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Flash Art California

GUY DE COINETET

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Otis Art Institute

In Guy de Cointet's most recent dramatic conceits, *Tell Me* and *A Photograph*, beautiful women are brought together once again for an hour of contrived nonsense. The characters, highly stylized as usual, ramble on in a thick maze of non-sequiturs. All sense of meaning is abandoned early in favor of what seems at first to be poetic ambiguity. But a wholly arbitrary cross-assignment of meaning and function — de Cointet's verbs nominate at random, his nouns become transitive — soon overtakes our tolerance for ambiguity. However verbal, this is not poetry; just as the performers' high finesse



Guy de Cointet, *The Painter from 33 scenes*. New York Art Theater Institute, NYC.

mocks the necessarily theatrical medium they are obliged to use. Cointet's discursive confoundment is such that his "dialogue" and proscribed actions can be seen only as an abstraction, a kind of extended verbal fabric collaged against what immediately precedes and follows it. Each collective effort resembles a big painting or sculpture. By this scheme, his characters and their props serve as color-analogues while their speech and movement works as drawing.

Cointet continually compounds our bewilderment as the assortment of planar and polyhedral objects arranged as the set prove, one by one, to be if not utilitarian at least decipherable. Uses and messages abound. A white oblong is a mirror, a green T a telephone, a triangle a writing instrument with a nearby blue

parallelogram its paper, and so forth. Sounds, clapping and the tick-tock of a clock and spoken letters and numbers are marshalled as abstract counterparts to the representalism of words. Decoding the cryptic marks that cover the more overtly communicative objects or divining the meaning of each's shape prompts all manner of rhetorical flight. Cointet modulates the expressiveness of each of these monologues, typically constructing some fantastic tale distinguished by its almost-whole narrative. Within these oases of near-rationality some kind of hyperbolic activity invariably surfaces. In one, a heroine teeters on the edge of a high cliff, "Marcia is terrified to find herself suspended in empty space," the performer relates, adding, "I'm terrified myself." By such violations of the play's formal integrity — its picture plane — the author speaks most directly. His own horror of vacuums animates Cointet's ferociously crowded constructs. We are assaulted by a vertiginous gaggle of absurd appositives, arbitrarily assembled phrases, objects, and images. The work is alternately baffling and amusing, indigestible but appetizing, legible yet impenetrable.

RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER

Asher/Faure Gallery

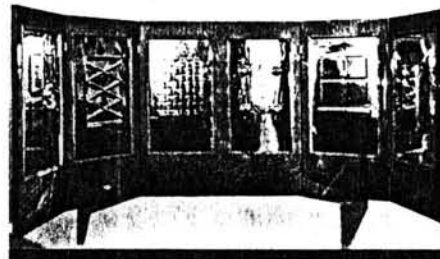
In a distillation of his show in New York last fall, Artschwager is represented here by a melange of paintings and objects from the last fifteen years. This show served as both coda and antiphonal response to the retrospective exhibition currently travelling the country. A startling continuity of concerns and methods marks both. Artschwager, if known at all, seems to be known for what is taken as incessant novelty. On close inspections, however, it is clear that he established the repertoire of images and media he is still working with during the first two or three years of his career. The novelty is in his repeatedly combining essentially the same premises into different conclusions. For this show, for example, a number of older pieces, extant and otherwise, were remade with variations of formica, or color, and to a larger scale.

Certain leit-motifs keep popping in the show, so that for the literal-minded the work can be seen as a three-dimensional roman-a-clef with pictorial and sculptural notions acting as protagonists. Black formica, for instance, translates into a physical surrogate for real space. Thus, an untitled corner piece from 1964 employs the material as shadow, assuming the blond formica wedge is being lit from top and bottom simul-

taneously. A bookcase is raised effortlessly in the back by means of a 2" or 3" black rectangle coming off the floor into the piece, spanning the long gap between its "legs."

Perhaps more saliently, the show, at least in its Los Angeles version, had a curiously sacred air about it. There was the usual reverential feeling as in all of Artschwager's work for the materials and the requisite craft of making something beautiful. But the feeling extended beyond that literal manifestation to the subject matter. The single largest piece, six joined mylar bas-relief panels framed in more blond formica is a polyp-tych that enshrines Artschwager's domestic canon: door, window, table, basket, mirror, rug. It is a good-hearted high jinx of medieval painting, both by its form and by the panel's precious "silver" nature. Artschwager's commonplace images, treated in such off-beat ways, have an endearing humility about them that bespeaks of the artist's frame of mind. His hybrid surrealism is all the more profound for its humor, imagination, and tolerance. Its only dogma is that art be as lively as existence.

Richard Armstrong



Richard Artschwager, *Six Mirror Images*, 1975-79. Formica, vacuum metalized plexiglass on wood 58 x 155 x 4". Courtesy Asher/Faure Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo B. Davies, NYC.

PETER LODATO

Rosamund Felsen Gallery

Los Angeles harbors and fosters an indigenous abstract art style, one that in its many variations has a common dependency on architectural context for its success. Physical surrounds are unusually important for these "situations" because their physiological requirements supersede their aesthetics. Thus, with insensitive lighting — either too much or too little — a piece by Robert Irwin, Jim Turrell, Maria Nordman, or Eric Orr becomes indistinguishable. Likewise, with too much ambient sound Michael Brewster's acoustic sculptures are lost.

But these artists, its best-known participants, represent only the minimal, somewhat dematerialized branch of the style. Richard Jack-

Painters at Protetch

Gary Bower

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AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE THEATER: THE EIGHTIES

by Mel Gordon

Numerous articles, discussions, and conferences about American avant-garde theater's past and future appeared in the last weeks of 1979 in New York. Everyone queried, critics, playwrights, whoever, almost without exception, were of a single opinion: the Seventies were a "bust," a "holding action," or a time to "practice survival." The most positive called the experimental theater of the Seventies, the Sixties digested. End-of-the-decade talk like this heavily-laced with self-conscious lament and prophecy, gave the distinct impression it was still the Sixties, not the Seventies, they remembered. Interestingly, both the people asking and those answering the questions reached artistic maturity before 1972.

Naturally, there are different ways of looking at the American avant-garde theater of the Sixties, Seventies, and the Eighties:

A Short Social Retrospection

Between 1967 and 1969, - the height of Vietnam - experimental theater in America had a following of over 65,000. Spectators and theater practitioners of the avant-garde provided a powerful element in the alternative society growing around America's cultural centers and campuses. Anti-capitalist/rationalist/war, pro-drug, and pro-sex sentiments as well as those promoting Black and Hispanic Power fuelled the mania for performance.

Experimental directors tried to make not only a new theater, but to challenge traditional ideas of behavior, health, spirituality, and entertainment. Never commercially successful like popular "anti-Establishment" music, the Sixties avant-garde theater, however, offered an excitement which television and cinema - heavily censored or self-censored politically and morally - could not. The sexual revolution and drug culture by 1970, suddenly found strong adherents in America's middle classes. When that and the youth culture became fashionable, especially in film and radio the theater's efficacy was blunted.

The loss of interest in experimental theater showed in declining attendance, depressed magazine sales, and the near total absence of mass media coverage. It is estimated that by '71 less than 5,000 individuals, mostly in New York followed new performance. Curiously, it was then that governmental and private agencies began funding avant-garde productions grandly - even lavishly. While theater of the Sixties was supported - if at all - by personal or family money of experimental directors themselves, the Seventies avant-garde saw tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants poured into them.

Grants transformed the avant-garde theater. After 1972, it became possible, even stylish, to present elaborate, grandiose spectacles before tiny non-existent audiences like Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson did. Both designed rich visual productions with disturbing imagery and sound altering the spectator's normal perception. Foreman and Wilson, like the Surrealists and Symbolists, attracted an elite audience

of the avant-garde. Each reached their height in 1976-1977 with Wilson's five-hour *Einstein on the Beach* with the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center for four performances; and Foreman's performances at the Vivian Beaumont Theater and his own downtown Ontological-Hysteric Theater receiving wide media coverage. Since then, both have undergone a malaise, at least in the States, Wilson working almost exclusively in Europe and Foreman moving toward film. Today, Wilson and Foreman are probably better known in Paris and Rome than in any city in the States.

Besides Wilson and Foreman, another major trend of the Seventies was performance. Like the Fifties - Happenings, performance art was rarely seen as theater in the early Seventies. Presented mostly by artists or musicians in lofts or galleries, the works frequently involved comic, grotesque, bizarre, or reconstructed activities in a melange of styles. Drawing on indirect public subsidies (also funding museums and galleries), or aided by art patrons investing in props or photographs, and helped by relatively large new art audiences, such performances had an economic buoyancy experimental theater lacked.



Ken Jacobs, *Stick to your carpentry and you won't get nailed*, 1979. Photo Robert Del Tredici, NYC.

Observations on the Eighties

Since 1978, no new names have replaced Foreman and Wilson in the media's Pantheon of the American avant-garde. Somewhat difficult it would be to produce a more intellectually dense, emotionally-fractured, pornographic play than Foreman; or a more gigantic, slow-motion piece than Wilson's one hundred performer, 12-hour *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1974). While no one has - or maybe could - appeal to the mass media the way Foreman and Wilson did, significant, avant-garde work has been done through the Seventies into the Eighties.

Artist and composer, Laurie Anderson constructed a performance style containing so many perceptual and cognitive shifts that some spectators get the giddy sensation of a roller-coaster. Working infrequently since 1974, Anderson is known for her unusual musical instrumentation - violins with record discs or recording tape replacing the horsehair strings - all autobiographical presentations. In *Americans on the Move: Parts I and II*, last April at the Kitchen, Anderson was a charming self-

conscious performer. Using simple comic projections and overlays of maps and lines, Anderson described anecdotes about travelling across America (staying in a nunnery, picked up by a sex-crazed truck driver, etc.). During each story, a gesture, a phrase or a sound is repeated; immediately Anderson is transformed, making hysterical dancing movements, singing a punk rock song (with her band), making strange noises - or doing imitations. Associations lead to the next story: the waving goodbye of a violin bow becomes a windshield wiper; the word "currents" leads to a story about Thomas Edison. As her performance unfolds, the audience notices repetition of objects, gestures, words, sounds, shapes; accelerating into a spinning outer space finale.



The Performance Group in *Point Judith* by E. LeCompte and Spalding Gray. Performing Garage. Photo M. Barcelona.



Laurie Anderson playing a "viophonograph".

Like Anderson, the infrequency of Ken Jacobs' performances made him better known to experimental cinema and dance. Working intermittently since the Sixties with the group "The Apparition Theater of New York," Jacobs marries startling optical displays - manipulating the spectator's depth perception - with unsophisticated or melodramatic social messages.



Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte, *Sakonnet Point*, 1975. Part 1 of three places in Rhode Island. Photo Bob Van Dantzic.

has been the subject of controversy since its beginning in 1975. Attacked for both his academic background and his pronounced lack of interest in Structuralism, Kirby's productions are more influenced by Bauhaus, the French New Novel, and the films of Resnais and Antonioni, than by his own work. Constructing plays without plot, character, or "content," Kirby forces the spectator to retain certain patterns or structures in the performances. A repeated gesture (the opening of an umbrella), sound (the ruffling of leaves), image (the slide of a stairway), phrase ("It's them again.") all populate a typical Structuralist Workshop presentation. Since the performances are generally given in an atmosphere of mystery and dread, the acting understated and unexpressive — as if everyone were speaking in code — audiences search for some story-meaning, of which there is none.

The Structural Workshop's most recent presentation *Incidents in Renaissance Venice* (1979) involved the constant reshuffling of nine character-types (the beggar, the guard, the Countess, etc.) meeting at night in sixteenth-century Venice. Speaking softly in a dim-light space, each character, reciting his same stock dialogue, formed new relationships with the other performers.

Combining comedy with the French avant-

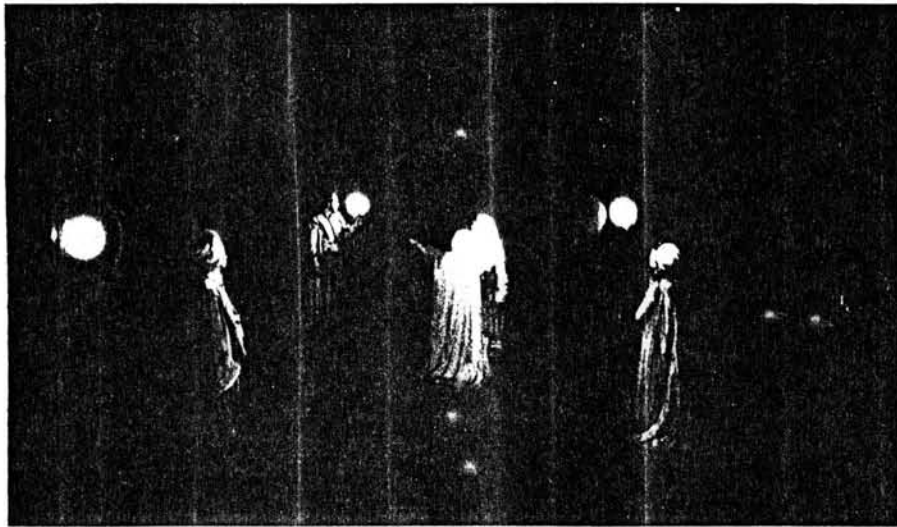
Working alone at the opposite spectrum is **Winston Tong**, interacting with dolls and puppets. His work is notorious for brevity and sex. In wedding details of classical Chinese and Bunkaru theaters like a child playing with toys, Tong relies on his own and the childrens' deeply-felt reactions to disturbing images, like in his well known, *Bound Feet*, where Tong, bound like a Chinese woman, manipulates male and female dolls to a kind of orgasm.

Popular and prolific, **Spalding Gray**, with **Elizabeth LeCompte**, use unmediated — and sensational — autobiographical materials in a framework of comic madness, schoolboy satire, confession, impossible dream imagery, and documentary audio-visual presentation.

Squat, relocated in New York, has staged two productions relying on bizarre and shocking imagery and the unsuspecting participation of passing on-lookers in the street. Housed on 23rd Street, far from Broadway or Soho, the expatriate Hungarian families composing Squat devised a pattern weaving the fixed or uncontrolled elements of theater, video, film, and unknowing voyeurism together. Their last production, *Andy Warhol's Last Love* (1978), using a pot-pourri of science fiction and spy drama ends after Warhol has been chased round Chinatown by a 250 lb. naked witch, with a New York street crowd peering through Squats store-window at the naked woman and audience inside — an electrifying real-life situation for New York and its avant-garde.

Mel Gordon

Mel Gordon is an associate editor of *Drama Review*.



Structuralist Workshop, *Incidents in Renaissance Venice*. Photo Michael Kirby.



Winston Tong with puppets. Photo V. Lowe.



Squat Theater, *Andy Warhol's last love*. Photo Teo Shank.

Typically in an Apparition Theater piece, spectators are handed polarized 3-D glasses, old films or slides with double-images, are then projected. Jacobs moves through the audience helping with the glasses. A special shadow-screen with polarized lamps shows the 3-D silhouettes of children or young women at play. Dissimilar shadows are resolved in the spectator's mind through the glasses.

Michael Kirby's **Structuralist Workshop**

garde, **Guy de Cointet** is slowly becoming known in New York. French-born and California-based since 1969, de Cointet continues Raymond Roussel's turn-of-the-century experiments with the grotesque and meta-linguistic behavior. The dislocation of everyday thought, the substitution of signs and abstract shapes for physical objects, the invention of artificial languages, the metaphysical basis of the banal, masturbatory-like repetition as structure, are basic. Previously working with midgets, *Tell Me* (1979), a melodrama, revolves on the relationships and chatter of three housewives. Each spews out passages from novels, movies, classical poetry, nineteenth-century philosophical treatises, and television, in the rhythms of the shopping-center — as if three computers had gone mad.

Founded by Donald Sanders and Linda Blumberg in 1978, the **New York Art Theater** attempts to expand scenic time-and-space. Their 33 *Scenes on the Possibility of Human Happiness* uses twenty-five actors in 180 plastic, seventeenth-century costumes. Staged like a fashion show, each group depicts one tableau of human happiness.

ITALIA/CALIFORNIA

The first international art/theater meeting will be held at Pistoia from May 7 to 11. The meeting, focused on ITALIA/CALIFORNIA, has been organized by Enzo Bargiacchi and Giuseppe Bartolucci and the Comune of Pistoia, with the collaboration of T.R.T. and the Regione Toscana.

The first meeting is centered on an "exchange-match" between two Californian groups (The Snake Theater and Soon 3) visiting Europe for the first time, with Theodore Shank and many artists (including Suzanne Helmutt and Jack Reynolds). The gathering is part of the fifth "Theater and music towards new ways of expression" review.

The following Italian groups will be taking part: *Beat '72* from Rome, *Magazzini Criminali* from Florence, *Gara Scienza* from Rome, together with Andrea Ciullo and his *Teatro Dopo*, Benedetto Simonelli and friends and *The a tre*.