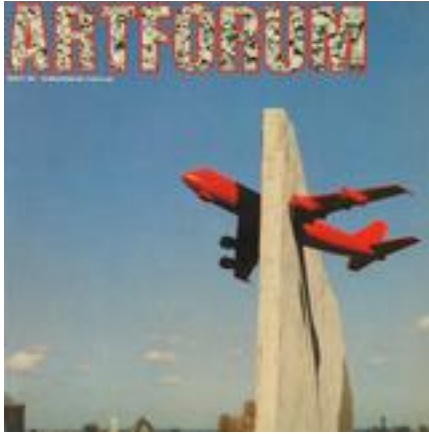


NEW YORK



PRINT MARCH 1981

try in the throes of revolution, three "tourists" (two Americans and a South African) are murdered by terrorists.

Phase Six: In an international airport, a black American woman strikes up a conversation with a white man from a South American republic. The woman's name is Berinthia, she likes tea, and is on her way to South Carolina.

Phase Seven: The corpse of an ox is strung with Christmas lights and sprinkled with play money.

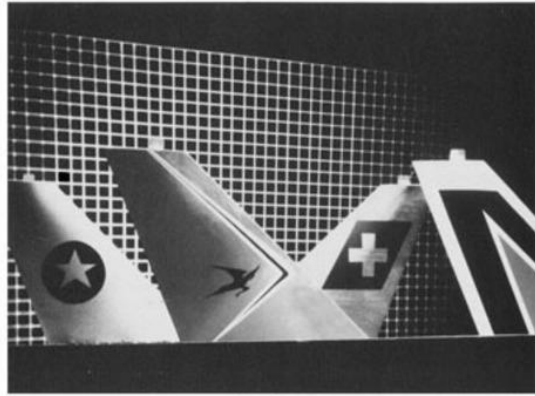
The preceding is an outline of PING CHONG's *Nuit Blanche*. What's missing are the bridges between scenes (slides or film with taped accompaniment), almost all of which refer to the moon, which floats through *Nuit Blanche* with relentless diversity. Whether it is referred to through the odd banality of the American astronauts' lunar landing or a dippy rendition of "Blue Moon," the moon remains impervious to earthly turbulence. This is certainly not a new metaphor, but the NASA slides provide a techno-poetic context for the main concern: power in all its ramifications (political, social, sexual, racial and emotional).

Nuit Blanche consistently presents chaos as resolution. Hysteria parades as resolve; anarchy is little more than an enthusiasm for change. "Take a chance" is the message, but "things won't get better" seems to be the only conclusion. This philosophical ambivalence is annoying; it appears to welcome change but, in the end, refuses to endorse it. The result is a middle-class shrug of the shoulders, more apolitical rowing in the waters of Lake Wishywashy.

Watching *Nuit Blanche*, I was reminded of how I've initially resisted the home-

made quality in Chong's previous work (*Lazarus, Humboldt's Current, Fear and Loathing in Gotham*), only to be charmed and won over by the power that his impoverished props and costumes gradually acquire. What I haven't been won over by are Chong's performers, who tend toward a theatrically declamatory style better suited for the proscenium than the alternative space. *Nuit Blanche* contains what is, for Chong, quite a bit of dialogue. That so much of it rings false—and often includes clichés that might better be left out—is due to that old devil, technique. The odor of Adler, Chaikin and Hagen hangs heavy and makes every phrase an emphatic bid for attention.

Nuit Blanche is, however, hypnotically lovely to look at. The washerwoman sequence takes place against slides of a man walking away from a weedy tract house. Each slide is a portrait as telling and involving as the story of the plight of the woman he has left behind. The Neanderthals' conflict is played out in silhouette against a succession of exquisite, steely blue icescapes. Also presented in silhouette is an exchange between the owner of the Haven of Peace resort and a Chinese visitor (played wordlessly by Chong). A beach umbrella tilts into the picture plane as the host discusses his shell collection; meanwhile, in the bloody foreground, the guests are being dispatched with rote efficiency. At the airport, a seemingly endless series of tail fins (their insignia growing increasingly fanciful) passes in review, generating a wonderful *ballet mécanique*. The final image of a sacrificial ox—with incense wafting through the air—is a potent combination of *National Geographic*-like docu-



Ping Chong, *Nuit Blanche*, 1981, performance, approx. 90 min., long

mentation and Pub Tiki floor show. Who cares if it isn't particularly smart—it's fabulous theater.

—RICHARD FLOOD

Fashion Moda, The New Museum; ANTONIO GAUDI, Brooks Jackson Gallery Iolas; "Further Furniture," Marian Goodman/Multiples; DUANE MICHALS, Sidney Janis Gallery:

The series of three group shows, collectively entitled "Events," that The New Museum is staging this winter—of which Fashion Moda's is the first—raises at least two interesting problems that may or may not be related. The first is about the liveliness, and continuing viability, of well-established alternative spaces. The second concerns the more wide-ranging issue of curatorial responsibility; the meaning of certain kinds of display.

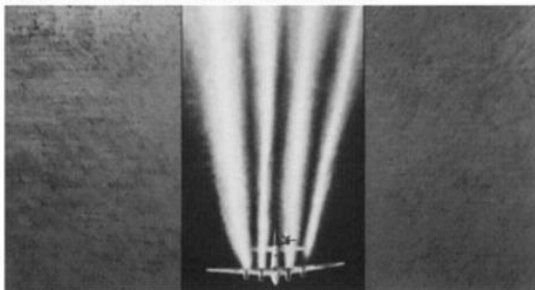
To quote from the press release: "The New Museum has invited Fashion Moda, Taller Boricua, and Collaborative Projects, three New York based independent artists organizations to each select, organize, and install an installation/exhibition at the Museum. . . . Events is the first exhibition at The New Museum completely organized and installed by artists groups. Each group will take over and transform the Museum's space according to its own character and esthetic interests." There is of course nothing unusual about an organization inviting a guest curator to develop an exhibition. Nothing unusual,

and nothing unhealthy either. Most art organizations run the risk of becoming stale, especially if they're committed to perpetually seeking out new work; a fresh eye can only help. What is unusual, however, is the wholesale surrender of control to an outside group—not just of the selection of work, but of the installation as well.

The clue to understanding this unwonted submission lies in the identity of the honored guests. Each is a small, publicly (but minimally) funded organization. They all operate, by choice, on the fringes of the New York art world: in the ghettos of the South Bronx, Spanish Harlem, and the Lower East Side. Each has a political program, no matter how vague, that caters to the idea that art should be as available to the poor and disadvantaged as it is to the middle classes. Most important, each is run by artists, as a service to their peers. In short, each is potentially ideal for fundraising—except for one crucial fact—none has a respectable institutional base. This is an important criterion to those who award grants, because it means that they have no guarantees that money will be spent in a responsible manner. And so a marriage is proposed: The New Museum gets greater credibility in terms of "innovative new art," while these three groups get greater exposure to an audience that would never dream of taking the subway from Manhattan to the South Bronx.

Not a bad exchange, except for the nagging suspicion that as a result one is

Jack Goldstein, *Untitled*, 1980, oil and acrylic on canvas, 3 panels, each 96 x 60"



Fashion Moda

NEW MUSEUM

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Not a bad exchange, except for the nagging suspicion that as a result one is paying twice for the same thing—cavil, perhaps, but it’s one that is raised only because of the entirely specious claim that The New Museum is not merely another alternative space, but a museum, which, in presenting this series, is acting as all museums act, drawing in a lot of disparate information and processing it through a central bureaucracy. The New Museum is a museum in name only; it is without even the rudiments of a collection, and in this case the material is presented free of the synthesizing effort usually associated with the curatorial profession. Despite this the Fashion Moda show was invigorating, and threw a different light on the usual curatorial conventions. All

manner of things were thrown together, seemingly without care, but in fact with a great deal of attention. Some of the work looked like art, while some of it tried very hard not to. Some of the work was made by people with art training, and some by people without it; often there was no telling which was which. A few of the pieces looked slick, or silly, but enough of the work rang true to make the show a success.

Much of the pleasure lay in the display, the creation of a spectacle of discourse. Disparate things were placed next to each other with casual abandon, with abrupt changes of style, context and scale; there was the expectation that the pieces would connect, but mostly there was only movement, and pretty snappy movement at that. Individual items were decontextualized, uprooted and shown to have little inherent meaning beyond the expression of a momentary joy or a private rage. Simple cultural artifacts were rendered stylish; one moved from graffiti to an oil painting borrowed from a famous-collector, from plaster casts of anonymous neighbors by John Ahearn, to a huge wall papered with photographs of jazz musicians by Ray Ross, from little jokes to long narratives, from objects on the wall to objects in the room. The show was not so much about individual works as about a style of presentation, of cross-references, of rhythm.

So in spite of certain misgivings I was pleased to have seen the show. It gave Stefan Eins, Joe Lewis, and William Scott, the directors of Fashion Moda, a chance to distill their activity, to come to grips with the meaning of their own organization. Moreover, it gave them a chance to make their contribution to an ongoing debate concerning the way art, and our lives are controlled by the conventions through which they are represented.

Antonio Gaudi

BROOKS JACKSON GALLERY LOLAS

By making an overall sense of style more important than the individual objects on show the directors of Fashion Moda (and of Collaborative Projects, for that matter) use techniques of display in an attempt to begin a certain kind of subversion. An entirely opposite strategy, taking utilitarian objects and elevating their importance as cultural signs, can also be used to similar effect. This seems to be, in part, the intent of artists making furniture as art.

A decision to forge a direct link between making art and making useful objects stems from the Arts and Crafts movement. Thus it was an interesting coincidence that the small show of Antonio Gaudi's furniture at lolas occurred at the same time as a more ambitious exhibition of contemporary artists' furniture around the corner at Marian Goodman.

The Gaudi designs all dated from around 1902–04, although the actual pieces on display were recent reproductions. Included in the show were a couple of chairs and a large mirror from the Casa Calvet, and a bench and small chair from the Casa Batilló. They all had a chunky, home-made quality strangely at odds with their almost precious Art Nouveau designs. They looked like rugged, country versions of a city style.

Like most furniture designed by architects, these pieces were made for a specific use, and a specific place within an overall design. It was this particularity of object to place, as much as the direct intervention of the artist in production, that gave the Arts and Crafts movement its political impetus. It became clear that it was not so much a matter of form following function—instead, form was the function. A piece of furniture was certainly a useful object, but a good part of that use was esthetic. It could be admired, but its uniqueness as a work of art was not the primary issue. Rather, what was at stake was an understanding of how each element operated as a sign in the larger ensemble.

When furniture of this sort is isolated from its original surroundings and put on display in a museum or gallery, all this changes: the piece becomes a desirable commodity, an *objet d'art* to be coveted for the status it might confer. We can no longer see it, only desire it. Its original meaning is lost and it becomes merely an item of exchange.

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Meret Oppenheim, *Table with Bird Prints*, 1939, gold leaf, wood and bronze, 26½ x 21" along

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In recent years quite a few artists have begun to explore the implications of this shift in meaning, by making art which takes the form of furniture. For the most part work of this kind only looks functional, and in fact is really produced for esthetic purposes rather than everyday use. The artist may intend it to participate in its owner's daily life, but by its very nature it is too significant to be treated as ordinary furniture. Art of this sort inserts itself mischievously into most of the hoary old debates about artistic practice: that the inner structure of a work of art should refer only to its own making, that art is frivolous unless it has a social function, and on and on. One could continue indefinitely, mouthing the formulas that are neatly compromised and made ridiculous by the best works in this genre.

Working in such a vein demands a certain amount of wit, and fortunately Nicolas Calas, the curator of "Further Furniture," has it. His selection is lively, although there are no surprises: Scott Burton plays an elegant joke on Constructivist devices by building a small table out of a square, a triangle, and a circle of steel; Richard Artschwager continues to play a double game, making fun of Minimalist procedures with the severe geometries of his Formica-covered desk, chair, and bookcase, while raking many a half-forgotten association over the coals. There was a nice touch of self-parody in Sol LeWitt's contribution, a low, glass-topped coffee table supported on a version of his open cube structures. The most visually stunning were also the least functional: Robert Wilson's two *Beach Chairs*, unequal in size, each a triangular form made of slatted aluminum with a solid roll of metal for a headrest. These could not be mistaken for anything but art.

The inclusion of Allan McCollum's paintings turned the show into something more than just another collection of artists' furniture. These works are small Masonite constructions that operate towards painting in a critical spirit



Antonio Gaudi, *Batlló Bench*, 1900 (reproduction of original, ca. 1900), hand carved American oak, 40½ x 57½"

“Further Furniture”

MARIAN GOODMAN/MULTIPLES

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This sense of unease permeated the show as a whole. Even the most innocent looking objects appeared vaguely threatening—not in a physical sense, but threatening to the ways in which we try to make sense of everyday experience.

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The desire to create a situation which leaves the viewer uneasy is of course a recurring motif in the Dada/Surrealist tradition in which DUANE MICHALS claims to participate. In his most recent show, optimistically titled "New Ideas in Photography, Painting, and Photograph/Drawing," he sought to unsettle the accepted perceptions of art by manipulating in tandem, two separate codes of representation—either pho-

tography and drawing, or photography and painting.

This kind of juxtaposition requires wit, partly because it is no longer a new idea. And wit seems to be an attribute which Michals possesses in small quantity. His work often has charm, sometimes humor, but it never has enough bite to be truly witty. There is a fatal timidity, a refusal of the extreme, that constantly renders the work merely cute.

An example of his shying away from the possibilities of extreme positions is the series comparing photography and drawing. Laid out in the simplest, most direct manner, each piece consists of a black-and-white photograph placed next to a rendering of the same image in pen and ink. Neither photograph nor drawing is exceptional, and that is the problem. To rise above the utter banality of a rather dull, easily acknowledged comparison, demands panache. The execution should be dazzling—either ravishingly exact, or careless to the point of absurdity. But something is needed, anything, to breathe fresh life into the pale shadow of an idea which on its own is too dull to merit attention.

The trouble is that Michals undervalues the potential of the clichés with which he works. It's as if he fails to get his own joke. His painting style, like his method of drawing, is totally conventional, but either he does not know this,



Alexandra Exter, *Three Costumed Figures*, c. 1920, paper-mâché
left to right: 11 1/2" high, 10" high, 10 1/2" high

or cannot bring himself to acknowledge and exploit it. Painting grapes over a group portrait so that the grapes appear larger than the heads of the people fails to illuminate anything new about scale. Painting a still life over the bottom half of a photograph of a young man looking down barely gets us thinking about different kinds of depicted space. Painting a face off to one side of a photograph of a head tells us next to nothing about the kinds of possible depth in contrasted media. The fact that the face belongs to Picasso and the balding head to Michals adds nothing to the latter's stature. Picasso understood the way in which collage can pull asunder the expected reading of a picture, throwing the "natural" seamlessness of any form of representation into jeopardy. Magritte, another ghost honored by Michals, also understood these things. Michals, in drawing attention to the masters he would emulate, only makes us realize how far his work falls short.

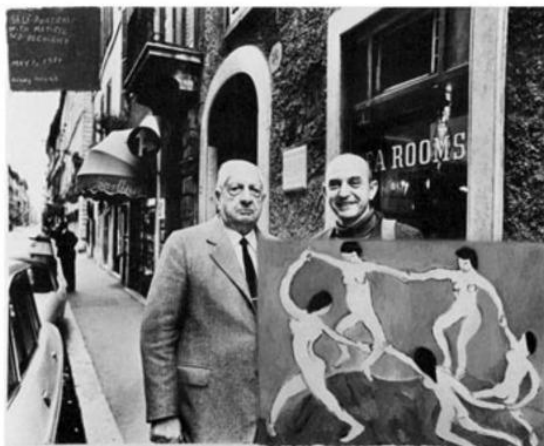
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"The Russian Revolution in Art—3," Rosa Esman Gallery in collaboration with Adler/Castillo, Inc.; JAMES BIEDERMAN, John Weber Gallery:

The more examples there are of early 20th-century Russian avant-garde art hanging in one place, the better it all looks. This group show of work from 1914 to 1925 includes familiar names from the pioneering generation (Alexandra Exter, Kasimir Malevich, Liubov Popova), a few of their younger colleagues (El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko), and others who have become best known for their relationships with Malevich (Vassily Ermilov and Ivan

Kliun, who reflected Malevich's influence at different stages of their own careers, and a few of his more orthodox Suprematist followers among the Unovis group—Nikolai Suetin, Ilya Chashnik.)

The kinds of esthetic, formalist investigation, that were of concern to this group—involving relational studies of colors, lines, and planes, in addition to practical design-related problems, including book design and theater work—can be gleaned from the 26 examples on view. The show also included a videotape of the California Institute of the Arts production of the Malevich-designed opera, *Victory Over the Sun*, written by the Russian Futurist poet Alexei Kruchenykh. The majority are small works on paper, executed in various media, including gouache, watercolor, pencil, and ink. Among them are Popova's dynamic color constructions and Malevich's simple pencil sketches, which are representative of his development from Suprematism to a mystical expressionism. Two works by Rodchenko—a gouache on cardboard (1915) and another on paper (1917)—exemplify his early, pre-Constructivist-Productivist career. One of the few oils on canvas is a 1925 Purist-related still life by Kliun; indicative of the high degree of Russian interest in Western developments throughout this period. The knock-out in the show is the pair of three-dimensional figure-costume constructions by Alexandra Exter. It is probable that they were once used as models in the courses that Exter taught in stage and costume design in Russia and then in Paris. She was the first to create and to teach a truly Modernist style of constructed theatrical design.



83 Duane Michals, *Self-Portrait with De Chirico and Matisse*, 1980, oil on photograph, 11 x 14"

Duane Michals

SIDNEY JANIS GALLERY

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