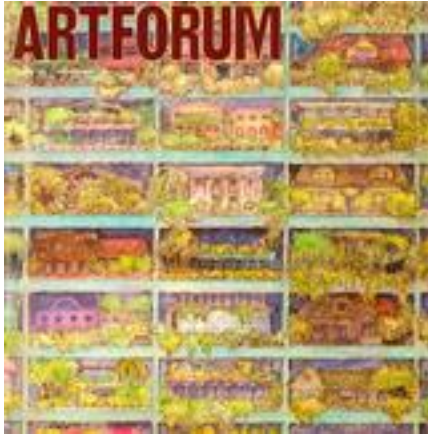


New York



PRINT October 1982

Leandro Katz

P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center

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The romantic aspect of the film, the pleasure it takes in the look of the city and the rhythms of its movement, is accentuated by the soundtrack, composed by Richard Landry. The sound is that of the saxophone, establishing a mood from the very first note. As the music progresses this mood is intensified through the use of an electronic delay system which produces a haunting echo between the speakers, an aural equivalent to the double projection.

Which brings us to the aspect of the film's presentation which takes it a step beyond the hysteria of the conventional travelogue. Two projectors, each loaded with different reels of film, are set up in the back corners of the room, pointing inward as well as forward at a screen which stands concertinalike so as to accept two images. From a conventional viewing position in the center of the room both films are visible at once, one intersecting the other in equal portions. As one moves from side to side, one image grows more complete as the intervening slices of the other narrow to nothing. Katz hopes that this eccentric presentation will encourage the spectators to become more aware of their positions as spectators, forcing them to move around to get a better

idea of the whole picture. While this is an interesting enough notion, it is nevertheless true that it takes something more than an oddly shaped screen to disturb the inertia of the usual consumers of spectacle. At the screening I attended few people bothered to move, preferring to rest content with whatever was available from the first place they chose to sit.

Far more interesting than its use as a device for installing self-consciousness in its viewers is the zigzag screen's potential for extending our understanding of montage. Here the two terms are neither superimposed nor juxtaposed, but repeatedly inserted into one another. It is this intermingling, almost erotic in its effect, that makes Katz's rhapsody so effective. It abstracts from the specific details of daily life, building a rhythmic picture of sensation, taking us from the particularities of life in New York to a more generalized sense of the endlessly repeating movement, abrasive yet soothing, of life in Metropotamia.

Paul McMahon

Artists Space Exhibitions

Two other small events from the end of last season deserve mention. Both were too quiet to attract much attention or to have much of a lasting impact, but slightness can be a virtue, and both demonstrated that. They may not have blown anyone over, but their humor and intelligence in the face of so much dull pretension provided pleasant relief.

Paul McMahon is the balladeer of life in Lower Manhattan, singing artfully simple songs of the joys and fears, and, most especially, of the paranoias of New York's artistic demimonde. His words are simple, his tunes are simple, his presentation is burdened with a minimum of show or effect, but because they cut so close to the bone, and in ways that are intensely personal (even the least imagination can match names to McMahon's often reptilian disguises), his songs are simultaneously unbearably sad and very funny. The songs are full of yearning, but also of mockery. McMahon plays a double role—he is both the alienated insider who knows too much and is disgusted, in an ironical way, with what he knows, and the fascinated outsider who does not know enough and cannot believe how much he wants to know more. The role is a sympathetic one, and the charm of McMahon's performances lies in the very obvious rapport he is able to build with his audience.

This rapport was particularly strong on the evening of this performance, in which the atmosphere was relaxed enough to allow the improvisational song "Rock 'n' Roll Psychiatrist" to work successfully. This piece is always something of a litmus test, since McMahon composes the verses of the song in response to questions thrown from the audience—an audience at the Kitchen earlier in the year had proven too self-conscious to enter the party-game spirit essential for the song to work, and as a result the entire performance seemed a bit strained. Another feature of the performance at Artists Space was McMahon's decision to play in front of drop-cloths, each painted to accompany a particular song. His songs have always been written with the painter Nancy Chunn, and the backdrops were also collaborative in conception and execution. There, painted in a crypto-naive style to match that of the songs themselves, was "The Valley of Art" with its busy artists digging up quite familiar looking artworks; "Simon Weasel," busy at

his easel; that sexy salamander, “Cream of the Stream”; and the impressively fecund “Genius with a Penis,” to mention a few.

[Sigmar Polke](#)

Holly Solomon Gallery

The crypto-naive mode is not unique to McMahon and Chunn, of course—it has been a popular device throughout the '70s, especially with artists involved in performance. Nor is it solely American, as the performance/painting fusions of Salome, Der Kippenberger, and other German artists demonstrate. An important influence on much current European practice is an earlier devotee of the approach, Sigmar Polke, who over the years has developed a painting style that brings together a sophisticated taste for popular culture and kitsch with a spacy transcendentalism. For years Polke has luxuriated in the delirious appropriation of material, images, and styles favored by so many artists today. He has mimicked banal forms of photography and high-Modernist abstraction, he has lifted images from wallpaper design and comic books, he has used all sorts of untraditional and unstable materials, he has used thick paint and thin, large scale and small. In short, much more than painters like Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz, for example, he is an artist who is still vitally connected to the world and to the problem of dealing with it effectively in contemporary terms.

The gallery is to be congratulated, then, on finally introducing Polke to New York. It is a scandal that he has never shown here before, and so a sense of gratitude overcomes a certain disappointment—only three ten-year-old pieces by someone who is clearly of seminal importance is just not enough. Not only not enough, but unfortunately only too helpful to some younger artists who would probably prefer that his work never be shown here in depth.

Polke's paintings are complex, contradictory works, and the three pieces on view come from a particularly difficult period in which he seems to have been moving away from a more overtly political stance to a private, quasi-religious one. This was the period he completed several huge drawings of motorbikes heading for infinity, which relate quite plainly to the drug culture of the time—drawings whose sentimentality seems shocking from an artist whose work often possesses such acerbic wit. The pieces at Solomon, large, unstretched works on a variety of supports, have some of that spaced-out, hippy feeling, but still evidence the sly humor of the earlier antibourgeois satires.

A major retrospective in Tübingen and Düsseldorf in the mid-'70s firmly established Polke's position in Europe, particularly in relation to the then emerging Trans-Avantgarde. We now need to see more of his work here.

—[Thomas Lawson](#)

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Leandro Katz, *Metropotamia*, 1982, color film on zig-zag screen, 8 x 18". Photo: Dianne Baasch.

New York

LEANDRO KATZ, "Metropotamia," P.S. 1; PAUL McMAHON, Artists Space; SIGMAR POLKE, Holly Solomon Gallery:

LEANDRO KATZ

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PAUL McMAHON

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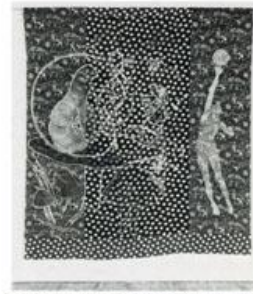
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Paul McMahon, *Flattering the Flatterers*, 1962, performance view. Painting by Nancy Chunn. Photo: Noble Peika



Paul McMahon, *How I Love Your Paintings*, 1962, performance view. Painting by Nancy Chunn. Photo: Noble Peika



Sigmar Polke, *Alice in Wonderland*, 1971, mixed media on fabric, 125 x 115"

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—THOMAS LAWSON

"The Pressure to Paint," Marlborough Gallery:

This is a show not about art but about power: the power of money, the power of hype, and the power of exclusion. According to curator Diego Cortez, the first two are justified by an undisguised (if ludicrous) process of inversion: middleman becomes producer (the "new" dealers' marketing techniques are, he writes, part of a "strategy of the soul," and his "admiration and respect" for them "is at least equal to that of the artists and their work"); and high-powered commercial gallery becomes radical alternative space ("Yes, Marlborough for my purposes is an alternative space"). In other words, the ethically ambiguous becomes holy. The third or silent partner in this troika is a sexism which is glaringly obvious but never overtly mentioned, not even to be glossed over and turned inside out.

The inversion tactic is an old one, useful in providing a new thrill for jaded palates. Cortez's catalogue essay is meant to provoke the mocking laughter which would *épater le bourgeois*. Indeed, there's quite a bit of the flavor of the yellow '90s in all this, but the decadents were not allied to the dominant system as this polemic is, and the bulk against which they pushed in the late

Victorian period was a homogenous block—not, like the art world, a Play-Doh material ready to take any imprint. Far from penning breathless paeans to it, as dandies or bohemians, '90s esthetes excluded themselves from the common productive actions of commercial society. And the decadents were also anti-establishment in esthetic theory, were interested in a breakdown of categories. Walter Pater distrusted art objects so much that he believed only the experience of art to be enduring. "The Pressure to Paint," by contrast, is about the restoration of old pieties, big canvases, and "masterpieces."

If the pieces included in this exhibition are masterpieces, as Cortez insists, then the Emperor in new clothes belongs on Blackwell's "best dressed" list. Regardless of what one may think of the overall quality of the artists gathered here, the works by which they are represented are mainly samples of their worst efforts. Thus the paintings act as symbols of the artists' fame rather than as proofs of their alleged ability. So many claims for Anselm Kiefer's genius are being made these days that one hesitates to peep the word "pompous," but his contribution to this parade—some characteristic rings on some characteristically murky impasto—doesn't even have hubris going for it. Georg Baselitz's canvases make you wonder whether a lot of good theory hasn't gone into some pretty weak painting (to be fair, both works are from 1973). And so on. Most of these painters need the evidence of a one-person spread for viewers simply to understand their concerns, let alone lend sympathy. Among the very few who look good are some who do so because they are more effica-