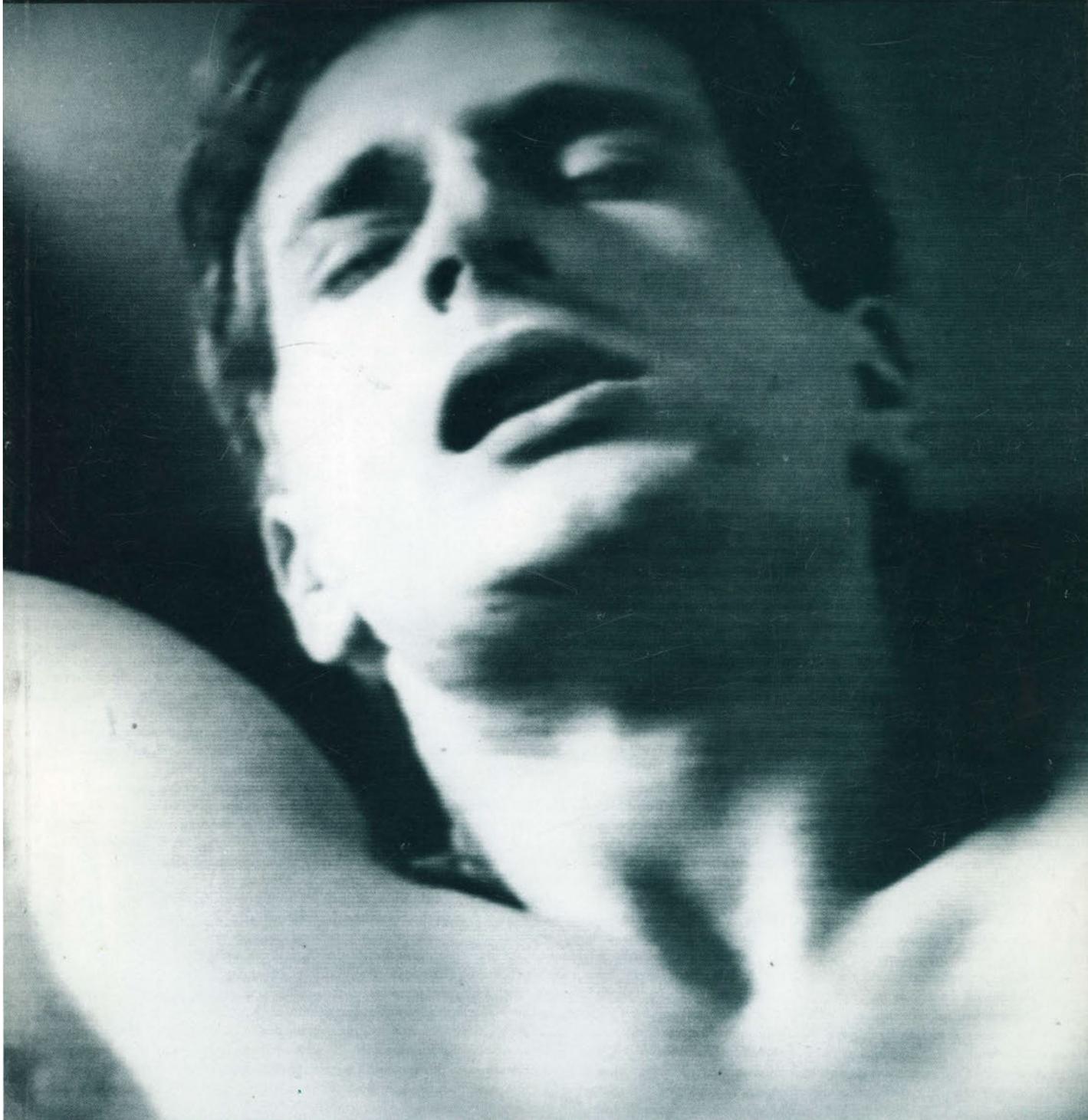


Performance

Summer 1989 No 58 £3.50



Fluxus Arte Povera Situationism Video Sculpture

Marie-Jo Lafontaine New European Dance

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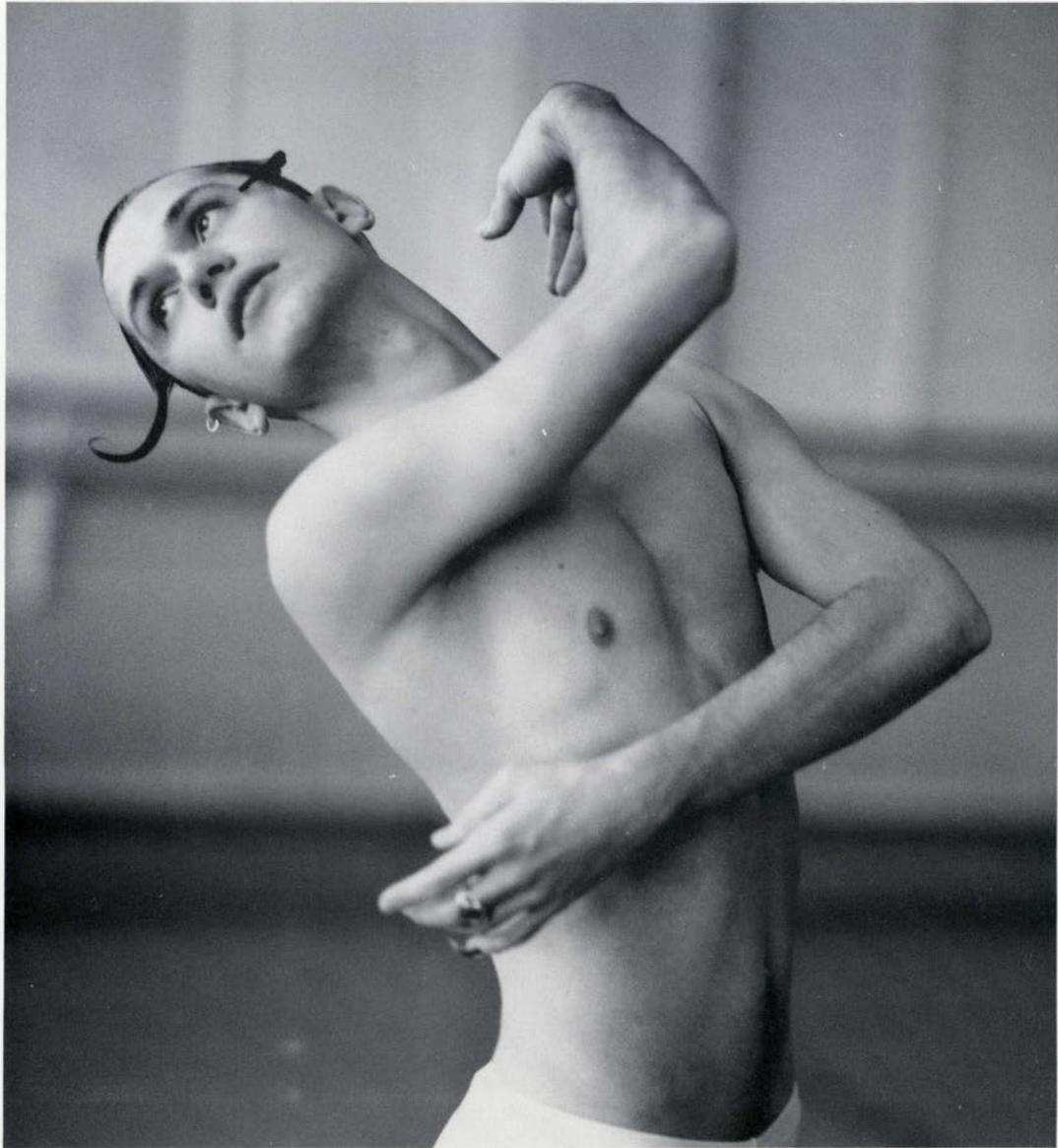


Photo: Michael O'Brien

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Performance

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Front Cover:

Marie-Jo Lafontaine, still from
Les Larmes d'Acier, 1985-86

Back Cover:

Luciano Fabro, *Italy of War*, 1981,
iron wire mesh, 150x100cm.

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The Steve Rogers Memorial Fund at Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham

On Thursday 8th December 1988 Steve Rogers returned to his part-time teaching of Creative Arts Performance students at Trent Polytechnic. We were pleased to welcome him back after a period of illness. On Monday 12th December we received the devastating news that he had died. The only possible response was stunned disbelief and despair. It didn't seem possible and even now, months later, doesn't make any sense.

Steve had been teaching Performance Theory and Criticism at the Polytechnic for a period of about 18 months and he was well known by staff and students as a gentle, sympathetic colleague with a very wide-ranging knowledge of contemporary performance, always at pains to find the positive attributes in any production and to stress or enhance its potential. He seemed to have both a sound, rigorous critique and a sympathy for new performance that was second to none.

Because Steve's sudden death left a significant gap not only in the lives and development of a particular group of students but also in the development of the Performance Theory courses, Trent Polytechnic decided to establish a Memorial Fund which would finance an annual lecture in Nottingham to be called *The Steve Rogers Memorial Lecture*. The lecture is to be given each December, commencing December 1989, by a nationally or internationally known performance artist or critic of contemporary performance work. On each occasion the subject of the lecture will be basically the same: to review major British and European contemporary performance events, highlighting the current issues in the art form and singalling possible future developments. Put more simply, the title of the lecture will be *Contemporary Performance This Year and Next*.

By this means it is hoped to achieve two things: to debate the most important performance issues and developments; and to recollect Steve Roger's work, personality and contribution through the 1980s.

A memorial fund or annual lecture cannot replace a person, but they can at least attempt to support the continuation of the work to which Steve Rogers was devoted.

Barry Smith
on behalf of
The Steve Rogers Memorial Fund

If you would like to contribute to the Memorial Fund please send your donation to *The Steve Rogers Memorial Fund*, c/o Ms Ruth King, Finance, Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham, NG1 4BU. Cheques and postal orders should be crossed and made payable to *The Steve Rogers Memorial Fund*. Contributors will receive details of the annual lectures. Arrangements are also in hand for the lectures to be published.

Editorial

The decision to re-launch *Performance* as a quarterly rather than a bi-monthly magazine, together with a corresponding re-structuring of it in several significant ways, is intended as a response to changes which are occurring in the cultural climate as a whole and in the position of experimental and avant-garde art in particular.

Everything points to the truth of the view that the time is now ripe for a radical and thorough reassessment. The gaping chasm between, on the one hand, the very real potential of advanced art to help fundamentally in re-shaping perceptions of the world and, on the other hand, the extreme extent to which such art is in practice marginalised is, or should be, more apparent than ever. The euphoria associated with the breaking of traditional artistic boundaries, which took place within the context of the adventurous cultural climate of the 1960s and early '70s, is sufficiently far in the past for it to be possible to view what happened in a reasonably accurate perspective. Since those heady days, there has been plenty of time for those involved with relatively new media, including performance, to come to terms with their no longer being in the fashionable forefront of artistic innovation. And now at the end of the 1980s there are many indications that another major cultural shift is in the air, one which offers extraordinary opportunities to experimental art, if only they can be intelligently grasped.

Performance art in particular stands at a crossroads. Either it can accept the marginalised but relatively institutionally secure status which it has *de facto* been allotted, somewhere between a minor subcurrent of fine art and a variant of alternative entertainment; or it can address itself with renewed vigour to the considerably more far-reaching ambitions which gave birth to it in the first place and which are, of course, intimately bound up with those of the avant-garde in general.

To the extent that it opts for the latter — and it is the premise of this magazine that nothing less is worthy of it — it has two immediate tasks. The first is to examine these ambitions in detail in order to separate what is essential to them and remains valid today from what, in the light of subsequent experience, might seem dated and in need of modification: such experience would include, for example, changes both within capitalism and within communism, developments in sexual, racial and ecological politics and the possibility of an emergent world consciousness,

along with — more specific to the arts — certain issues raised by post-modernism and the trans-avantgarde. The second task is to explore, again with the benefit of the extra years of experience, strategies which might convert these ambitions from dreams into workable realities.

All this demands a context within which practice and theory can fruitfully interact. *Performance* aims to help in the provision of such a context. The magazine has always provided a forum for those interested in performance art and surrounding areas to exchange information and ideas; and the intention now is to make this possible in greater depth.

The principal element, therefore, in the re-structuring which accompanies *Performance* becoming a quarterly is a greater emphasis on long-term issues and the adoption of more long-term perspectives, even in the consideration of issues of immediate current interest. It is hoped that each issue of the magazine will enjoy a long active shelf life: that it will contain articles which will continue to be referred back to for many years after publication, in some cases indeed constituting the most definitive writing published on the subject in question. Anyone who has taught about non-traditional forms of art, and in particular performance, in an art college or university will know the difficulty in referring students to more than a handful of full and reliable texts; the demand for such texts outstrips the supply by a staggering proportion. In practical terms, this will also mean the inclusion in each issue of at least some articles rather longer than any which have been included in *Performance* hitherto, so that writers will have the opportunity, in tackling important themes, to develop their arguments with the thoroughness which these warrant.

The second element in the present re-structuring of *Performance* is a somewhat wider range of subject-matter: both in terms of the coverage of areas of artistic activity which can only be related 'performance' as such by virtue of a shared sensibility; and also in terms of the inclusion of extra-artistic topics of more general human interest, which might more usually be thought of as coming under the headings of anthropology, psychology, etc., but towards which much of the best performance art points. It goes without saying that the magazine's past involvement with such disciplines as visual theatre, dance, etc., will be maintained — and hopefully deepened — but we shall also be mindful of the fact that performance art originated as a language used by fine artists to supplement

the traditional languages of painting and sculpture. It is — like, for example, video or installation work — one of many languages now at the disposal of artists; and much of the best work in performance has always been done by artists who, like Beuys, have also utilised a number of different media. A fetishistic attachment to any particular medium for its own sake falls into the same trap as the formalised obsession with this or that particular visual style. On the other hand — and this is part of the justification for this magazine's title — there is a sense in which performance or live art may usefully be taken as paradigmatic, as constituting some sort of extreme or exemplary case. What is crucial, even if there are times when reflexivity may be necessary, is that art should not become bogged down in merely professional concerns but should, however indirectly, be at the service of life.

It is for this same reason too, given that much of the work with which we shall be dealing points towards topics as diverse as war, schizophrenia, the possibility of spiritual development, the complexities of erotic or of maternal love, the relationship between tribal and industrial societies or the relationship between human and animal experience, that it seems appropriate from time to time to include articles on these topics in their own right. This should be valuable both in the sense of providing opportunities to artists engaged in such areas to deepen their understanding of them and in the sense of making some contribution towards bridging the unhelpful gap between advanced art and other forms of intellectual and practical activity within our society.

The third element in the present re-structuring is a shift towards a more international coverage and outlook. Here, even more than in other areas, we are hampered by lack of funds. However, it is clear that all the issues of greatest public importance today are global in scale and that to be bounded by national perspectives is to remain hopelessly parochial. Certainly it is true that one's viewpoint will necessarily in part reflect the influence, even down to precise details, of geographical, racial, class, sexual and other such factors; and that the notion of a detached, objective viewpoint has convincingly been shown to be an illusion, usually attaching to privilege. Nevertheless, even an awareness of this is in itself helpful, provided that it is combined with an attempt at least to mitigate these limitations. A move towards greater internationalism can only proceed in

stages; and the first stage, as far as a British-based magazine is concerned, is the development of a more integrated European consciousness. It is with this in mind that articles will sometimes be included in other European languages, along with an English translation.

Nevertheless, internationalism cannot stop at the borders of Europe: thus whatever one may think of the Paris exhibition 'Les Magiciens de la Terre' — and an enterprise of such ambition is bound to have its shortcomings — the basic conception underlying the show represented an important milestone. The European and North American avant-garde tradition which gave birth to performance art can no longer be seen in isolation; if there is a real desire to contribute to the creation of fresh paradigms for seeing the world — and that is without doubt one of the avant-garde's principal purposes — then it needs to enter into productive contact with a whole range of other traditions, stemming from very different historical and cultural circumstances. Much of the work of Ulay and Marina Abramović has been exemplary in this connection. For our part, great though the practical difficulties are in establishing an international network of contacts, this is the direction in which, insofar as we are able, we hope to move.

Inevitably, there will have to be some sacrifices, especially in the coverage of day-to-day events. In particular, it has been felt that it is impractical for a magazine appearing only quarterly to continue with the listings and news section which used to appear at the front of the magazine. This is undoubtedly a loss — it may come to seem that the sacrifice is too great — but it should be noted that this function is now effectively being performed by *Artists Newsletter* in their section entitled 'Live Art', which has taken over directly from the Arts Council's monthly bulletin *Performance Art Events*.

The decision to publish *Performance* quarterly and to re-structure it broadly along the present lines had already been taken before the tragic and remarkably sudden death from AIDS-related pneumonia of our former editor, Steve Rogers, last December. My appointment as his successor largely reflects the sympathy that I feel with the thinking behind these changes. Inevitably, had he lived, he would have carried through the re-structuring somewhat differently; I only hope that I can carry it through as well, and to the satisfaction of as many of our readers, as

possible.

I am acutely aware of how hard an act Steve's is to follow. Not only was he clearly an excellent editor, but I have been profoundly impressed and moved by the ample evidence I have seen of the degree of personal loyalty and affection which he inspired in those who worked with him. If I am able to inspire so much as half such loyalty and affection, I shall be very happy indeed.

I should also like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to Rob La Frenais and Chrissie Iles for the generous help they gave me in preparing this issue for publication.

Gray Watson

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no.

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Three of the main articles in this re-launch issue are specifically historical: David Dunbar sets out to correct some misconceptions, now more widespread than ever, about the history of Situationism, as he takes us on a guided tour through the fiendishly complex but picturesque ruins of the Situationist International; Simon Anderson takes us out Flux-hunting, bringing a new degree of clarity and order to our understanding of a notoriously elusive movement, even while acknowledging this very elusiveness as one of Fluxus' inherent strengths; and Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton takes us for a ride on the Big Dipper, as she traces the continuing legacy of Arte Povera. There is an historical element too in the long hard look that Chrissie Iles takes into the potentially narcissistic mirror of video sculpture and installation; while Sigmar Gassert, in an article published both in the original German and in English translation, concentrates on the work of the Belgian artist Marie-Jo Lafontaine. Finally, David Hughes watches four young European dance companies, in pieces not perhaps coincidentally all choreographed by women, dance away the frontiers, both national and metaphorical.

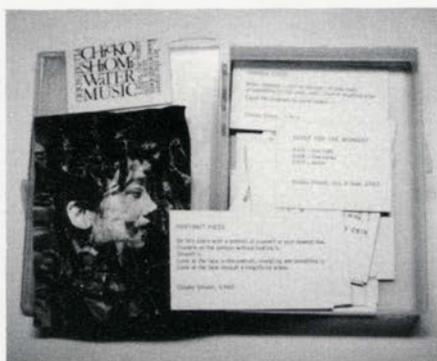


FLUXMANIFESTO ON FLUXAMUSEMENT -VAUDEVILLE -ART? TO ESTABLISH ARTIST S NONPROFESSIONAL ,NONPARASITIC, NONELITE STATUS IN SOCIETY, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE OWN DISPENSABILITY, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE SELFSUFFICIENCY OF THE AUDIENCE, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT ANYTHING CAN SUBSTITUTE ART AND ANYONE CAN DO IT. THEREFORE THIS SUBSTITUTE ART-AMUSEMENT MUST BE SIMPLE, AMUSING, CONCERNED WITH INSIGNIFICANCES, HAVE NO COMMODITY OR INSTITUTIONAL VALUE. IT MUST BE UNLIMITED, OBTAINABLE BY ALL AND EVENTUALLY PRODUCED BY ALL. THE ARTIST DOING ART MEANWHILE, TO JUSTIFY HIS INCOME, MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT ONLY HE CAN DO ART. ART THEREFORE MUST APPEAR TO BE COMPLEX, INTELLECTUAL, EXCLUSIVE, INDISPENSABLE, INSPIRED. TO RAISE ITS COMMODITY VALUE IT IS MADE TO BE RARE, LIMITED IN QUANTITY AND THEREFORE ACCESSIBLE NOT TO THE MASSES BUT TO THE SOCIAL ELITE.

Simon Anderson

FLUX-HUNTING

**The Uncertain in Pursuit of the
Incomprehensible?**



Mieko Shiomi, *Flux Events*.

Flux Manifesto; statement published as part of information flyer, Fluxus, N.Y., 1965. Also published as a postcard by Ben Vautier.

FLUXMANIFESTO ON FLUXAMUSEMENT — VAUDEVILLE ART ? TO ESTABLISH ARTISTS NONPROFESSIONAL, NONPARASITIC, NONELITE STATUS IN SOCIETY, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE OWN DISPENSIBILITY, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE SELFSUFFICIENCY OF THE AUDIENCE, HE MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT ANYTHING CAN SUBSTITUTE ART AND ANYONE CAN DO IT. THEREFORE THIS SUBSTITUTE ART-AMUSEMENT MUST BE SIMPLE, AMUSING, CONCERNED WITH INSIGNIFICANCES, HAVE NO COMMODITY OR INSTITUTIONAL VALUE. IT MUST BE UNLIMITED, OBTAINABLE BY ALL AND EVENTUALLY PRODUCED BY ALL. THE ARTIST DOING ART MEANWHILE, TO JUSTIFY HIS INCOME, MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT ONLY HE CAN DO ART. ART THEREFORE MUST APPEAR TO BE COMPLEX, INTELLECTUAL, EXCLUSIVE, INDISPENSABLE, INSPIRED. TO RAISE ITS COMMODITY VALUE IT IS MADE TO BE RARE, LIMITED IN QUANTITY AND THEREFORE ACCESSIBLE NOT TO THE MASSES BUT TO THE SOCIAL ELITE.

Statement published as part of information flyer (Fluxus, N.Y., 1965). Also published as a postcard by Ben Vautier (Vence, 1965).

WHEN IT STARTED TO FLUXUS

But what is Fluxus? Fluxus was the brainchild of an asthmatic and ascetic Lithuanian-American with a fierce, obsessive drive: part artist, theoretician, organiser, historian, and administrator, George Maciunas made his living by graphic design and poured almost every penny he had into Fluxus from 1961, when he first had the idea, up to his death in 1979.

Historically, it was the name for a periodical which never appeared (although the material gathered was eventually published — not by Fluxus — as ‘An Anthology’, today acknowledged as a seminal work, containing scores, texts, poems, thoughts and an assortment of pieces by people now loosely associated with Fluxus). Some of the work collected to this end was performed during a series of concerts throughout Europe in the early 1960s; the tour gave its name to a publishing house and mail-order art collective; was later used as a cover-all title for a number of diverse socio-political and artistic ventures in the 1970s; and has since become the focal point for a wide range of historical investigation and continuing art activity. The name was deliberately chosen for the number of diverse, but rich and appropriate associations which it carries: a philosophical notion of Heraclitus’ permanent impermanence; a scientific liquidity of matter; a biological — almost scatological — concept of discharge; and the general usage, indicating change, or an uncertain state between points which are known, secure and safe.

Despite considerable internal strife, despite Maciunas’ own jealousy, excommunications and petty political proscriptions and despite attempts by

historians and curators to manoeuvre its fate, Fluxus turned into something much greater than the sum of its physical output, its stylistic variance, political incredibility and creative potential.

From a short series of concerts and events, Maciunas and a few colleagues, joined later by a number of other artists in different fields, developed an art philosophy which is bound less by style, medium or even politics than it is by a roughly coherent approach to art, its function and role. It became an idea; a way of thinking about art and art's relationship to society; an attitude which, being so deeply embedded in the idealistic thinking of the '60s and '70s, has tended to become obscured by reputation, myth and legend.

Live Fluxus works first appeared in 1962, in a European tour which occurred as part of George Maciunas' grandiose plans for an united front of activity on the contemporary music scene. He had planned a series of concerts which would cover all really new developments on an international scale. For practical, stylistic, political or personal reasons, some composers — Ligeti, Stockhausen and Brown amongst others — were soon ousted from the programme, leaving a 'hard core' of less than a dozen young artist/composers who performed their own pieces, those of their friends, or of contemporaries whose work they admired. As the tour progressed, so the nature of the pieces — and the manner of their performance — changed subtly, becoming less obviously musical: simpler, more direct, and absolutely unique.

Despite this assimilation, the content of the concerts during the 1962-63 tour varied enormously; sex, violence, politics, music and laughter — all had their place. The most notorious early piece stretched over several weeks of the first Fluxus festival in Wiesbaden: the loose instructions for Philip Corner's *Piano Activities* were interpreted with nihilistic vigour and a grand piano was systematically destroyed with hammers, screwdrivers and sheer physical abuse — setting an outrageous, perhaps publicity-seeking tone. There followed many different levels of shock and sensation. Contrast the latent violence of Dick Higgins having his head shaved on stage for *Danger Music No. 2* with the perverse humour of Alison Knowles removing and displaying a succession of different coloured knickers from under her skirt when performing Nam June Paik's *Serenade for Alison*. Compare Ben Vautier's calm and silent stage presence in his *Regarde moi cela suffit* — the artist simply sitting behind a title-card, to be looked at — with the Crazy Gang-like lunacy of performers raising their hats, popping their cheeks or blowing raspberries as directed by chosen numbers on a till-roll, in George Maciunas' *In memoriam to Adriano Olivetti*. Consider the different qualities of watching and listening to someone deliberately and regularly smash their forearms on the keys of a piano 566 times with Thomas Schmit pouring water between a circle of beer bottles until the liquid had evaporated or all been spilt (LaMonte Young's *566 for Henry Flynt* and Schmit's *Zyklus for beer bottles*



George Maciunas, *In Memoriam to Adriano Olivetti*; l-r: Ben Vautier, Takako Saito, Geoffrey Hendricks, Emmett Williams, Ben Patterson.

respectively).

When Maciunas returned to the United States in 1963, he had the basis for a philosophy of activity which can now be seen as integral to Fluxus: collectivism; simplicity of structures; humour; anti-elitism; investigation, or avoidance of conventional boundaries; and attention to insignificance. These qualities are the germs of all that was to follow in the name of Fluxus, and they were developed during those few early performances.

Along with the aesthetic intent, each was a mixture of pragmatism and politics: sometimes the idealism intruded disastrously on the activity; on other occasions the practical necessities of the day obscured any significant meaning in the work; occasionally, ad hoc-ism and ideology blended perfectly to create quite powerful pieces. Many works were ideally suited to this régime, being designed with flexibility, adaptability and ease of performance in mind. These included Addi Koepcke's *Music While You Work*, an aleatory structure of actions (timed by a broken or scratched record) which cleared the stage of debris and Robert Watt's *Two Inches*, whose instruction to 'stretch 2 inch ribbon across the stage / cut ribbon' was suited to a variety of different situations: depending on lighting, timing and positioning, the piece could be melodramatic, so simple as to be ignorable or, when performed using a New York street as the stage, a mixture of publicity stunt and urban activism.

*MONOMORPHIC NEO-HAIKU FLUX-EVENTS . . .
LIVE ON STAGE!!!*

This mutability was a deliberate and direct result of the in-built simplicity of structure that characterises early Fluxus performance. Overtheorised — typically — by Maciunas, as 'monomorphic neo-haiku flux-events', these minimal performances stood in antithesis to the then-popular 'happening' (or 'mixed-media neo-baroque happening', as Maciunas would have it).

Happenings were — albeit very loosely — structured, with a multitude of sensations, directed by the artist, showered on an audience who participated by default: Fluxus events were much simpler in form, but offered a wide margin for interpretation, both for performer and audience. The scripts (or more properly, the scores) were generally terse; and often enigmatic — to the point where the artist George Brecht admitted not understanding some of his own works himself, particularly those from his *Yam* collection. This allowed each piece to become a springboard for the imagination of others and thus furthered Fluxus' anti-elitist, anyone-can-do-art philosophy. Benjamin Patterson's *Paper Piece*, whose score simply reads 'Improvisations with paper', can be, and has been, interpreted in many ways, ranging from an inhibition-breaking and hectic stage-versus-audience battle, to a long, delicate and meditative sound piece created by slowly tearing a

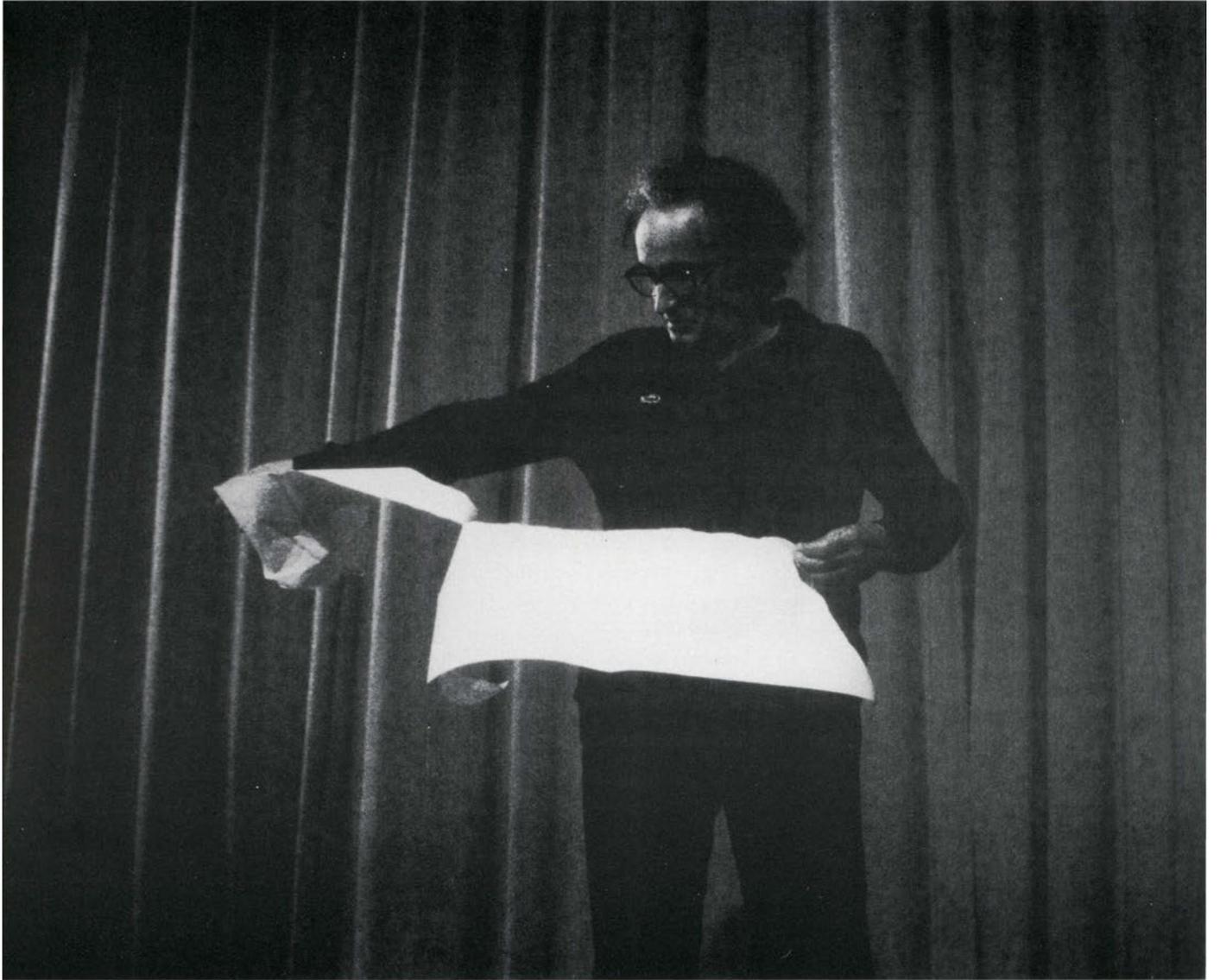
single sheet of paper.

Later Fluxus pieces developed from this theme-and-variation idea and became set pieces, standard activities rendered unconventional by the application of Fluxus artists' imaginations. Therefore the proscenium-based concerts of the early '60s were replaced in later years by such things as Flux-weddings and Flux-divorces, where the surreal nature of traditional rites of passage was illustrated by even more arbitrary ceremonies, or Flux-sports, where competition was rendered impossible by subverting the apparatus of everyday games: using leaden table-tennis bats or musical boxing-gloves, doing the long-jump whilst holding a lighted candle or playing chess with wine-glass-pieces whose value depended on the amount of drink (red/white) left in them — a distinctly variable quality!

Flux-doctors at the Flux-Clinic, for example, might measure the weight of a patient's pocket-fluff, the minimum distance between their mouth and foot, their tolerance to hair-cuts or their vision in the wrong glasses. These actions, amongst others, continued Maciunas' ideals: not only were they easy and humorous to watch or take part in, but they could involve a non-specialist audience in a direct way, causing them to question the limits and therefore the meaning of art, sport statistical analysis or whatever.

When viewed in the light of a continual questioning of values, the shift between, say, a lone performer on stage slowly and majestically raising a violin above his head, only to smash it violently and swiftly on a table, and a Fluxus feast, with coloured food, anthropomorphic shapes, treated drinks and inedible concoctions, becomes more understandable and less radical a change — especially over a period of more than five years. Both kinds of activity break the barriers between acceptable and unacceptable, between expected and unexpected behaviour.

One of the greatest influences on these attempts at dissolution of artificial limitations was John Cage, both through his music and through his espousal of Zen Buddhism. Cage's attack on the most fundamental assumptions concerning music — particularly in his notorious noteless piano piece *4' 3"* — had left the area of musical definition wide open. Some American Fluxus artists were amongst his students in the very early '60s; and he allowed them the freedom to experiment with musical composition which was as visual as it was aural, whose structure and form were arrived at by chance, and whose priorities were decided in recognition of non-Western, Zen-oriented modes of thought. While it is known that Cage was comparatively well informed about Zen and had attended the lectures of the great Zen proselytiser, Dr. Suzuki, it is impossible to be certain about the true influence of Zen on Fluxus artists or to know how clearly it was understood by them or their audiences. All that can safely be said is that a popular form of non-progressive, anti-linear thinking was current, which took on many of the attractively enigmatic characteristics of the Zen credo. Unfathomable questions with a-logical answers — the traditional Zen teaching technique — obviously



influenced the thinking behind the form and the notation of Fluxus pieces. The use of a score — generally a set of verbal instructions but occasionally some less narrative form, such as a mere word, or even an image — is a powerful, if little used, development which Fluxus pioneered: considering that the documentation of performances is a problem which has yet to be solved, there is a good deal of mileage in the idea of the score — even if the format as published by Fluxus appears now to be somewhat limited.

Equally importantly, Zen taught that all experiences were essentially of equal value, so any judgements between them would be unnecessary or distracting. Such a view proposed that beauty could be discerned, that pleasure could be found, in all things — given an open mind and an appropriate attitude. This, surely, is the key to such pieces as Milan Knizak's *Confrontation no. 3* ('Keep silent all day long'), George Brecht's *Piano Piece* ('A vase of Flowers on(to) a piano') or Mieko Shiomi's *Boundary Music* ('Performers make the faintest possible sounds'). There are many similarly formed works in the Fluxus oeuvre: short, almost curt instructions which are more-or-less do-able, but which don't necessarily need to be performed before their potential is realised. Their motor is the concept behind them.

*DOWN WITH ART!
DEMOLISH SERIOUS CULTURE!*

Concept Art was first mooted by Henry Flynt in 1960. One of the few Fluxus theorists, he wrote of an art whose material is concepts, in the sense that the material of music is sound — although he went on to argue that, as concept art enveloped many activities, for instance music itself, he should perhaps invent a separate category. Later, he did; and he named this new activity, which was apparently the focus of all subjective actions, 'Brend'. Obviously, this term wasn't as catchy as 'Concept Art' but, as a way of expanding art's possibilities, Flynt's theories profoundly influenced Fluxus and prepared the ground for a good deal of other activity in the '60s and '70s. His extreme but logically faultless political views also affected Fluxus — and held sway particularly with Maciunas for a short period in the mid 1960s. He advocated a complete break with the prevailing culture, considering it to be racist, corrupt and decadent; and the resulting — admittedly rather clumsy — attempts to mould Fluxus into an overt political weapon caused something of a rupture.

Maciunas was forced to guide Fluxus through a maze of differing ideologies amongst the artists in his circle, whose views varied from the allegedly apolitical, through democratic socialist, to super-Maoist. Whilst some regarded their work as sufficient representation of their political attitude, others actively campaigned — for instance against the Vietnam War — and a few saw Fluxus as a vehicle for

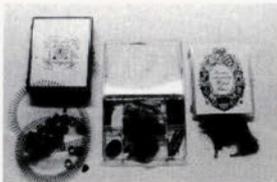
Ben Patterson, *Paper Piece*;
originally 1962, here performed
by Giuseppe Chiari at Fluxus 20th
birthday celebrations, Wiesbaden,
1982. (photo Simon Anderson)

agitation against many forms of 'cultural imperialism' — including, in some cases, the activities of fellow Fluxus artists. Therefore, since its inception, Fluxus has found it necessary to encompass a whole spectrum of sometimes contradictory political stances, including: the almost obsessive introversion and individualism of some events, realizable only in private; a jokey, optimistic, whole-earth idealism which mirrored much popular free-thinking of the period; revolutionary, functionalist zeal; and completely impractical plans for urban art-terrorism, such as bankrupting museums by obliging them to pay return postage on unwanted bricks. At the same time, there was a series of more or less Utopian schemes for collective living, working, sight-seeing and selling. Fluxus housing did in fact open up New York's SoHo for succeeding generations of artists; but a planned trip round the world never materialised, the Fluxus Island was never purchased and the Flux-Mail-Order warehouse barely sold a thing.

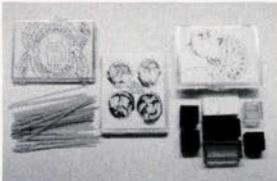
Perhaps the thread that runs through this varied fabric is anarchism, the theory and practice of which can encompass both eat-the-rich black-flag-wavers and professors in the philosophy of science. Like other anarchist organisations, Fluxus used shock, outrage and violence as weapons, whilst at the same time trying to create practical alternatives to the solutions of a world which they say as failing them. One of those alternatives was publishing — partly because publishing eased the problem of distance which an international grouping suffered and partly because it was an ideal vehicle for publicity about the aims and ideas of Fluxus. The first publications were simply advertisements and information about past and planned activities: reprints of the newspaper coverage that the European tour had caused, and lists of works to be produced under the Fluxus imprint. During the semi-official Fluxus appearance in England, held at Victor Musgrave's Gallery One (known as 'The Festival of Misfits'), the artists involved had been primarily concerned with visual or object-based work, and unlike at most other venues on the tour they produced things: give-away mementoes of the show, working sculptures, environments — a slight shift in emphasis which appears to have foreshadowed a change of Fluxus, whereby performance became secondary, in a period of frenetic publishing.

GEWGAWS FOR GIRLS! TOMFOOLERIES FOR BOYS!

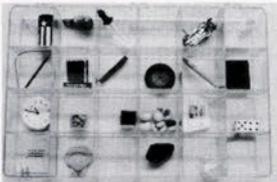
As might be expected, Fluxus publications cover a range as wide as the live works. There were books, objects, boxed mini-sculptures, games, periodicals, anthologies and films. They served as publicity, propaganda, information, objects of meditation, jokes, puzzles or portable environments. The most famous format was the Fluxbox; generally a perspex case slightly larger than an audio-cassette box, containing a physical illustration of a Fluxus idea. Jock Reynolds' *Determine the Values*, for example, contains a pebble and a fake pearl glued to the base of the



Three Fluxboxes: Alice Hutchins, *Flux Jewelry*; John Chick, *Flux Food*; Robert Filliou, *Flux Hair*; all published Fluxus, N.Y., 1965-70. (photo Simon Anderson)



Milan Knizak, l-r: *Flux Snakes*/*Flux White Meditation Flux Dreams*; published Fluxus, N.Y., 1969.



Robert Watts, *Flux Time Kit*; published Fluxus, N.Y., 1967/69. (photo Simon Anderson)

box, challenging the viewer to a stark choice between artifice and nature. The commonest Fluxboxes were George Brecht's *Games and Puzzles*; enigmatic and idiosyncratic, his puzzles typically offered a small object accompanied by a short text or instruction. *Bead Puzzle* is a clear perspex box containing a number of varied ball-bearings, with a card which reads:

Arrange the beads so that they are the same.

Arrange the beads so that they are different.

Some boxes were attempts to capture ephemeral, even metaphysical qualities: Ben Vautier's *Fluxbox containing God*, which was sealed shut; Milan Knizak's *Flux Dreams*, a compartmentalised box containing seven small coloured transparent perspex cubes; Per Kirkeby's *Flux box* which contained a solid white plastic rectangle, filling the entire box; or, more prosaically, Maciunas' own *Smile Machine*, a wicked-looking sprung device in a box with a ghastly label.

Other boxes were simple collectons of material: visual puns, double-meanings, jokes, oddities and curiosities. Carla Liss' accumulation of exotic receipts was published as *Flux Travel Kit*. Larry Miller's *Orifice Flux Plugs* present an eye-watering assortment of suppositories, corks, plugs, beans, etc. A *Flux Timekit* by Robert Watts appeared in various formats, always containing fiddly parts from a watch or clock, with occasional added mystery objects. A few boxes contained collections of simple printed cards, scores for performance events by an individual artist. The Fluxboxes were periodically published in a collection, together with films, posters, copies of the Fluxus newspaper *V TRE* and any other material to hand. Assembled in customised briefcases or wooden boxes, they were issued as *Flux Year Boxes*, reminders that the initial ambitions of Fluxus had been anthological, periodical and multiple. All the assembly and design was done in New York by Maciunas; artists simply mailed him their ideas, or a prototype, and he would scour SoHo for ready-made items which fitted the bill. His characteristic design — assorted typographic fonts fitted into a regular shape, often illustrated with early photographic or earlier engraved images — gave coherence to the wild variety of multiples produced; an unmistakable, if eccentric, corporate style.

Fluxboxes served a number of purposes. They were vehicles for the ideas of Fluxus artists which could be centrally produced and yet easily transported; they were semi-permanent advertisements for the collective name; and they were — in theory, at least — sources of income for Maciunas, to fund more Fluxus activity. Most importantly, however, they were intended to be subversive weapons in the revolutionary war that Fluxus had declared on the art establishment. The conventional system for the dissemination, sale, appreciation and judgement of art that, in the opinion of at least some Fluxus artists, had so patently failed was composed of several elements: producer (artist), commodity (artwork), broker (dealer/gallery), authority (museum) and market (audience/general public). Each of these elements bore some responsibility for the problems as perceived by Fluxus.

Briefly and schematically, the process involves the following: the ego of the producer is easily tempted by a hierarchy or star-system amongst artists, which results in personalities tending to count for more than ideas; to compensate for this, and also to justify it, the art produced must become surrounded with mystery and hyperbole; this allows dealers to charge inflated prices, and self-interest will generally prevent them from breaking this cycle of importance-breeding-difficulty-raising-cost; museums and institutions encourage this in order to maintain the status quo and to ensure their role as guardians of national culture; consumers, depending on their level of personal wealth or education, cosily remain part of an elite or, at the other end of the scale, have no opportunity to enter what is, in effect, a closed circuit.

Maciunas and his companions aimed to break this at every level, using the Fluxboxes: firstly, by subsuming the individual artists under the 'Fluxus' collective name; secondly by the Fluxus Mail Order Warehouse acting as sole agent for distribution of the product and re-investing any profits; thirdly by mass-producing work which deliberately confuses the departmental mentalities of some museum curators (Fluxboxes, like Fluxus events, are neither one thing nor another — print, painting, sculpture, book, toy, multiple, original, precious, junk, etc.). Worse, they demand to be handled, played with, sometimes even used up, a concept which is anathema to connoisseurs, collectors and other investors. Lastly, as with the live events, Fluxboxes were deliberately funny, easy to like, cheap, impermanent, attractive but with a designed-in ordinariness which attempted to dissolve the barrier of inhibition which some art, many art institutions, and most art history seeks to inculcate.

Unfortunately, it didn't work. The most famous Fluxus associates — Yoko Ono, Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik — were all 'excommunicated' at some time for their individualism. The Mail Order business was a disaster, both financially and by the measure of popular appeal: there were actually only two regular buyers, and their collections have subsequently gone to major museums. Institutions and collectors have either lavished funds, attention and otherwise embraced the problems that Fluxus implies, or simply ignored them: killing with kindness or starving to death. The advertisement mass-produced multiples were apparently made by hand as orders came in; therefore each one is an unique object, much sought after and even re-issued. Museums are still there; dealers are still getting rich; artists become more like pop-stars; Joe and Joan Public never stormed the gates of culture with Fluxus as their banner — Flux what?

THE PERPETUAL FLUXFEST?

But wait: is Fluxus in the air again? On the evidence of a show in Paris, an earlier exhibition in New York or Yoko Ono's contentious retrospective at the Whitney,

it would seem so. Fluxus does have the habit of reappearing periodically to remind us of its potent programme. There have been several major exhibitions over the years to re-vitalise or re-inforce various views about Fluxus; and the two most important Fluxus collections have both published substantial catalogues, the most recent being Gilbert and Lila Silverman's *FLUXUS CODEX* (Abrams, New York, 1988), a weighty and exhaustive, if perhaps restrictive, list describing their enormous holdings of Fluxus publications and ephemera.

Fluxus' reputation, however, still seems largely based on myth: particularly so in Great Britain, where the general level of knowledge about it is far lower than in America or on the Continent. This is perhaps because there has been little in the way of descriptive, analytical writing available here — and less physical evidence of Fluxus' published or performance output on public view. Apart from a few non-specific mentions in general histories, there are no readily available English language publications which offer much more than lists; and anyway, to my knowledge, there is still nowhere in Britain to see the stuff — with the honourable exception of the London Filmmakers Co-operative's battered but popular anthology of Fluxus films. Yet Fluxus did maintain a presence in Britain, one which began as early as 1962 and continued for a number of years — culminating, but not ceasing, with a touring exhibition in 1972/3 which contrived to involve dozens of British artists, including Stuart Brisley, Genesis P-Orridge, Helen Chadwick and Marc Chaimowicz.

Fluxus is a complicated affair whose complexity is exacerbated by a general lack of agreement amongst Fluxus artists about what Fluxus was, when it finished (if it has), who might be counted as a bona-fide Fluxus artist (there are several important names I have not mentioned, simply from lack of space), and what constitutes a Fluxus work. Purists reject the notion that Fluxus was a movement, preferring to think of it as something much less ordered and ordinary; a sensibility, a coincidence of shared concerns, a small but special part in the lives of artists who each had other interests. There is no archetypal Fluxus work; styles, media, content and intent varied enormously; there was no shared aesthetic; no single exhibition, publication or event which can be used as a bench-mark of Fluxness. Because it has defied the normal devices of the historian to reconstruct it or dissolve it in the seamless flow of twentieth-century art history, Fluxus remains much misunderstood or unknown, a mystery as obscure as Mail-art (but more chic — although Fluxus certainly had a tremendous influence there . . .), as unfathomable as 'Pataphysics (but more fun).

Deliberately, mischievously, with absolute conviction, artists that made up the Fluxus core have worked, performed, created; they have argued, pontificated, dissembled, kept quiet; all somehow conspiring to ensure that there never has been, nor ever will be, an easy answer to the question 'What is Fluxus?'



Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton

THE BIG DIPPER

The Legacy of Arte Povera



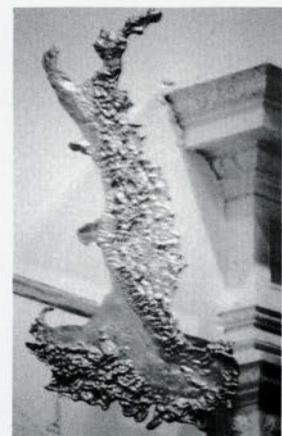
Salvo, 1970
Photo Paolo Mussat Sartor
(© Paul Maenz Cologne 1976)

Michelangelo Pistoletto, *The Big Dipper (Seven Orchestras of Rags)*, 1968, and *Venus of Rags*, 1967; insallation in P.S.1. Museum, New York, 1985.

Water fluorine wax glue in alchemical solutions, charcoal copper wire foam-rubber rocks; irony of weight and form! stuffed caterpillars and spiders sheaves of straw heaps of labelled material giant sleds and precarious rafts indecipherable lists of names Italy upside-down wet sheets cut toward the north white lines below the water line and art of the mountain top . . .¹

One thing is certain: it could never have happened in Britain. St. Ives is not Amalfi, the wind is too fierce; and Arte Povera, if it was made for *palazzi*, came from an easygoing relationship with the earth, with the outside. It was Italian soil and sun, and an Italian political consciousness, that energised what was undoubtedly a radical shift from the style-conscious idealism of Italian art and generated artists whose work over the last twenty years not only has been able 'to survive and bear the analytic imprint of American reductionism'² but can now be seen to threaten its very legitimacy. What happened in Italy in the late '60s has had a ripple effect whose turbulence beyond its shores is not diminishing but gaining in strength. If the most significant among the artists, who with Germano Celant made a noble and a 'legitimate defense of a historic culture run on the rocks',³ have now gained some recognition outside Italy, their roots in a heterogeneous series of events in the late '60s have been given scant regard not only in the context of performance art but also in discussion of the 'new' art of the eighties, especially new British sculpture. There are in the overt materialism, the anthropomorphism and the sense of transience in much current work, close conceptual and indeed formal links with the 'language of action' which is at the heart of Arte Povera.

This Italian 'movement', if now it can be categorised as such, was galvanised and articulated with ferocious energy and a passionate engagement by the critic and curator Germano Celant for whom it was, in his words, 'a way of being and of considering oneself that changes like the weather.'⁴ Celant appropriated the name from the seminal essay by Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*,⁵ first published in Poland in 1965. Arte Povera was 'birthed' at a show at the Galleria La Bertesca in Genoa in 1967 and included just six artists: Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali and Emilio Prini. The problem in looking back and forth through the texts, shows, events, artists and art associated with Arte Povera is in unwrapping Celant's claims for it from what actually took place, existed and exists. It is also difficult to disengage the hold that the commercial gallery and the museum have on the presentation of the current work of major figures, which tends to mask the development and the context of the strategies of the artists concerned. In Britain only Mario Merz, Jannis Kounellis, Giuseppe Penone and Luciano Fabro have had major shows. The performances, texts, theatre, film and ever changing object works of one of the



Luciano Fabro, *Golden Italy*, 1971, gilded bronze, 100x80cm.



Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Sacra Conversazione*, 1963, collage.

most unpredictable of artists, Michelangelo Pistoletto, are only superficially known anywhere outside Italy. However the one thing that becomes clear is that from 1967 until 1971 when he decided the phenomenon had run its course, Celant poured into the work of a shifting group of artists, not all of them Italian, a seething mass of ideas which amount to a blueprint for an art which soared high and aimed 'to run over the whole keyboard and to know all the aspects of the real.'⁶

Not surprisingly, the collection of texts and images published by Celant in 1969 extends far beyond an Italian context and runs the gamut of contingent 'movements': process art, conceptual art, earthworks, 'raw materialist micromotive art, antiform'. The artists included alongside the Italian *associazione* — Pistoletto, Kounellis, Fabro, Anselmo, Paolini, Penone *et al* — are also international: Beuys, Hesse, Weiner, Kossuth, Haacke, Andre, as well as Britain's Long and Flanagan. (It is as well to be reminded by Celant that in 1971 these two artists were at the 'front' — presumably alongside the true veterans of the Artists' Placement Group, Latham, Brisley and Breakwell — demanding 'the acknowledgement of a law that will permit the placement of an intellectual in every factory or industrial plant in England, naturally not in a productive role, but in one which will require them to breach behavioural and procedural norms'.)⁷ Celant's project for Arte Povera went far beyond the consolidation of current actual activity in Italy: it was visionary and utopian, its hot rhetoric part of the many expressions of rejection and disillusionment with a Western social order which crossed national boundaries and led at their most extreme to the cold reality of terrorism in the '70s. Thus Celant's manifesto for a 'poor art concerned with contingency, events, ahistoricism, the present . . . an anthropological outlook, "real" man and the hope (now a certainty) of discarding all visually univocal and coherent discourse . . .'⁸ is unequivocally aligned with the tenor of the times and was published as a clarion call for revolution as 'notes for a guerilla war' in the newly launched magazine *Flash Art*. But it is hard to see his Italian 'warriors' armed with anything more menacing or effective than a shovel and a spade. Unlike the Situationists, whose ideas they shared to a degree, Arte Povera artists did not engage in creative vandalism or more serious guerilla actions. It was the beautiful and tragically shortlived Pino Pascali, at the Venice Biennale of 1968 where he had been awarded an exhibition room, who found occupying students as menacing as the security forces who closed the show. Nonetheless it is the philosophical acceptance by many of these artists that 'a poet's politics rarely attain to more than an ingenuous, inept gesture'⁹ that gives much of their work its continuing power. There is, from the perspective of the late '80s, more than poignancy and wit in Pascali's 'fake sculptures' of canvas and wooden frames, notably the savagely prescient *Decapitazione del rinoceronte* (1966).¹⁰

Yet there is no doubt that the commercial success of Arte Povera has masked

and distorted its most fundamental strategy: to 'bring about, through total activity or immobility, an objective change that will be based not on secondary assets such as culture (art, cinema, theatre, philosophy, architecture, politics . . .), but on primary assets such as uses, exchanges, transactions, services . . . The myth continues to create superthings, while reality and life call not for superthings, but for obvious, commonplace, and nameless things.'¹¹ Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings* (1962-) and his *Minus Objects* (1965-) are activated, brought into being, only when their images are released by the physical presence of others. From 1967 Pistoletto has collaborated with artists, poets, actors, playwrights (including Beckett) and 'anyone who wanted to do things with others and remain together with me'.¹² For Pistoletto art is event and most fundamentally *change*: 'the result is a simple and poor (povero) manner of acting, which contrasts with the view of the individual artist as monolith, as the producer of an absolute language whose meanings are fixed for all time. The four dimensional language is expressed in continuous changes.'¹³ Whatever the susceptibility of his work to the maw of the marketplace, Pistoletto's objects and installations are inextricably tied to the public gesture. From the early days of the events at *Arte Povera + azioni povere* at Amalfi in 1968, there have been the Zoo Performances with friends and the public, in streets and squares mostly in Italy, theatre collaborations and more recently work with video and film, most of this invisible to an international art audience focused on gallery shows and swayed by the relentless proselytizing of new, rival critical campaigns, above all Bonito Oliva's crusade for the *Transavantgardia*. Pistoletto's *Art of Squalor* (1985-6) makes eloquent the decadence of new painting, that 'immobile, viscous, worn-out art . . ./Grayish, blackish that tends towards yellowish./Mass of triturated ideas, of pulverised objects, of meanings that are smashes, rotted, softened, and compressed.'¹⁴

Bonito Oliva's attempt to bury Arte Povera has floundered because its legacy is profound and becomes clearer with time. With greater hindsight it may be possible to show that this 'practice of fusion' which attempted so much to break down dualities and closed systems has by some way of osmosis generated or at the least anticipated some of the most significant art of the last twenty years. Three areas of concern seem to have been particularly fecund: the centrality of the body and the phenomenological experience of time, space and matter; modification of the environment (aligning with land and process strategies); and the structural analysis of representation, of the art object. In short Arte Povera ranges over most of the most significant and innovative strategies of the last two decades. So far as British art, performance included, is concerned, it is no great step to connect, say, the means deployed in the work of Stuart Brisley or Ian Breakwell with that of Pistoletto although both the British artists have more overtly political ends. Brisley's installations and works for the *Georgiana Collection* (1983-), where sculptural objects are metaphors for social structures and the failure of

Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Venus of Rags, 1967*; installation in Café Einstein, Berlin, 1978.



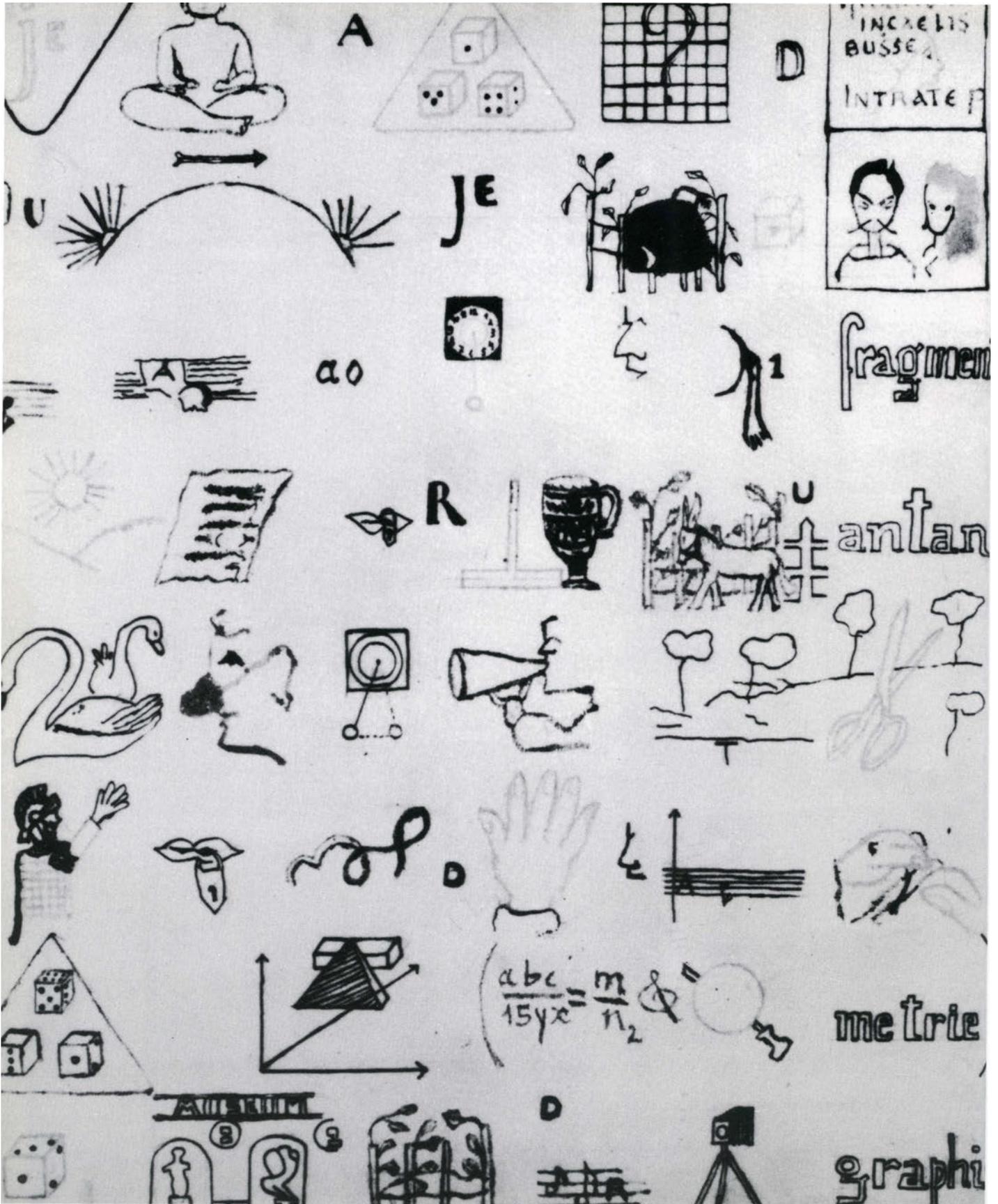
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communication, parallel Pistoletto's *The Big Dipper (Seven Orchestras of Rags)* (1968): 'I destroyed the concept of subjective style, of a language of identity — whether an identity of form or of personal combination — in order to shatter the individual for the benefit of countless personalities.'¹⁵ The breaking of linguistic constraints and artistic languages is central to some of the most challenging of current work, performance art as well as installation and sculpture. Pistoletto's concern with perception is reflected in the work of Fabro, whose use of 'poor' materials to evoke not only phenomenological experience but also historical and cultural history, finds a resonance in the current work of Richard Wilson and Richard Wentworth in Britain and Lili Dujourie in Belgium. The stress on corporeality, on the human frame, in *Arte Povera* has legion reverberations in the sculpture, widely differing one from another, of Richard Deacon, Anthony Gormley and Alison Wilding. It is no surprise that the recent show of work by Guiseppe Penone at the Arnolfini should have been so enthusiastically received, British artists having long been concerned with the generative energy of natural processes over time which is at the heart of Penone's richly sensual and poetic work: '. . . the adaptation of one element to another, of one material with [sic] another, of a tree with a stone, of life with death, fullness with emptiness, the fluid with the solid, light with shadow . . . all these things blur the action of the sculptor . . .'¹⁶ There are parallels not only in recent British sculpture (Cragg, Nash), but in the nomadism of Richard Long and in certain aspects of the paintings of John Murphy and the drawings and recent 'boxes' of Avis Newman.

The more the work of the Italians is evaluated the more difficult it becomes to define Celant's *Arte Povera*. Giulio Paolini is a case in point. Paolini's concern with the language of representation aligns his work closely with *Art & Language*; yet this critical intellectuality is at odds with what is commonly associated with *Arte Povera* — irreverence, exuberance and a provocative physicality — so brilliantly displayed by Pino Pascali. It is perhaps more useful to regard the 'we want everything' attitude which fuelled the '60s as the root of a particularly vigorous plant in Italy — one which not only spread with remarkable speed disturbing the stronghold of an American terrain but which, as 'an asystematic way of existence in a world in which system is everything,'¹⁷ seems more significant than ever. There is no doubt that what happened in Italy exerts the same kind of persistent pressure as does Joseph Beuys, whose epitaph indeed might have followed Celant's words on Jannis Kounellis: 'the important thing for Kounellis is focusing that Kounellis is alive, regardless of what happens in the rest of the world'.¹⁸

NOTES

1. Lia Rumma, introduction to Germano Celant, *Arte Povera Arte Povera*, Milan: Electa, 1985, p. 12. This book is the major reference on Arte Povera; see also Celant's *Arte Povera: Conceptual, Actual or Impossible Art?* Milan: Gabriele Mazzotta, and London: Studio Vista, 1969. A recent and important publication is *Verso L'Arte Povera 1963-1969 Storia tra poetica e strategia (Towards Arte Povera 1963-1969: The History Between Poetic & Strategy)*, Milan: Padiglione d'arte contemporanea, Electa, 1989. See also an excellent article by Marcia E. Vetrocq, 'Utopias, Nomads, Critics, from Arte Povera to the Transavantgardia', *Arts Magazine*, April 1989, pp. 49-54.
2. Celant 1985, op. cit., p. 24.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.
6. Celant 1985, p. 24.
7. Celant 1985, p. 161.
8. Celant 'Notes for a guerrilla war', *Flash Art* No. 5 November-December 1967; and Celant 1985, p. 35.
9. José Ortega y Gasset, 'Notes on the Novel' 1925, in *The Dehumanisation of Art*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968 edition, p. 94.
10. Private Collection, repro. Celant 1985, p. 235; *Italian Art in the 20th Century*, London: Royal Academy, and Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1989, note 187.
11. Celant 1985, p. 155.
12. Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Division and Multiplication of the Mirror*, exhibition curated by Germano Celant and Alanna Heiss, The Institute of Contemporary Art, P.S.I. Museum, New York, USA. Milan: Fabbri Editori, 1988, p. 25.
13. Ibid, p. 120.
14. Ibid, p. 196.
15. Ibid, p. 151.
16. Giuseppe Penone 1968, Celant 1985, p. 239.
17. Celant 1967, Celant 1985, p. 35.
18. Ibid, p. 37.



David Dunbar

THE PICTURESQUE
RUINS OF THE
SITUATIONIST
INTERNATIONAL

Isidore Isou, *Les Nombres, no 1*,
1952, oil on canvas, 65x54cm.

This summer the Institute of Contemporary Arts has put on display some sophisticated additions to contemporary confusion. It has been quite the most revolutionary confusion which home-grown cultural commentators have had the pleasure of concocting since the entry of Surrealism into the London gallery system. First imported as a tiny trickle of articles some thirty years ago, now the picturesque ruins of the Situationist International are embalmed in their very own show.

Once upon a time in Notting Hill, round about 1968, lived a somewhat thuggish presence, in the shape of the sub-Situationist group King Mob, which would have delighted in honouring Peter Wollen's and Mark Francis' exhibition by reducing the assembled ruins into rubble. However, to be pro-Situationist today primarily means to be pro the show, for the Situationist International has become a focal point for an academic nostalgia for safely distant radicalism. The ideas and activities of the S.I. now satisfy a need for an intellectually challenging but inactive opposition to the Thatcherite disruption of academic wonderland. For academics dreaming of the victorious return to '60s privilege, the S.I. is the superb spectacle of acutely cultured revenge.

An explanation as to why so many owe so much confusion to so few is absent from the S.I.'s theoretical canon. It is inadequate to pour scorn on the efforts of such cultural commentators as Adrian Henri, Chris Gray or Howard Brenton in interpreting the work of the Situationist International. Such scorn, elaborated in psychotically abusive mode, has sustained several species of pro-Situationist in the delusion that somehow their publications place capitalism under threat. A more revolutionary approach would be to analyse how the confusion has arisen. To achieve this, it is necessary to question why Situationist theories are credited with such a crucial role in the revolutionary project; why art historians like Adrian Henri only understand the S.I. to be a group of politically committed artists; why Jamie Reid wants to be regarded as an artist working in this 'Situationist' tradition; why, at least when it first went on display in the Pompidou Centre this Easter, Wollen's and Francis' exhibition could present the largest collection of Situationist art and artefacts ever seen in one place in such a way that they appeared primarily as an interesting influence upon the Sex Pistols; and how confusion about the Situationist International has now become so widespread that *Performance*

PART ONE —
THE CREATION OF ARTISTIC SITUATIONS

THE CREATION OF SITUATIONISTS

The Situationist International distinguished itself from all other revolutionary organizations by insisting that proletarian revolution must achieve the 'realisation and suppression of art' through the programmatic 'creation of situations'. However the simultaneous assertion that 'art is dead', combined with the claim that only the art created by members of the S.I. was of any significance in this era because they made a 'Situationist use of art', did more than merely cause confusion. This assertion was, rather, confusion incarnate. It was a perspective which certainly confused the international assortment of artists, architects and revolutionary theorists who grouped together in Italy in 1957 to form the Situationist International. Whilst it was plausible to propose that the project of the creation of situations could resolve contradictions within the fragmented achievements of previous political and artistic avant-gardes, it was also a project open to interpretations which are themselves entirely contradictory. Unfortunately for the individuals who formed the S.I. these contradictions were only ever embraced and never satisfactorily superceded.

Despite the claims to the contrary by Guy Debord, the S.I.'s most sustained theorist, its foundation was not coherent. Before the founding conference of the Situationist International a split took place between the two leading theorists of the Letterist International, Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, concerning whether or not the social and architectural experiments proposed by the L.I. required the suppression of art. Whilst Gil Wolman believed that 'one did not exclude the other', Debord's faction declared the necessity of the suppression of art. Paradoxically it was this faction which then joined forces with a group within the Imaginist Bauhaus, whose art could hardly be described as radical, and with an opportunist individual named Ralph Rumney who called himself 'a Committee of Psychogeographers', to create the Situationist International (S.I.).

In fact the disparate groups which came together to form the Situationist International in 1957 were barely united beyond their desire to establish a wider organization and thereby break free from isolation and impotence. The group of artists which composed Asger Jorn's Imaginist Bauhaus did vote in favour of uniting with the Situationist Faction in the L.I. and their vote was based upon a plausible interpretation of the theses contained in Debord's *Report on the Construction of Situations*. However by doing so, they placed themselves in the extremely ill-defined role of being Situationist artists. Whilst the creation of situations seemed to promise the supercession of constraints upon their creativity, in fact this attempt to overcome limitations gave rise to an actuality of unlimited limitations.



Gil J Wolman, 1954, metagraphic collage, 27x42cm.

REVIEWING A SITUATION

Eager to avoid any serious critique of the implications of the artistic activities of the S.I., Debordists argued that the existence of such works as Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio's *Anti-Material Cavern* was unimportant. This activity, it was argued, was theoretically superseded by the socially revolutionary concept of 'the creation of situations'. However, this argument only disguises the essential crisis of the concept. The artistic element inherent within any understanding of the creation of situations must be confronted. If the creation of revolutionary situations is not understood as the realisation of art, then it is inherently incoherent. One can speak, as Debord does, of the creation of the science of situations to supersede separated cultural production, but in doing so one is only returned to the problem the concept was originated to supersede. If there is a science, rather than just a theory of proletarian emancipation, how is this science indebted to art?

The passage of a certain critical capacity through the *Anti-Material Cavern* is revealing. The *Cavern* consists of an artistic situation constructed from canvas, upon which Gallizio has placed his personal, though hardly unique, variations of gestural abstraction, and is derived essentially from the artistic approach developed by Cobra. Being an environment constructed from canvas, it is, technically speaking, an architectural situation. However, it neither represents any real artistic advance, standing in very poor comparison to the approach of such experimenters in the creation of artistic environments as Yves Klein and Lucio Fontana, nor does it constitute a satisfactory approach to the realisation and suppression of art. It is simply 'real art' in the form of a painted environment.

In this context it is useful to contrast Gallizio's *Cavern* with an environment created by the vastly superior artist, Asger Jorn. The beautiful decoration of Jorn's house in Albisola could easily support the designation of a work of art or even the designation of being an architectural situation. Being a beautiful architectural environment it could no doubt house the creation of some wonderful social situations. For example, it could well be conducive to the act of falling in love. Certainly receptive lovers would find themselves stimulated by the surrounding presence of Jorn's murals and ceramics. But in congratulating Jorn for creating an environment which can only assist in the creation of beautiful social situations, something both very traditional and very pre-Situationist is being stated about art, situations and real life. Jorn's house is a very nice house, but to experience the real life this house can support cannot be said to realise art; it is only real life heightened by the proximity of beautiful murals and ceramics. If then the house that Jorn built had been superseded to become a Debordist house, how would the beautiful murals have been realised and suppressed to create a situation? Another critical derive down Gallizio's *Cavern* is required.

The *Cavern* demonstrates that the perspective for the creation of artistic situations for the founding members of the S.I. was essentially within the aesthetic orientation of Cobra and is not, as the English Situationist Chris Gray has argued, an example of Situationist anti-art. Furthermore, whatever the subsequent position of the Debordist minority of the S.I. was with regard to the creation of artistic situations, it should be stressed that initially they were entirely enthusiastic about them.

Clearly, with the foundation of the S.I., Debord reached an unstated compromise with what he had always regarded as a reactionary aesthetic. It was a compromise within which it was possible to interpret the architectural creation of situations as the creation of décors in the style of Cobra. It was a compromise in which the creation of situations was understood as an ensemble of all artistic possibilities and, as such, not only preserved the possibility of artistic production but necessarily re-confronted artists with the problem of the necessary evolution of art. An evolution, moreover, which cannot merely be resolved by a simple call for collective creation extended into architectural space.

Examined as a work of art, the *Anti-Material Cavern* not only allows us to make precise the confusion of the S.I. concerning its actual practice of art, but also the preposterous confusion within the S.I. concerning any sort of supercession of art. In approaching the formation of the S.I. Debord claimed he argued for the coherence of the positions held within the Letterist International. And he presented the L.I. as constituting a coherent rescue operation of the creative activities of Isidore Isou and the original Letterist group, which since 1946 had presented its intention as being the creative continuation of all the experiments of all previous avant-gardes in all fields of artistic, social and scientific exploration. Clearly, Gallizio's *Cavern* fails to supercede the aesthetic achievements of the Letterists, for the L.I. regarded gestural abstraction as an incoherent and regressive step from Letterist aesthetics. As such, it illustrates the opportunism and confusion underlying the actual artistic practice of the ex-Letterist elements within the S.I.

REVIEWING THE SITUATION

The 'realisation and suppression of art' by the 'creation of situations' can usefully be explored by scrutinising the concepts involved in a literal sense. How does Debord select which paintings are to be realised? And how would a Situationist realise the properties inherent within a painting?

Is the *Stone Breakers* by Courbet realised by workers returning to make road surfaces by breaking stones with hammers, or is it, alternatively, realised by participating in the abolition of roads by replacing cars with hovercraft? Clearly, a proletarian trip with Courbet to resurface bad memory lane would not be liberating. The realisation of realism is not realistic as a theoretical contribution



toward proletarian emancipation.

How then is a non-realistic painting like *Guernica* by Picasso to be realised? One cannot seriously believe that the approach to realisation argued by Debord would entail the rather dubious ethics required to breed a bull with both eyes on the left side of his face or arranging another aerial bombing of the eponymous Basque town, therefore one must assume another angle upon realisation is being proposed. Two possibilities require initial examination: either the realisation envisaged by Debord is to literally select such palaces as those painted by Claude Lorraine and build them, in which case we are talking about the realisation of a selection of idealist art; or, on the contrary, the realisation envisaged is not literal and in fact entails the realisation of an aspiration within the painting — such as the abolition of war and fascism.

Revolutionaries create concepts to equip themselves for an effective struggle toward creating their own liberation. When Marx argued that the revolutionary proletariat would realise philosophy, he did not of course mean that workers would become real Stoics, real Empiricists or perhaps real Idealists. Instead he wished to convey, with this Hegelian concept, that truths about humanity perceived by philosophers as universal, were in fact conditional and only given reality by the existence of class society; a conditioned reality which could be abolished by revolution. But what supplement to this project does Debord have in mind? If the realisation of art envisages the realisation of such qualities inherent in art, as love, beauty, or playfulness, it is still legitimate to ask: what will be the style of building in which post-revolutionary lovers make love? It is quite insufficient to side-step the issue by arguing that the style is up to the post-revolutionary lovers themselves. The point is that Debord's concept does not add to the viable conceptual arms of the proletariat. The problems posed by art remain in the problems posed by the realisation of art. And they remain not simply as social problems but artistic problems. The problem of creating paradise clearly requires posing in more appropriate ways.

THE CREATION OF SITUATIONS

As an avant-garde position, the creation of situations possesses vastly superior perspectives to those outlined by the Surrealists and Constructivists. The Constructivists simply propose that a desirable life is not 'natural', but 'constructed'. The Situationists supercede Constructivist utilitarianism by combining the basic concepts of Surrealism with Constructivism: they propose the actual construction of ludic situations which in effect would make 'real' or 'construct' the 'fantasies' of Surrealism.

Perspectives for partying in one's own cathedral, care of a revolutionary redistribution of property, however, misdirects aspiring insurgents away from a

Pinot-Gallizio, *Anti Material Cavern*, 1959, with model.

more fundamental struggle to change life. Simply to understand that a desirable moment of life could consist of creating such situations as drinking champagne with one's insurgent friends on the roof of a newly liberated Buckingham Palace only touches superficially upon the real problem of the creation of a desirable life. The creation of life is not, as Debord asserts, the consequence of assembling the elements of a situation. Selecting a palace and dancing on its roof with champagne-filled friends misses a fundamental point. It is obvious enough that before the situation is created someone must not simply build but create the technique of building palaces and someone must create the champagne. It is not just a question of re-stating a Marxist perspective in more desirable clothing. In fact in terms of the creation of life, situations can almost be said to look after themselves. The real problem is pre-Situationist. The problem is inventing champagne.

The creation of situations as a final solution to the persistent attempts of the international avant-garde to discover a superceding synthesis of both artistic and socially revolutionary principles misdirects would-be radicals. The creation of situations as a guiding principle, misunderstands the nature of the creation of life and as such does not answer its own intended purpose of creating an ever new way of life. The real creation of life is elsewhere. Debord has misidentified the point of creative departure. He has established his avant-garde battle-lines against the misery of contemporary existence within the margins of a misconceived reworking of the Marxist historical dialectic. As a result he fails to make a stand in the majority of contemporary battlefields. The revolution of everyday life requires more than incoherent proposals for social and decorative re-arrangements.

PART TWO — *THE CREATION OF INSURGENT SITUATIONS*

THE BITTER VICTORY OF SITUATIONISM

With a second evaluation by Debord of such works as the *Anti-Material Cavern* the original ambiguity of working within avant-garde culture to produce 'Situationist' works of art, and most noticeably of creating artistic situations, was abandoned. The Debordist S.I., after the expulsion in 1962-3 of the artists who had made its launch possible, now had a new theoretical and practical orientation which inherited all of the S.I.'s original artistic inconsistencies and theoretical ambiguities. With a membership little bigger than the original Situationist tendency within the Letterist International, the Debordist S.I. now focused its attention on the creation of insurgent situations. The majority tendency, grouped around Asger Jorn's half brother Jørgen Nash, formed themselves into the Second Situationist

International and continued to include the creation of Situationist art in their anti-capitalist arsenal.

It is at this juncture that most of the confusion concerning the actual orientation of the S.I. and what it has subsequently meant to be Situationist originates. This confusion is made worse by being compounded with the confusion inherent at the S.I.'s inception. The secession of the Nashists led to the creation of an organisation which embodied a coherent expression of artistic possibilities within Debord's *Report on the Construction of Situations*. When the Scottish poet and novelist Alexander Trocchi split from the S.I. and launched his Sigma project, he not only gave articulate expression to the first phase of the S.I. or Nashism, but also launched himself with the full approval of Debord. Consequently Trocchi's Nashism became the legitimate, illegitimate expression of Situationist ideas in the Anglo-Saxon world. The cornerstones of the confusion on display at the I.C.A. were now firmly in place.

THE INSURGENT'S NEW CLOTHES

The break with the Nashists marked the emergence of a crucial new period in which the Debordists radically redefined what they meant by creating a situation. Any connection with art was now wholly repudiated and the creation of situations became the practice of the insurrectionary intervention. However, far from being a development, this concept was in practice a regression, in the same category as that supercession of clothing practised by a certain naked Emperor.

The tactic of the intervention, far from being new, was integral to the programme detailed by the initial Letterists grouped around Isidore Isou and Gabriel Pomerand, in January 1946, when they inaugurated their official launch as an avant-garde movement. The theory was put into practice later that month with the disruption of a lecture on Dadaism by Michel Leiris at the Vieux Columbiere Theatre, Paris. Isou and Pomerand used the lecture to present to a receptive public some Letterist poetry and in terms of the public attention gained for their ideas the intervention was a success. However it also gave rise to some ambiguities. They certainly succeeded in preventing the cultural establishment from ignoring their ideas, but they also began to attract members more interested in the excitement of the intervention than in the fundamental creativity underlying its purpose.

The intervention which most influenced those members who were later to form the Letterist International was the 'Notre Dame scandal' of 1950. With his head appropriately shaved and dressed as a Dominican, Michel Mourre mounted into the pulpit of Notre Dame during Easter High Mass and began reading a sermon whose central message was that 'God is Dead'. He succeeded in so disrupting the ceremony that the congregation which numbered over ten thousand attempted to lynch him. The scandal was immense and brought to the attention of the entire

French nation the presence of a youthful organization intent upon completely overthrowing every aspect of established society. It was so successful, emerging furthermore amidst a veritable avalanche of other Letterist scandals, that in the following years it attracted into the Letterist ranks scores of young people including Guy Debord who joined the movement in 1951.

In October 1952 Guy Debord and fellow Letterists Gil Wolman, Jean-Louis Brau and Serge Berna formed a breakaway group, the Letterist International, and disrupted a press conference given in Paris to launch Charlie Chaplin's film *Limelight*. Primarily because of inadequate research by the ex-Situationist Chris Gray, it is an intervention whose significance in this country has been dominated by Debord's interpretation of it. As an inaugural activity of the Letterist International Chaplin was denounced initially as a plagiarist. Following a letter to *Combat* from the Letterists Isadore Isou, Maurice Lemaitre and Gabriel Pomerand which defended Chaplin as a real creator in the cinema, the Letterist International then declared that they had been engaged in the action of knocking an idol from his pedestal; an action described as an urgent revolutionary task. This was not simply a move which sidestepped the essential issue for the Isouian Letterists, but was a move away from any clarity concerning the nature of creation. Following perspectives laid out by Debord, Chris Gray has accepted a highly partisan description of the conflict between the Letterists. In fact Isou was not defending a reactionary or aesthetic Letterism against a revolutionary anti-art Letterism. Isou was legitimately defending a concept of creation without which no proper understanding of how life was to be reinvented could be attained. In addition, the logic of denouncing Chaplin as a cinematic plagiarist implied the belief that comedians like Max Lindner were 'true' creators in the cinema, which is not at all the anti-art perspective defended by Chris Gray. Neither is it consistent with an attack upon idols. These fundamental contradictions reveal that an intervention need not necessarily supersede anything and can in fact compound nonsense.

Against this background of Letterist interventions it is possible to examine the two interventions for which the S.I. is most famous and from which the present status of its concepts is ultimately derived.

In 1966 a few student radicals at Strasbourg University formed themselves into the *Society for the Rehabilitation of Marx and Ravachol* and succeeded in having themselves elected to the leadership of the student union. Uncertain as to how to exercise their newly attained power, they asked the S.I. to assist. Discussions were complex and in the incidents that followed, the S.I. succeeded in becoming a household name in France. They also succeeded in losing about half their remaining membership with the exclusion of the four 'Garnaultins'. Firstly, the S.I. made it quite clear that none of the students were sufficiently conversant with radical theory to make them eligible to become members of the S.I. Secondly, attempts were made to persuade the students to produce a critique of student life:

when they failed to do so the critique was supplied by the Situationist Mustapha Khyati. Using student funds, ten thousand copies of his treatise entitled *On the Poverty of Student Life* were published and publicised by André Bertrand's comic strip *The Return of the Durutti Column*. The comic strip was plastered all over town and the treatise was then handed out at the official opening of the academic year. Following general public outrage fuelled by the sensation-seeking press, the students were prosecuted for misuse of student funds. The stage had been set for the enormous escalation of the reputation of the S.I. in the minds of French students. One consequence of this was the S.I.'s continuing contact with student disturbances throughout French universities at this time.

The intervention of the Situationists in the events in Paris in May 1968 was essentially conditioned by their contact with the pro-Situationist student group Les Enragés. Emulating the disruption of university life in Strasbourg, certain students at the University of Nanterre including the Enragé Riesel were suspended by the university authorities. These suspensions led to protests which in turn developed into riots. The riots found massive popular support and assisted in focusing popular opposition to De Gaulle. The rioting escalated and the Sorbonne was occupied and eventually ten million workers came out on strike. During the strike the Situationists agreed a common platform with the Enragés and formed the Committee for the Maintenance of the Occupations which consisted of about six Situationists and about thirty close sympathisers. Given the generally insurrectionary atmosphere in the Latin Quarter, the S.I. was able to place printing presses under its control and to publish enormous quantities of propaganda material in the form of leaflets and comics. Together with graffiti these constituted the principle intervention of the S.I. in the May Events. Whatever else it is ultimately possible to state about the role of the S.I. in May 1968, it is clear that the Situationist intervention was a sustained attempt to persuade workers to form themselves into Workers Councils with which to seize power and bring about the abolition of capitalism and the state.

Some precision, however, is required concerning the prestige allocated to the role of the S.I. by themselves in the May Events. The S.I. was undoubtedly one of the most influential of the revolutionary tendencies then agitating on French university campuses and this agitation did assist in promoting student unrest. The unrest certainly culminated in the student riots which provoked the general strike. It is also true that the S.I. were extremely active in attempting to persuade workers to transform the strike into a revolution. These actions are, of course, exemplary; but they also suffer from limitations, of which the most important is the inability of the May Events to confirm the adequacy of Situationist theories.

If the activities of the S.I. really did possess the power to provoke a potentially revolutionary general strike, rather than play an astute role within it, then an individual with the tastes of Debord would have continued to provoke such strikes

until the outbreak of proletarian revolution.

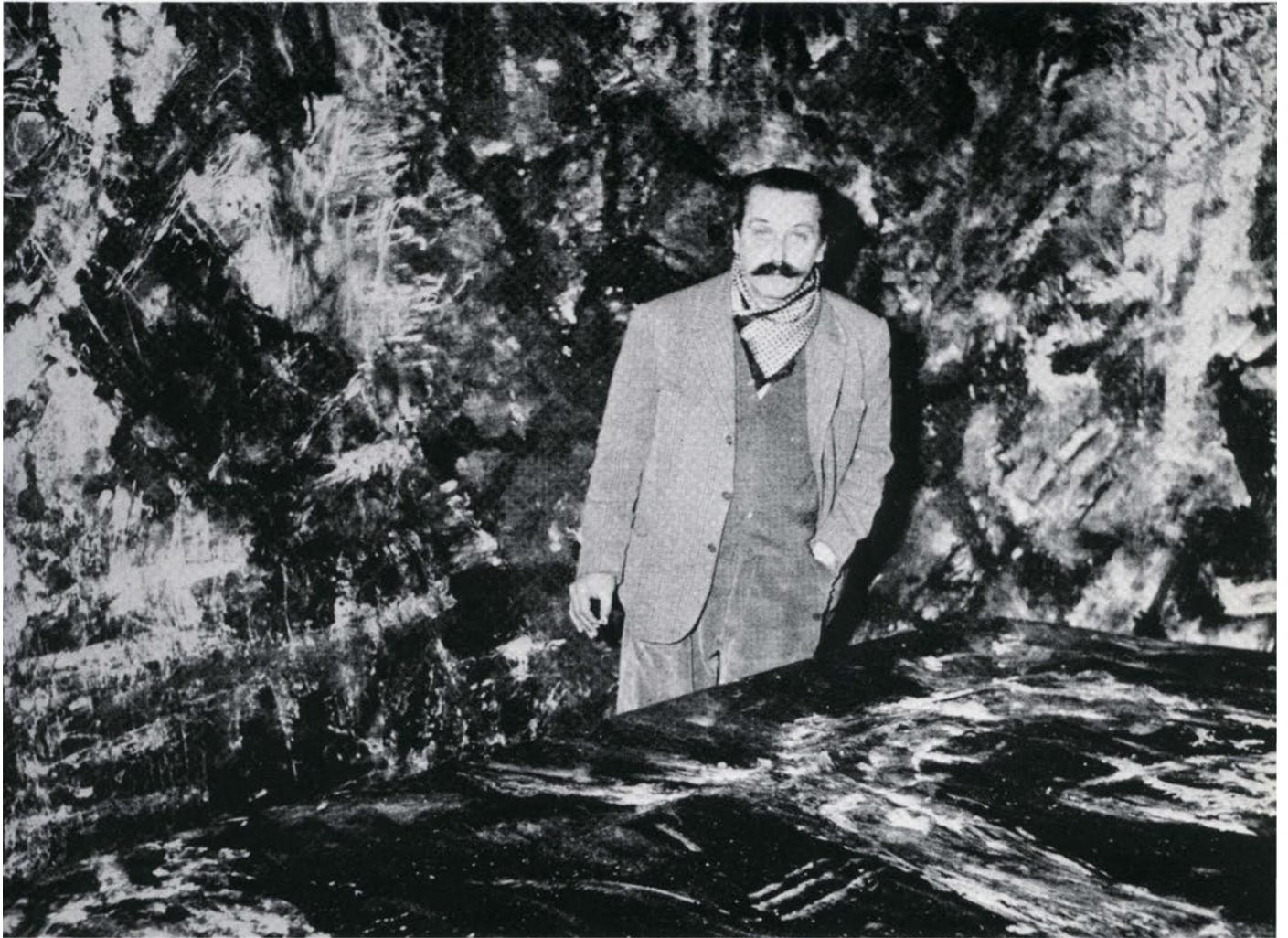
SITUATIONS VACANT

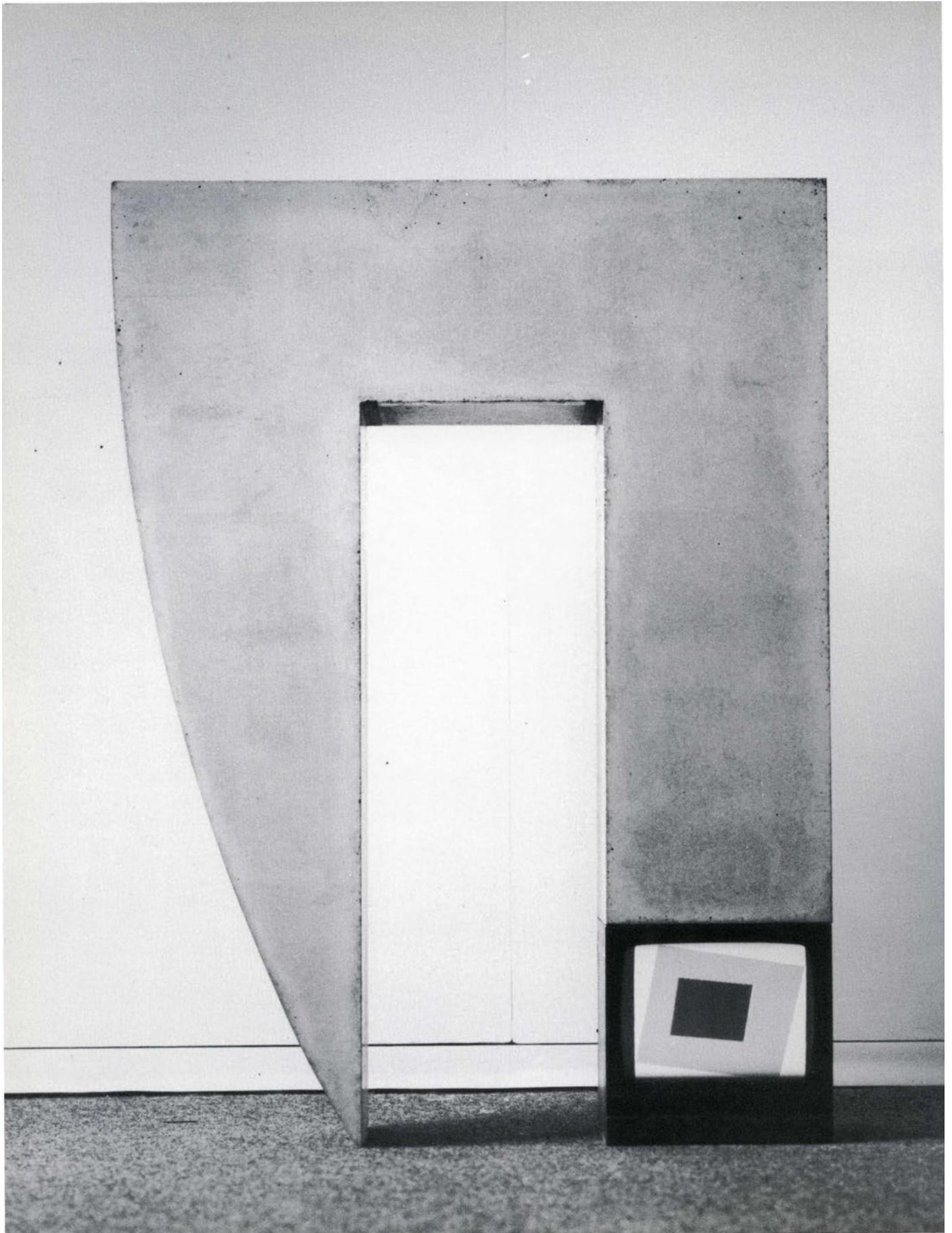
Whilst it is legitimate to state that there is no such thing as Situationist performance art, it is also true that the S.I. has exercised a significant influence upon performance, which extends well beyond the couple of rather banal excursions that the S.I. themselves made in this respect. The influence of the S.I. upon performance art stems entirely from a confused mixture of the radical reputation of the S.I. with the mistaken belief that they were political artists interested in revolutionary 'happenings'.

A revealing example of the 'influence' of the S.I. upon the development of guerilla performance, was the intervention of King Mob into the activities of Oxford Street Christmas shoppers. Dressed as Santa Claus, a member of the group passed among the shoppers in Selfridges pretending to act in an 'official' capacity, handing 'gifts' directly from the shelves into the hands of happy recipients and thereby creating a moment of class struggle as a costume drama. In doing so they simultaneously succeeded in superceding all the artistic, social and political categories within which the S.I. insisted modern revolutionaries could operate. And so a vulgar interpretation of Situationist theories gave rise to the creation of a 'theatrical' event, which in its 'art' proved that art was not dead but revolutionary. Unfortunately, it was a game which the members of King Mob failed to develop further. Indeed, in what they perceived to be a move toward greater 'revolutionary effectiveness', they subsequently turned against this kind of action. They hoped this move would clarify the principles necessary to overthrow capitalism, but in the event it only made matters more confusing. Far from opening new revolutionary vistas, the attack they subsequently launched on their own 'artistic' activities only succeeded in creating a vacuum.

The dead hand of Debordism has failed to strangle the paradisaical potential implicit in the creation of situations. Principles which will enable the proletariat to place themselves 'in their own cathedrals' still await creation.

Pinot-Gallizio during the creation of his *Anti-Material Cavern*, May 1959.





Chrissie Iles

REFLECTIONS

Video Sculpture Past and Present

Helmut Mark, *Sculpture*, 1985;
exhibited 'Video Sculpture',
Cologne, 1989. (photo Friedrich
Rosenstiel)

Video: I see.

Narcissus looked into the pool and saw his own reflection. He fell in love with his own image; and in the pursuit of it, he was destroyed.

Television is one of the most mundane and familiar elements of our intimate, domestic life. Its screen is a pool into which we gaze at our own reflection. It holds a mirror up to our collective selves, the reflections of which are beyond our control, but which we largely accept as truth.

Video installation and sculpture entered into art directly through performance. The video portapak appeared 25 years ago at the height of body art and performance/happenings in America, and was immediately adopted by performance artists to document their activities. The relationship between viewer and viewed, and experience of the artwork in 'real time', central tenets of the performance artist, were also the substance of the earliest video sculptures by Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, Peter Campus, Vito Acconci, Wolf Vostell, Frank Gillette, Les Levine, Dan Graham and Ira Schneider, in which the closed circuit television camera was the dominant element. Video was treated as a 'live' medium, in which the artist and/or spectator participated. The video monitor became a window through which artist and spectator could appear, and disappear.

Video has become a symptom of the disappearance of the body. In art, science, entertainment and war, technology has largely removed us from direct experience and substituted an electronic metaphor. This metaphor has no physical substance and no tactility. It is inorganic. In both video installation and video sculpture, metaphor is now the predominant iconography. Video sculpture has taken the place of the performance artist as mediator in time.

The recent international exhibition of 25 years of video sculpture 'Video Skulptur: Retrospektiv und Aktuell', shown in Cologne and Berlin,¹ frames this transition of video from its conceptual beginnings to post-modern technological and aesthetic spectacle, through a number of major European and American works from the '60s, '70s and '80s.

The important distinction between video sculpture and video installation has not been evident in the majority of exhibitions of either. Although the Cologne exhibition defines itself by the term 'video sculpture', the majority of the earlier work can broadly be termed 'sculptural' and the later 'environmental'. One walks around the early work in the Kölnischer Kunstverein as a sculpture exhibition. In the DuMont Kunsthalle, location of the later work, we enter a world of theatrical metaphor: a garden (Dalibor Martinis, *Rock Garden*, 1984); a maze (Buky Schwartz, *Three Angles of Coordination for Monitoring the Labyrinthian Space*, 1985/6); a landscape (Rita Myers, *The Allure of the Concentric*, 1985); a boardroom (Antonio Muntadas, *The Board Room*, 1987); a cenotaph (Barbara Steinman, *Cenotaph*, 1986); a travelling trunk (Abramović/Ulay, *Continental*

Video Series II, III, IV, 1989). Life is laid out at one remove, in the simulation of a physical experience of the world. Inside this place, it is possible even to rest in a garden, where one watches the video monitors instead of the flowers. The histories of painting, sculpture, theatre and film are laid before us, all conjured by the presence of video.

The power of video to enable this to happen lies in its fragmentation of the frontal viewpoint, established by the theatre and later by the film screen. The drama created by the anticipation of our external space entering into the internal, imaginative space of the film frame, is replaced by video's placement of the exterior space (represented by sculptural materials) *alongside* imaginative space (images on the video screen). The edges of the film frame which fixed reality outside the imagination have been erased, blurring the transition between exterior and interior space.

Video simulates exterior reality not only through the insertion of sculptural materials alongside the video image, but also by the use of the multiple frame. Unlike film, images can be seen simultaneously, within other images, or travelling across multiple screens. Multiple imagery as a simulation of reality is demonstrated in four works. An early piece, *Madame Cucumatz* by Friederike Pezold (b/w, 1975/1989) fragments the female form in a painterly Surrealist construction, in which various segments, hand-coloured, are shown moving in unco-ordinated time, within a larger sculptural black and white structure representing the body as architecture. The fragmented relationship between the images is emphasised, and the individual status of the image within each screen retained.

Michel Jaffrenou's *Le Plein de Plumes* (b/w, 1980) drops handfuls of feathers from the top screen of six stacked monitors, which float down to the bottom screen where they accumulate until all screens are obliterated by the pile. In Ulrike Rosenbach's *Or-phelia* the body flows fragmentarily across three screens. In Studio Azzurro's *Il Nuotatore (The Swimmer)* (colour, 1984), a swimmer swims across twelve screens in an apparently seamless perpetual movement between the two ends of the swimming pool, traversing the video screens. This is an outrageous rejection of the single frame, and its triumphant technological wizardry emphasises the future through the infinite. The swimmer could, if more screens were laid end to end, continue swimming across them ad infinitum. It is an endless simulacrum, an infinite mirror prism self-reflection; the perfect narcissism.

The fragmentation of the body through a number of screens is an archetypal image straight from the stage, in the sawing in half of women in theatre and vaudeville. This infantile fantasy of cutting up the mother, confirmed as fantasy by the relief of seeing the wholeness of the body revealed at the end, is, in psychoanalytical terms, a crucial stage in the transition of the integration of the personality, as the child gradually discovers the mother as a whole figure. Fragmentation of the body is a prerequisite of film, and latterly of television and

photographic advertising. In video, it assumes a concrete reality.

Given the importance of such a history, it is impossible to argue, as many have done, that video has little relationship to film (in particular to montage), or television, and that video sculpture and installation should be assessed only in sculptural terms. Moreover, the video image, wherever it is placed within the overall construction of a sculpture or installation with organic materials, remains the dominant focus of the viewer's attention. As Vito Acconci observed, the physical surroundings fall away before our eyes, in the deference of the clumsy three-dimensional past to the quicksilver scientific future which the omnipotence of video represents. Its mesmeric insistence also links it back fundamentally to performance art, since its power lies in movement.

As performance artists began to take the presence of the video camera into account, their movement became bound up with the recorded image. This led to explorations of the self which were inescapably narcissistic. This exploration was extended to the viewer, through the use of the closed circuit camera in video sculptures. The artwork can only be completed and experienced with the presence of the spectator who, confronted with his/her reflection, becomes mesmerised by its intangibility. This notion of the *Doppelgänger*, explored so eloquently in Peter Campus's *Interface* (1972), evokes again the myth of Narcissus. Both artist and spectator come face to face with their own death.

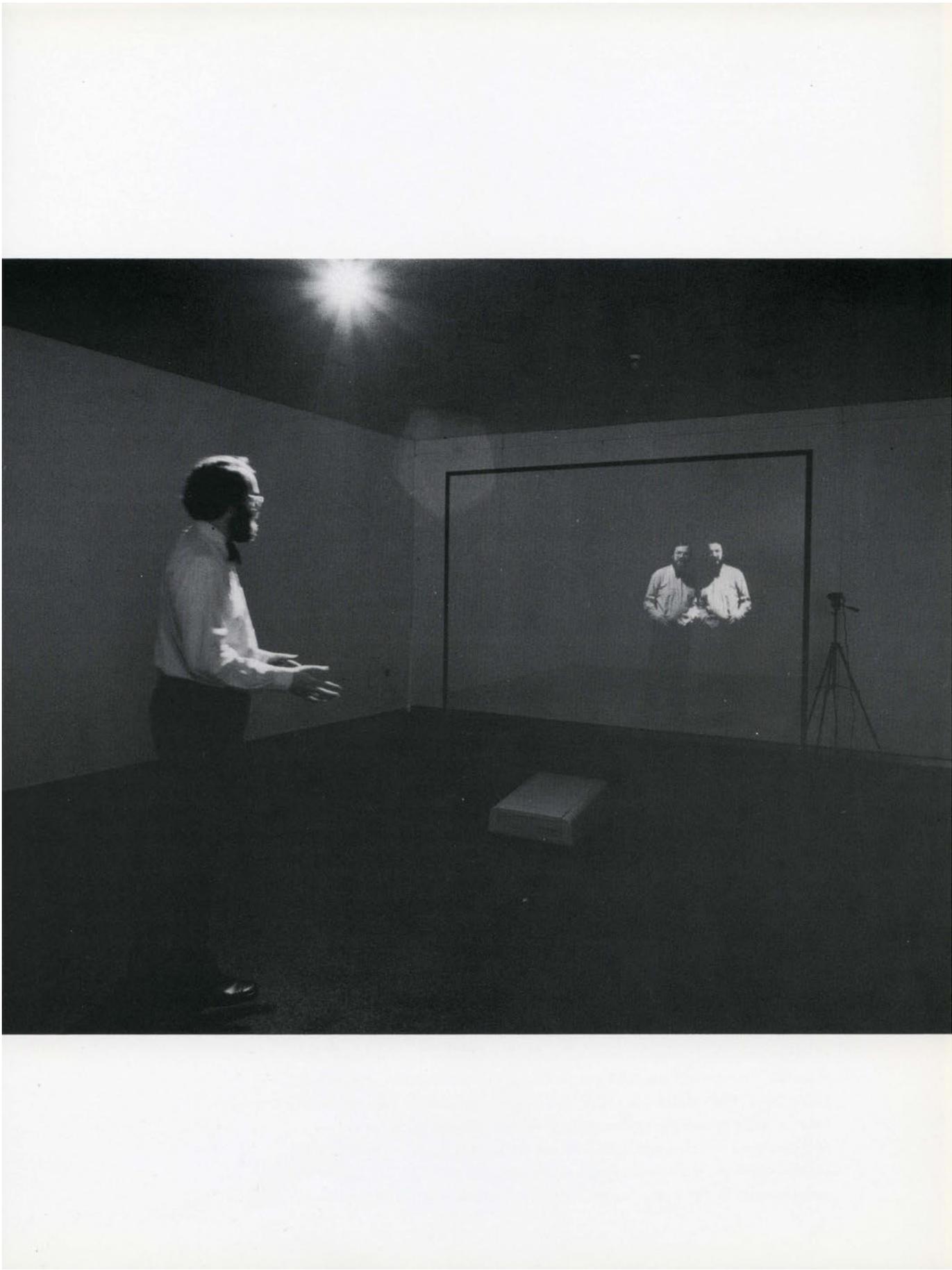
The ubiquitous eye of the closed circuit television camera derives directly from the Panopticon, as discussed by Foucault,² the all-seeing 360 degree system of visual control. In Wolf Vostell's *Heuschrecken* (1969/70), a photographic montage of intimate erotic exchange and the military entry into Prague, is underlined by a row of small black and white television screens, all displaying the viewer's movement around the sculpture in a direct reference to ideological control. An obsession with surveillance and closed circuit television was central to both American and Eastern European culture during the cold war period in which this work was made.

The panopticon is also echoed in Buky Schwartz's *Three Angles of Coordination for Monitoring the Labyrinthian Space* (1985/86), in which the viewer's path through a lifesize wooden maze is recorded on screens placed above. The screen can be used to find one's way, avoid others or meet others; but it is impossible to escape the gaze of the unseen camera.

Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette's *Wipe Cycle* (1969) allows the spectator to watch him/herself recorded walking into the room and up to the sculpture, from eight points of view in slightly delayed time, on a bank of nine black and white monitors filtered with colour. By taking over the making of the image, at first unwittingly and then, usually, with great delight, the spectator makes his/her own performance, which is in turn recorded.

The viewer takes control of the image in a less inward, more revelatory sense in

Peter Campus, *Interface*, 1972,
closed circuit video-installation;
exhibited 'Video Sculpture',
Cologne, 1989.



Jeffrey Shaw's *Narrative Landscape* (1985), with texts by Dirk Groenveld. The piece provides a rare example of late '80s computer technology applied to create profound and complex meaning. By the aid of a joystick, the viewer selects one of a grid of nine squares containing three images each. These are set into a blueish mandalic image on a large video screen which is visible, like an archaeological mosaic, viewed in the floor from a gallery in an otherwise darkened space. Each square opens up an image and accompanying spoken text, which can then be further opened to reveal another two. The spoken text relating to each of the first nine images becomes more fragmentary at each stage. 'How situational is a city . . .' ' . . . ancient stone breaking into pieces.' . . . ' . . . how lost is the body . . .' . . . 'the rose gives honey to the bees'. The first set of images are places of mystical importance (a mosque, a castle in flames); the second set, the body (a medieval drawing of birth, an alchemical vessel); and the third, symbols of both (a model of Pisa held in the hand; Yves Klein's famous scattering of gold leaf onto the Seine, spiritual gold scattered in the river of life; bees and honey). Gradually, out of the randomness one can reveal, in any order, the entire hidden system of signs and images as a complex alchemical emblemata, in a simulation of the stages of acquiring knowledge through the combination of the extremes of ancient and contemporary magic.

Landscape, so central to the history of painting, continues to preoccupy American and European video artists. This could be seen in this exhibition in the work of Rita Myers, Tony Oursler, Dara Birnbaum, Mary Lucier, Shigeko Kubota, Abramović/Ulay, Dalibor Martinis, Ingo Gunther, Jeffrey Shaw, Barbara and Michael Leisgen. In almost all cases, landscape continues to operate as it has done for centuries, as a metaphor for inspiration and an affirmation of the natural forces of life. The imagery as expressed through the inorganic medium of video depicts either naturalistic landscape beside a metaphorical one suggested by physical elements (Rita Myers), or idealised/ecologically whole landscape against the harsh reality depicted by physical materials. In each case, the objects and materials used become, in the language of video, iconographical symbols for life.

The simulation of physical reality involves a number of changes in scale. Film has three sizes, 35mm, 16mm and super/standard 8, and a unitary format. The size and format of video stretch from the wristwatch to the filmic, large scale screen. Both extremes can be found in the Cologne exhibition, as tiny mouthpieces for the irreverent portraits of powerful religious and political figures in Antonio Muntadas' *The Board Room* (1987), or as the large scale archaeological mosaic of Jeffrey Shaw. The video screen can be camouflaged, contained or presented as itself, in single or multiple combinations. This range, in both historical and technical terms, is epitomised in an early and recent work by Nam June Paik. The simple technology of the single, furniture-like television set of his '60s sculpture is tampered with by the artist to create a critical conceptual intervention. In *V-V-V-*

Vyramid (1982/89) a pyramid of monitors soars to the roof, a contemporary spectacle of technological and visual excess.

As in film, a progression in video sculpture and a change in scale is linked to the growing importance of sound. In the Cologne exhibition, the early section in the Kunstverein resembles a sculpture exhibition partly because the works are, mostly, silent.

A memorable exception to the silence is Bill Viola's zen installation *He Weeps For You* (1976). A single drop of water, whose reflection of the room is magnified, recorded and screened on the opposite wall of the darkened room, drops from a brass pipe and valve deafeningly onto an amplified drum on the floor at the repeated intervals of time it takes to swell and complete its form. The process is a precise articulation of Viola's concern with the expression of the whole life system by the smallest part, and with 'that moment of exchange between viewer and art work when energy is released.'³

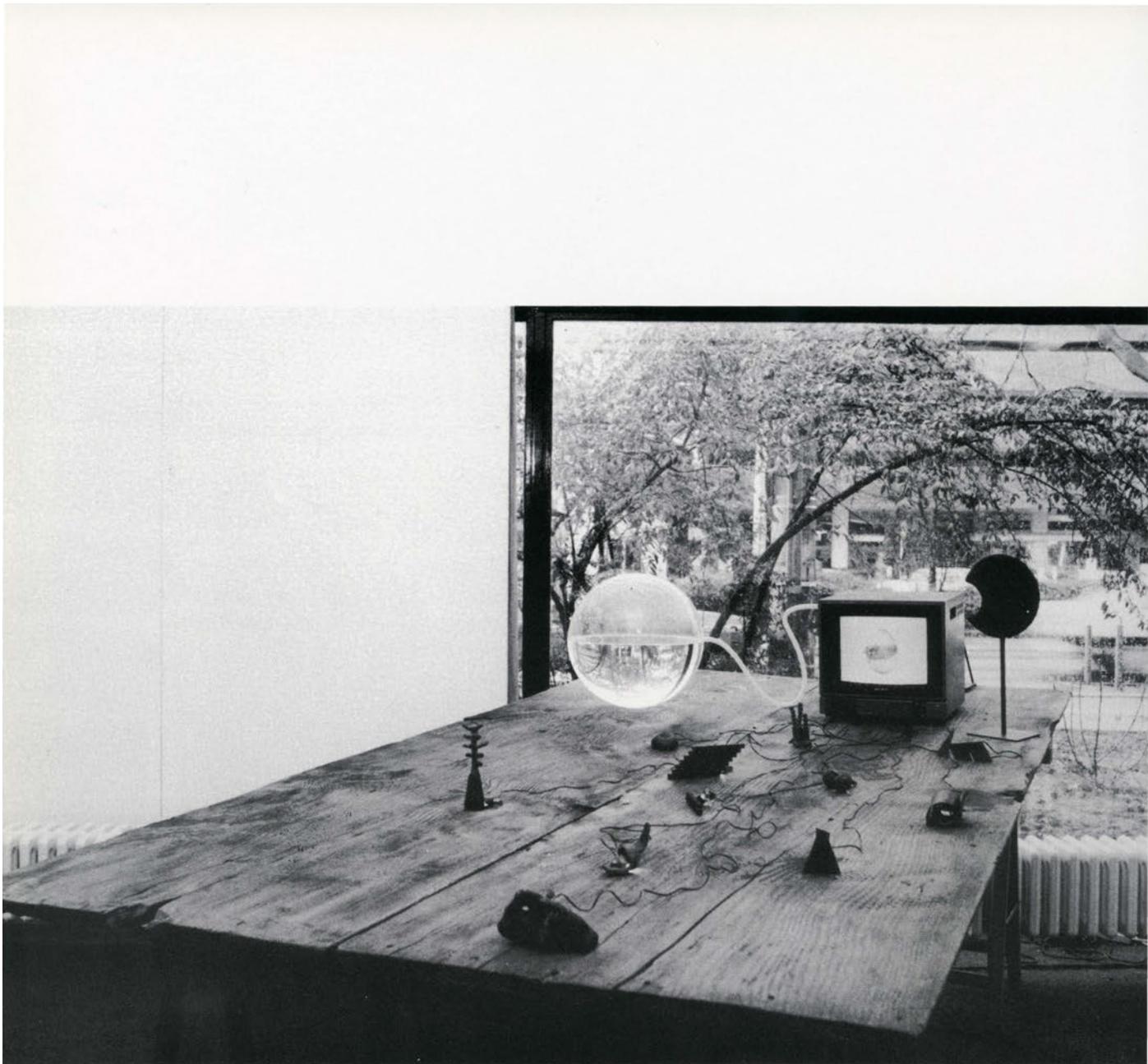
Servaas's compact and amusing *PFFT* (1982/83), in which the artist's close-up face on the screen blows with great exertion at a white feather balanced on the plinth, which obligingly moves at each puff, provides some of the only other sound. The live element in this piece serves to suggest 'real' time by linking the video image directly with simultaneous movement beyond the screen.

In the DuMont Kunsthalle, sound is a major component of the majority of work, paralleling developments in early film, where the introduction of sound made the image on screen less tactile and more illusionistic. The infra-red headphones, whilst essential for a proper reading of each piece in this section of the exhibition, divorces the viewer even further from direct experience, as sound cannot be heard with the naked ear.

Video was taken up by women artists in great numbers in the '70s for its lack of male-dominated history and the possibilities it offered for new forms of representation. Apart from the work of Dara Birnbaum, the work in this exhibition hardly reflects this important aspect of video sculpture and installation.

It could be traced more clearly in the nearest equivalent to the Cologne exhibition to be held in Britain, 'Video Positive'.⁴ Yet, presented not as an exhibition but as a festival, the single screen predominated even in the gallery, where the space at the Tate was overwhelmed by a video wall, a showcase for technological experiment by single screen video makers. One of the most significant video sculptures to have emerged from Britain, David Hall's seminal *A Situation Envisaged — The Rite II* was tucked unobtrusively away behind the opulent technology. No curatorial logic to the installation and sculpture selection was in evidence, nor any distinction between the two made. Moreover, none of the considerable body of work by major British artists, apart from David Hall in Liverpool, was included in either show.

Video has gained enormous image-making potential from the rapid



developments currently taking place across all technological media. Yet recent video sculpture displays a slickness of presentation which its engagement with sophisticated video and computer technology is in danger of reducing to a hollow aesthetic. Furthermore, the presence of a performance element, which has nourished video since its inception, is diminished as technology continues to remove the necessity for the direct physical experience. As this happens, the body will continue to disappear, into its own reflection.

NOTES

1. 'Video-Skulptur: retrospectiv und aktuell 1963-1989', Cologne, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Kunststation St Peter, Belgisches Haus and DuMont Kunsthalle, 18 Mar-23 Apr 1989; 39. Berliner Festwochen 1989: '25 Jahre Videoskulptur Videoinstallationen Videotapes', Berlin, Kongresshalle, 27 Aug-24 Sep 1989; Kunsthaus, Zürich, 13 Oct-12 Nov 1989.
2. See his *Surveillir et punir, Naissance de la Prison*, 1975; *Discipline and Punish, Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan, London, 1977.
3. Barbara London, *Bill Viola*, New York: MOMA, 1988.
4. 'Video Positive' — Video Festival at the Tate Gallery, and Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool; and Williamson Gallery, Birkenhead, February 1989.

Anna Winteler, *Discours des Montagnes a la Mère*, 1988;
exhibited 'Video Sculpture',
Cologne, 1989.



Sigmar Gassert

GLANZ UND ELEND

Die Multimedia-Kunst von Marie-Jo Lafontaine

BRILLIANCE AND MISERY

The Multimedia Art of Marie-Jo Lafontaine

**Marie-Jo Lafontaine, still from
Victoria, 1987-88.**

Im Zweiten Weltkrieg bezeichnete man mit 'larmes d'acier' (Tränen aus Stahl) die vom Himmel fallenden Bomben, ein Spektakel für das Auge, ein Grauen, wo sie einschlugen. *Les larmes d'acier* hat nun Marie-Jo Lafontaine ihre für die 1987 in Kassel veranstaltete Documenta 8 geschaffene Video-Skulptur genannt. Mehr als zwei Dutzend Video-Monitore sind da in sieben Blöcken dicht nebeneinander aufgetürmt. Diese kompakte und mächtige Masse von Bildschirmen wird von einem dunkelschwarzen, skulpturalen Gehäuse zusammengehalten, das gleichermassen spinnenartig wie maschinell wirkt mit seinen pleuelstangenähnlichen Aussenstützen und den die Skulptur nach oben unter der Decke abgrenzenden und krönenden Kuben. Bevorzugt im Halbdunkel, schwer, unverrückbar und den jeweiligen Raum übermächtig dominierend pflegt die Künstlerin diese ihre Installation aufzustellen, gleichsam wie eine statische Architektur, die unumgänglich ist, weil man ihr nicht ausweichen kann. Und Unumgänglichkeit ist in der Tat eines der ebenso sorgsam thematisierten wie geschickt versteckt inszenierten Motive nicht nur dieser Video-Installation, sondern aller Arbeiten der Künstlerin, die schlechterdings vom zivilisatorischen Geschlechterkampf handeln.

In *Les larmes d'acier* sind Bodybuilder in ihrem asketischen, masochistischen Training die ausschliesslichen Akteure auf den raffiniert in wechselnder Synchronität geführten Bilderzeilen. Die Monitorwand ist mit Absicht so gross und unüberblickbar gehalten, dass der Betrachter nur mit wandernden Augen die einzelnen Bilderfolgen lesen kann oder aber, sofern es der jeweilige Ausstellungsraum erlaubt, das ganze Drama nur von Weitem ins Blickfeld setzen kann, dann aber besonders deutlich die Bilderrhythmen sieht, in der die Akteure in der Mechanik des Geschehens völlig aufgehen. Ohne eigentlichen Anfang und ohne eigentliches Ende wird der Betrachter genötigt, Augenzeuge dieser — freilich freiwilligen — Männerkasteiungen im Räderwerk der Bodybuilding-Maschinen zu sein. Diese Bodybuilder sind in dem landläufigen Sinn schön, weil eben und muskalös wie es die Cover-girls von Magazinen sind. Diese Muskelmänner stossen die Hanteln und stemmen die Gewichte in einem selbstgewählten Kreuzzug des Körpers für ein Ideal des Männlichen, das sich, antiken Vollendungsvorstellungen ähnlich, im muskelproportionierten, stählernen Körper erfüllt. Bis zur physischen Erschöpfung wird diese Tortur getrieben und unendlich, genau wie diese Bilderketten über die Monitore laufen, scheint im Maschinenzeitalter der fatale Hang, sich selbst als Menschmaschine zu frönen.

Das ist ungefähr der phänomenale Tatbestand, den der Besucher dieser Installation in den ersten Minuten wahrnimmt. Das Auf und Ab der Bodymaschinen, die Hörigkeit des männlichen Körpers in der Unterwerfung unter diese erbarmungslose Mechanik und die Muskelanstrengungen in dieser säkularisierten Fleischwerdung sind das optische Schauspiel, das ebenso anziehend wie abstossend wirkt. Um eine weitere Ebene einnehmend und attackierend ist die synchrone Begleitmusik, klassische, pathetische Klänge, die diese Faszination um

In World War Two, bombs descending from heaven — a spectacle for those watching from afar, a horror for those they hit — were called by French speakers 'larmes d'acier' (tears of steel); and Marie-Jo Lafontaine has used this epithet as the title of the video sculpture she originally produced for Documenta 8, held in Kassel, West Germany, in 1987. In this piece, over two dozen video monitors, arranged in seven blocks, are piled closely next to each other — a compact, colossal mass of screens contained in a pitch-black, sculptural casing which, with its piston rod-like external supports and the series of cubes confining and crowning the whole structure beneath the ceiling, gives the impression simultaneously of a spider and of a machine. Heavy, immovable and overwhelmingly dominating the space it occupies, this installation is erected, preferably in semi-darkness, like a piece of static architecture which creates a sense of elemental necessity simply by virtue of its physical unavoidability. Unavoidability is indeed one of the themes, as carefully projected as concealed, which inform not just this video installation but all of Lafontaine's work, one of whose central themes is civilization's battle of the sexes.

The sole actors in this *Larmes d'Acier* display of video screens, synchronised in cunning alternation with each other, are body-builders pursuing their ascetic, masochistic calling. The reason for the monitor bank's size and complexity is in order to prevent the spectator from taking in the individual picture picture sequence at a glance — or else, the exhibition space permitting, to allow him or her to view the entire drama only from a distance, when the series of images portraying the actor's total dedication to the mechanics of their work becomes crystal-clear. With no actual beginning and no actual end, the spectator is turned into an involuntary eye-witness of these self-inflicted mortifications of the flesh executed in the wheels of the body-building machines. The body-builders themselves, whose beauty matches that of cover girls on popular magazines, are muscle men heaving dumb-bells and lifting weights in a body crusade of their own choosing, aimed at a masculine ideal culminating, not unlike the aspirations of the ancient Greeks, in a muscle-dimensioned, steely physique. They pursue this torture to the point of physical exhaustion: the man's calamitous propensity, in the age of the machine, to spare no effort in becoming a human machine himself seems as endless as the picture chains running through the monitors.

This is roughly the impression left on the observer in the first few minutes. The body machines' continual up and down, the male body's total subservience to these pitiless mechanical exercises and the muscular efforts made in this secularised process of becoming flesh make for a spectacle at once attractive and repellent. Then, at the non-visual level, the spectator is confronted by synchronised accompanying music, sounds classical and pathetic, further intensifying (and magnifying almost beyond words) this fascination with violence and the erotic. The world-famous operatic diva Maria Callas, in tender, infinitely beguiling tones,

Erotik und Gewalt noch verdichten und bis ins schier Unsägliche steigern. Maria Callas, der weltweit gefeierte Opernstar, singt mit geradezu zärtlicher, sinnlich bestürmender Stimme von Kraft und Schicksal, gibt dieser Vermassung im Streben nach körperlicher Perfektion und Ueberlegenheit den Glanz eines wagnerianischen Ueberbaus. Manche dieser Sequenzen, wo die Verquickung von Opernrausch und Maschinenidee zur idealen Partitur gelungen ist, produziert allerdings die bedenklichsten, und sicher von der Künstlerin intendierten, Assoziationen beim Besucher. Von Nietzsches Uebermenschen als Nachfolger der Götter bis hin zum Herrenmenschen oder Reinrassemenschen des spezifisch teutonisch-germanischen Faschismus reichen hier die bewusst konzipierten Anspielungen. Und besonders in diesen, sich an den Grenzen der Wahrnehmung bewegenden Passagen wird entwickelt, wie solcher Körperwahn Sexualität und Erotik zwangsläufig deformiert und wie diese Verfremdung nicht anders kann als Machtansprüche zu gebären. Der Mythos physischer wie sexueller Ueberlegenheit des Mannes wird hier in einer *tour d'horizon* rekapituliert, die auch die abendländische Geschichte nicht unberücksichtigt lässt. Vom Römischen Reich bis zum Dritten Reich gehörte zum programmierten Untergang dieser fatale Glaube an Perfektion und Vollendung, die Hingabe an Schönheit durch Dressur und nicht zuletzt der aus all dem resultierende Herrenanspruch auf Reinrassigkeit.

Das sind natürlich alles mehr oder weniger bekannte und geläufige und auch oft erneut verdrängte Tatsachen, die durch Analysen der Kulturgeschichte bestens untermauert sind. Man denke etwa an Elias Canettis vorzügliche Beobachtungen zum Thema 'Massen und Macht.' Worum es aber Marie-Jo Lafontaine geht, ist nicht bloss die Darstellung dieser Mechanismen im neuen Medium Video, sondern die Eruierung zeitgenössischer Vorausbedingungen solcher Kulturperversion, die sich natürlich in der Gegenwart gewandelt haben. Verführung zur Macht, die Faszination des Vollendungswählens und gar die Erbauung angesichts von Schrecken- und Gewaltproduktion, das sind die eigentlichen, tiefer greifenden Themen von *Les larmes d'acier*. Deshalb ist dieses Bilder- und Ton-Spektakel so pompös und berauschend inszeniert, deshalb ist die Aesthetisierung des Szenariums bis an die Grenze zum Nobelkitsch strapaziert. Schwülstig oft wirkt diese Paarung von Körper und Maschine. Verführerisch allemal der Rausch von Ekstase aus Kasteiung und die Geburt des Willens zur Macht aus der Pathologie der Selbstunterwerfung. Schlimmer als die Götter kann nur die Gottwerdung des Mannes sein.

Als Abwesende dennoch die grosse Anwesende in diesem Bilderreigen des Mannesrausches ist die Frau, die nicht in Perlen des Schweisses ausbricht, sondern die wirklichen Tränen über die Ereignisse zu vergiessen hat, über jenen Taten, die die Maschinen-Helden und ihre Helden-Maschinen angerichtet haben und anrichten.

Victoria, eine Installation von 1988 und übrigens rechtzeitig in den Besitz der

sings of force and destiny, imparting to this all-consuming passion for physical superiority and perfection the lustre of a Wagnerian super-structure. Some of these sequences, musically welding the operatic and the mechanical together, nevertheless create, doubtless intentionally, the quaintest associations of ideas, ranging from Nietzsche's superman as successor of the gods to the racially pure *Herrenvolk*, or master race, of the fevered imagination of German fascism. Their near-subliminal message, of course, is that such body mania is bound both to corrupt sexuality and physical love and to generate a lust for power. The myth of man's sexual as well as physical superiority is here reviewed in outline, including a sketch of the history of the West. The fall of empires, from the Roman to Hitler's, was partly rooted in this worship of physical perfection, the cult of the body beautiful and, not least, the resultant hegemony claims based on racial purity.

These familiar, but often suppressed, facts are well attested, of course, by social historians; one thinks, for example, of Elias Canetti's pertinent comments on the subject of 'crowds and power'. What Lafontaine seeks to do, however, is not just to present these mechanisms in the new video medium, but to undermine contemporary, albeit lately changed, preconditions for this kind of outrage. The yen for power, delusions of grandeur, even delight in violence and terror — these are what *Les Larmes d'acier* is about. Hence the show's ostentatious design, carried almost beyond the limits of good taste. The coupling of body and machine at times seems high-flown. The ecstasy of self-immolation and the will to power born of the pathology of submission are certainly entrancing. Yet it is made clear that the only thing worse than gods is man becoming a god himself.

Absent from this exhibition of male chauvinism, yet mysteriously present throughout, meanwhile, are women who do not perspire but do shed real tears over the goings-on, over the things perpetrated and continuing to be perpetrated, by machine heroes and the machines they worship.

Victoria, a work of 1988 which was snapped up by London's Tate Gallery, consists of nineteen monitor sets spirally arranged in such a way that the visitor is surrounded and trapped by the flood of pictures encircling him. Turn, or look, where he may, he is caught up in a drama of emotions which, to him, is anything but a peepshow. As previously in *A las cinco de la tarde*, an earlier work of 1984 inspired by Flamenco and bullfighting, the central theme here is mounting, all-engrossing conflict.

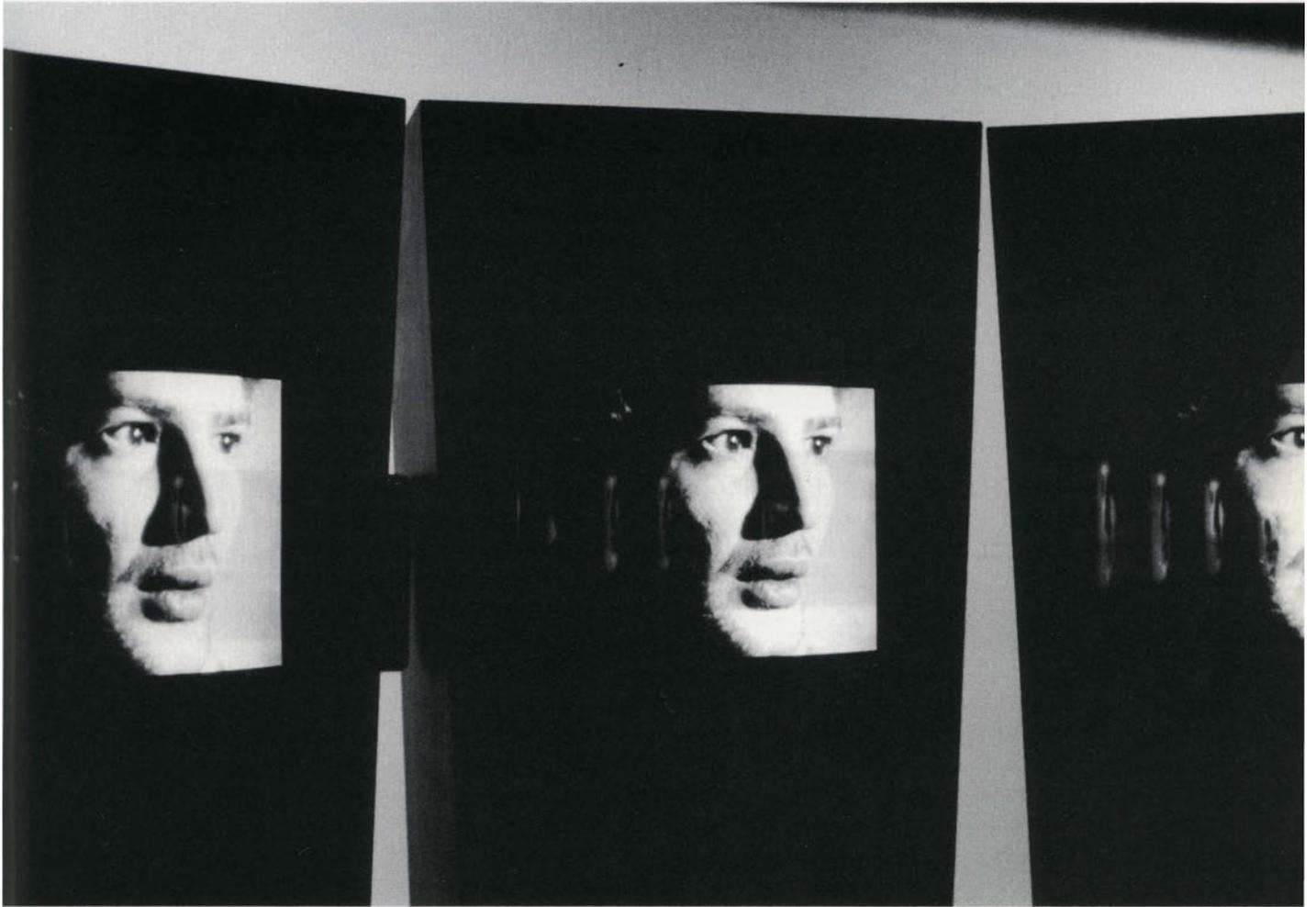
In *Victoria*, the name of the absent woman with its implication of victory, two men are seen dancing the tango. And this dance of warriors watching, touching and embracing each other until finally they collapse, turns into a near-archetypal ritual of two men in their last throes. Here, too, in the course of the action, masculinity and aggression engender physical violence, even though there is not, as with Cain and Abel, a victim and a victor in the end. No single individual, who might be crowned as victor or hero, gains the upper hand; rather, it is a conquest

GLANZ UND ELEND

Tate Gallery, London, geraten, besteht aus neunzehn dunklen Monitorblöcken, die in einer Spirale so angeordnet sind, dass der Besucher von der Bilderflut der Monitore kreisförmig umgeben wird, wie gefangen ist, und sich aufgrund dieser Raumsituation kaum der Intensität des Geschehens entziehen kann. Wie er sich auch wendet, wohin er auch schaut, er ist inmitten dieses Schauspiels und Dramas der Emotionen, zu denen er nicht nur als voyeuristischer Teilnehmer verpflichtet wird. Wie schon in *A las cinco de la tarde*, einer früheren Arbeit von 1984 mit den Motiven von Flamenco und Stierkampf, ist der sich steigernde, der sich ausschliesslich formierende Kampf das zentrale Thema. In *Victoria* nun, der Name der abwesenden Frau mit der Anspielung auf Sieg, tanzen zwei Männer Tango. Und dieser Tanz der sich belauernden, sich touchierenden, sich umarmenden und schliesslich stürzenden Kämpfer gerät zu einem archetypisch anmutenden Ritual zweier Männer in Extremsituationen. Auch hier produzieren im Verlauf des Geschehens Männlichkeit und Aggression physische Gewalt, wenngleich es am Ende nicht, wie bei Kain und Abel, einen Erschlagenen und einen Sieger gibt. Die Oberhand gewinnt nicht mehr ein Einzelner, der sich als siegreicher Konkurrent oder Held feiern lassen könnte, sondern es sind die mentalen Kräfte, die über die physischen siegen. Die Bewegungsabläufe sind, wie, um wohl zu zeigen, dass es um eine nicht endende Schlacht geht, zeitlich versetzt in einem wellenförmigen Rhythmus auf Band aufgezeichnet und werden auch so in der Installation abgespielt.

Untermalt wird dieser Kampf mit Klängen aus Richard Wagners *Siegfried*, und wiederum rücken Rausch und Ritual sowie Dasein und Destruktion in beängstigende Nähe zueinander, ohne das eine Lösung in Aussicht stünde. Viele Betrachter von *Viktoria* sind ebenso beeindruckt wie bedrückt vom Kulturpessimismus dieser Installation. Und der Gedanke, dass sich die Zivilisation selbst zum Verschwinden bringen könnte, weil letztlich egomanische Kräfte wie der Narzissmus oder massenpsychologische Verführungen wie die Idee der Menschvollendung im Reinrassismus oder die unseelige Symbiose beider wieder einmal dominieren und diesmal technisch noch totaler ist natürlich nicht von der Hand zu weisen, zumal das heutige Philosophieren damit ernsthaft rechnet. Deshalb kann man den Kampf der beiden Rivalen von *Victoria* durchaus auch als einen Kampf lesen, der bereits Züge des Deliriums trägt. Denn, wo es keinen Sieger mehr geben kann, ist die Ideologie des Triumphs, das heisst, die siegreiche Zerstörung der Andersartigen und des sogenannten weniger Wertvollen längst obsolet geworden. Wie in *Les larmes d'acier* sind die Mechanismen dieser verkehrten, sich selbst pervertierenden Zivilisation klar. Der Mensch verdinglicht in dem Masse den Körper wie er sich die Maschinenwelt für seine erotischen Projektionen erschliesst, um in Abhängigkeit von den Maschinen zu erobern und zu unterwerfen. Für die Beglaubigung eines solchen falschen Mythos braucht es natürlich reine und hehre Vorstellungen, die der überhöhenden Identifikation

Marie-Jo Lafontaine, *Victoria*,
1987-88, detail.



dienen, selbst aber nie erreicht werden können, ausser im Scheitern — im Totalitarismus und dessen Katastrophen. Die Gottwerdung des Mannes entspringt dem gleichen Denkmodell wie der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk diverser Künstler.

Wo Mythos und Ritual ursprünglich Spiel und Kompensation boten, ist heute, wo die Geschwindigkeit von Handlungen wichtiger geworden ist als die Entfernung zwischen den Orten, Leidenschaft mehr denn je in Gefahr, in Eskalation umzuschlagen und das ist tatsächlich belegbar. Geschichte wird heute in Schrecken durch Katastrophen geschrieben, und die Beschleunigungen, die nunmehr möglich geworden sind, machen eine Entropie plausibel. 'We're at the end of a period of love,' sagt Marie-Jo Lafontaine und fügt an 'Our times are concerned mainly with survival.'

Die neueste Arbeit der Realpessimistin Marie-Jo Lafontaine, eigens für The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, und The Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, produziert, war ursprünglich unter dem Titel *Die neue Frau* als Beitrag zu den Olympischen Spielen in Seoul gedacht. Jetzt unter dem Titel *Savoir, Retiner et Fixer ce qui est Sublime* (To Know, to Retain and to Fix that which is Sublime) ist eine Installation aus 17 Fotoportraits, alles Trauenbildnisse, die seriell im Raum verteilt sind und wo die Fotografien jeweils als Unterleib einen schlichten, aber schweren und flachen Holzkubus im dunklen Blutrot tragen. Es sind Fotoportraits von jungen Frauen im Alter von 18-20 Jahren und zwar der verschiedensten Rassen, die für einen Augenblick lang für diese statischen Bildnisse ihrem Lebensalltag entrissen wurden und nun in diesem skulpturalem Zuschnitt als Ikonen des Zukünftigen, eben als Bilder einer 'Neuen Frau', präsentiert werden. Alle Fotografien zeigen neugierige, offene Gesichter, wenn auch schon da und dort Wunden eines Neo-Darwinismus die Reinheit der Gesichtszüge beschägt haben. Diese schlichten Frauenbilder unternehmen den Versuch, an die architektonische Inszenierung von Altarbildern zu erinnern, jedoch ohne daraus irgendeinen Kirchenanspruch ableiten zu wollen. Im Gegenteil, eher wirken die aufgeschlossenen Gesichter als Bilder verbotener Wünsche, Wünsche nämlich nach einer Zivilisation, die Interaktionen schätzt, wo wieder spirituelle Energien dem Maschinengeist des logischen Positivismus entgegentreten. In dieser Hinsicht sind diese 17 Fotoportraits eminent politischer — auch so von der Künstlerin gemeint — als die vorher diskutierten beiden Video-Installationen, die eine Politik des Bilderraushes betreiben, während hier in geradezu feierlicher und konzentrierter Stille ein Plädoyer für einen neuen Menschen abgehalten wird. Das ist Anschauungsmaterial im unverfälschten Wortsinn. Der neue Mensch, und das ist wahrlich das Credo vieler Gegenwartskunst, wird wohl, wenn überhaupt, von der 'Neuen Frau' inauguriert werden.

An dieser Stelle ist ein Vergleich mit einer konträren Haltung im selben Medium Fotografie aufschlussreich. Susan Sontag hat über das Selbstverständnis der Aesthetik bei Robert Mapplethorpe dessen Formalisierungsstrategie als 'camp' wie

of physical by mental forces. The sequence of events is presented out of phase in a series of waves to indicate an unending battle, made all the more dramatic by leaving the spectator in total ignorance as to whether the fighters really hurt each other. The solitariness and inevitability of conflict; defence and dominance; greed and disdain; and possessiveness — these are the underlying themes. And the battle idea is underlined by passages from Wagner's *Siegfried*, bringing insanity and ritual, life and destruction once again into alarming proximity with each other without the prospect of a solution.

The exhibit impresses as well as oppresses by its darkly pessimistic message. And the idea that civilisation itself could perish, either through excessive preoccupation with self (Narcissism) or the lure of mass psychology (belief in human perfectibility and racial purity) or both, can't be ruled out, of course, when some contemporary thinkers seriously envisage the same outcome. So the battle of the two *Victoria* fighters might also be said to show traces of insanity. After all, where there are no longer any victors, the ideology of triumph, or victorious destruction of what is alien or inferior, is played out as well. The mechanisms of this perverse, self-corrupting civilisation are just as obvious here as in *Les larmes d'acier* earlier. Man becomes body as, and to the extent that, he harnesses machines in his erotic chariot in order to conquer and subdue others thereby. Such myths can be validated, of course, only by pure and lofty ideals intended to exalt, yet incapable of being achieved save in failure — in totalitarianism and its disastrous consequences. The idea of man becoming god is akin to some artists' search for a work of art embracing all arts.

Where myth and ritual originally were a kind of innocent game, the speed of events, dwarfing geographical distance, can nowadays all too easily, as experience shows, allow passions to get out of hand. Modern history is a series of disasters succeeding each other with breath-taking, terrifying rapidity. 'We're at the end of a period,' remarks Lafontaine, adding: 'Our times are concerned mainly with survival.' This ultra-pessimist's latest work — created specially for the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London — was originally conceived under the title *New woman*, as a contribution to the Seoul Olympics. Now, under the title *Savoir, retenir et fixer ce qui est sublime* (Getting a grip on the sublime), it is an exhibit consisting of 17 photographic portraits, all of women, arranged in a series and each forming a plinth that supports a plain but heavy and flat wooden cube in dark blood-red. The women portrayed, aged 18 to 20 and belonging to diverse races, were snap-shot in their every-day background and are now, in this sculptural configuration, presented as icons of the future, or as illustrations of the 'New Woman' theme.

All photographs show probing, open faces, though the scars of neo-Darwinism disfigure the purity of some. These unvarnished women's pictures attempt to reproduce the architectonic design of altar pieces, but with no ecclesiastic



Marie-Jo Lafontaine, still from
Les Larmes d'Acier, 1985-86.

folgt beschrieben: 'Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of style over content, aesthetic over morality, of irony over tragedy.'

Das genaue Gegenteil dieser Haltung demonstriert Marie-Jo Lafontaine in ihren Bildern einer 'Neuen Frau'. Es ist der energische Appell am Ende einer sich verlierenden Zivilisation eine andere soziale Grammatik aufzubauen als jene, die übermannen und territorisieren will und muss.

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pretensions. On the contrary, their open faces betray secret longings — for a civilisation which esteems interaction, where spiritual forces return to oppose the mechanical drive of logical positivism. In this respect, those 17 portraits are, and clearly are intended to be, rather more political than the two video exhibits previously discussed, which go in for a pictorial orgy, whereas these plead for a new human type in almost solemn and concentrated stillness.

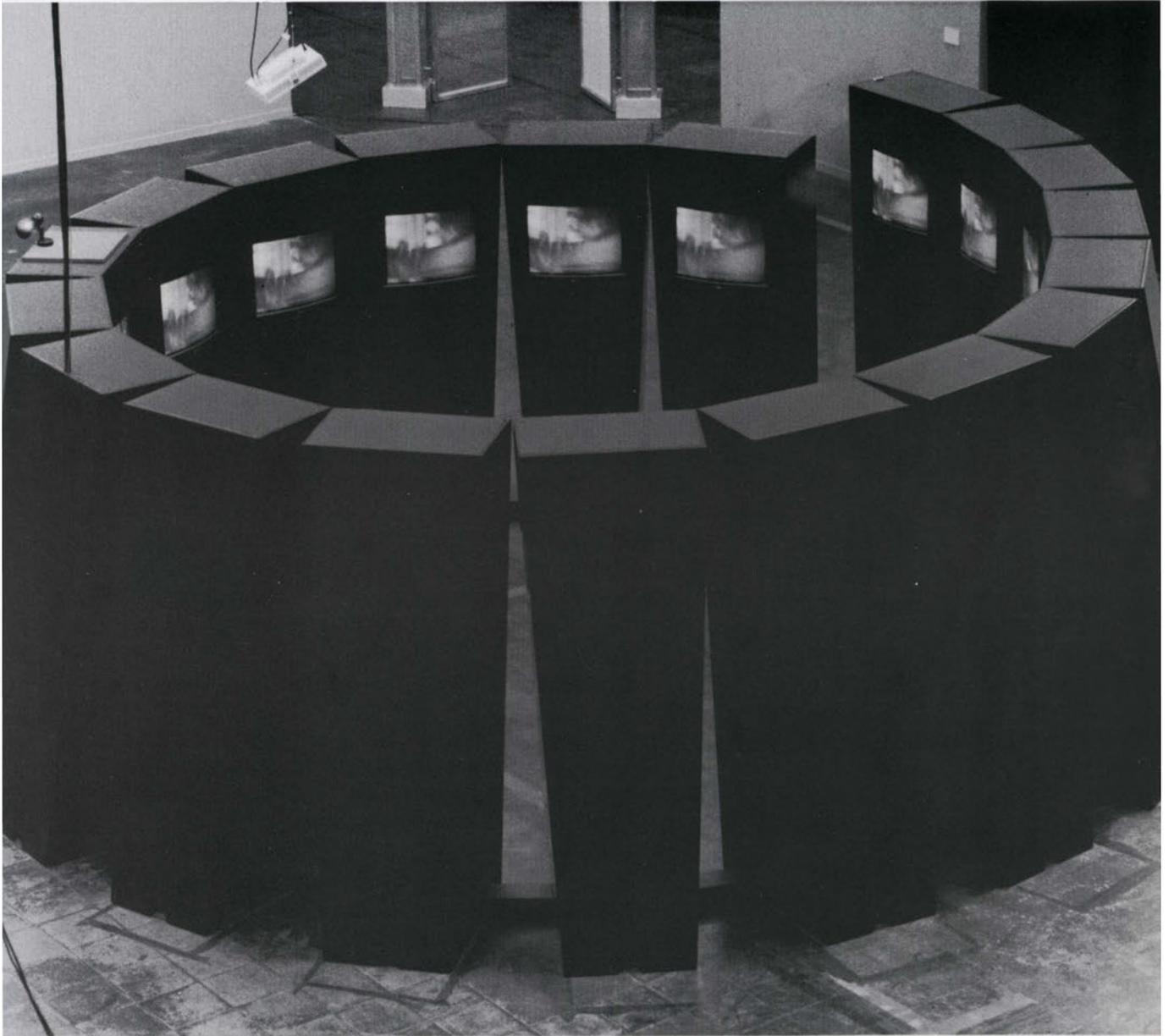
This is a display that doesn't mince words. The new type of human being, which is indeed what much modern art is all about, will be inaugurated in all probability, if at all, by the 'New woman'.

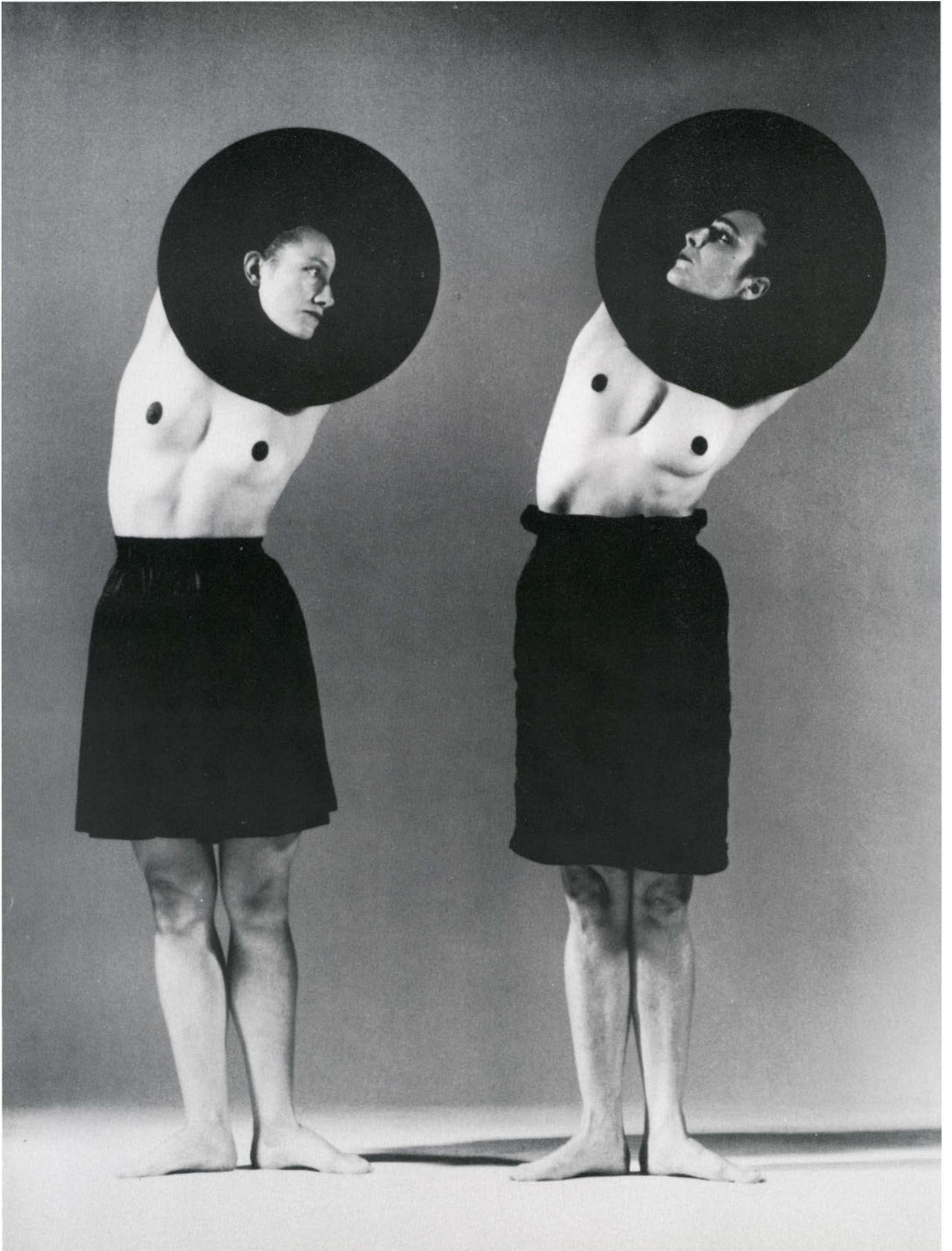
Comparing this with a different approach to the photographic medium may be illuminating. Susan Sontag, referring to the manner in which Robert Mapplethorpe takes aesthetics for granted, has described his 'camp' formalisation strategy as follows: 'Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of style over content, aesthetic over morality, of irony over tragedy.'

Lafontaine, in her 'New woman' pictures, demonstrates the precise opposite. At the end of a civilisation which has lost its way, she powerfully appeals for a new social grammar to replace the one whose sole meaning is domination and terror.

Translated by Walter Grey

Marie-Jo Lafontaine, *Victoria*, 1987-88, 18 monitors, 5 tapes, sound, wood, diam 750cm height 240cm; installation in Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, 1988.





David Hughes

DANCE AWAY THE FRONTIERS

New Dance Work by Four European Women



**Angelika Oei, *Oidan Skroeba*,
1989.** (photo Hajo Piebenga)

**Brigitte Farges and company, *Le
Ballet du Fergistan*, 1989.** (photo
Chris Nash)

Since March, Britain has had the opportunity to see work by dance companies from all over the world. There was the Leicester International Dance Festival, April in Paris at The Place, a season of new international dance work at Watermans Arts Centre, Brentford, and another season of dance work on tour from Holland.

As 1992 and the channel tunnel are fast approaching, it seemed appropriate that it was a group of young European women whose work caught my eye and fired my imagination. Each of them choreographed and danced, their concepts challenging and their compositional skills compelling. They were: Angelika Oei and her company from Holland in *Oidan . . . Skroeba*, Phoenix Arts, Leicester, March 7th; from Britain, Lea Anderson's *Flag*, performed by The Cholmondeleys with The Featherstonehaughs and The Pointy Birds, University of Warwick Arts Centre Studio, March 9th; Brigitte Farges and company, from France, in *Ballet du Fargistan* at The French Institute, April 10th, and The Place, April 18th; and Maria Antonia Oliver and Dancers, from Spain, in *Ocho* at Watermans Arts Centre, May 17th.

Although there were distinct similarities between Anderson and Farges on the one hand and Oei and Oliver on the other, a clear set of divisions is not possible. Anderson and Farges worked with bare stages and a sense of style that evoked contemporary fashion photography and its classic period, the 30s. Indeed, the current issue of *Vogue* contains fashion photography of 'post-modern man on the move' which could well have been choreographed by Anderson, her 'mix and match' ethic fundamental to some conceptions of the 'post-modern'. Both she and Farges used their dancers as objects, design components, changing the shape and nature of the body by isolating parts (Farges) or by dressing in absurd costume (Anderson), the dancing cool and distanced, even when working with 'revolutionary' gestures (Anderson). Oei, on the other hand, was more obviously within that 20s/30s realm of evening wear pressed into service in the dance for its kitsch, cut and freedom for physical movement, whilst Oliver's troupe were dressed in bolero tops, baggy shorts and peasant dresses in 'acid' colours that were both ethnic and vogueish. Perhaps the vogue is the 'ethnic' look. Paradoxically, Anderson used the most theatrical stage costume, reminding me of Lumière and Son. Not only has dance influenced fashion, but fashion periodically catches up with the kind of period look of much dance costume, derived directly from original period clothes. Thus, it was difficult to decode the semiotics of costume in these shows, caught as they were between fashion, street, aesthetic and cultural contexts.

Both Oei and Oliver used multi-media settings to extend their ideas, though Oei's presentation and settings were easily the most polished and complete, leaving the dancers to work in a more physically expressive manner: much more obviously related to performance theatre and the intense physical and emotional theatre of

Eastern Europe — both shows demanded effort almost in its own right.

All four worked with a gestural and movement vocabulary limited by theme or constructed according to a strict logic. The continentals used the most limited vocabularies, arranging them in a variety of syntactic combinations. This was the manner of the Indian dancers I saw at Leicester, such as the Kathak Guru, Durga Lal, their skill not being in the range of their invention, but in composition of the limited terms available. A similar minimalist approach was in evidence in Steve Reich's *Octet* which currently accompanies Rambert's *Embarque*. In Anderson's *Flag*, however, though limited, different dance and gestural vocabularies were suited to each scene or turn.

Although it is tempting to do so, it would be invidious to draw conclusions about the entire oeuvre of these women on the evidence of just four shows, and equally to draw conclusions about 'national styles' from isolated cases. Indeed, what characterised all four works was the extent to which they crossed boundaries between styles of dance, media and modes of presentation, and defied categorisation.

On stage and off the Cholmondeleys are dressed in uniform that defines them as part of a 'family group' and the theme of *Flag* — national and patriotic iconography, with particular reference to revolutionary Russia and China — is worked out in all possible ways. Each piece of publicity material treats the theme in some new way. The visual style was mainly derived from Constructivist/Futurist graphics with its bold black and red lines evoking Russian revolutionary propaganda, but also a kind of social realism. The uniform off-stage clothing simply seems to function as another medium through which the show concept is worked, but it did strike one as rather sinister, with fascistic overtones. The corporate image Anderson has created for her company and its product, should not surprise us. She is in the business of creating images. She choreographs pop videos and publicity photos for such bands as Bros and Pet Shop Boys, and, as I mentioned earlier, the images in *Vogue* could well have been staged by her — sleek young men in designer sweatwear assuming fitness-conscious parodies of dance and yoga positions and managing to look both cool and ever so slightly concerned at the same time. Chris Nash's photographs of Bros could easily take their place alongside such images.

Angelika Oei's 'peripherals' are not of the same, glossy kind, but the press were presented with a folder containing a photograph, notes on the evolution of the piece, a reduction of the art work for the set's painted drape, and a prose poem, 'texts' that stood alongside the dance as quite other and interesting texts in their own right, working the thematic material in another medium.

In *Oidan . . . Skroeba* (roughly translated as 'causing a cacophony of silent noises, a study of opposites') Angelika Oei initially dressed her dancers as schoolgirls; these costumes partly removed revealed themselves as the elegant

dresses of young ladies at formal dance and finally gave way to summer dresses, the strict uniformity of under- and over-wear gradually giving way to an increasing individuality within the uniformity of convention or fashion. The show begins in a vague space somewhere between the schoolroom and the religious seminary, vaulted windows projected onto the white backcloth, the stage floor covered in a virginal white sand. At the sides of the stage are deckchairs, globes, radios, sunglasses, suitcases all in miniature and of a certain kind from a vaguely nostalgic past. Thus the whole of childhood — from schoolday to holiday — is conflated into this space of memory, the conditioning forces of religious and academic education alongside the potentially disruptive energy of the holiday, the festival. But staking its claim as the dominant influence is a desk and chair set centre stage at which a dancer sits and writes and issues commands. At stage right there is a painted drape, an enlarged detail from a carpet, we assume, giving the set the feeling of having been tipped through ninety degrees.

Oei begins the action. Moving from her place against the drape, where she has seemed as trapped as the painted bird among the 'branches' above her head, she begins to translate instructions from a ballroom dancing manual into solo movement, her feet marking the floor in a pattern that echoes the drape. From the outset it is clear that whatever personal and group narratives, relationships and actions develop, the marking of the floor and the percussive accompaniment of footfall and shuffle are important concerns in their own right. Faltering at first, she soon learns to fashion the steps into repeatable patterns and her own idiosyncratic dance emerges. As she shares these movements with the other dancers, and they share theirs with her, they create language, they come into language together, the repeatability of the mark a sign of their acquisition of writing, of ordered thought, of a sense of self, however artificially constructed. As Oei moves in this first sequence Karin Schaafsma writes at the desk, and a circulation of marks is initiated: from the book comes writing, the writing is absorbed and the written upon (the dancer herself) writes, on the floor, on the paper, and as the dance progresses, each dancer will write on the others, as they learn and repeat steps in a kind of 'follow-my-leader' structure. In this way they interrogate both the politics of choreography and of identity.

The work proceeds without concrete or mimetic gesture, and indeed, there is no mimetic gesture in the show except for one sequence where errant hands are punished for doing the unacceptable. Once they have learned their lesson the arms flail almost useless or swing in the air. The power for the work comes from the feet, and the vocabulary consists of shuffles, slides, half arcs and lines, kicks, stumbles and falls.

The whole proceeds through a series of games, each section ending with 'we all fall dead'. Mainly danced in silence, the music reinforces the feeling of order that pervades in the 'courtly dance', and then powers a frenzied solo from Oei as an

**Angelika Oei, *Oidan Skroeba*,
1989. (photo Hajo Piebenga)**



ecstatic saxophone lets a dangerous sexual energy into the proceedings.

Quite late in the show the backdrop functions as a screen for film and slide. The film has a dancer in petticoat whose actions are only possible by virtue of being on film, like appearing to defy gravity. She performs an impossible dance that the live dancers try to emulate, and they enter a dialogue with this dream figure.

One of the most striking features of this piece was the pacing. It started slowly, demanded attention to the smallest detail, and held that attention by dint of Oei's own concentration in the moment of performance. The material unrolled slowly and steadily from the outset with occasional outbursts of energy. This, in refreshing contrast to most of the British work I've seen recently, where everything starts at a gallop and ideas are thrown away as soon as they're introduced. A profligate economy.

What Oei's show tells is the story of emergence into social uniformity, through the acquisition of language and the desire for acceptance. As the child grows up the standards set for it are internalized as a super-ego which effectively keeps the instinctual drives in check, but they wait beneath the surface ready to break through at any moment. It is the feminine energy as dance which here erupts.

The architectonic of the show was one of compartments linked playfully by games, but with the through line of 'growing into conformity' holding it together. The joins showed, were not papered over, and through the joins we saw the games that signalled the ever-presence of childhood as informing adult structures.

Flag had a quite different structure, each scene separated by clear breaks, owing a great deal to conventions of cabaret and variety, with 'variety' being an operative word. The stylistic premises were also quite different to Oei's. While Oei worked with a simplicity and purity Anderson's piece mixed together from many different styles of costume, and dance. The paradigm for her method was clearly established in the eighth scene, 'Carmen and Kirsty Macpherson-Velasquez'. Here, as the names suggest, many references are conflated: there are two Velasquez-type señoritas, but with their flamenco costumes made of tartan, and rounded off with cross-gartered pumps redolent of Scottish reels. And indeed the dance itself conflated reels and flamenco.

The show begins at a border crossing, with two performers at microphones separated by the black wastes of the stage, he speaking a kind of Russian, and she a Chinese, phonetic gibberish. The show begins and ends with Mao suits, whilst in between there are the wetlook suits of Olympic swimmers, Revolutionary women in their Eastern European aprons and big boots, a silver-lamed sports-star bride and groom, and the primary coloured jump suits of a Futurist troupe. Much play is made, in the biographies, of the dancers' racial antecedents — most seeming to have Scottish mothers, but fathers from almost any other country you'd care to mention. The show begins at a physical border, but also the point of division and interface of languages. The gestures of these two Mao-suited singers are modelled



Lea Anderson, *Flag*, performed by The Cholmondeleys with The Featherstonehaughs and the Pointy Birds, 1989. (photo Chris Nash)

on the mime of the Chinese theatre, and they capture something of the elegance and beauty of that form — a beauty that depends to some extent on its rootedness in so alien a culture: it is a system of communication in that culture, but its meaning is lost to us. Anderson plays on this, developing a mime language of signs with no significance except to exist as signs, signs pointing nowhere but to themselves, ultimately raw material for 'abstract' composition in time. The play extends in other directions, the whole show oscillating between the jingoistic, and the cross cultural. There is, to quote her programme note, a 'blurring of the boundaries'.

Brigitte Farges also crosses boundaries in her work, an interesting fusion of the

stylishly chic, the theatrically expressionistic and conceptual performance theatre. In her event at the French Institute she paraded elements of *Ballet du Fargistan* and added the stage and auditorium to her company — herself and two male dancers. As her piece progressed lighting bars, stage drapes and window shutters contributed to the dynamics as they flew in and out, opened and shut in a perfect rhythmic syncopation with the pulse of the work. At the end the stage was left atmospherically bare with moody shadows. And a similar kind of strip tease informed her use of decorative prostheses which effectively isolated various body parts. Discs of black material about the head and limb joints, and arabesque postures, evoke Nijinski, the Bauhaus, the fashion photographs of Lartigue and Cartier-Bresson, and the transvestites, pimps, whores and studs who people Brassai's photographs of Paris. The logic of her movement and concrete elements was handled with great skill, transitions between sections holding through perfectly timed and placed entrance, exit, fade and swell.

In Kantor's *The Dead Class*, there is a section where body parts are held up, isolated and named. The heel of a foot is highlighted and the word 'heel' applied to it repeatedly. This becomes a litany of names — 'camel' etc. — and we begin to focus on the foot in such a way that it ceases to be known, familiar. We no longer recognize it as the thing named by 'heel'. Language's ability to mediate the world begins to break down. Here, in the isolation of the body parts, there is not simply stylish decoration as first appears, but a dismembering of the body, and of language. Name and function are prised off objects and they float free, stage drapes become dancers, body parts become unfamiliar objects of a quite startling otherness. Throughout, the stage space is reframed, perspective lengthening and contracting, horizontal and vertical rectangles of various widths appear and disappear as the fabric of the stage machinery and environment is torn into. Language is revealed as an arbitrary construct, and our preconceived notions of image, gender, type, space, dance, etc. must needs come under attack.

Perhaps what comes most readily to mind are the inappropriate captions to Magritte's pictures, and Maria Antonia Oliver seems also to be working in a post-Dadaist theatre of shock, but of a more obvious kind. Her show opens with a film of one dancer — in slow motion, with a melon, on a swing suspended from the bottom of a hot air balloon basket and finally appearing to fall a great distance into the sea. On to the stage come two dancers, one on a go-cart the other providing the anchor point and pivot for the long rope on which it swings dangerously close to the footlights and no less in danger of flying off into the faces of the audience. There is a great deal of sheer physical effort in this piece which seems not to have a centre, or theme, unless it is 'travel' or 'movement' in the most general sense. Another section has Oliver throwing herself quite literally at one dancer as they run round and round a third who is repeatedly spinning, the two bags of melons hanging from her body held out in the air by centrifugal force.

Her attention unwanted, Oliver is constantly rebuffed and thrown to the ground. The scene goes on for many minutes, the spinning dancer executing many dozens of spins, and receiving an ovation as she walks off. Such an honest and uncompromising physicality is firmly within that tradition of muscular commitment to the moment that we have come to expect from Eastern European performance of the post-Grotowskian kind and is also a feature of the work of companies like Epigonen whose sequence where the company run round and round the lethally swinging punch-bag was so strongly evoked here. However, like the Belgian Epigonen, Oliver's *Ocho* seemed to have moved a distance from whatever had originally powered it; all that remained were relics, fragments, from which it was impossible to reconstruct an origin.

The great physical strength of the performers was tested at every moment. There was a great deal of carrying, of walking on the backs of kneeling figures — scenes that combined archetypal images of women as delicate and fragile, with the brute reality of these women's solidity and strength. Oliver's solo dance, however, was immensely moving, gentle and lyrical, with little self-deprecating taps on the head and a self-effacing modesty combined with the tenderest, searching scoops of the outstretched arm — a gesture that delicately continued, in a succession of moments of close focus, into the air beyond the tips of the fingers. There was a great deal of comedy too, as when the entrance, passage across the stage and reversal of one dancer was seemingly manipulated by the forward and backward pedalling of bicycles, which were suspended from the grid.

The final sequence, unfortunately telegraphed from the first moment of the show, involved all three dancers mounting the bicycles, and slowly being winched up and down as they pedalled, illuminating each other as the dynamos spun.

What becomes clear is that dance as a category has been expanded in these works. But they were made possible by a general trend which has emerged in companies such as School of Hard Knocks, DV 8, Pina Bausch, and many more, where the physical vocabulary of the dance evolves from the bodies, persons and personalities of the dancers as much, perhaps more than from the storehouse of dance's hallowed vocabulary of steps, gestures and signs. These companies exist at important points of cross-over, of fusion between performance theatre and dance, at which human movement assumes a high profile.

It is also pertinent that each of these shows patrols areas of interest outside the realm of dance — feminism, semiotics, psycho-analysis, post-structuralism — as they interrogate the processes of construction of theatre, the dance, the unconscious, gender, meaning and the socialized human subject. Each essentially questions the construction of identity and possibly provides new images of woman realized, in the work of the Continentals, through her sexuality and body and, in the work of Lea Anderson, through the conscious manipulation of the surface image.

Reviews

Reviews in the new format will be arranged geographically, by the venue at which the performance, exhibition, event or installation being reviewed took place: firstly London; then other towns and cities in the United Kingdom, in alphabetical order; and lastly towns and cities in other countries.

London

Nancy Reilly

Professional High

The Gangster and the Barmaid

ICA

Reviewed by Tim Etchells

Professional High and *The Gangster and the Barmaid* are solo pieces written, directed and performed by Nancy Reilly who is probably better known outside the United States for her work with The Wooster Group. She first met the company when she played The General in a 1982 version of Genet's *The Balcony* and since then she has become a full time member, performing and helping devise such recent pieces as *The Road To Immortality (Just The High Points)* and *Frank Dell's St. Anthony* (see separate review; Antwerp).

The solo pieces at the ICA both have their origins in a novel Reilly is working on called *Crack In The Peepshow*. The design is sparse: on the left of the space is a small table; and on the right, at an angle to the audience, a high bar upon which stand four glasses.

In *Professional High* Reilly sits or wanders near the table, reading from a pile of typescript. The central character, an out of work actress, is alone in her room. She is trying to lose herself in either drink or drugs, but is too poor to buy enough of either.

The text is a fast intercutting of third person narration and

interior monologue, endless interjections, wordplays and puns. In a quick, throwaway voice, Reilly enlivens this dense, literary style, emphasising the rhythms of the text with the odd casual gesture or pause for breath to look around. There is an enjoyable feeling that one is not getting everything, that whole sentences and ideas are being shot by too fast to grasp, a feeling which is heightened by the variety of tones and sources in the text.

In the hope of getting out of her head and getting some acting practice to boot, the central character searches through old plays to find booze in there she can drink. She starts with O'Neil's *The Iceman Cometh* drinking champagne from a glass, and ends trying to re-live the re-created acid trip from The Wooster Group's own piece *The Road to Immortality*. The ease with which this idea of the 'professional high' slips into one's mind characterizes an admirable casualness in Reilly's work — a kind of effortless seriousness, unsuspected in its camouflage of irony and deconstruction, a sudden engagement with a culture in which all experience is mediated, second hand, in which we all must re-create ourselves from the scraps of our own and other people's fictions.

Most of the second piece, *The Gangster and the Barmaid*, is spoken from behind the bar on the opposite side of the stage. The attempt to represent the fictional location, rather than

simply implying it, suggests correctly this will be a more 'truly theatricalized' response to the text drawn from the novel. For me though, the piece seemed less resonant than *Professional High*; committed to (or stuck with) its character and its location, less visibly referring out to a wider culture or to autobiography.

The Gangster and the Barmaid cuts between two 'tracks' of text. In one we see the actress one Christmas Eve in her former job as a barmaid in a tit bar on Wall Street. In the other we see her in the future on a distant pleasure cruise: lying on her back, talking on the phone in a subdued voice, she is visible only through a long perspex window in the side of the bar. The piece works as a musical point and counterpoint between these tired, strung out sections and the gobby coke speed of the bar text. However, on the night I saw it, the stage transitions were sometimes clumsy and the telephone texts blurred and rushed where they wanted to be slow. On occasion the performance smacked of the gratuitous virtuosity particular to solo theatre artists, who seem a bit too intent on exhibiting their range.

These reservations aside, however, the execution of *The Gangster and the Barmaid* is controlled, witty and impressive. It is passionate where it needs to be; yet, like *Professional High*, it also contains a superb off-the-cuff self-mockery.

Lindsay John

Skin

ICA

Reviewed by Matthew Springford



Lindsay John is a sculptor/dance-performance artist based in Edinburgh, who has been primarily concerned over the last five years with developing new approaches to dance. *Skin* is the third and most recent development in a series of performances with the overall title *Before Form*. The piece was developed and premiered in Japan, where John attended workshops with the co-founder of Butoh, master dancer and teacher Kazuo Ohno, to whom the piece is dedicated.

There is an affinity with the spirit of Artaud as well as an influence from John's background in sculpture. John says of his work that it is 'attempting to celebrate . . . the whole spectrum of human emotions, to touch on the very profound elements in

the human psyche, to celebrate humanity in its darkness and pain as well as in its more obvious joyful experience . . .'

This personal/universal dynamic reflects a conceptual approach characteristic of early Butoh work. When Butoh emerged in the ferment of post-Hiroshima decimation, it sought to shake off the heavy imprint of Japan's strict society and emphasised an unbouded expression of 'personal' truth. This was exemplified by extreme physical processes, in an attempt to unclothe the 'historical' body and address social issues in a new way. In the light of this, we might read Lindsay John's title as (*Shedding*) *Skin* and so complete the implicit metaphor. We could see the performance as an attempt to go beyond the platitude of the socio-historical body, in order to tap a source of motivation deeply rooted in the personal, instinctive response.

The performance I saw caused a deathly silence rarely experienced in the theatre. John, locked in some anthropomorphic transformation, instilled an intense akinesia in the audience, a sort of communal holding of breath, followed at the end by a giant sigh of relief. It is something of a challenge being a spectator to this performance: from his dreamscape vocabulary comes a potent fusion of images that probe and lacerate the imagination.

Brighton

IOU Theatre

Just Add Water

Brighton Festival

Reviewed by Ariane Koek

Science comes to the seaside in IOU Theatre's latest outdoor show *Just Add Water* premiered at this year's Brighton Festival. Amidst the deckchairs, sea and sand, a kitsch magic show begins on Brighton Beach, performed by a two-bit magician whose tricks constantly go wrong. And as he gets hopelessly entangled in his efforts to make two separate metal rings join or an acrobat disappear, slowly a white scientific inquiry landcraft unexpectedly inches its way towards the stage . . .

According to the show's originator, David Wheeler, who has been with IOU since the company started in 1976, the show started with the landcraft and the images followed:

'The way that we work is that we make images which serve as the starting point, and see the reasons later,' says David who in this case plucked his idea of a scientific landcraft out of an as yet unproduced film script he is working on and decided to build a show around it.

But as a result, *Just Add Water* is one of the most disappointing shows IOU has ever produced in its thirteen year history. The show proves that it's not enough simply to have a potentially good idea, such as the world of scientific inquiry colliding with the world of beach entertainment. What is needed is



thought, attention and an 'organising principle'. *Just Add Water* has none of these, and has all the appearances of a show hastily cobbled together as an excuse to use the fantastical land vehicle of David Wheeler's imagination.

When the magician is lifted off the stage by the scientists, hoisted into the landcraft, weighed and measured then sent out into the sea in diving gear, what exactly is happening? Is he now researching for the scientists or is he still part of the experiment? And when he stomps out of the sea at the end, linking hands with the acrobat as the landcraft retreats, the audience is left in limbo and the show drifts to an end.

Lack of pacing and vision lead to a show which the audience watches half-heartedly as a seaside sideshow, which fails to engage the imagination of either children or adults. Calling *Just Add Water* a family show is no excuse for its being simplistic. IOU's other shows, such as

1988's *Pocket Atlas*, are just as suited to be called a 'family show' with a breadth of imaginative vision which couldn't fail to capture the attention of all ages.

Just Add Water is currently on tour in Britain until the end of August and hopefully the production will have pulled together by the end of the tour into an entirely different show from the one presented on Brighton Beach. Admittedly there were technical difficulties in the Brighton performance: the landcraft broke down en route to the venue so the first night was postponed to the following day; the intercom system on the landcraft was hazy and ineffective; the company was not used to using their equipment on Brighton beach. But even so, by any standards the performance was shoddy.

Let's hope that with their next show IOU Theatre recovers some of their former imaginative zeal and brilliance in order to explode clichés rather than perform them.

Gardzenice Theatre Association

Avvakum

Gathering

Brighton Festival

Reviewed by Ariane Koek

The rejection of history is the key to the work of the Gardzenice Theatre Association from Poland who made their British debut this May at both the Brighton Festival and Glasgow Mayfest.

In their piece *Avvakum*, the company seeks to unravel the concept of linear time by using songs, stories, and music drawn from such diverse sources as the thirteenth century *Carmina Burana*, Yiddish and Byzantine folklore, Russian orthodox liturgical songs and the infamous autobiography of the seventeenth century Polish leader of the Old Believer Movement, Archbishop Avvakum, noted for his 'sinful saintliness'. The whole performance is a rejection of history by, in and with fragments of song and sound, creating an 'ethno-oratorium.'

The company's denial of history spills over into their rejection of being fixed into a particular lineage of Polish theatre. When, in an interview in 1986, Richard Schechner tried to draw the company's founder and artistic director Włodzimierz Staniewski into describing the influence the celebrated Polish director Grotowski had on him, Staniewski's reply was brutally to the point:

'I get the impression that you need to situate me near Grotowski for your own image of historical order. There are people who forcibly to my face use those kinds of political tactics. That repulses me very much. It disgusts me, it alienates me from how I feel, from what in Grotowski's work is close to my heart. What's the use of these politics, all this history-making day in, day out?'¹

Nevertheless Staniewski's work often recalls Grotowski's. Staniewski studied under him at



the Teatr Laboratorium until 1976, when he left to found Gardzenice Theatre Association a year later. Nowhere are Staniewski's links with Grotowski more evident than in *Gathering* which was performed at the Brighton Festival before the *Avvakum* piece.

The audience is welcomed into a church hall, greeted by the company with song, dance and flowers. Members of the audience are plucked from their chairs, and placed with the company, who spin them in circles, finishing up by hugging and singing over the dizzy spinners. The emphasis is on communal celebration. Brechtian 'alienation' is replaced by what Staniewski calls the 'closeness effect.'

This breaking down of barriers directly recalls Grotowski's quest to restructure the existing post-industrial social order by replacing it with person-to-person interactions or 'meetings'. But for Staniewski, the 'closeness effect' of *Gathering* is the

releasing of the 'raw native culture' present even within the urban cultures of Europe and America which have lost their 'tribality and nativeness'. It is this 'raw native culture' or 'ahistory' which for Staniewski can be released by songs, 'the score of movement, the source of gestures, rhythm and action'.

Nowhere is Staniewski's drive to untie opposites in order to show a 'raw culture' beyond history given fuller expression than in an extraordinary few minutes in *Gathering*, when the members of the company move jerkily around the floor in a series of movements and sounds made up from fragments of everyday life, fusing them to create a physical, ritualistic language.

For *Avvakum*, the audience is led from the church hall along a narrow passageway lit by candles to a small theatre set up within the church itself. It is here that Staniewski's 'profane theatre', uniting 'high' and 'low' art, is performed in a kaleidoscopic

series of images. A corpse is used as a battering ram. Candles are rocked in an empty wooden cradle. A hanging man grimaces with pain and joy. A priest flagellates himself with a smoking censer. Another man falls from a wheel of pain into a cradle shedding his shroud.

Oppositions are constantly denied and untied, and 'the sequence' of history is broken in the swift stream of images drawn from different eras and sources which are all linked by the performance's weaving narrative — song.

This is the heart of what Staniewski calls his 'performative architecture' as opposed to Grotowski's 'changing rituals and ceremonies'. Song unravels time to point to an apocalyptic vision in which distinctions collide: a bacchanalia is both a religious ceremony ('high art') and an orgiastic celebration of excess ('low art'); the hanging of a criminal, Christ at Golgotha.

But after *Gathering*, *Avvakum* is a disappointment. Lack of variation in pacing leads to a sense of boredom and frustration as the images and songs flash by. And the piece seems one-dimensional in its insistence on 'ahistory' which never pushes any further. After all, the piece works itself within the definitions of history and linear time in order to oppose them and the underlying failure of the piece is that it never gets to grips with this contradiction. It never forges a pure 'ahistory', only an 'anti-history'.

Similarly, the lucid exposition

of the company's theories in the first half deadens the following performance of *Avvakum*, although there is a break between the two. If newness and oldness don't exist in Gardzenice's vocabulary in their attempt to unravel linear history, nevertheless by using the concept of history in order to deny it, they fall prey to the question, 'but is what we are seeing new?'

The answer is: probably not. Ten years after the Cardiff-based Centre for Performance Research first saw Gardzenice Theatre Association, they have finally brought them over to Britain. But it is ten years too late. *Avvakum* is rooted in the '70s Polish theatre, with its emphasis on 'native culture', looking for rural communities with indigenous songs, rituals and oral history as evident in the work of Grotowski and Josef Szajna.

Note

1. Włodzimierz Staniewski to Richard Schechner, Baltimore 1986, quoted in the Centre for Performance Research's programme accompanying the Gardzenice Theatre Association's 1989 tour of Britain.

Glasgow

Peter Brook

La Tragédie de Carmen

Tramshed

Reviewed by Lucy Hughes-Hallett

Nineteenth century opera is a medium replete with opportunities for the director impatient of the conventions of theatrical realism. Its extravagant rituals and vividly emblematic

plots, its combination of formal discipline and emotional lushness, its denial of psychological naturalism and, above all, its circumvention of language in favour of a discourse — that of romantic music — which works directly on an audience, obliging them (unless they are unusually resistant to such manipulation) to pass through a series of psychic states complementary to, but by no means precisely illustrative of, the predicaments of the characters on stage, all serve to make opera a fertile field for dramatic experiment. The most innovative of the present generation of directors — Nicholas Hytner, Peter Sellars, Peter Stein, Patrice Chereau — have all chosen to work largely to music. And Peter Brook, the big daddy of them all, has created (or re-created) his *Carmen*, a small-scale production of unassuming but extreme violence which landed at last in Glasgow this April, nearly eight years after it first opened at the Bouffes du Nord.

Brook and his collaborators, writer Jean-Claude Carrière and composer Marius Constant, have distilled Bizet's opera down to a seamless, interval-less ninety minutes. Diversions and extras have been shorn away. No flirty factory-girls, no urchins, no soldiers, no gypsies: just the principals and a pared-down drama. So much was to be expected. But in the process of adaptation that drama has been drastically altered. Bizet's *Carmen* was a romantic rebel, an

advocate of adventure in the mountains and of free love. The Carmen of the far harsher novella by Prosper Mérimée on which the opera was based was, by contrast, an unscrupulous businesswoman whose stocks-in-trade were sex and the illusion of exoticism which white racism had projected onto her and which she, with the shrewdness of the underdog, accepted and sold back to them. Freedom she cared about (capitalists and freebooters tend to) but love, to her, was simply sex unpaid-for, a bad deal.

Brook's Carmen contains elements of both its predecessors, but the alterations to the plot of Bizet's opera tend not so much to bring the piece nearer to Mérimée, as to make of it something entirely new.

Micaëla and Carmen, the embodiments respectively of home and of the wild, come face to face in the first scene. Carmen is arrested, not for attacking another girl off-stage, but for drawing a knife on Micaëla and for slashing her face in full view both of the audience and of José. It is clear that the latter is knowingly making a demonic choice, not between a saucy gipsy and the good girl next door, but between love and rage.

At Lillas Pastia's inn José doesn't just quarrel with Zuniga, he strangles him with his bare hands. Later he murders Garcia, Carmen's husband (a Mérimée character erased completely from Bizet's scenario). Before the bull-fight Carmen is at Escamillo's side for, not a triumphal

procession, but the solemn preparations preceding a death. Escamillo's corpse is rushed across the stage on a pallet as Carmen faces José, her own killer. All of these changes serve to darken the drama, to lend it a violent pulse and a sense of fatality which is more in key with 20th century taste than the opera's merry libertarianism: it also lends the story a narrative coherence which the Bizet version signally lacks.

Brook's Carmen is a sorceress. She is first seen, alone on the stage, hidden under a heap of old rags. A hand emerges. Various fetish objects — bone, feathers, rope — are laid out. A spell is being cast. When, half-way through the José/Micaëla duet, Carmen, played by the glittering black American soprano Cynthia Clarey, steps forth from the pile of rags there is not only a frisson of pleasure to see a being so enticing emerge from such an unpromising chrysalis, there is also a quiver of suspicion. Is this farouche and heartless temptress, who sings her *habanera* flat on her back on the ground, legs open, cigarette clenched between teeth, simply a chimaera, an alluring form assumed by the witch for fell purposes?

Magical imagery pervades the production. Another muffled figure lights a triangle of fires and draws a circle of red dust around them. Into this bewitched space Carmen leads José, feeds him (to eat a sorceress's proffered food is to succumb to her spell) and takes him in her arms. At the very end she

chooses the site for her own murder, first nervously pacing the stage as though in search of the source of her own weird power and then kneeling ready for the blow. She has conjured José, it seems, precisely in order that he may kill her. This Carmen is not that old cliché, the femme fatale, but the focus of an energy both destructive and thrilling, an energy which includes sexual passion but transcends it. Escamillo, the bull-fighter, is another of its acolytes. Investing himself in his suit of lights (the only costume which is not ash-colour, earth-colour, or cloud-colour), he is adorning himself for a gorgeous and deathly ritual. Like Carmen, he makes magical passes with his hands, practising his toreador's moves with gaudy pink capes. Like her, he deliberately enters a sacral circle, the bull-ring, to woo death.

Obvious, isn't it? It is Brook's great gift to make his achievements look easy, to discover in familiar texts (or scores) patterns and meanings so vital that it is hard, watching his productions, to remember that it took him to uncover them. His Carmen is visually exquisite, with the simplicity of a fastidious taste rather than of austerity. Ochre sand, black or beige cloth, a faded rug, a few cushions are enough for the setting. Brook uses the whole depth of the acting-space (fully visible from amphitheatre-style seating) to develop three-dimensional webs of influence and action between the characters. And there are

jokes. Bizet's music is allowed not only its full sensuality but also its teasing. Carmen, hidden under her rags, turns her head to follow Michaëla's movements, half-elephant-man, half-periscope, an image which is as cheeky as it is sinister. Lillas Pastia, the night I went (there are alternating casts) was played by Bakary Sangare in a wonderfully athletic, leering performance. As Zuniga (Jean-Paul Denizon) undresses on Carmen's orders, Pastia cavorts around them both, an irresistibly uproarious procurer-come-pickpocket-come-familiar sprite. This Carmen may be more perilous than the more familiar version, but, under Brook's direction, it is equally pleasurable.

Hull

Stefan Szczelkun

Emigration Ritual

Orchard Park and Postengate Gallery

Reviewed by Fran Cottell

Stefan Szczelkun's project for Hull Time-Based Arts involved workshops, a journey, two sound performances and an exhibition, all based around the construction and use of four house-like structures.

The project raised the problem of whether there is such a thing as 'working class architecture': Stefan Szczelkun thinks that there is. He sees it in the form of seaside shanty houses and allotment buildings, the type of buildings that would never normally be preserved as part of our cultural heritage. The energy behind the brilliant colour, improvisation and creativity

often displayed in these 'houses' should, in Szczelkun's opinion, have been harnessed when new estates like Orchard Park, on the outskirts of Hull, were designed in the '70s (he had studied and become disillusioned by architecture, before becoming an artist). In previous performances simple buildings reminiscent of the shanty houses were constructed out of scraps of plywood, stitched together with string and stood on pallets; just big enough for two people to sit or stand up in. Whether or not the 'shanty connection' was understood, they have proved very accessible objects for people to interact with.

Many of the inhabitants of the Orchard Park estate originally lived in Hessle Road, a fishing community within Hull. When the industry declined the community was broken up and



moved to new estates on the outskirts. Szczelkun was anxious to try and redress this situation by bringing the people from Orchard Park back into the centre of the town and its attention. Groups and individuals came together to build four 'huts', which evolved very specific identities: one political, an S and M castle, a boat and a children's house. The constructions were highly decorated, sometimes to a confusing extent, with posters, personal photographs, children's drawings, graffiti and torture implements. Each structure had its own sound tape, made by its creators, of jokes, singing, spoon playing or laughing.

Although initially apprehensive, the builders of the houses took part in the journey from Orchard Park to the gallery along Hesse Road (the 'Emigration Ritual'), using forklift trucks and stopping along the way to do a sound performance and to let children play in the 'huts'. Seeing the small structures against blocks of flats and on the trucks gives a sense of vulnerability and exposure. Even if the participants only did it for amusement, or because they were lonely or good at woodwork, they carried it through with enthusiasm. A successful project, on many levels: not least for getting a new group of people into a gallery. At the same time, there was the feeling that Szczelkun, as an Anglo-Pole, might be alluding to his own sense of alienation.

Antwerp

The Wooster Group

Frank Dell's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*

De Singel

Reviewed by Tim Etchells

Frank Dell's Saint Anthony is the third and final part of The Wooster Group's *The Road To Immortality*. Like part two, *L.S.D.*, *Just the High Points*, which they presented at the Riverside Studios and Chapter Arts in 1986, it is an intricately wrought collage of different texts, drawn from a variety of sources. Flaubert's *The Temptation Of Saint Anthony* and the Albert Goldman biography *Ladies and Gentlemen . . . Lenny Bruce!* are particular and constant reference points.

The piece seemed to work in two distinct stages. In the first there's a bewildering amount of information, characters, allusion, narratives. Even in sections where one's not sure of the exact sources there is a tumultuous feeling of depth and of reference. Significantly no text is presented raw. Flaubert is on Channel J, rewritten, videoed, lip-synched. A 'junky' narrative is 'taught' to two performers who 'don't know what they're supposed to do'; one of them appears to be German, her 'real' accent recontextualizing the cod-French and cod-English voices used elsewhere in the piece.

St. Anthony is a feast of theatrical mediation in which The Wooster Group hide behind a series of fictive veils, screens to their presence in the here and

now of the performance space. Lenny Bruce, Frank Dell, endless suggestions of other performers, other times, other performances, sex acts, magic acts, vaudeville, dances, comedy gigs, in night clubs, theatres, hotels, brothels.

Any sense of continuity or order is further hidden by the ragged, untidy quality of the writing which places texture over content at every opportunity. It reminds me of Impact Theatre 'making work from the bits of stories other people have left out.' Looking through the Goldman biography I noticed how few 'central' passages had been used. There are few big speeches, only trash, ephemera, chance details.

If the first thirty minutes of the piece are bewildering and frustrating then the second phase reaps the benefits of the storm. Crammed full of imagery one is desperate to find order, meaning, coincidence and the structure of the piece delicately allows for this need.

Nevertheless, there remains an overwhelming sense of all the sections and images I did not see, or have forgotten, or can't contain in the order that I've made of it. It is a radical, challenging piece that puts its audience on the line, an arrogant and perhaps bitter move away from the tightly focused 20 minute sections of *L.S.D.*

Paris

Les Magiciens de la Terre

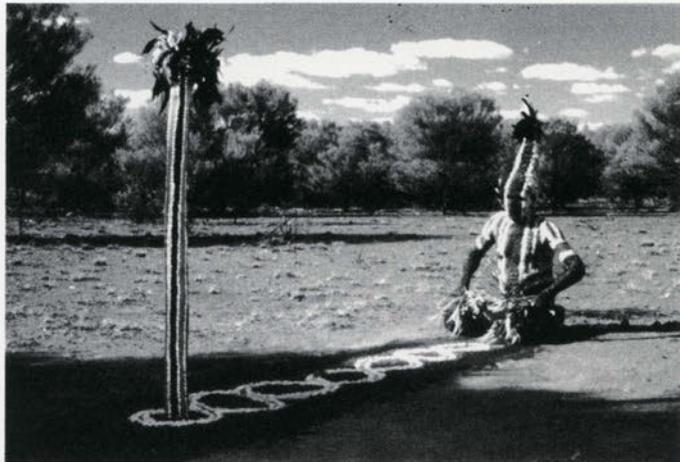
 Centre Georges Pompidou
 and Grande Halle, La Villette

Reviewed by Fiona Dunlop

This summer's blockbuster at the Centre Pompidou is one of their most ambitious yet.

Masterminded by Jean-Hubert Martin, director of the Musée national d'art moderne, its tentacles have this time stretched out in global dimensions attempting to make a 'statement on the existence of artistic creativity throughout the world' — oh brave art world! Four years of globe-trotting for a team of curators (including ex-Whitechapel Mark Francis) have resulted in this Tower of Babel, an amalgam of world cultures, of ancient traditions with the 'latest' western movements: the *in situ* work of Tibetan monks next to a Mario Merz, aborigine bark paintings and Rebecca Horn, tantric works juxtaposed with Clemente, garish oneiric sculptures by the Mexican Felipe Linares as (comic) relief after Kiefer's dark universe.

The scope is admirable, the aim too. Promoting the spiritual effect of art ('a work of art cannot be reduced to a mere retinian sensation' *dixit* J-H. Martin), looking for the totemic aspects and the original function in primitive societies, it is as much an ethnographic study as an art exhibition. And finally it is neither. When the Australian aborigines defend themselves against possible criticism for decontextualising their land art



by saying they want to prove to the white world that their society is still functioning, it seems paradoxical that this must be done alongside the products of the just-functioning Western society. And Eskimo sculptures have long had a profitable place on the Canadian art market — although this is a drop in the ocean beside the two millenia of their tradition.

Half of the exhibition is housed in the Grande Halle at La Villette, one of the city's most impressive exhibition spaces with its lofty iron and glass structure. Hans Haacke and Denis Adams did little with the exterior square allotted them for interventions but, even worse, the exhibition architect managed to take away the élan of this space, carving up the entrance into little boxes, thus preventing any total vision of the hall. Richard Long's monumental earth circle on the 12 metre high end-wall with a Yuendumu aboriginal sand painting in the foreground,

created a fitting symbol for the works grouped under this roof, but again the voluntarily baroque juxtaposition did little justice to anything. Luckier were certain artists exhibiting on the upstairs galleries: Alfredo Jaar, Boulatov, the astonishing Chéri Samba, Rasheed Araeen, Louise Bourgeois, Nancy Spero and Juan Munoz all benefited from individual stands. Perhaps most representative of the somewhat aborted overall purpose was an installation by a Catalan artist — Miralda: here a Westerner confronted Latin-American culture by constructing a cynical shady shrine of gastronomic and religious icons thus combining yoruba, voodoo and catholic cultures — *ave Maria ave Banana!*

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