviet regimes need not be considered here). Far from satirical caricatures, however, the late fifties new realist generation—Johns, Rauschenberg, and Kaprow in New York, Tinguely, Spoerri, Christo, and Klein in Paris, and Fontana and Manzoni in Milan—proposed a Dada-like raising up of the banal and everyday to new heights of aesthetic signification.

Meaningless junk, the mute and/or battered remnants of industrial culture, was transformed through these artists' efforts into ambivalent beacons of postwar anxiety. At the same time, the institutions which safeguarded the cultural standards of the moment—museums, galleries, critics—were ridiculed for their ineffectual pursuit of sanitized standards that no longer applied to art or to everyday life.

Because there has been a strong tendency on the part of revisionist historians to discuss cold war art-making in terms of a strict separation of European and American interests, it has come to be intellectually convenient to accept this as automatically being the case. As someone who believes, on the other hand, that despite its trendiness the Europe/America debate is not likely to be viewed as one of the more compelling aesthetic topics of the last twenty years, I feel it is important—since that is the way history will most likely view them—to begin once more to speak of the generation of artists listed above in terms of their similarities and shared interests as opposed to merely their differences. Like Fluxus, the movement which most naturally followed in its wake, the new realist generation was consciously international in scope and direction, despite later attempts to confine it to separate countries. A schism with the American aesthetic was indeed felt in Europe as a result of the ascendancy of Pop and minimal art a few years later. But this reaction makes a great deal of sense, since these movements stand as the most typically American expressions of any of this century's developments—until, that is, the emergence of the neoconceptual generation of photographic artists in the late seventies.

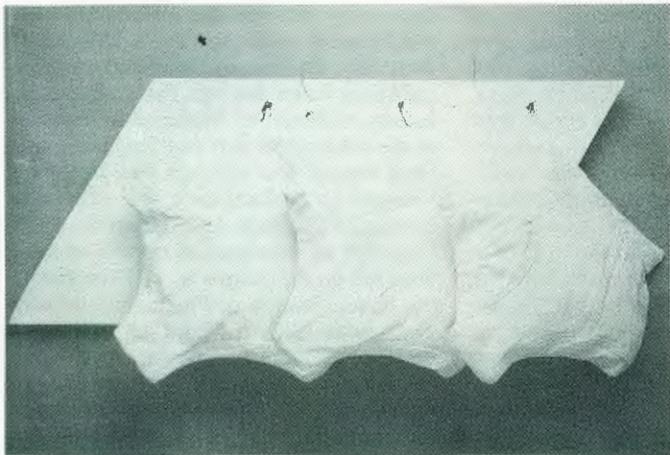
The weakest link in the argument that there was a plot to make American art the dominant cultural force of the so-called "free world" is that the wholesale race in the early sixties to make New York the

capital of the art world was instigated and maintained to a large degree by European dealers, museums, collectors, and even artists, whose work was frequently shown alongside American art in order to provide a mutual context. Furthermore, the extraordinary momentum of change that began in American art at that historical moment (and which continues, albeit in different form, to the present day) makes more sense as a homegrown attempt to duplicate what the European avantgarde had always done: shock the bourgeoisie and be catapulted into instant notoriety. It is important to stress that not only was the fledgling New York art world based on the European model, but also that because Americans have always tended to use European standards to judge their "progress" in the fine arts, the generations of artists following on the heels of Warhol and Morris did not choose to copy or continue the investigations begun by their elders, but dutifully obeyed the tenets of avantgardism by splitting up into different bands and running in every conceivable direction.

Nevertheless, the year 1964 marks when American art became the official enemy in certain quarters of European culture. Known primarily as the year Pop art conquered the European museums, it also marks the first time new American art—most notably in the person of Robert Rauschenberg—upstaged European art on its home ground, the Venice Biennale. "In 1964 the Americans took the prize at the Biennale," writes Germano Celant in the self-interview introduction to his 1985 *Arte Povera* book, "but for me Turin was the center of the world." His tone is much as if someone had challenged Europe's honor directly, and Celant must rise to defend her. There is no question that by May, 1968, the political and ideological terms of anti-Americanism had been honed to a much finer point across Europe; but it is curious to observe Celant's tactics in

adapting such language six months earlier to describe the context of his ideas. Even the subtitle for the text which introduced the term "Arte Povera" is auspicious: "Notes for a Guerilla War." The military metaphor which Celant later excuses as "surreal" nevertheless continues unabated in the 1985 reminiscence, in response to a query about "international strategy": "Art in Europe, with Paris in the lead, was threatened by the growing role of New York... There was no defense, even if there was an attempt to beat a retreat, as the Paris-Milan connection may be seen to be... Because the outer edges—Paris and Berlin—were in crisis, a central band was created, between Amsterdam, Cologne, Düsseldorf, Basel, Bern, Turin, and Rome, which attempted to mediate and check the impact of American art."

Considering the consistency with which Celant viewed the situation over a twenty year gap, it isn't surprising to find that the tone of the introductory part of "Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War" is alarmist bordering on the propagandistic. Associating America (although he never actually uses the word) and its culture with a level of wealth and industrialization that negates the individual's humanity, he states that: "...contrary to this is a 'poor' inquiry that aims at achieving an identity between man and action, between man and behavior... (It) prefers essential information. It does not dialogue with the system of society or with that of culture... It even avoids competition, in order to guard against a renewed contact with the system's laws or a revived dialogue with its institutions." Of course, setting up Op, Pop, and the "primary structures" group (all of which he does name) as adversaries would have been obligatory for any new movement's spokesman at the time, but to do so in terms that have less to do with art than with ideology, makes us feel that the author is simply substituting one paradigm for the other, both in order to justify his



CLAES OLDENBURG, THREE JOCKEY SHORTS, 1962. WALL RELIEF, 47 X 108 X 14 CM.



ROBERT SMITHSON, BIOLOGICAL SPECIMEN, 1962.

championing of a new group of artists and to give his (presumably somewhat partial) readers more to sink their teeth into.

This background is pertinent within the present discussion because it helps pave the way to grasping a fundamental premise that generally tends to be sidestepped by critics and other commentators on the subject: whatever its historical status, *Arte Povera* would never have become a force without the efforts of Germano Celant. From being a young, unaligned critic in Rome during the early sixties, his promotion of the *Arte Povera* generation—first as a local, then an international, movement—launched Celant's career as the most influential critic and curator to emerge from Italy over the last generation. While this observation is not by itself a matter of any dispute, the question has arisen as to whether or not Celant articulated the idea of *Arte Povera* primarily as a vehicle for himself, with the artists serving largely as accessories until the time when they were no longer of any use to the "movement." In fact, since the accepted date for the dissolution of the *Povera* group, 1971, more or less corresponds with Celant's emergence as an important critical and curatorial force outside of Italy, there are grounds for asking how the achievements of *Arte Povera* are to be considered alongside the efforts of non-Italian artists, both during and after. Perhaps the issue of greatest interest to future historians is not the degree to which *Arte Povera* was modeled on very much the same principles as the American work that it was intended to displace, but whether or not the achievements of the *Arte Povera* generation should rightfully be considered as nothing more than the Italian branch of a remarkably consistent international tendency, closely linked to the protest mentality of the counterculture, which began around 1966 and continued until 1972 or 1973. This movement has never been given a satisfactory name, however; postminimalism, the sobriquet usually applied to American sculptors such as Nauman, Hesse, Le Va, and Sonnier, encompasses too little critical theory and too much stylistics to be satisfactory. Perhaps the best decision was made by the generation which formed around Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf during the late sixties and early seventies (including, among others, Immendorff, Palermo, Polke, Ruthenbeck, and Walther)—who chose not to limit themselves through a single name or group identity. Since the Düsseldorf group was in some ways more closely interconnected than the Turin and Rome artists, one is at a loss to try and explain in retrospect why Celant did not take his own call for greater freedom in art more seriously, in terms of avoiding the temptation to yoke his artists with the problem of a group identity. Unless there are special characteristics in these artists' late sixties works that are so

outstandingly Italian they outweigh the general tendency of the time to move in this direction, it might be prudent to strike the name "*Arte Povera*" from the vocabulary of historical movements as being more misleading than it is informative.

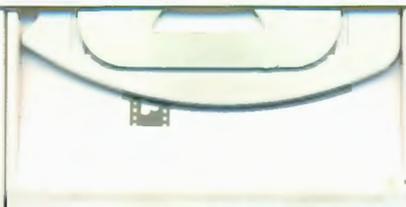
Although it is a topic that often seems to grate at Italian national pride, a look at some of the international developments in art taking place from the early sixties to the early seventies defeats not only the effort to claim autonomy from the influence of American and other European art, but also the notion that the artists associated with *Arte Povera* sprang fully formed from the hills of Turin, the cafés of Rome, and/or the ambition of Celant. Of primary importance in this discussion are the vanguard American artists who showed in Italy during the fifties and sixties, especially those whose work can in some ways be associated with *Povera* developments. Ironically enough, the name cited most frequently in this connection is that of Robert Rauschenberg, the same "outsider" who in 1964 challenged the supremacy of Italian art on its own territory. Unfortunately, this characterization ignores the number of solo exhibitions of Rauschenberg's work held in Italy both prior to and after '64: at Galleria dell'Obelisco in Rome and Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea in Florence (actually the same show) in 1953; at Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome in 1959; at Galleria dell'Ariete in Milan in 1961; at Arte Moderna in Turin in 1964, and at Sperone Gallery in the same city in 1965. In fact, far from being an unknown presence in Italy, Rauschenberg showed as regularly in Italy during these years as any Italian artists of the same generation, and was frequently written about in cultural magazines and newspapers. More than his presence, however, Rauschenberg's pioneering interest in the poetics of literal space, in the recycling of the everyday, and especially the affirmation of humanism in the face of technology connect him with the *Povera* generation at the most fundamental level.

Two more artists whose exposure in Italy during this period may well have influenced developments in Turin and Rome were Jim Dine and Richard Serra. What is curious in both cases is that their impact would have been at a fairly youthful age, through work from which each was to dissociate himself in later years. Dine's exhibitions, in 1962 at Galleria dell'Ariete in Milan and in 1965 at Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin, occurred at the most intense stage of his poetic interplay with everyday objects such as clamp lights and building materials, and his theatrical juxtapositions of such objects with expressionistically painted, reductivist canvases are reported to have been much discussed in artists' circles at the time. Even more striking is the case of Serra's

1966 exhibition at Galleria La Salita in Rome, in which the most memorable feature was a display of live and stuffed animals in cages—again, exemplifying an experimental approach that would have been noticeably out of keeping with the shows of the day, and therefore almost certain to be discussed throughout the art community.

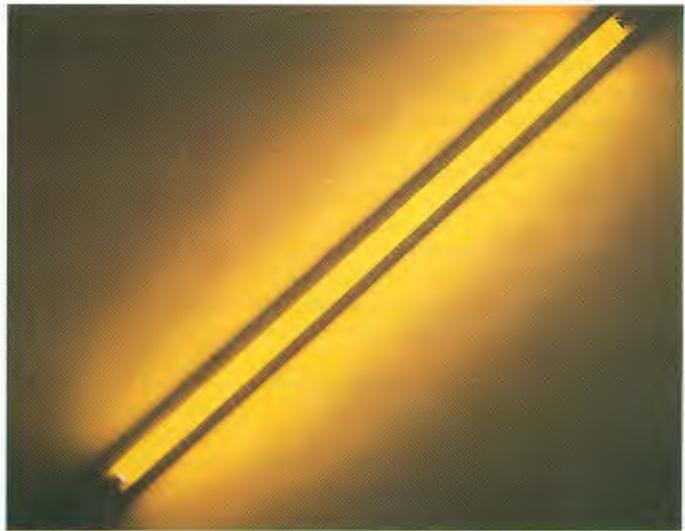
However, singling out these three examples overlooks the fact that, after the midsixties, it was no longer necessary to have an exhibition in a place in order to be influential there; the circulation of information in the form of catalogues, art magazines, and photos had become sufficient to keep far flung sectors of the international art world in touch with one another. In New York, such pre-1966 developments as Oldenburg's and Dine's environments, Flavin's light fixture installations, the Judson Dance Theater, Kaprow's Happenings, Morris's fiberglass box series and Warhol's boxes were creating enough of an impact that successive developments seem in retrospect to have been inevitable. By the end of 1967, Kosuth's definitions, Barry's events, Huebner's declarations, Hesse's wrappings, Judd's boxes, Serra's and Nauman's rubber and/or fiberglass pieces, Le Va's scatterings, Weiner's displacements, Acconci's events, Andre's lines, Kawara's "Today" paintings and Bochner's measurements, as well as—on the West Coast—Baldessari's made-to-order paintings, Kienholz's junk assemblages and Ruscha's books had already articulated a new, reduced set of criteria for American art, one that could be read as nothing less than a direct challenge to the sleek excesses and rampant materialism of Pop.

So as to avoid the risk of making the international exchange into a binational issue, it is important to cite certain changes in European art at the time the groundwork for *Arte Povera* was being laid. To cite the most significant example first, it would be impossible to overstate Beuys's impact on the midsixties European vanguard, especially through the influence of his teachings as professor at the Düsseldorf Academy. Outside of Germany, the main influence came through Paris, where the impact of *Nouveau Réalisme*—especially in the work of Spoerri and Tinguely—was great enough that although they may have seemed to romanticize the everyday detritus of life, their development of a new language of materials is certain to have been felt on the deepest level. Even though the popularization of Fluxus did not take place until 1968, it would not have been unusual to have been aware two years earlier of the activities of either George Brecht or Yoko Ono, artists whose work has remarkable affinities to that of the Italians. Celant confirms that Gilardi was in touch with Dibbets and van Elk in

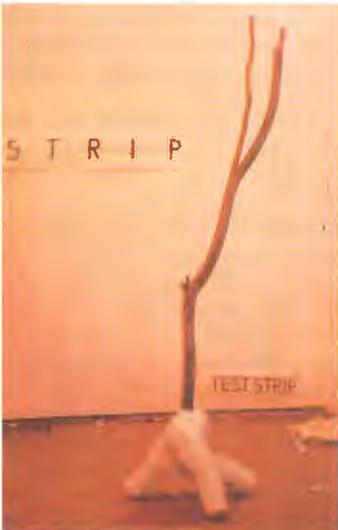




EVA HESSE, *INSIDE I*, 1967.
ACRYLIC, STRING, AND PAPIER MÂCHÉ ON WOOD, 30 X 30 X 30 CM.



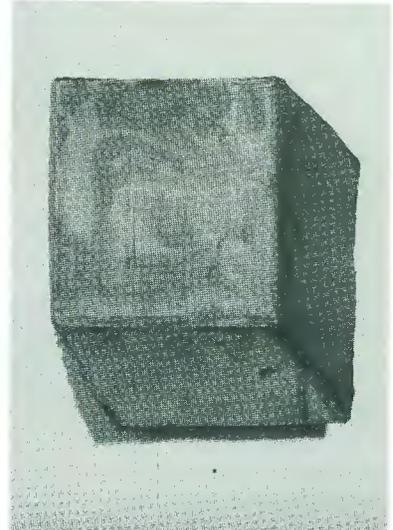
DAN FLAVIN, *THE DIAGONAL OF MAY 25, 1963 (TO BRANCUSI)*, 1963.
YELLOW FLUORESCENT LIGHT, 244 CM.



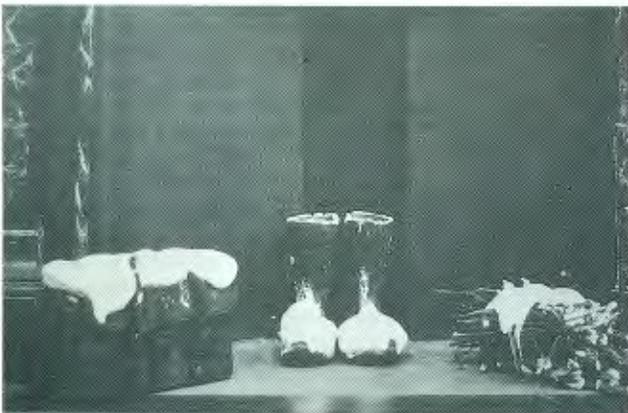
BRUCE NAUMAN, *TREE STANDING ON THREE SHOULDERS*, 1967/68.



ROBERT SMITHSON, *THE ELIMINATOR*, 1964.



BRUCE NAUMAN, *MODEL FOR A ROOM IN PERSPECTIVE*, 1966. FIBERGLASS, LATEX.



PANAMARENKO, *SNEEUW/NEIGE*.
OBJECTS AND ARTIFICIAL SNOW, 10 X 50 X 40 CM.



EVA HESSE, *SEQUEL*, 1967/68.
91 LATEX SPHERES AND LATEX SHEET, 76 X 81 CM.

Amsterdam, and with Flanagan and Long in the U.K., and the work of Broodthaers and Panamarenko was certainly connecting to an audience in Belgium. In general, one can even say that the mood in Europe was already so strongly inclined toward a critical treatment of materialism that the early manifestations in Austria of the Aktionisme group led by Rainer, along with Tàpies at the forefront of Informalism in Spain, should not be overlooked as equally significant counterparts to what the Italian and German artists were about to undertake.

Although the issue of European influence on Arte Povera is interesting from the point of view of how history might be interpreted today had this phenomenon originally been presented as part of an international shift in aesthetic priorities, it is not as loaded as the problem of possible American influences—any imprint would have been preferable to that of New York. In fact, in light of the fact that the interchange between American artists and the early to midsixties Italian art world seems to have been much more developed (albeit on a one way basis) than is generally acknowledged, there is no critically justifiable reason why Celant would take the occasion of the 1985 *Arte Povera* volume to characterize American art in the following way: "...in America, the speed of information creates perceptive conditions in which the image takes form only in rapid and ephemeral communication. It is therefore 'without substance': from Warhol to Weiner. It is coupled with an indiscriminate worldly corporeality, and it becomes flat and superficial, so much so as to be carried by mass media like TV and magazines." Later on he says, "The American continent has cast its lot with straight lines and has become infatuated with cubes; these are forms that indicate the distance or the perimeter from the beginning to the end." Not surprisingly, Celant contrasts this tradition (which presupposes the lack of will of the individual) with Europe, which is unpredictable and baroque, reflecting a sense of the complexities of history, as well as highly individualistic in nature.

Such a ludicrous dichotomy not only overlooks the fact that the development of geometric reductivism is one of the most fundamental concerns of European (although not Mediterranean, which is perhaps more the point) modernism, but the rhetorical device Celant is employing threatens to subsume the more interesting points to his argument. Oddly enough, once a series of exhibitions appears in Italy during 1968, each entitled "Arte Povera," each different, and each curated by Celant, the key to his efforts becomes somewhat clearer: the trajectory to the movement will be nothing if not international, with Italian artists spear-heading the transition. Meetings that year with Harald Szeemann

led to the unprecedented inclusion of nine Italians—Anselmo, Boetti, Calzolari, Icaro, Kounellis, Merz, Pascali, Pistoletto, and Zorio—in the latter's watershed exhibition, "When Attitudes Become Form" (there are, by comparison, six German artists in the show, two Dutch, four British, and thirty-nine Americans), which opens in March of 1969. Despite the personal and professional triumph implied by the event, Celant takes no chances in assuring that his stamp will remain permanently associated with this moment of transition by putting together a book entitled *Arte Povera*, which is published simultaneously with the exhibition. Consisting for the most part of individual contributions by each of the thirty-four artists, this 1969 version of *Arte Povera* suddenly became an international movement as well: supplementing Szeemann's list of Italians with Fabro, Paolini, Penone, and Prini (and dropping his fellow Genoan, Icaro), Celant trims some twenty Americans as well to come up with not only a more historically prescient grouping of names—nearly a dozen of the Americans in "Attitudes" were soon to disappear from the scene—but also a careful proportioning of national interests—eleven Italians, sixteen Americans, four Germans, two Dutch, and two British—that is more in keeping with his vision of an Italian led, second reconstruction of Europe.

Celant's internationalist vision of *Arte Povera* was given its greatest platform in the exhibition he organized in June of 1970 for the Turin Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna: "Conceptual Art-Arte Povera-Land Art." As the first presentation of the

leaders of these movements in an Italian museum, the event also signals the abrupt end of Celant's use of the term *Arte Povera* to connote a group identity of Italian artists. As a definitive curatorial statement, it also marks the definitive end of any fiction regarding *Arte Povera* as a movement that has been formed in opposition to a perceived dominance of Americans: while adding Pascali to his list of artists from the year before, he also manages to include six additional American artists, including a few (Baldessari, Christo, and Flavin) that Szeemann had overlooked the year before. In short, once Celant has effectively captured the world's attention, he makes it clear that his interests are much more internationalist than he had indicated in the past. Years later, he would state both that the American artists he was interested in were not the "official" American artists (in other words, they were artists for whom, like the Italians, he could take at least partial responsibility for discovering), and that the term "Arte Povera" could be brought back into use, not only because it was "historicized," but because "it functioned again as a 'conflict' with the return to order of the art of the eighties."

In terms of the most fundamental requirements and responsibilities of criticism, Celant's need to have it both ways on the *Arte Povera* question—first negating the use of the term, then bringing it back when it suits him, claiming it as a movement that defies Americanism, then rushing to embrace the new American artists—must be cited as the source of a large degree of the confusion generated by the subject today. For example, were we able to treat the unfolding of *Arte Povera* as an exclusively Italian (or even European) phenomenon or as a movement that effectively vanished after two and a half years, it might be equally possible to discuss the work made by this group of artists in more definitive critical terms. However, the way we are presented with this information today raises more questions about the artists themselves than it answers. What is to be done, for example, with an artist such as Alighiero Boetti, who to those not involved in the issues has only become an interesting figure since dropping the *Povera* tag in 1975 and beginning to make pictures? Or of Pier Paolo Calzolari, whose work may have started to fizzle out around the same period, but whose constructions of the late sixties and early seventies seem to have been largely kept from the public eye ever since? Or of Piero Gilardi, an important theorist and spokesman, as well as a source of international connections for the Turin group in particular, who was key to Celant's original use of the term "Arte Povera" in 1967, but whose activist/teaching concerns were conspicuously overlooked in all of the latter's



ROBERT SMITHSON, INSTALLATION VIEW, 1962.
CASTELLINE GALLERY, NEW YORK.



BRUCE NAUMAN, SMALL NEON AND PLASTIC FLOOR PIECE. 1965. FIBERGLASS AND NEON TUBING, 122 CM. DESTROYED.



CHRISTO, WRAPPED LANTERN. 1964. 39 X 18 X 15 CM.

shows and formulations?

The problem is that the level on which the work associated with the *Arte Povera* myth has typically been perpetuated does not allow for a truly critical discussion of many of the artists. Try as they might to transcend it, they are invariably trapped by the *Povera* definition—as in the respective cases of Anselmo or Fabro, for example, both of whose work has been considerably more interesting in the past decade than it was in 1968, but neither of whom uses materials or processes in a way that can be considered remotely poor (or even politically sensitive). Nor is the recent stagnation in the work of both Kounellis and Merz—the two figures who were irreducibly *povera* long before the term was coined, and whose innovations of the period are of monumental importance to our general understanding of postobject art—a subject that can be broached in print without feeling that one is trespassing upon territory that is better left unsullied. In addition, because of what is perceived as a “prior commitment” to the *Povera* grouping, the work of Paolini is frequently omitted from discussion of the generation to which his work rightly belongs (conceptual art). Even more drastic is the misunderstanding of a figure such as

Pistoletto, whose best work makes little sense when it is considered from a specifically Italian perspective; in fact, Pistoletto’s inclusion as a representative of Pop art, while misleading, has probably been less damaging in terms of the appreciation of his recent work than the *Povera* categorization. Finally, the poetics of ecological sensitivity, which remains the source of insight in Penone’s vision, was too greatly simplified by his association with the *Povera* generation, which has made the showing of his work in any group situation a problematic issue ever since.

In making the claim that the typical perception of *Arte Povera*—as a generation of Italian artists that pioneered a radically new force in Western art—has been based on ideas about stylistic autonomy and influence that do not seem very convincing today, it is not my intention either to discredit Celant’s accomplishments, nor those of any of the artists he has championed over the years. On the contrary, what Celant achieved in bringing this generation together has had the most profound implications not simply for Italian art, but also for the resurgence of European art in the past two decades. One only has briefly to consider the separate achievements—at various points in their

respective careers—of Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Jannis Kounellis, Giovanni Anselmo, Luciano Fabro, Giulio Paolini, Giuseppe Penone, Piero Gilardi, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Pino Pascali, Gilberto Zorio, and Pier Paolo Calzolari—to recognize that they are not only the artists whose work most eloquently represents their generation, but their simultaneous emergence in the same historical moment represents a challenge for recent generations of Italian artists. To what extent it was Celant’s intuitive collaboration and singlemindedness that made this concurrence of important talents possible must be left to historians to speculate over; what is undeniable is that his efforts were largely responsible for keeping this generation in the public eye. Unfortunately, any serious argument in favor of the importance of this generation only reinforces the position that such a misappropriation of the idea of movement must be corrected sooner or later: we must be clear to ourselves, at least, that either *Arte Povera* happened in a dozen places at once (including New York), or it simply never happened at all.

■
Dan Cameron is a critic, curator, and musician living in New York.

C O N T E N T S

EVEN
MACHIN
AHH...

50
WHAT'S ALL THIS
BODY ART?
JEFF RIAN



62
WHO IS JESSICA DIAMOND?
FRANCESCO BONAMI



54
KIKI SMITH
FRANCESCO BONAMI

64
THOMAS RUFF
THOMAS WULFFEN



68
DAVID HAMMONS
DAN CAMERON



56
THE LOGIC OF MODERNISM
ADRIAN PIPER

72
ALIGHIERO BOETTI
GIACINTO DI PIETRANTONIO



59
BRIDGET RILEY
ANDREW RENTON



76
JULIA SCHER
WILLIAM SCHEFFERINE



DAVID HAMMONS

COMING IN FROM THE COLD

DAN CAMERON

Although for many people David Hammons seems to have emerged from nowhere in the past two or three years to suddenly enter the front ranks of international sculptors, such a perception is actually mired in the unfortunate sociopolitical dynamic that tends to influence how American culture views itself. Were we to let ourselves be dominated by its influence, it would probably be more accurate to write the following: "Despite the best efforts of the American art

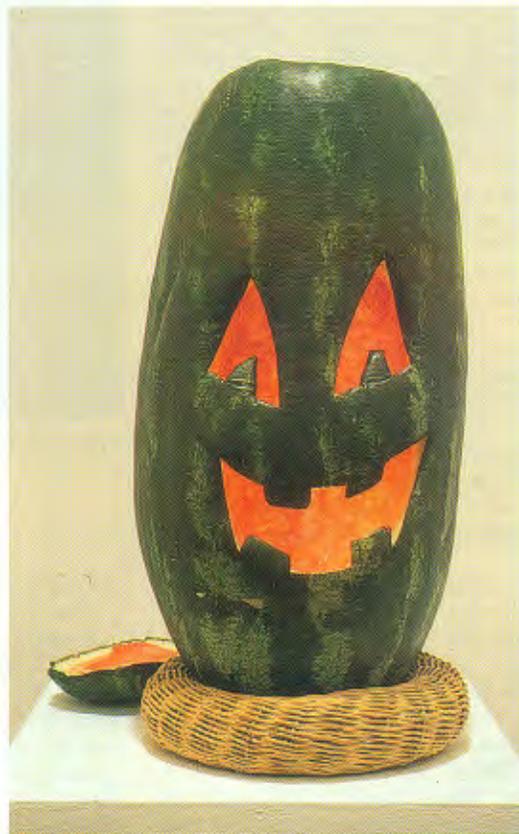
establishment to deny the existence of an artist like David Hammons within its midst, his work has at last been exposed to a general and highly appreciative audience." In fact, the truth lies somewhere in between. Hammons's art would probably have become well-known much earlier on. Instead, he chose to focus his artistic activity on the experience of being a fully engaged African-American male at the end of the twentieth century, with all the contradictions that this entails. In this

way, Hammons more or less forced the art world to come after him, ensuring that his work would be taken on its own terms, and prompting a general re-examination of the issues of cultural identity in American art — the repercussions from which will still be felt for many years to come.

Born in 1943 in the medium-sized, midwest town of Springfield, Illinois, Hammons's formative experiences were of the slow cultural ferment that would constitute the United States in the fifties,



ROCKY, 1990. ROCK, HAIR, WIRE, 37 X 13 X 13".
COURTESY JACK TILTON GALLERY, NEW YORK.



OVER THE HEADS OF ORDINARY VIEWERS, 1990.
CARVED WATERMELON.



BAG LADY IN FLIGHT, 1990.
SHOPPING BAGS, GREASE, HAIR, 48 X 113 X 5".

only seen from the wrong side of the tracks. One of ten children, Hammons went to live in Los Angeles at age twenty to study advertising, but was diverted into art soon after meeting Charles White, a WPA veteran draftsman and printmaker, whose work depicted the lives and struggles of African Americans. Galvanized as well by the growing black nationalist movement of the sixties, Hammons's first works were also prints, many of which turned the symbolism of the American flag against itself in a critical manner (a motif that would return in the 1990 *U.N.I.A. Flag*). But his first complex works were a series of body prints done in the late sixties and early seventies that used his skin, clothes, and hair as a printing plate. These sold well enough to allow him to move toward more sculptural and participatory works, but they also established Hammons's remarkable gift for fusing a meaningful gesture with its visual trace in such a way that the integrity of each is kept dynamically intact.

By 1973, Hammons had created his first "Spade" pieces, simple utilitarian forms turned into ceremonial objects through their adornment by materials like chains. The open references both to Duchamp and African art in these works, and a growing interest in using discarded materials to articulate an anti-art stance, shows this as the first major turning point in Hammons's work. Like many artists of the early seventies, he undoubtedly saw enormous potential in the use of poor materials to create an anti-formal vocabulary that would operate at the outer margins of art's self-definition. But unlike most other artists in Europe and the U.S. who made use of a similar vocabulary,

Hammons's commitment to making work that was true to his own relationship to culture also gave him access to cultural references which the mainstream had a hard time assimilating, or even noticing. His African-American identity, explored for its wealth of social and poetic meanings, became at the same time a badge of disenfranchisement, the symbol of a self-imposed distance from the values of a white-dominated art culture. In a sense, his worn-out "spade" — the word was once a widely-used derogatory term in colloquial English to refer to a black man — becomes transformed into a linguistic shield, to prevent art from encroaching on the creative spirit of the work until it has itself been transformed along the way.

Because of the subtle juggling in Hammons's work between the overriding themes of race and culture, the choice of Harlem as a work base and home has strongly influenced his art after moving to New York in the mid seventies. As the spiritual center of black American culture, Harlem has certainly offered Hammons an unlimited range of materials and situations to draw from. It has also allowed him to keep a constant life-line to the street, so that he maintains a sense of himself as belonging to a community that comes together partly through the daily struggle to transform material want into a special brand of poetry. Among other things, such a delicate operation requires a strong stylistic adherence to the basic principles of narrative, as well as a healthy sense of humor. Both qualities are demonstrated in one of Hammons's best-known works of the early eighties, *Blizzard Ball Sale* (1983), for which the artist stood out in the street with a small blanket on which he had arranged an assortment of snowballs,

ranging from plump to very small. Serving as a form of homage to the predominant homeless people who sell only marginally more valuable merchandise at all hours of the day and night, Hammons's use of one commodity that was available for free to all — snow — underscored the plight of those whose position within the economy is never more than a day or two from disaster.

Not surprisingly, Hammons's best works have tended to take place far outside the confining structures of the museum, addressing themselves to an audience that does not regularly confront contemporary art. One of his signature works is *Higher Goals*, which was first realized in Harlem in 1983 and expanded upon in 1986 as an outdoor commission for Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn. Placing basketball hoops atop telephone poles which had been decorated with bottle caps to create elaborate African-inspired geometric designs, Hammons's totems celebrate the spirit of hopeful play that manifests itself on the inner city basketball court. He is also just short of stern in his admonition that young men of African ancestry must set their sights a bit higher than hoops if they want to achieve worthwhile things in life. Equally memorable was the artist's two-part contribution to the site-specific exhibition, "Places with a Past," organized as part of the 1991 Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. The first half of Hammons's contribution, *House of the Future*, was actually a collaboratively designed free-standing narrow structure based on the typical Charleston single house — except that it was constructed from scrap materials and sited in its empty lot at a ninety-degree diagonal to all the other



HEAD WARMER, 1990. CARVED WOOD, 39 X 1".

houses on the surrounding blocks. Across the street from this work, Hammons replaced a billboard advertising cigarettes with a photo he had taken of young neighborhood kids looking upward in what project organizer Mary Jane Jacob calls a "pose of hopeful determination." Additional force was added with the transformation of the lot into a small park, and the placement of a flagpole — to which the kids' eyes now seem affixed — bearing Hammons's signature American flag in red, green, and black, the colors of African nationalism.

It is important to see this invention of new and positive images of blacks as consistent with Hammons's use of found materials and imagery that function as stereotypes of the African-American identity — from Jesse Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and Ornette Coleman to fried chicken, watermelon, and wine sold in pint bottles. By claiming images that have been used to foster feelings of cultural inferiority and deploying them in a new way, Hammons has produced a remarkable model for how artists of color are able to forge individual sensibilities within the art world as a whole. With his open but self-reflective manner of bouncing positive and negative associations off one another, he sidesteps both the element of blatant parody that robs Robert Colescott's paintings of the ability to appear as serious as they really are, as well as the air of sanctimoniousness that makes Lorna Simpson's work seem more severe than it really is. Among his other achievements, Hammons's weaving of a critical, reductive African-American reflex into postmodernism, at precisely the moment when the multiculturalist debate has come to a boil in American and European art, has permitted a new generation of artists to find new ways to

question the assumptions of parity within current discourse on the subject. The issue of race has been broached before in the avantgarde, most notably in Adrian Piper's information-based works of the seventies and Mel Edwards's metal "Lynch Fragment" sculptures. Today, however, from Fred Wilson's reconstructed museum sites and Renée Green's breakdown of the language of "empirical" comparison, through Faith Ringgold's use of quilts to retell modern art myths and Gary Simmons's gold-plated high-top sneakers, the ways in which American artists of color are choosing to make cultural identity an integral part of their work is a process which is suddenly engaging the interest of a much broader cross-section of the art world than ever before, thanks in large part to Hammons's role as pioneer. This process, furthermore, does not show any signs of slowing down; on the contrary, now that the gates have finally opened somewhat, the true diversification of American art seems to have just gotten started.

The first widespread recognition of Hammons's work within the art world mainstream — around the first half of 1990, during the period leading up to his survey exhibition at New York's P.S.1 — coincided with the loosening of neogeo's grip on the art world's imagination, as well as with the emergence of other American artists interested in a looser, poorer aesthetic. However, it would be a critical mistake to try and pigeonhole Hammons, after the example of some of his apologists, as the dialectic opposite of Jeff Koons. Such a pairing would require that the older artist be called upon to rescue meaning from the clutches of his younger colleague, following a scenario whose applicability to the present situation is

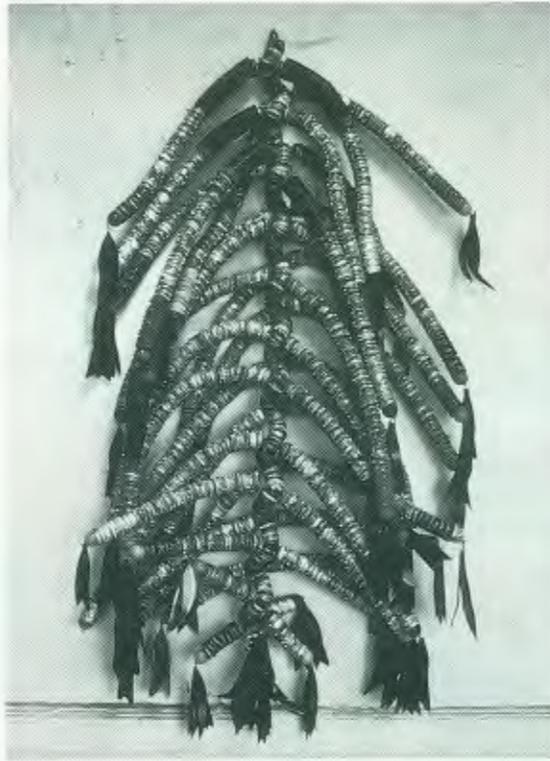
dubious at best. What makes more sense is that the directness and simplicity of Hammons's art, with its unique capacity for drawing a poetic atmosphere from the most unlikely situations, did appear as an antidote for the kind of binge mentality that, more than any other single factor, defined the eighties for most people. But it is important to stress here that Hammons's method does not, in any primary way, constitute a reference to other artists' work, since it is precisely this insular, self-referential approach to treating art and the art world that has kept him fundamentally disinterested in the entire process. As immersed as his work may be in the structure and language of postminimalism and body art, Hammons's closeness to urban black culture allows him the freedom to revamp some of the expected meanings of his materials, expand upon other meanings that have not been anticipated, and leave the rest to take care of itself.

While Hammons's 1989 relocation to Rome has provoked some commentary from observers who do not believe he can maintain the same blend of poetry and social relevance overseas, the opposite seems to have taken place. From the confrontation with the status quo implicit in the Charleston work to the mesmerizingly organic force of his untitled construction of African hair and stones in Documenta IX, Hammons has successfully resisted being reduced by the art world's mechanisms to a simple formula. At the moment, his work seems equally divided between the more sculptural or object-based pieces that he has produced for gallery shows and the installations which transform an entire room with an elusive presence. One of the strongest examples of the latter is the unforgettable *Jesus is the Light* (1990) at P.S.1: a roomful of plastic crucifixes that glowed in the dark to the strains of Aretha Franklin singing gospel. As it gracefully straddled the seemingly immense canyon separating folk culture and conceptualism, this piece showed that Hammons can bring his own truth to bear on the public imagination without losing touch with the popular sources from which it springs. In other words, the artist seems to want to demonstrate his utter certainty that the culture of "just plain folk" is much more extraordinary than the art world seems willing to accept. At a time when that same community seems caught up in the endless dilemma of recasting its values in relation to those who are caught outside its aura of privilege, Hammons's expanded sense of subject matter seems to be just about as relevant, and as transcendent, as one can hope for art to get.

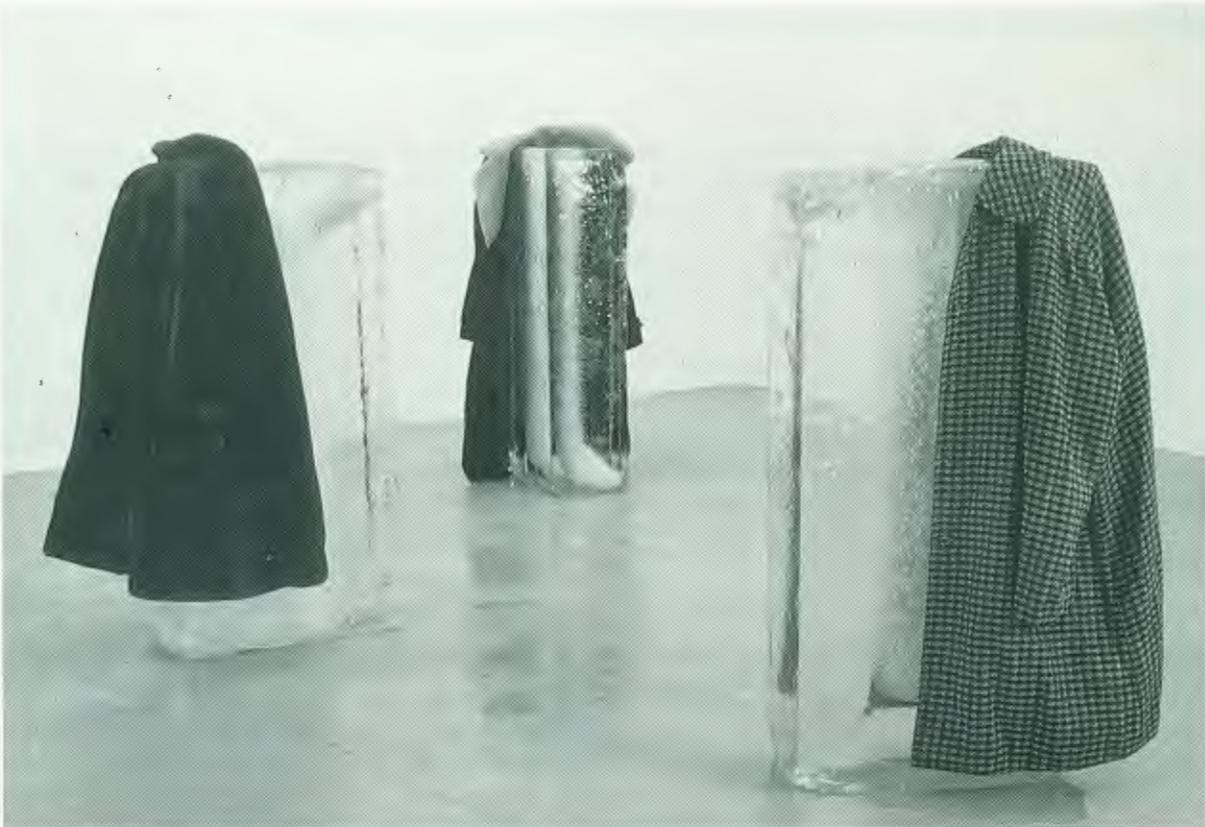
Dan Cameron is a critic, curator, and musician living in New York.



HOUSE FOR THE FUTURE, 1991.
"PLACES WITH A PAST," SPOLETO FESTIVAL, CHARLESTON.



UNTITLED, 1989.
BOTTLE CAPS, WIRE, BROKEN RECORDS, RUBBER INNER TUBE, 54 X 36".



COLD SHOULDERS, 1990.
INSTALLATION, JACK TILTON GALLERY, NEW YORK.

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87
A REPORT FROM THE FIELD

JUTTA KOETHER

90

ART AND ADVERTISING

MARY ANNE STANISZEWSKI

96

SALVO: EGOISTIC PAINTING

ANGELA VETTESE

98

SUNDAY ON EARTH

BARRY SCHWABSKY

101

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

LOS ANGELES

119

TURNING THE URN

DUNCAN SMITH

122

ENTRIES: RUTH KLIGMAN

ROBERT PINCUS-WITTEN

125

AN EYE ON THE EAST

MARGARITA TUPITSYN

129

NEWS

133

FLASH ART REVIEWS

150

SPOTLIGHT

HIGH-TECH REDUX

L.A. ART OF THE SIXTIES IS BEING RE-ASSESSED IN

TERMS OF THE ART OF THE LATE EIGHTIES.

DAN CAMERON

The date is June, 1986; the place is Baskerville+Watson, one of Soho's most visible young galleries. An exhibition entitled *Modern Objects* has been curated by R.M. Fischer, one of the gallery's leading lights (in fact, it is the second exhibition organized by Fischer on this theme; the first was held three years earlier at Barbara Toll Gallery). The text by Jeffrey Deitch emphasizes that "Modernism is no longer a call to action but an arena of fantasy." The selection of work seems to bear out this premise, first through its choice of recent pieces by Neil Jenney, Fischer

himself, and Jeff Koons; and secondly by the curator's inclusion of a mid-'60s surfboard and a tiny but perfect Steuben crystal. However, what really distinguishes this survey and drives the curatorial point home is the large number of works in *Modern Objects* by the so-called "finish-fetish" artists who made up the core of Los Angeles' mid-'60s contribution to the avant-garde: a 1967 Larry Bell glass cube, a 1970 John McCracken leaning fiberglass "slab," a 1969 Robert Irwin optical disc, and a 1966 curved plexiglass vacuum-molded sculpture/painting by Craig Kauffman. To those visitors who are familiar with this work, Fischer's task seems to have been to set up a visual tension between the more recent sculpture, which plays with past and present historical connotations, and the 20-year-old California work, which appears more than ever to have been designed and produced somewhere in the not-so-distant future.

Four months later, at P.S. 1, the bastion of avant-garde art in Queens, curator Edward Leffingwell inaugurates a project which has occupied his time for more than a year: the retrospective of John McCracken. In addition to showcasing McCracken's well-known "slab" or "plank" paintings, the exhibition focuses on some of the artist's less-known work, including the blocks, pyramids and wall reliefs which are contemporaneous with his first experiments, ca. 1966, in leaning his monochrome paintings against the wall. The exhibition, although largely unheralded by the New York press, remains one of P.S. 1's finest surveys of a single artist's work.

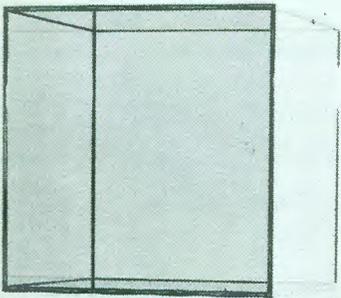
In February of 1987, André Emmerich Gallery mounts a survey of John McLaughlin's work from the '50s. McLaughlin, who died in 1976, was the leading West Coast proponent of reductivist abstraction, not to mention the sole American practitioner, in the '50s and early '60s, of the purely transcendentalist non-objective vision espoused by early geometric pioneers like Puni and Vantongerloo. In contrast to the dry pragmatism found in the work of other early American geometrists like Ilya Bolotowsky or Burgoyne Diller, McLaughlin's paintings are objects of meditation which ultimately have more in common with the tragic vision of the sublime found in Rothko

or Reinhardt (even though McLaughlin's work is anything but tragic). The Emmerich gallery has shown paintings from his estate in 1979 and 1982, but this exhibition of work from the 1950s will present McLaughlin's work to the most enthusiastic audience since his death, and is quickly followed by a show of paintings from the '60s (held in November), coinciding with the inclusion of minor (and in some cases damaged) McLaughlins in group shows at the Washburn and Erpf Galleries.

Up until this point, the re-kindling of interest in minimalist art from the California '60s was a more or less underground phenomenon, occurring largely in galleries and alternative spaces. The ambitious project by Robert Irwin at Wave Hill in spring and summer 1987—which involved two subtle alterations of the landscape, and a sun-room transformed by a double installation of Irwin's signature scrim—was on a similar scale with these other exhibitions. The surest indication that a

"My greatest emphasis is on simplicity. This quality does not necessarily indicate a lack of content. For many years I have been devoted to Asian paintings of certain schools and above all the most compelling quality in this has been the economy of means in concert with large unpainted areas. These paintings I could get into and they made me wonder who I was. By contrast, Western painters tried to tell me who they were. This I believe is just as true of abstract painting today as it has been in the past with other types of Western painting. In other words, the spectator is made to see the image and its particular characteristics emerge by logical deduction.

"In contrast to this, my own method, as must now be apparent, is to refrain from recording on the canvas my reactions to or understanding of some object or idea and instead I develop a composition which in theory at least contains those qualities which might enable the spectator to contemplate nature beyond the limitations of an image of symbolism."
(John McLaughlin)



LARRY BELL, UNTITLED, 1967.
MINERAL-COATED GLASS, RHODIUM-PLATED BRASS,
20" x 20" x 20". COLL. WHITNEY MUSEUM, NEW YORK, GIFT
OF HOWARD & JEAN LIPMAN.



CRAIG KAUFFMAN, UNTITLED, 1968-69.
ACRYLIC LACQUER ON VACUUM-FORMED PLEXIGLASS, 43" x 89" x 15". COURTESY ASHER/FAURE, LOS ANGELES.

trend was developing came in early September, when the Whitney Museum used its prestigious lobby gallery for a small survey of Craig Kauffman's wall reliefs from the late '60s. Because it is largely devoted to either cutting-edge art or to selections of work by modern masters, the Whitney's decision to organize a Kauffman project in this room confirmed what some people had been suspecting for a while: namely, that the work of Kauffman and his contemporaries required a complete re-assessment, not in terms of historical criteria or by comparison with New York art of the same period—which had been the point with most discussions of this work—but in terms of art being produced in the late 1980s. In other words, an adequate response to the issues raised by this work today would entail that the work be considered in ways which have never even been applied before.

Of primary interest among the loosely-defined California Minimalist school are those five already mentioned: Irwin, Kauffman, Larry Bell, McCracken and McLaughlin. Certain reductivist tendencies can be singled out from this group which might form a composite Southern California artist type. Both Irwin and Bell are essentially non-colorists, while Kauffman and McCracken work best in monochrome. The collective desire (excepting McLaughlin) to merge high-tech fabrication processes and materials with this simplicity of format brought out a much-discussed local trait: their fixation with surface, particularly the reflective qualities found in lacquers and metallic finishes, and the synthetic appearance offered by fiberglass and plexiglass structures. In terms of locating the elusive meditative potential of elemental forms, each member of the group found himself conceptually bound

on the one side by the precedent of McLaughlin's crisply serene vision, and on the other side by the other-wordliness of Irwin's post-object room transformations. Considering the few stylistic options available between these two examples, the degree of invention which Bell, Kauffman and McCracken applied to their respective processes makes their contribution that much more intriguing.

There were other important contributors to the art of that particular time and place. Perhaps the first well-known artist in the vicinity was Ed Ruscha, whose 1962 "Hollywood" and gas station paintings

"There are things I've undertaken as an artist that I will never accomplish in my lifetime. It's just not possible. The kind of change I'm envisioning, the ideas I'm entertaining, simply don't enter society whole. There's always a process of mediation, overlapping, intermeshing, threading into the fabric. But we're heading there: the complexity of consciousness, its capacity to sustain being in presence in all its rich variety will be growing with each generation. Sometimes I feel on the verge of that."

(Robert Irwin)

introduced a synthetic realism which continues to depict the same dry, if not barren, landscape of uncoiled words masquerading as feelings and things. Like the others, Ruscha's art at first appears to be a one-line joke repeated ad infinitum, until it draws the viewer into its absurdist orbit. Ron Davis was for many years creating the only Op Art paintings to be taken seriously by certain color-field critics, linking the next generation of abstractionist—Tony Delap, Bud Holland, Guy Dill, Laddie John Dill, and Peter Plagens—with both their L.A. predecessors (including Ed Moses) and their New York counterparts (Noland and Olitski). Ed Kienholz, while serving as unofficial dean of the Los Angeles "Funk" assemblage group in the mid-'60s, can also be credited with establishing a point of contact to the "finish fetish" group by way of his dark, ironic humor and interest in the macabre. Finally, there is the most elusive member of this school, Billy Al Bengston, an infinitely talented but often frivolous half-reductivist whose early canvases combined slogans, numbers, shapes



ROBERT IRWIN, DOOR LIGHT WINDOW.
INSTALLATION VIEW, WAVE HILL, BRONX, NY, 1987.

"I've been preoccupied with that certain sort of 'look' of mine, if 'look' is the right word. I can't really describe it as sexy or sensual. The word I'm trying to think of is a word which would be contradictory to what the pieces actually are—'soft,' for instance. The pieces feel soft but you don't have to touch them to have that feeling . . . [yet,] for something to be soft, it can't be strong. And these things can't take an ambience that's anything other than strong."

(Larry Bell, 1971)

and machines in a colorful but deadly mélange.

It would be difficult to determine exactly when and how California reductivist art began to seem so vital again. In part, it can be explained by the present-day fascination with typical 1960s culture, with an interpretation of the American dream that from a contemporary perspective could be made to appear nostalgic and ironic. Like bean-bag chairs and psychedelic posters, we see this work as part of the struggle with history for possession of a moment whose loss we haven't yet learned to accept. Unlike their East Coast counterparts, however, this group believed in the more functionalist, even utopian applications of modernism as an outgrowth of man's eventual reconciliation with technology. They weren't interested in irony because it was too impure, too social. And if this dose of ecology-consciousness made California's minimalists obsolete more quickly than the intellec-



INSTALLATION VIEW, "MODERN OBJECTS," CURATED BY R.M. FASCHER, BASKERVILLE+WATSON, NEW YORK, 1986.

tualized Pop/Minimal contingent in New York, it also transformed these artists' possible naïveté into high-tech icons of wish-fulfillment. California's art, like its movies, T.V. and music, became famous for its streamlined, carefree nature.

One of the other reasons southern California's minimal period has returned to visibility is that the current interest in reductivist formats, in the industrial fabrication of artworks, in abstraction as a

"I reject the kind of art history which self-consciously attaches itself to history. I'm not abstaining. I simply can't relate to it. Pressures on artists today are extreme. They feel obliged to push things as far as they will go. I find that very unnatural. It's funny that people keep pushing and pushing. I feel comfortable, that's the rules. I get satisfaction from my work, I really do."

(Ed Ruscha, 1970)

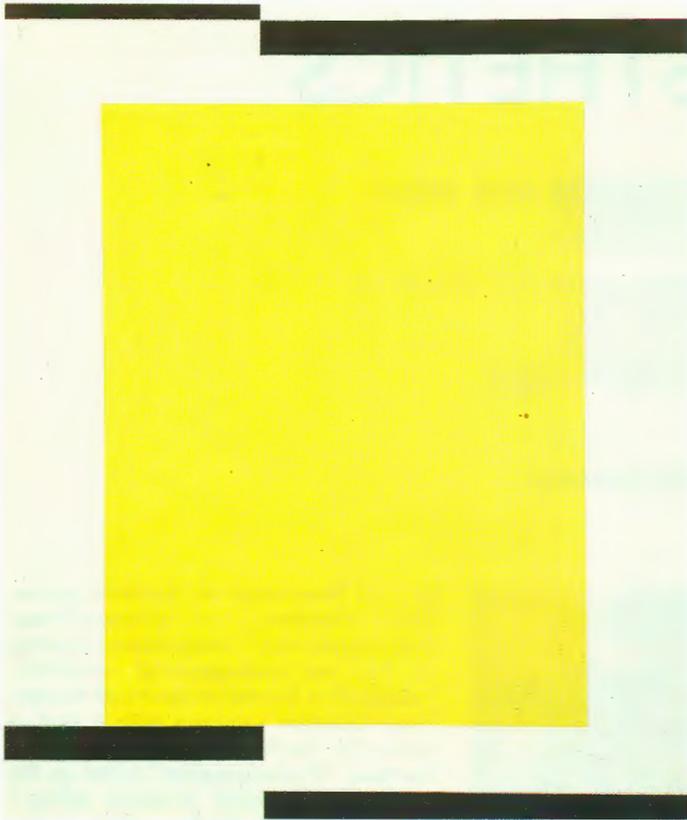
"social" concept, and in the ironic positioning of visual art relative to other forms of high culture all pay tribute to the West Coast minimalists more than such New York figures as Donald Judd, Robert Morris or Carl Andre. In effect, what the Californians seem to have produced was a type of abstraction that resembled Pop, more so in fact than the work of any American artists of the period (with the possible exception of Frank Stella). Certain resemblances, such as that between a Larry Bell cube and a Jeff Koons tank, for example, suggest the context of science fiction, fantasy and myth that many of the New York minimalists were trying to literalize their way out of. At the time, it might have been easier to perceive this California work as a type of minimalist mannerism, wherein certain well-established ideas were re-worked by devoted followers, and made elegant to the point of ineffectuality.

Perhaps yet another reason why this work has regained popularity is that present-day viewers are transfixed by an art with such an ambivalent relationship to the possibility of its own spiritual self-awareness. Of the group, McLaughlin is the one whose indebtedness to Eastern religion comes out most literally in his treatment of form. Bell, Irwin and McLaughlin all have a tendency to touch directly upon meditational issues through their objects, but not without having first proposed a re-organization of the perceptual and cultural clues which allow an acceptably modern experience of spiritual values to take place. Much of this work first came to our attention disguised as avant-garde tricksterism, and for many viewers of the past and present it will always remain that way. But history has demonstrated too many times that the present sees only what it wants to see, and leaves the rest to be exhumed by the archaeologists of the future. In the case of the California minimalists, the obsolescence of the idea of a "future" is already built right in, so the related notion of an eternal present would follow as naturally as that of a ruin which is built in accelerated time.

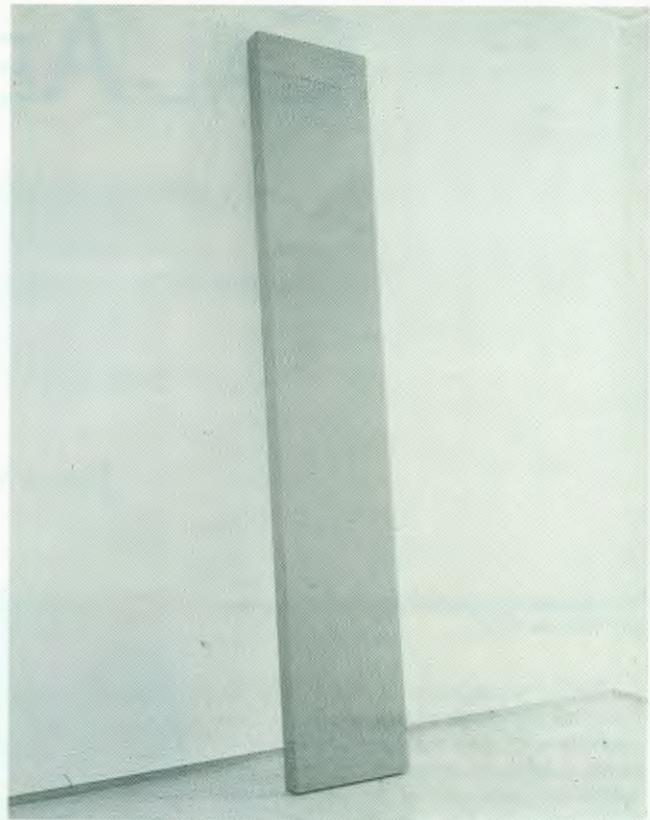
During the 1960s, art in Los Angeles was organized around a handful of fairly exclusive social groups who did not actually interact with one another to any great degree, nor did they enjoy the same kind of cohesive definition which hindsight has offered. At the center of the ferment was



EDWARD RUSCHA, U, 1968. OIL ON CANVAS, 20" x 24".



JOHN McLAUGHLIN, NO. 5, 1956.
OIL ON CANVAS, 48" x 40". COURTESY ANDRE EMMERICH, NEW YORK.



JOHN McCracken, UNTITLED, 1969-70. WOOD, FIBERGLASS, POLYESTER RESIN.
94" x 14 1/4" x 1 1/4".

the co-operative Ferus Gallery, founded in 1957 by Ed Kienholz and Walter Hopps, but galvanized as an artistic (and commercial) force by Irving Blum during the early '60s. At its peak, Ferus's artists included Bell, Irwin, Kauffman, Bengston, John Altoon, Ed Moses, Ken Price, Kienholz and John Mason, and could be said to have defined a generation of Los Angeles artists in much the same manner that Castelli was doing in New York (albeit on a smaller scale). But Ferus's artists were also stylistically quite different from one another, representing not only the twin poles of excess and austerity, but also most of the stages in between. Still, by the time it closed in 1966, it had successfully captured the essential spirit of Los Angeles experimentation, and made that spirit palatable to the rest of the world.

Obviously, Ferus wasn't the only game in town, as evidenced by John McLaughlin's years of successful exhibitions at Felix Landau Gallery during this period. Also, once Dwan Gallery had established itself

"I'd prefer my painting to come to an end. I'd be satisfied to paint myself into a corner, and then just give it up. It's not a vocation. I just use painting. Painting for me is a tool. All the things that I achieve through it become obsolete. I'm terrified to think I'll be painting at sixty."
(Ed Ruscha, 1970)

in California in the mid-'60s, followed quickly by Ace Gallery, the Los Angeles School became slightly more predictable in its development and in the promotion of its artists. By 1968, the scene was being elegized by a Los Angeles County Museum Retrospective; this exhaustive project, and the 1976 Newport Harbor Art Museum survey entitled *The Last Time I Saw Ferus*, effectively placed the stamp of history on a heretofore scattered moment (also engaging a few of the original artists in the process). A number of exhibitions in New York and Europe during the late '60s and early '70s also created a context for the Californians within the types of work created contemporaneously elsewhere.

Not that the reputations established in the early '60s were necessarily that long-lasting; certainly, the idea of a consistent California "look" had dissipated by the beginning of the next decade. Certain key individuals were also not interested in the idea of a community. Robert Irwin, whose work moved further and further from objecthood in the '70s, has spent much of the present decade creating public art commissions which are quite often the diametrical opposite of the ephemeral pieces which made him in many ways the most theoretically interesting artist in the group. Both Bengston and Kauffman retreated during the '70s from their reductionist positions, undertaking a form of loose naturalist painting that is at once more personal and more generic than their ear-

lier work. Larry Bell, who like Irwin became an important international figure during the late '60s, is still involved in quite related types of sculpture, but rarely exhibits in galleries.

The two artists who have most consistently retained the focus of their work over the years are McCracken and Ruscha. The former seems to be more involved in the hermetic type of investigation which defined McLaughlin's painting, while the latter unapologetically serves on occasion as spokesperson for the entire L.A. art community. In recent years, the nature of southern California's contribution to recent art has been couched in terms of the more conceptual approach in John Baldessari's work. Certainly it is worth observing that not only has Baldessari's art served as an important precursor to the neoconceptualists on the East Coast, but also that there is an explicit relationship between his art and that of the Ferus contingent who were his direct predecessors. If anything else, the continuing re-evaluation of this reductionist work suggests not only that the post-modernist era allows for a more open relationship between both current and past principles of the avant-garde, but that the once-sacred distinction between cutting-edge and regional art doesn't even work well in retrospect.

Dan Cameron, a Contributing Editor to *Flash Art*, lives in New York.

C O N T E N T S



103
INCIDENTS OF ROBERT SMITHSON
DAN CAMERON



108
KATHE BURKHART
HELENA KONTOVA

110
THE WORKS
KATHE BURKHART



112
FRAGMENTED SPACE
KRESIMIR PURGAR

116
BRICE MARDEN
ROBERT MAHONEY



121
LARRY JOHNSON
DAVID RIMANELLI

125
TRUE STORIES

126
THE SIGNATURE GAME
NICOLAS BOURRIAUD

130
ARTIST'S PROJECT:
ADMINISTRATION OF THE ADRIATIC
PETER FEND

132
ARTIST'S PROJECT:
RENOVATING NATURE
MARK DION

134
ARTIST'S PROJECT:
THE TRANSPARENCY EFFECT
PATRICK CORILLON

135
OKLAHOMA SRL
HELENA KONTOVA

136
FIELD WORK
ISABELLE GRAW

138
ANDREA FRASER
JOSHUA DECTER

139
ARTIST'S PROJECT:
PREMIATA DITTA

140
DE-CODING THE MUSEUM
JOSHUA DECTER

143
INGOLD AIRLINES
JUSBRAND VAN VEELEN



INCIDENTS OF ROBERT SMITHSON

POSTHUMOUS DIMENSIONS OF A PREMATURE PRE-MODERN

DAN CAMERON



ISLAND PROJECT (FAN 3), 1970.
PENCIL ON PAPER, 19" x 24".

"Nothing is more corruptible than truth"

—Robert Smithson, 1966, *The Shape of the Future and Memory*

Close your eyes for a moment and picture the art world that we live in. Not in terms of its geophysical limits, nor even in the sense of its communal reality as a global village of ideas or commerce. Try to focus instead on the discursive atmosphere which surrounds the art object and its creation today: consider the ambiguous layering of mutually contradictory meanings that constitute the loosely-structured code of interpretation by which all of us strive to connect ourselves to both the object's values and to each other. Think especially about the peculiar quality of interconnectedness that brings these various realms of meaning together—how politics invades the personal, how too much intended meaning defuses the impact of the whole, how careers and economies weave in and out among the once-exclusive domain of aesthetic content, how the end of

this century may become less of a struggle to create values as to harness them. Then think about Robert Smithson.

Because of the tragic/heroic overtones emanating from Smithson's fatal in situ accident at the tender age of 35, and because his obsession with art's outer fringes of meaning seems to link his name inextricably with that of American art's other mid-century rebel/martyr (Pollock), Smithson's contribution as a theorist has tended to fall between the cracks in terms of the often confusing changes that have marked art's progress over the past twelve to fourteen years. However, as the gradual loosening of neo-conceptualism's grip on the art world's collective imagination appears to signal the simultaneous opening of a vacuum of meaning which painters, sculptors, photographers and mixed media artists are all scurrying to fill, we as viewers are unexpectedly provided with a moment when the players are lost in thought, the cylinders have stopped spinning and we can peer a bit more deeply than usual into our quasi-metaphysical

system of belief in art, and how we have used it to construct murky and erratic meanings for ourselves. It seems that everywhere we have ventured along this twisted route, Robert Smithson's example has kept just one or two steps ahead of us, making it clear—as he tried to do repeatedly during his lifetime—that the problems we keep having are not with art itself, but rather with the categories that we laboriously construct by way of keeping art (and its meanings) penned in.

The return of Smithson to the center of discussion of American art appears to be a semi-regular phenomenon, since it has occurred every four or five years since his death (the last wave being 1984-86). This is not to say, however, that his position is willingly acceded by a general audience. On the one hand, the degree to which Smithson's art has directly influenced the work of two generations of American artists is an issue which most present day critics, in the interests of self-protection, would prefer to treat gingerly, if at all. In particular, Smithson has continued to



PIERCED SPIRAL, 1973.
 CARDBOARD, STICKS, 10" x 20". DIA. COURTESY JOHN WEBER.

represent one of the foremost gaps in shared reference between Europe and America, partly because there really is no equivalent figure for him outside of the U.S. in the sense that Beuys and Warhol always made the perfect foils for each other (maybe a cross between Broodthaers and Kounellis?), and also because his philosophical roots are in the American transcendentalism movement of the mid-Nineteenth century, and thus claim no common roots with, say, Arte Povera or the work of Richard Long. This problem is compounded by the fact that by the time he

had started to become a representative of American art abroad along the same lines as Joseph Kosuth or Claes Oldenburg, Smithson was already dead, his work imprinted in most people's mind as *Spiral Jetty*, or perhaps the "Nonsites." Robert Hobbs' summary exhibition, "Robert Smithson Sculpture," which went to the Whitney Museum and the Venice Biennale, might have been a little premature, in the sense that earth art may have been too recent a phenomenon to integrate so quickly. Even so, without discounting his sculpture in any way—which still does not

always travel as well as it might—it must be said that the most important aspects of Smithson's influence do not hinge directly on his visual work, but rather on the quality of his thinking, as well as in the intellectual ambience which he was largely responsible for creating.

Essentially, the argument runs as follows: before anybody in the art world really knew what the word "semiotics" meant, and when formalism and its offshoots seemed to be the only game in town, Smithson was already way out on a limb proclaiming the end of art's sense of self-containedness, and the dawn of an era in which context would determine all. Looked at another way, it could be said that Smithson was the first American artist since Ad Reinhardt to declare loudly and clearly that the premises upon which we justify our need to make and disseminate art do not always hold up under close scrutiny. For him, an artist who had not thought through the implications of what he or she was doing, who was creating art through "feelings," truly mocked the serious mission which art had to perform within the larger context of cultural knowledge. This was why so much of Smithson's project was directly concerned with articulating the notion of the site, because it was only by establishing a dialectical relationship with a specific set of conditions outside the gallery or museum that the artist could possibly open up art's previously closed system of self-referential attitudes.

In many ways, however, such an ellipse also brought the contemporary American artists back to the heroic conditions of

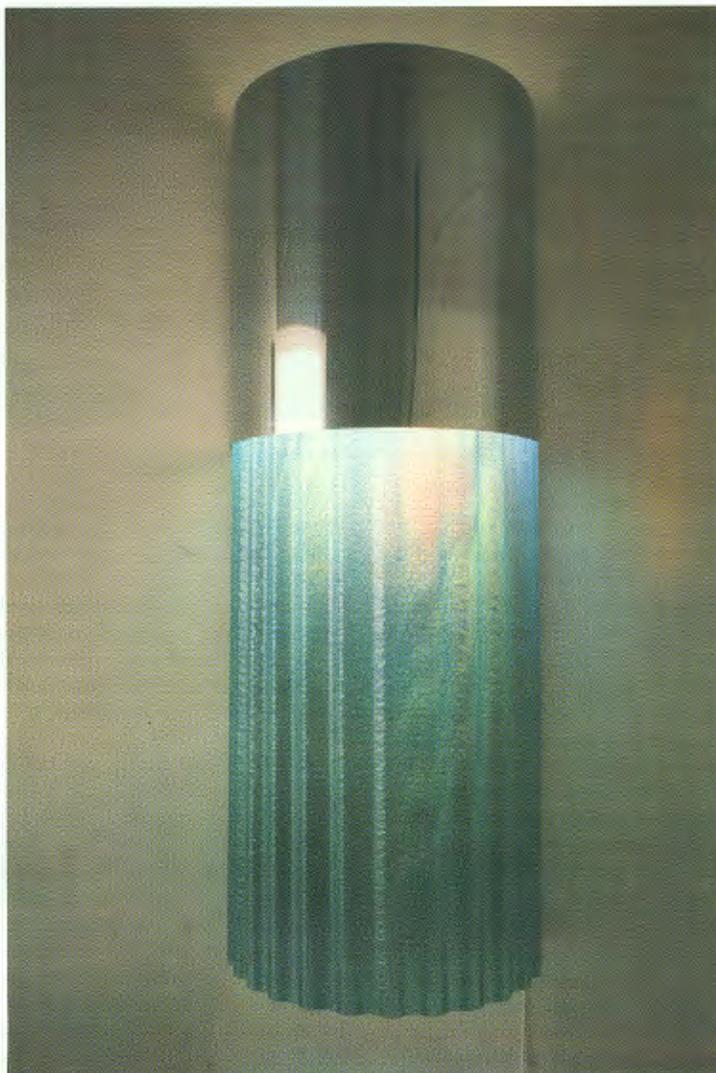


ROCK SALT AND MIRROR SQUARE.
 ROCKS, SALT, MIRRORS, 10" x 78" x 78".

abstract expressionism, because of the fact that Smithson's reading of their work had been based largely on the use of nature as a means for escaping the real, rather than finding a substitute for it. In this case, because art has been so thoroughly determined by its relationship to the intellectual self-image of the city, that from which one escaped was the social, with the multi-directional discourse of bars and cafés traded for the one-on-one dialectic of the artist with nature. Hence, the reader should be careful not to interpret "nature" as affirming the internal, reflective basis of the artist's instincts—which occurred, for example, in most "second generation" abstract expressionists like Cy Twombly—but rather as a challenge to civilized man's conception of culture as a self-contained system which defines its own parameters. Meaning, and by extension value, thus occurred at the interstices where the definition of art itself came into question, and other systems—Smithson's fascination with geology and other natural sciences—imposed a variant sense of order. "Art is not real," seemed the implicit message in Smithson's undertaking, "because it should always strive for something greater."

The intellectual caretaker of a transitional moment in American art when absolute formal values were transforming themselves into discursive, or societally-formed, values, Smithson is probably the single American artist most responsible for setting the tone of the entropic explosion that followed. By proposing for the sake of argument that the artist's struggle was not in creating an object that reflected his or her own world view, but rather in linking together such mega-systems as the museum and the natural preserve, Smithson is also at least partially responsible for deflecting his generation's inquiry into post industrial mass culture away from the immediate satisfactions of kitsch, and more towards the passionate intellectual wanderlust that Peter Halley, in his groundbreaking 1981 text, "Beat, Minimalism, New Wave and Robert Smithson," associates with such legendary 1950s characters as Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, as well as with artists then described as "new wave," such as Jane Dickson, Peter Fend, and R.M. Fischer. The eclectic course which Smithson's art and ideas eventually took, especially his impact on the anthropological and populist art that became post minimalism, is a solution to what Halley sees reflected in these other movements as well: "America's fascination-repulsion with its shallow cultural roots and its vulnerability to the impact of technological change."

Most of Smithson's sculpture should thus be understood as forming a series of visual examples based on his ideas, as well as illustrations of how physical form could follow from the implications of these



UNTITLED, 1964.
FIBERGLASS, ALUMINUM, LIGHT, 60" x 22" x 16".

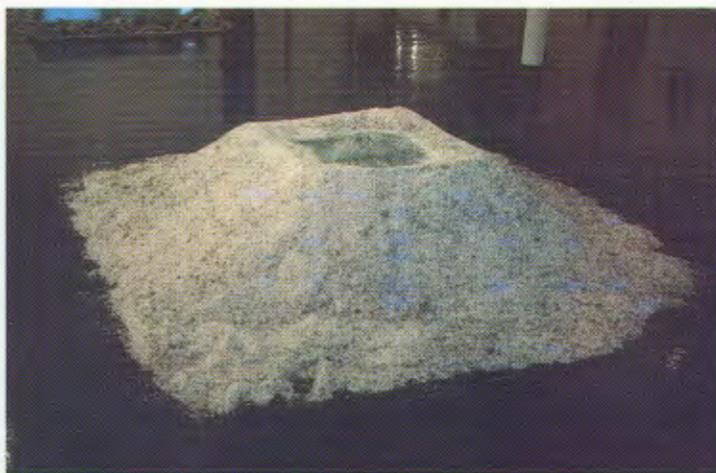
thoughts. The viewer, and the socio-cultural circumstances in which he or she was located, were asked to participate more actively in the confrontation with Smithson's work, because the occasion brought these circumstances up as part of the issues presented by the "objects" themselves. Hence, the very formation of intellectual meaning from the act of encountering a work of art serves, in Smithson's art, as the basis for the artist's investigation, and is thus the question pushed most to the fore by such an interchange. Once the work has been apprehended—"understood" is too thorough a word—by the spectator, it has no fixed status as a container of meaning, thereby giving the effect of appearing residual, or "transitory." All tactile (read "uninformed") enjoyment which the viewer has striven to wrest from the artwork vanishes in an instant, its comforts to be regained only from a renewed

immersion into Smithson's quagmire of self-cancelling meanings.

That much of the basis for Smithson's renovation of minimal art and theory grew out of his rejection of the phenomenological critical language used to discuss it seems all too clear when we examine the dates involved. By late 1966, Smithson had leapt fully into the discursive territory of Donald Judd (who had been publishing his criticism already for three years) and other post-Greenbergians with the publication that June of "Entropy and the Monuments" in *Artforum*. Meandering yet precociously self-confident, the essay tears into the recent northeast blackout, the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics, geology, science fiction movies, Park Avenue architecture, Muzak, Malevich and Tatlin, the Museum of Natural History, theories of laughter, and Buckminster Fuller—all by way of discussing the work of Dan Flavin, Robert Grosvenor, Peter Hutchinson, William Insley, Donald

Judd, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris and Paul Thek, among others of his generation. In choosing such an elaborately diverse set of references for these artists, Smithson is not merely proposing that they represent new ideas per se, but that their work is in fact best examined by using a completely different thought process than one is used to.

And yet, excepting certain pre-1966 sculptures that have come to light in recent years—*Enantiomorphic Chamber*, from 1965, has tended to be recognized as the first major statement in Smithson's oeuvre, but his untitled mirrored pieces from 1963-64 are especially surprising in light of developments in sculpture since 1985—his critical ideas at this time were ahead of his visual work by about two years. The problem was in finding a model for the quantum leaps of the imagination which Smithson wanted his artwork to make, and even though geology, cartography and set theory had already figured in his work quite prominently, the minimal art that had emerged a few years earlier was too limited by the perceptual specificity of the objects themselves to provide the springboard Smithson was looking for. That is, even though, as works of art, it was presented as encapsulated theory first and foremost, the sculpture of Judd, Morris, *et al.*, was not in fact guided by a dialectical relationship to its subject at all, and therefore seemed to be another example of "art about art"—declarative art, as it were. Smithson wanted his art to be speculative in the strictest



CLOSED MIRROR SQUARE.
ROCK, SALT, MIRRORS, GLASS ELEMENTS, 24" x 108" x 108". COURTESY JOHN WEBER.

sense of the word, however, and if his ascending/descending series of hyper-minimal sculpture, ca. 1966, is distinct from other minimal-derived work of the same period, it is also an illustration of his ideas rather than a demonstration of them.

Not so with the "Nonsites," which have their roots in Smithson's 1966-67 *Proposal for the Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport*, as well the 1967 mirrored and glass "strata" works, but are definitively founded in myth. His 1967 mythic quest to Passaic, New Jersey ("Has Passaic replaced Rome as the eternal city?" reads the teaser) where he singled out local industrial sites to become his "monuments," should be ample proof that Smithson's conception of nature is completely antithetical to that of most of the nature-based artists who came after. Although reclamation did eventually become a goal towards the end of Smithson's life, he did not romanticize nature in the typical manner. Instead, the

"Nonsites" served as bridges or crossover sites, points of concentration which were neither "here" nor "there", but someplace in between, thus disclaiming the conceptual structure of specificity altogether. Smithson's most famous work, *Spiral Jetty*, which was not a "Nonsite," nevertheless contained the same generalizing, iconic interest in displacing the viewer, making him or her uncertain about what "here and now" actually were. Although *Spiral Jetty* is in every sense a collaboration with its site,

Smithson insists that his work make available a perspective on nature which nature itself is unable to provide.

There are some easy parallels to make between Smithson and the current generation of younger American artists (that is, if you can still refer to Peter Halley or Ashley Bickerton as "young" artists). Halley has in particular been Smithson's self-designated spokesman for the current generation, and despite the fact that the younger artist's day-glo interiors do not seem directly related to Smithson's more ponderous output, there is in fact a close relationship between the two artists' thinking in terms of social and/or scientific constructs of truth. Halley's preoccupation with the semiotics of architecture, with the patterns of late-industrial society, and with mass-media language and imagery identifies him as an artist directly inspired by Smithson's example. Bickerton's recent work, which engages in a degree of direct sociobiological analysis of food and waste behavior among varying cultures, conveys an almost palpable sense of trying to interface the art system with megastructures outside its boundary. Peter Fend, whose use of geography and news media to create the ultimate home network of information, is someone on whose work Smithson's ideas have also left an unshakeable impact.

In considering several other types of work currently being produced, the relationship with Smithson may not be so immediately clear. In terms of his art, Smithson was never directly engaged by social or political issues, for example, but one gets the impression that he would have been quite approving of current takes on "the system" as both its subject and its nemesis, in terms of an artist like Alfredo Jaar, who wants us to see art and politics from an integrated, macro-perspective, as well as Gran Fury, whose art rises from a single, time-based agenda: the deadly symbiosis between AIDS and the state.



SHIFT, 1967.
PAINTED METAL, 33" x 30" x 20". 67.



ASPHALT RUNDOWN, OCTOBER 1969.
L'ATTICO, ROME. ESTATE OF ROBERT SMITHSON.

When Barbara Kruger addresses her work to an audience that is not fixed, or when Jenny Holzer makes use of television, Spectacolor boards and large public sites, the discursive energy that pushes these artists away from the safe enclave of the art world can be found as strongly in Smithson as in the work of any other figure of his generation (excepting, of course, for Warhol). Even the pretended chaos of Cady Noland's work, wherein the intended symbols of America are transformed into pure deconstructed spectacle, is an idea that Smithson would have gotten to eventually, just as Meg Webster's carefully refined structures assembled from natural materials appear to be a logical extension of the

indoor "Nonsite" idea.

What is perhaps lacking in the carry-over from that period is the sense that art's intellectual side must also be challenging, rather than merely affirm itself through direct address to the secluded minority who can decode and appreciate its meanings. Jeff Koons' modern Adam and Eve spectacle with Cicciolina, which drenches itself in the scandal of raw celebrity would be nothing were it not fed on the artist's mind-bending assault on aesthetic logic, which has just the kind of dissociative sense that Smithson would, nonetheless, have enjoyed very much. On the other hand, Koons' is a project which permits no irony, because of the fact that it has already

driven object and subtext as far apart as casual rationality will allow. The point here is not to suggest that Koons (and others) have consciously assimilated Smithson's example into their own, but rather that most of the stylistic turnings of the gyre over the last fifteen years have had the sense of half-evangelical proselytizing, half-deadpan absurdity which is clearly Smithson's greatest legacy to contemporary aesthetics. Or rather, to sum it up more simply, his position is still completely unassailable, at least until such time as someone comes along with a better idea. ■

Dan Cameron is a critic, musician and curator living in New York.



UNTITLED, 1963-64.
STEEL, PLEXIGLAS, 13" x 100" x 7".

C O N T E N T S

FLASH ART NEWS



.....46
**A SPECTRE HAUNTS EUROPE:
 AN OPEN LETTER AND RESPONSE**

.....55
GROUP SHOWS

.....58
**APERTO: TOKYO BY YUKO
 HASEGAWA**

.....61
INTERVIEW WITH DAN CAMERON

.....63
**CITYSCAPE: GLASGOW BY JUDITH
 FINDLAY**

.....41
SUPERMARKET MAKES MUSEUM

.....42
**NOMAD NIGHTS AT THE CARTIER
 FOUNDATION**

.....43
NEW JAPANESE ART CENTER

.....45
**MEXICAN TENDENCIES IN
 VANCOUVER**

.....69
**OPINION: THE CORRUPTION OF TIME
 BY LIAM GILICK**

.....73
VOICES FROM VIETNAM

.....75
**AFRICAN EDGE BY OKWUI ENWEZOR
 AND OCTAVIO ZAYA**

.....125
GALLERIES



FEATURES

.....76
LITERATURE (LESSON 4)
 TECNOTEST

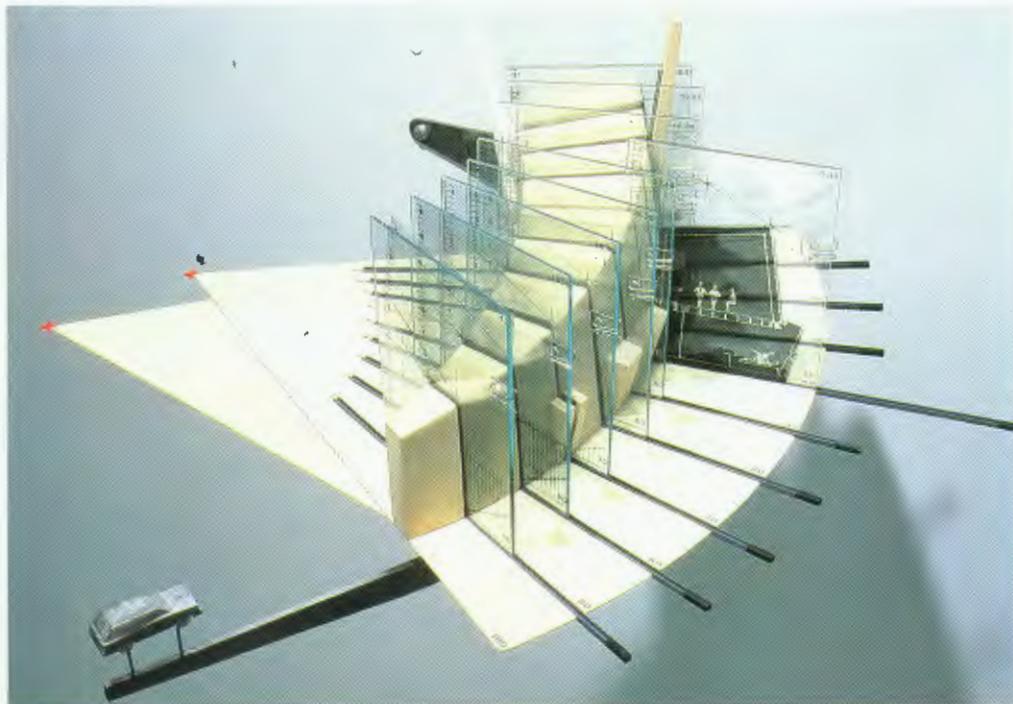
.....78
LUC TUYMANS
 LUK LAMBRECHT

.....82
KCHO
 JEN BUDNEY

.....88
PIA STADTBÄUMER
 WOLF-GÜNTER THIEL

.....92
DILLER + SCOFIDIO
 KYONG PARK

.....98
MARCEL BROODTHAERS
 ROBERT THILL



FINALLY SETTLING DOWN AT THE NEW MUSEUM

Francesco Bonami

Francesco Bonami: *After many years on the road you have finally decided to find a home as a curator. What made you decide to accept the position of senior curator at the New Museum?*

Dan Cameron: "Cocido Y Crudo" in Madrid was the biggest show I had ever done. It took three years of my life. But even though the artists in the show were thrilled at the installation and catalogue, and curators from outside Spain praised the show, local politics at that time made the whole experience deeply unpleasant. It began with the firing of Maria Corral ninety days before the opening, and ended with a barrage of negative and hostile press within Spain, and the wholesale rejection of the show by the Spanish art world. The week the show closed in Madrid, I had my first conversation with the New Museum. I realized that I was ready to function in a special institution like this, in which the curator's ego is put on hold, and everything is geared to how art can affect other people's lives. Independent curating is not easy in New York, as museums very rarely hire outside curators, so one is forced to travel just to pay the rent. You end up moving into new situations temporarily, making a project, then moving on. I realized after "Cocido y Crudo" that this formula was no longer captivating for me.

FB: *How do you see the function of a museum in today's art world and culture?*

DC: There are two functions, one applying to artists and their support network, and the other to the public. Both aim to create a platform or vehicle for an ideal exchange between object or event and viewer. We try to privilege the creative act so that the artist feels heard, and we try to show the general public, by example, why people who are involved in art think it is so important. One thing we've been discussing here at the New Museum is the notion of the artist as model citizen in a democratic society. By breaking the creative barriers of their time, artists are arguing that everyone should be more actively involved in seeing why those barriers are

there, and contemplating what their removal might mean to society at large.

FB: *What do you think about New York right now?*

DC: At the moment in the U.S., there is an unfortunate tendency in the U.S. to take a back seat. There is no American curator right now who wants to say, "I understand the international scene, and I think I can put something together." I find it disheartening, especially in New York, where curators only seem to care about big names, and the same dozen artists just get moved around from one museum to another.

FB: *Why is this happening?*

DC: Most independent curators seem to be completely market-oriented and provincial, and most of the institutional curators are either lacking the resources to do the fieldwork, or are just not interested in investing the time and energy. As a result, audiences in the U.S. have shockingly little information about what's happening beyond their own backyard—a problem that was bad enough in the 80s but is even worse today. That's one reason I'm glad to have been so involved in Europe, where curators have a more evolved sense of their responsibility vis-a-vis the rest of society.

FB: *One big problem today for museums is funding. How can a museum work efficiently within a limited budget to produce cutting edge exhibitions?*

DC: It's a grave situation, one that different institutions have to address in entirely different ways. The decision here was to respond by expanding. We believe that if we can do more shows in more spaces, with different kinds of artists, we can engage a broader audience—and in the process locate the kinds of support that is necessary for us to look towards the future without losing sleep over whatever aggressive act the conservative right will perform next. As a result, the New Museum is starting to think more like a business.

FB: *Is there a museum or an institution in Europe that you would like to set as an example for the New Museum in terms of*

programming?

DC: There are so many European institutions and curators that an American curator could learn from. In Holland, De Appel and Witte de With have done wonderful things, and Cathy de Zegher's program in Belgium is very interesting. I'm a big fan of the ICA in London and the way they mix art with popular culture. Smaller British non-profit spaces, like Chisenhale in London, Arnolfini in Bristol, Ikon in Manchester and CCA in Glasgow, are outstanding. Lars Nittve in Copenhagen is very interesting. I've been fan of Catherine David for a long time so I'm interested to see what she will do in Kassel next year. Oddly, there's no German institution that's caught my eye, except for maybe Kunstwerke in Berlin. In Italy, Ida Gianelli has a very solid program at Rivoli, and some of the things that Vincente Todoli did at IVAM in Valencia were quite strong. A lot of unaffiliated curators in Europe are also outstanding, and places like Depot in Vienna, which is more of a discussion place than a gallery, seem to point to the future of art.

I will focus on shows by people who have never been shown in depth in the U.S., as well as mid-career artists who have been overlooked by U.S. museums, and of course, younger artists. We presently have on the calendar projects with Carolee Schneemann, Eugenio Dittborn, Hale Tenger, Nedko Solakov, Faith Ringgold, Mona Hatoum and Cildo Meireles.

FB: *Is the market still a major element in defining the development of contemporary art?*

DC: The market will always be a driving part of the art world. Along with the droves of people who just want to experience art, there will always be a certain percentage who want to possess it, too. I see nothing wrong with that system, especially since it provides me with hundreds of spaces in which to view art, and it keeps artists fed and clothed. When these individuals also support their local art museum, the system works perfectly!

FB: *How do you see the roles of the critic and the curator in to-*

day's art world?

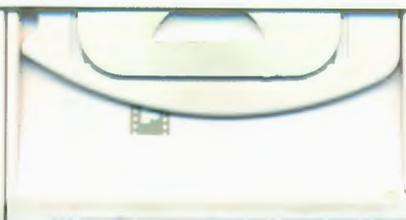
DC: The critic is still an interpreter, or an accompanist to the artist/viewer entanglement. I like how Stuart Morgan described it: critics try to make a permanent document from a temporary encounter. A curator is more active; his or her goal is to create the actual site where the art is encountered. It's like we set up the perfect blind date between artist and viewer, then slipping out the back door when the setting is perfect.

FB: *Can a good artist survive without a market structure, supported only by institutions?*

DC: This sometimes happens. Carolee Schneemann has gone for thirty-five years with almost no sales, and makes incredible work. But it's not the ideal set-up. To my mind, the market should probably go back to the connoisseurship model of the late 19th century, so that galleries can participate more actively in the education process of their public—which museums have understood for some time. Our biggest problem is that too many people find art impossible to understand, and this translates into an environment in which an artist may be appreciated by his or her peers, yet still have no money. This is unacceptable, especially in a society like the U.S. where artists are already being demonized for political reasons.

FB: *The New Museum is next to the Guggenheim SoHo, making for two completely different realities on the same block.*

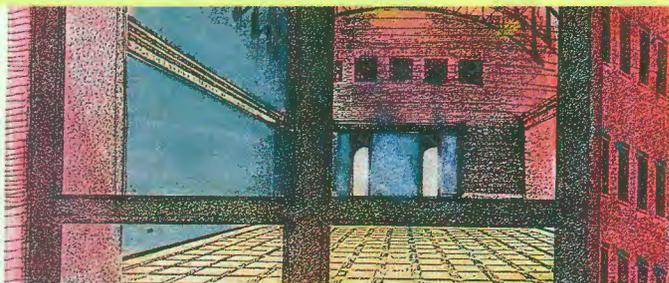
DC: The Guggenheim is the perfect neighbor, but you shouldn't forget that the Museum of African Art is also on the same block. This cluster functions like a downtown version of Museum Mile. Each place has a distinct but occasionally overlapping constituency. Since both the Guggenheim SoHo and the New Museum are going through big transitions in program direction, I think it will be interesting to ask the same question in a couple of years. We're still sorting out what the transformation of SoHo from bohemia into retail Mecca means for the future of our public, and how we can incorporate this new captive public into our ideas, to the advantage of all...



CONTENTS

93

ALDO ROSSI
GIACINTO DI PIETRANTONIO



99

FLASH ART REPRINTS



107

REWORKING HISTORY
ISABELLE GRAW



110

FLASH ART REPRINTS

112

THE TRAILER EFFECT
NICOLAS BOURRIAUD



116

RECENT WORK BY LAURIE SIMMONS
DAN CAMERON



119

VICTOR BURGIN
GREGORIO MAGNANI



RECENT WORK BY LAURIE SIMMONS

INFORMED BY UNEASINESS AND INDEFINABLE MALAISE.

DAN CAMERON

Some art is made to look as if it has merely slipped into existence, while the rest generally appears hard-won, or at least manmade in a more self-conscious sense. Laurie Simmons' practice has, in the past, tended to leave some viewers puzzled because she locates her work in between these two points of reference. She is not of the cut-and-paste (Charlesworth, Kruger) nor the point-and-shoot (Lawler, McCollum) schools of photo-conceptual technique, but neither does she take great pains to make her studio tableaux as seamless as those of Cindy Sherman, nor her final objects as subversively desirable as Richard Prince's. In contrast, Simmons' work mixes theoretical and colloquial (or sacred and profane) concerns in a relaxed manner, achieving a "natural" awkwardness as the same time as her photographs fall into a precisely measured state of linguistic self-awareness.

Whether or not she ever set out to consciously make work that might have been perceived as minor (a path many important artists before her have chosen) is hard to discern, but Simmons' choice of subject matter has never placed her decisively on the cutting edge of the photoconceptual vanguard. In particular, her ten-year foray into the charged psychosocial arena of dolls and their surrogate behavior as part of various backlit or projected tableaux seemed to draw attention from the fact that her work was dealing primarily with issues of representation, particularly within the realms of role-model identification and its influence upon the pre-pubescent imagination. Of course, one cannot rule out the possibility that Simmons' previous work happened to mine a social terrain that many viewers simply could not adequately distance themselves from, and may therefore be seen quite differently by a next generation.

As a first observation, one could say that in her work of the last two years, Simmons has apparently closed the gap between the literal subject of her work and its method of production. Like her short-lived series four years ago using live models to simulate the genre of fashion photography, Simmons has hit upon several solutions at once to certain previous issues in her work, opting simultaneously for elegance, precision, and a relentless eye for detail. As

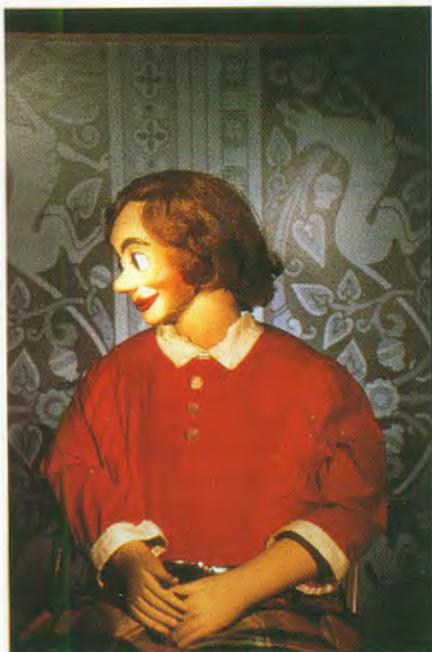
such, this body of work marks an important shift in certain of her concerns, while clarifying other aspects of her activity to date which may have been left uncertain.

By choosing ventriloquism, puppets, and the phenomena of animated human behavior as her current realm of investigation, Simmons has heightened the emotional intensity which her figures convey. Whereas her doll photographs conveyed information about human behavior in groups, this work

singles out caricatures or cartoon "types," and then treats them individually as the important character that each (according to childhood belief) is secretly longing to be. These are wistful, even melodramatic, images but even more intense is their sense of what used to be called "the uncanny": clenched in the paroxysms of an emotion's parody, Simmons' figures send shivers up our spine by suggesting the hopeless mortal vanity of all that *we* wish to be and achieve.



IZZY, 1988. CIBACHROME, 35 x 25". COURTESY METRO PICTURES.



JANE, 1988. CIBACHROME, 35 x 25".
COURTESY METRO PICTURES.

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of these photographs is the fact that it is their very animatedness which conveys such deeply troubling feelings.

Of course, pathos as a deliberate and stylized form of human expression has always interested Simmons. Because of the presumed authority of art's subject and its relation to the spectator, we as viewers have built up several layers to codify our encounters with art-objects. Yet by insisting above all on the vulnerability of, and our subsequent empathy with, the subjects in her photographs, Simmons makes this encounter a disarmingly familiar exchange, as if we were examining the intimate details of someone's life without really knowing very much about them. To the degree that social stereotypes also play a significant role in her work, they are introduced largely in order to be simultaneously denied, as features in a much broader landscape of human expression.

In *Mickey the Frenchman*, *Iggy* and *Pancho*, three characters whom Simmons has photographed at Venthaven (ventriloquists like to call themselves "vents") in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, the vaudeville-era sensibility that informs these faces also lends them a peculiar air of authenticity, even quasi-antiquity (many are from before World War II). Clearly Simmons is attracted by the fact that these human stand-ins belong to a genre of popular entertainment that thrived in America, culminating in the work of such performers as Edgar Bergen or Shari Lewis up to the advent of color and special effects TV in the early '60s, then all but disappeared. The notion

of documenting a "lost" art form (periodic rumors of a ventriloquism revival do surface in the Catskills or the West Coast from time to time), with its implicit idea of endangerment, proves that Simmons has found a way to open up terms of her investigation to incorporate a subtext related to the practice of art in our time.

As fascinating as the ventriloquism-based portraits are, they make up only a portion of Simmons' recent body of work (although most of it is quite interrelated). The first group of these images, shown at Metro Pictures in early 1988, also included a group of photographs that are, in fact, more along the lines of Simmons' earlier work with dolls, in that their ambiguity as objects—are they toys or are they serious?—cause them to be less immediately likable than their more humanistic counterparts. A talking handkerchief, talking walking stick, talking purse, talking coconut, talking bat, and even a talking gardening glove are part of the repertoire of anthropomorphized objects which Simmons has brought into the same close-up focus as the ventriloquist dummies, but without the same unnerving sense of their being personalities stranded inside inanimate materials.

Simmons' other recent series of photographs, which were exhibited during the end of last season at Daniel Weinberg Gallery in Los Angeles and Jablonka Galerie in Cologne, shows an unusual merger of these two ideas in the transformation of human figures into walking objects (or vice versa) through the use of dolls or real-life actors which appear as if they've had objects grafted onto their anatomy. Perhaps it is largely because of the tension caused by our wanting to ascribe moods or personalities to objects which essentially have no life of their own, but the idea of a seemingly animated camera, birthday cake or musical instrument also seems to imply the dispensability of the artist's role within the scheme of things. It is almost as if, by opening up her own studio world to the anthropomorphizing process that she creates within in it, Simmons' real/unreal society of substitute actors has begun to impinge on the world that she herself inhabits as an artist. Needless to say, the intensity which results from this unusual deployment of the object/model is heightened that much more in the process.

Another work which Simmons has made recently does not correspond to any of the categories cited above: a multiple portrait of ventriloquists with their dummies, a juxtaposition of types that is at first somewhat out of keeping with what appear to be the artist's goals in the overall project which she has undertaken. As unpretentious and straightforward as the dummies' individual portraits are bigger than life, this piece is actually a collection of old publicity stills, re-photographed and formatted to the same measurements and dis-

played as a grid. While the process would appear to be more detached than her work in creating studio setups, it is important to analyze these works as a form of anthropological evidence, showing that similarity and difference come to play an important role in how the "artists" who first introduced these characters into the world choose to represent themselves in relationship to their entertainment "partners".

In general, this work finds Laurie Simmons making art which builds a strong case for correctly positioning her at the forefront of her generation. Again, she is not suddenly dealing with extreme concerns of either angst or media critique, but what has changed is that the seemingly narrow set of issues which she first established for herself are now able to bear much greater weight in terms of their scope of reference. At some point, we might claim that all Simmons had to do was establish a more clear-cut relationship between her own practice and an allegorical representation of the inner working of the artists' consciousness to make a stronger foothold in the imagination of her audience. Yet, the uneasiness and indefinable malaise which informs these newest works are clearly grounded in an approach that is at once more intuitive and sympathetic than such a claim might support, and it is this grounding of her interest in social description with preoccupations that are more rooted in the private subconscious that makes her contribution to the present-day situation unique. ■

Dan Cameron is an art critic and curator living in New York.



TALKING BASEBALL BAT, 1989. CIBACHROME, 35 x 25".
COURTESY METRO PICTURES.



WALKING CAKE, 1989. BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, 84 x 48".

C O N T E N T S



85
ART ORGANIZATIONS AND COMPLEXITY
FULVIO CARMAGNOLA & MARCO SENALDI



90
ROBERT RYMAN
DAN CAMERON



94
ANDRÉ BRETON
ROBERT FLECK

98
JAQUES CHARLIER
NICOLAS BOURRIAUD



102
INTERVIEW WITH ANNETTE MESSEGER
GIANNI ROMANO



103
ANNETTE MESSEGER
ERIC TRONCY



106
ALEX KATZ
JERRY SALTZ



111
ZIPPING AND ZAPPING
GABRIELE PERRETTA

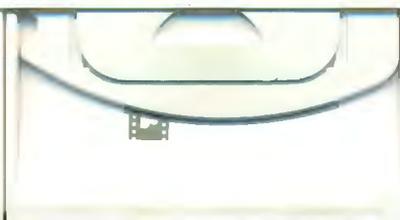


116
GAYLEN GERBER
KATHRYN HIXSON



118
DESIRE AND ILLUSION
KRESIMIR PURGAR

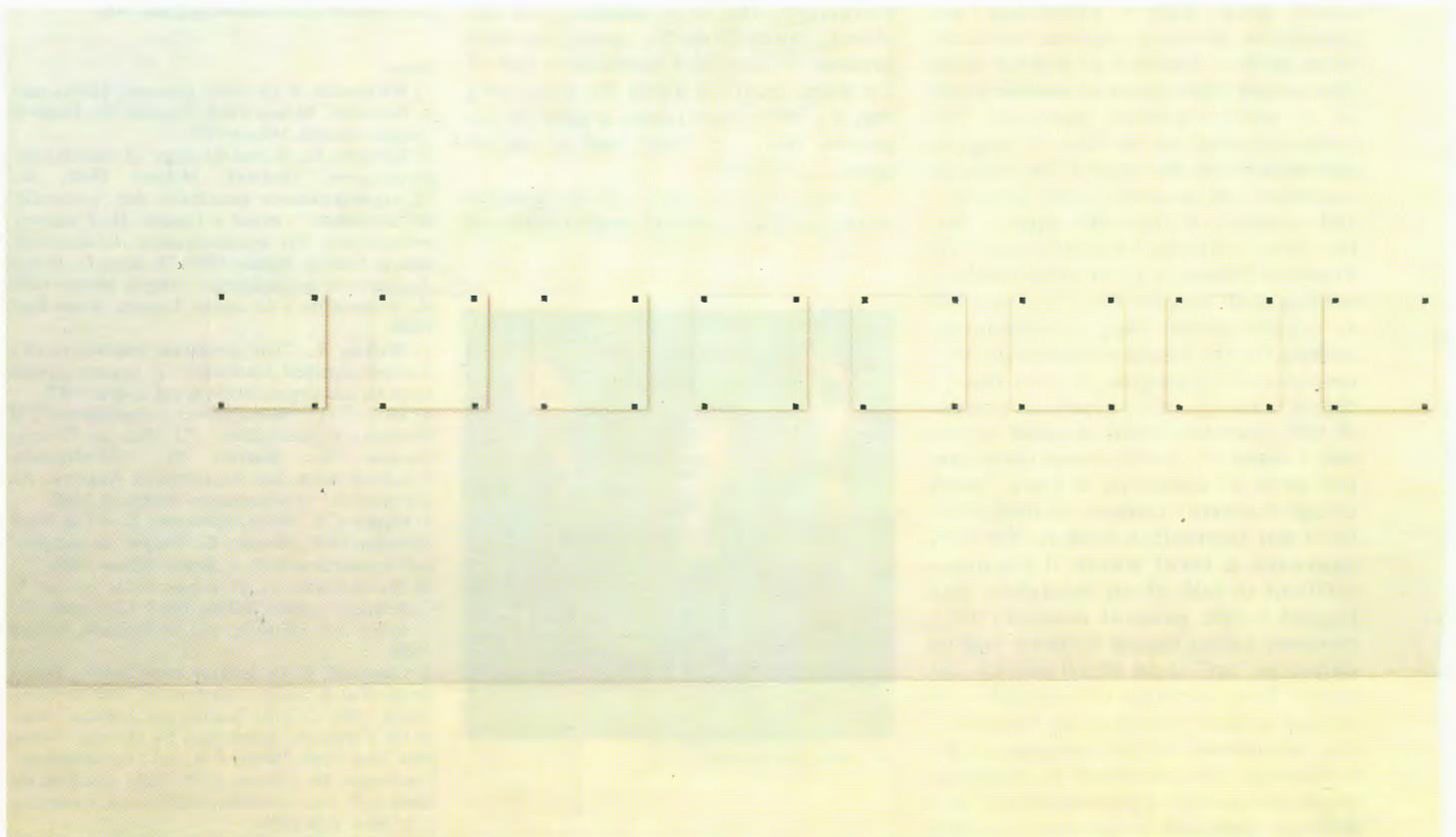
128
THE GAME CONTINUES
ACHILLE BONITO OLIVA



ROBERT RYMAN

ODE TO A CLEAN SLATE

DAN CAMERON



UNTITLED, STUDY FOR BRUSSELS, 1974.
POLYMER PAINT ON VINYL AND MASONITE, 10 PANELS EACH 21 X 21." COURTESY OF THE PACE GALLERY.

Ever since he first established himself as a fixture on the New York scene, it has seemed to many that Robert Ryman is trying to perfect the act of staying in one place for so long that the world starts to look like it's moving all around him. Perhaps on a stylistic level this is what he has actually accomplished, since the number of spectators who didn't understand why he began painting white paintings nearly thirty years ago is pretty much the same as those who, today, wish they'd thought of the idea first.

Yet, what is most intriguing about Ryman's undertaking is how worldly considerations like these do not seem to make much difference as far as the content of his art is concerned. In fact, contrary to

historical belief about the nature of avantgarde innovation, Ryman is clearly one of the few figures working today for whom one feels that it wouldn't really make a great difference had he been the first to do what he's doing today or not. On the contrary, the very striving for meaning that seems to elude us at first, as we consider Ryman's accomplishment today, is the very same factor that sets his work apart from most artists working in any other style or medium, making him one of the few truly integral figures in contemporary art—On Kawara and Ed Ruscha are the other examples that come quickly to mind—whose paintings can be said to rival the most challenging works of conceptual art, in terms of the sheer radicality of the

artist's proposition, and the inventiveness entailed by the process of carrying it out.

In terms of antecedents, we are probably in the safest possible critical territory if we probe the meaning of Ryman's art through the historical example of Malevich. Compelled to transform the meaning of the "empty" geometric signifier of the square into a renewed iconic prototype, what the pioneer suprematist accomplished was nothing less than the complete re-structuring of the idea of signification in abstraction. Through principles of reductivism whereby all extraneous material is removed from the viewer's encounter with the object, one's attention could be unswervingly fixed on the pure form at hand—the square, the

cross—which would in turn allow for the core meanings of that symbol to rise to the surface. Although the validity of Malevich's theories come to us most convincingly in the authority of his work, his fusion of principles in his work could only have taken place during a moment in history when all the variables—science, humanism, revolution, the future—co-existed in the public imagination with such an intensity that a complete re-working of the language of art seemed not just possible but actually necessary, in order to rebuild

time to consider that perhaps, after all, he did exactly what he set out to do. The legacy of Reinhardt's painterly proposition is that we now know that if we want to preserve art's capacity to mystify us, to present us with the spectacle of the unknowable, it is generally preferable to conceal sublimity in the place where we least expect to find it.

If Malevich and Reinhardt were pioneers in the broadest sense of the word, what does that make Ryman? A purist? A revisionist? A quirk in the machinery of late-century strategems? Let's look at it from a slightly different perspective: Ryman has managed, to a degree that would have made any Pop artist proud, to exert an almost total control over the context in which the viewer comes face to face with his work. His well-known anathema towards group shows, catalog reproductions, the market and interviews—in short, most of the clannish rituals designed to allow an emerging artist to be contextualized with his or her "generation"—has created about Ryman something of the air of the mystic. It isn't just that Ryman utterly refuses to compromise himself, in professional as well as technical terms, but rather that the very atmosphere of compromise, its temptation, seems to dissipate in the presence of his work.

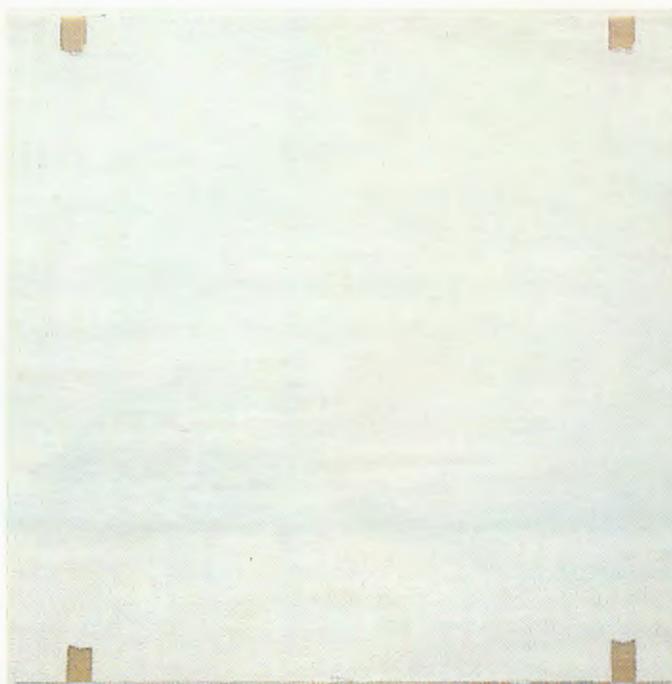
This quality of incorruptibility was perhaps best demonstrated by Ryman's extraordinary retrospective at the Dia Art Foundation three years ago. Suddenly, his paintings weren't really paintings anymore:

they were more like pictures, in the magnified sense of representing an ideal about painting which simply cannot be realized in any other way. What came through with special clarity in this even-handed sampling of Ryman's work (besides the almost unbelievable variety that informs it) was the artist's unwavering dedication to a pair of technical principles that every watercolorist, for example, holds as gospel truth: that no color is as all-encompassing, as elusive, as mysterious as the color white, and that no other colors can function without first taking into account, seeking cooperation from, perhaps even paying homage to, the power of white. Moreover, Ryman's ideal white paintings serve as the ideal conductor of light, stripping the spectrum down to a pure, blinding essence which is at the same time utterly transparent. But most of all, the white in Ryman's paintings suggests inviolability mixed with expectancy, the desire to make one's mark balanced against the need to let things happen of their own accord.

It is one thing to consider the limits, or better still the specificity, of Ryman's project, but something else again to try to understand the extraordinary variety in his language. Considered on the level of sheer ingenuity, one cannot help but be amazed at the number of ways Ryman has discovered to present the white painting to us, literally (re) inventing his definition of this same plastic/conceptual problem so many times that, rather than tire of the problem ourselves, we become further drawn into

civilization itself from the inside out.

Another forebear whose example must be cited in any discussion of Ryman is Ad Reinhardt. Interestingly, however, it is not Reinhardt the theorist, the monk-like spokesman for art-about-art, or the art-world satirist who interests us here. Instead, it is Reinhardt the painter, author of such impossible retinal paradoxes that an inordinate amount of his energy was invested in explaining to the spectator that what he thought he was seeing was not at actually there. The blind faith of this assertion, along with his staunch willingness to thwart the testimony of the human eye, has made Reinhardt into something of a tragic figure for successive generations, who have not yet taken the



UNTITLED, 1969.
OIL ON FIBERGLASS, 20 X 20."

the complex vocabulary of changing supports, brushstrokes, paint densities, shades of white, and other presentational devices. Yet, somehow this all takes place without our ever being permitted to lose sight of the fact that these details are themselves never more than the interchangeable variables in a constant search for the ideal. The artist is well aware that he is setting up the conditions for us to see more than what is perhaps factually there; yet, the fact that he accomplishes this by emphasizing the literalness of the painting's material existence creates an active paradox that keeps us moving back and forth between reading less into the painting than what the artist intended (an obvious non-sequitur where Ryman's work is concerned), or reading in more of what we ourselves hope to find.

It may seem simplistic, but I have always imagined that Ryman chose the format of the white painting in part because he knew that it would draw out the viewer's inclinations to project one's desires across its surface. As spectators, it is our fate not to be able to resist confusing absolutism with specificity, and in our assumption that the artist has made use of the picture as a type of vehicle towards some other realm of sensation, the paintings become guinea pigs, as it were, for precisely the kinds of emotions and beliefs that we want works of art to convey. Here the issue of light takes on particularly interesting connotations, because of our cultural tendency to associate white with clarity, the color of purity and revelation. It is almost as if the artist is proffering us the vessel in which signification can be conveyed, while asking us to go and fill it ourselves.

A personal note that may help explain why this is the first text I have ever published on Ryman is that his was the first contemporary work about which, as an undergraduate, I chose to write. The occasion was a comparison between a Chardin genre painting and the 1976 project that Ryman executed for the inaugural show, "Rooms," at P.S.1, and my point of view was essentially that Ryman had provided an occasion for the audience to come up with a means for interpreting the work in which the artist's own point of view was basically a meaningless digression. The very open-endedness of the work in question—which consisted of two pieces of paper, painted white and imbedded into the surface of an otherwise unrestored wall—was, I presumed, an unprecedented opportunity for the spectator to take a more active role than usual in determining the work's meaning. In fact, this work acted as something of a Rosetta Stone for me at the time, in the sense that Ryman became the sole artist whose work was substantive enough to explain why the formalist definition of content still held sway over the academic masses, and yet

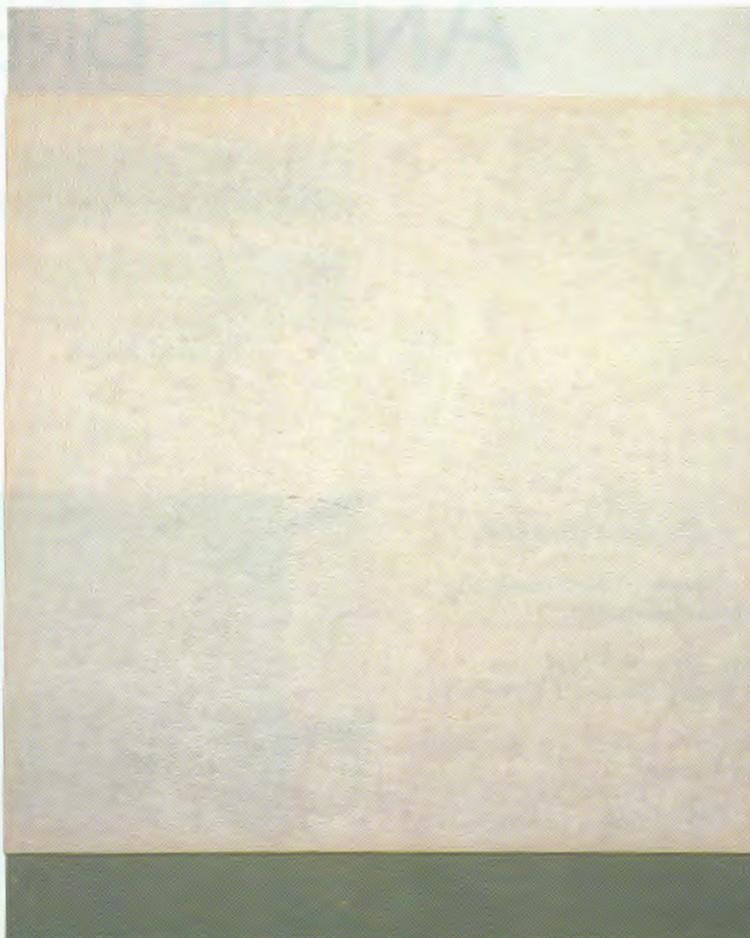
radical enough to justify why such a system was literally begging to be swept away.

The point here, of course, is that Ryman has always been one of the very few creative figures working today whose work can literally be all things to all people. Those who desire purity for essentially decorative motives need not be estranged from his project, just as those who object to the idea of content on purely ideological grounds consider Ryman practically the only painter whose work is even bearable. Even those who would like to see the cause of painting made more of a front-burner issue in contemporary art seem to not object too strenuously to the fact that Ryman's work doesn't exactly fulfill all the more mundane qualifications for the creation of pictures. In fact, he fulfills as few of them as possible; it's just that his re-phrasing of the equation makes it appear as if everything he leaves out wasn't really necessary in the first place.

When we take the trouble to contemplate Ryman's work as a whole, we begin to understand how the idea of essences can persist in art, even in the midst of an age when virtually all values are being subjected to a fundamental

renegotiation. By literally allowing the capacity for change to occupy the forefront of his work's linguistic structure—they were certainly not perceived fifteen years ago as being "sensuous" or "elegant," two of the adjectives most frequently batted around during the time of his retrospective—Ryman has effectively opened up an enormous range of possibilities for painting's future. Even more importantly, his art generates a complex reaction among a chain of signifiers that ultimately lead away from the asphyxiated reality of art, and towards the all-too-mortal aspirations that cause us to bring it into being, and ascribe such importance to its perpetual care. By thus freeing up art's signifying process at its point of origin, Ryman's art stands a very good chance of eventually being credited with something no artist in the last quarter-century has been able to accomplish: swaying an audience with the sheer incontestability of his faith that painting's—and, by extension, all art's—transformative powers are as yet all but untapped. ■

Dan Cameron is a critic, curator, and musician living in New York.



TRIBUNE, 1989.
OIL ON GATOR BOARD AND ALUMINUM, 31 X 25." COURTESY OF THE PACE GALLERY.