

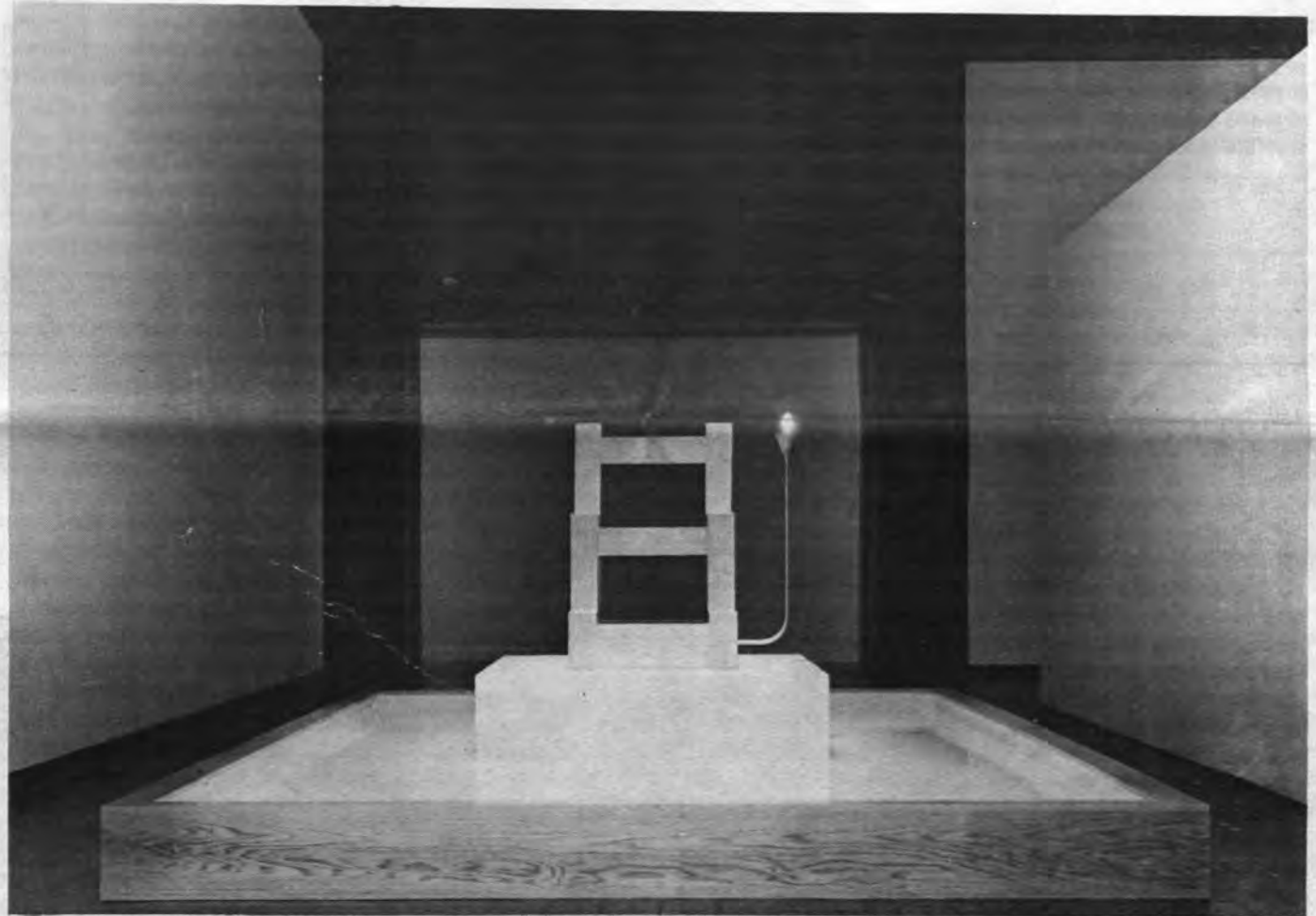
PERFORMANCE RECORDED THROUGH INSTALLATION SITE

Houston / Susie Kalil

Attempting to examine both visual and static components of performance activity through whole environments specifically constructed by artists for the museum situation, *Other Realities — Installations for Performance*, currently at the Contemporary Arts Museum, directly poses a question that has only recently begun to surface in other similar undertakings. Most notable of these were the exhibitions *Artists' Sets and Costumes*, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Philadelphia, and *From Performance — Costumes and Other Works*, at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati. Presenting sets and scenes as documentary memorabilia, however, these two shows sidestepped what curator Marti Mayo innovatively seeks from the decisively transitory nature of performance art. Can the impact and strength of a performance survive as a visually exciting installation which successfully holds a museum space during the weeks allotted a major exhibition?

Mayo has selected six mid-career artists whose varied installations represent the best examples of individual efforts emergent within performance's last decade. Each tableau, by a purposefully static and combined utilization of diverse media normally associated with performance — painting, sculpture, dance, music, architecture and video — creates a visual and psychological context that promotes viewer interaction, and also activates purely visual images, enticing the viewer to follow the artist pictorially into implied or invented other realities.

Tina Girouard, Joan Jonas, Eleanor Antin, Colette, Vito Acconci and Robert Wilson each created a specific environment inside the museum's cavernous space. The sites were then utilized for individual performances by each of the four women artists (Acconci chose to give a two-hour lecture). The question of whether the remaining installations can sustain the immediacy of their respective performances, however, is debatable. Always in play, the temporal aspect situates the spectator in a curious perceptual dilemma — as if the entire exhibition is suspended in time. The viewer knows something has taken place in each site, which resembles an empty stage set, yet each also maintains animated, albeit ghostlike, distinctions. Furthermore, the viewer is dealing with image per se, but unlike the image in a painting, this one must be gradually



Robert Wilson, "Overture Chair," 1980, oak, brass, vinyl, water and acetylene gas, at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. Photo: Jorge Hernandez.

perceived. The discernibly singular installations constructed by each artist display common threads pointing to pluralistic trends, two of which are the preoccupation with image, in some cases with autobiographical implications, and increased utilization of theatrical devices and reliance on technical aids.

Performance was intrinsic to Tina Girouard's installation, *2C3TS (Cactus Crude Texas Trinity Trip)* and vice versa, in what is the most site-specific of the pieces included. Girouard, given a residency grant by the NEA (as was Joan Jonas), assembled a troupe of Houston artists and students whose ten-day participation in a workshop directed by the artist culminated in the installation of a piece that also doubled as performance. Girouard's penchant for a slowly evolving visual image is more well known in Europe than in this country. She charges her installations with a sense of place, building a portrait through props, lights, colors and objects that take on meaning as they are consciously positioned in patterns. Girouard attempts to make reality even stronger by incorpo-

rating objects (or artifacts) into the installation.

Her symbolism directly involves the community, plucking resources that will lend a visual sophistication to an otherwise personal response to the particular location. In this case, viewers look down on the work from a balcony much like passers-by perusing a painted canvas. The triangular space, marked out by the performers, specifically concerns itself with the spiritual and physical context of Girouard's personal and public exposure to Houston. The CAM (time present) is represented by a jungle of house plants and a female mannequin wrapped in a green plastic garbage sack who sits at a desk with open checkbook, Wall Street paperback, and a piranha in a tank beside her. Old Texas (the past) is a mound of sand (desert), its city built out of oil cans, while toy airplanes, brightly colored miniature animals and jelly beans dot the makeshift highways which expose oil (or gunpowder). The future, NASA, is a powerful image of a spacesuit placed in a plastic "coffin" surrounded by plexi-

glass cubes punctuated by a blue strobe light. Machete knives describe the boundaries and a kachina doll above floats toward the viewer. The whole is a rich interweave of visual elements, mostly recognizable, that imbue the objects with personal as well as universal meaning.

While video documentation of Girouard's performance/installation was important to the viewer's understanding of the evolving images, color, light and composition easily formed an independent visual statement that is lacking in Eleanor Antin's section, *Recollections of My Life with Diaghilev*, part of Antin's ongoing exploration of her persona as Eleanora Antinova, the once-celebrated black ballerina of the Ballet Russe. Girouard inserts autobiographical experiences in her work to clarify reality, while Antin further obscures that tenuous barrier between viewer and artist, between real and unreal, through purposeful confusion. Antin's performance, in which she read from her *Recollections* text while dressed

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Performance Recorded through Installation Site, continued

in a twenties' period costume, sipping sherry and rolling her fingertips with exaggerated gestures, clearly placed her in a theatrical realm (although I'm sure she would disagree). She's an actress and a funny, bitchy but pathetic ballerina. Actually, the spectator gets confused as to exactly *who* she is. Her performance, nevertheless, touches the viewer in a way that the installation cannot transmit. This is not to say that the installation is unsuccessful as a visual image, which includes wall-mounted, period-printed pages of text describing her experiences, loves and misfortunes, plus the sepia-toned Baron de Meyer-like photographs of Antinova in her illustrious roles (in *Pocahontas*, *The Hebrews*, *The Prisoner of Persia*). The installation cleverly weaves subtle pithy statements about "making it" (a timely dilemma) with a salon environment that evokes a mood long dead, which is further exemplified by the interspersed sensitive pen and ink drawings — colorful washes of dancers and stage designs in the grand manner.

Colette manipulates this same kind of autobiographical force as the primary element in blurring the distinction between reality and illusion. Utilizing her own person as an essential activating agent that breaks down barriers of art and life, Colette creates a fantasy world that duly emerges as reality. Yet the emphasis of her installation is placed entirely on the visual product, in which she combines fantasies of art, fashion and theater, mixing *haute* style with today's punk culture. Although Antin may take on three distinct personae, Colette's private life metaphorically merges with legacy and arises as commercial industry. *Major Works from the Estate* is composed of six large-scale light boxes containing various artifacts from the life of Justine, an identity assumed by Colette, who "died" in a performance (1978) at the Whitney Museum in New York. Justine is the president of Colette is Dead Co., creator of the *Deadly Feminine* clothing line for Fiorucci, a member of the rock band "Justine and the Shades," and designer of a custom bed. However self-promoting this rigamarole seems, such overt commercialism is exactly the point as Colette simultaneously parodies and kowtows to media exploitation. It's difficult not to like her installation — the commercial forthrightness touches upon fantasy, romanticism and an excessive opulence that is equally seductive and repellent. Employing her usual trademarks — boxes, photographs of her clothing ventures, documentation of past installations and performances, plus copies of her disco album *Beautiful Dreamer*, the installation provides a recent update of Justine's commercial



Eleanor Antin, "Eleanora Antinova Reading from Her Memoirs," 1980, performance, at Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

history. More important, however, is the rich visual display of images — the signature mannequin, draped in cream-colored parachute silks and a laced corset, and camouflaged against large panels of pale satin ruches and silk cords, artificial doves, music boxes and showcases painted with hearts and snatches of melancholy love songs. Like Girouard's imagistic installation, Colette's windows function as paintings, combining color, texture and dimension with a romantic exoticism that belies a naive simplicity of form.

As with Girouard's controlled composition, Joan Jonas's installation reflects a similar adjustment to the specific location, augmented by explosive visual imagery whose subsequent activation proved essential to the expression of Jonas's ongoing concern with the notion of space and the ways in which people perceive things. Jonas's *Double Lunar Dogs*, previously performed in Berkeley (ARTWEEK, July 5, 1980) but altered for a triangular corner at CAM, emerges as an intimate, rich experience whose various imagistic layers have the quality of numerous intricate artifacts, purposely left behind for scrutiny. Jonas's piece must be perceived as a visual installation dependent on props. Yet, the viewer also senses Jonas's pervasive galvanic charge, as if the elements of the performance — video, drawing, sound, light, action and color — could be energized again at any given moment.

A loosely abstracted version of Robert Heinlein's science fiction story, *Universe*, *Double Lunar Dogs* works well as a stagelike container, representing a space vessel that "has been traveling for hundreds of years in which everyone has forgotten where they were born and where they were going." In the perform-

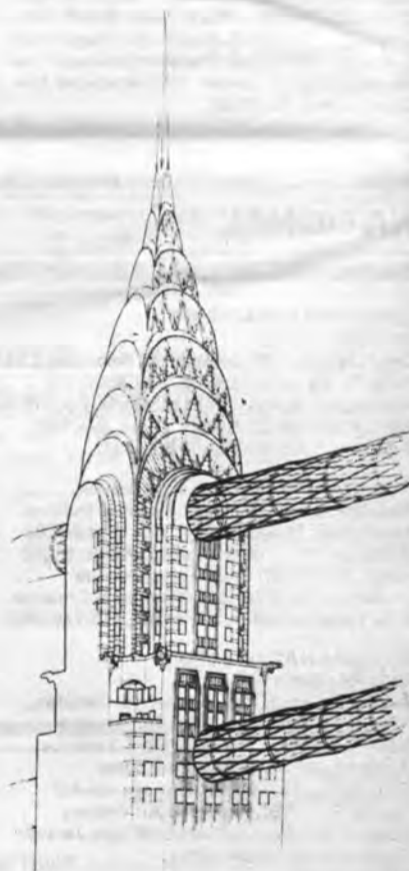
ance itself, Jonas's character and its alter ego attempt to determine the existence of a reality other than the one prescribed. The objects left behind — a dog mask, a pair of red oars and a showcase full of mundane objects such as a flashlight, a black rubber glove, a toy car and scissors — give intimations of Jonas's intended direction. However, it is the theatrical props that dramatically linger as vestiges of Jonas's reticulated energy field — the flashing red and blue lights, a yellow platform, a red swing embellished with glittering stars and brightly colored banners bearing images of the artist's familiar vocabulary.

It seems that the performance has indeed merged with theater, yet without performance documentation a viewer cannot envision how certain images evolved. Furthermore, the viewer has no idea how the space undergoes important and visual changes during the performance — an essential component for experiencing Jonas's richly woven layers that mix whale sounds, music from the Peking-Shanghai Opera Co. and planetary filmstrips. At one point, drums are beaten while Jonas and her alter ego appear to flash in darkness. The heightened suspense of the beat psychologically moves the viewer to the point that fear for Jonas develops. The installation, however, doesn't give us a clue to this scenario and ultimately distances the viewer.

While theatrical memorabilia diminishes the impact of Robert Wilson's *Overture Chair*, a set from the opera *Overture* (1972), approaches theater with an immediacy that engages the viewer directly and, curiously, without reference to its theatrical origins. More recognized for his work in avant-garde theater than performance, Wilson, nevertheless, alters the museum space from that of container to that of encounter, creating a tableau that melds painting, sculpture and architecture into a single vision materializing as a ritualistic throne rising from the middle of a reflecting pool, with acetylene torch extending to one side. The chair, the most dramatic installation of the exhibition, emits a sense of serenity in spite of the surrounding pieces; nonetheless, it relies wholly on lighting techniques and Wilson's theatrical experience. Wilson paints with light, which activates the stark, geometric and static image with a physical presence that makes the rose-colored wood seem to shimmer.

Like Wilson's chair, Acconci's self-erecting architecture is largely independent of the space, its temporality defined only as the piece changes when activated. Acconci, whose early pieces

combined interpersonal with autobiographical references that placed him in confrontational positions, still regards his works as "instruments for action" that provoke interaction between viewer and work. Acconci's latest piece — more tranquil than those earlier abrasive works that backed viewers into corners, forcing them to question definitions of art, politics or esthetic experience, — nevertheless embodies his familiar ambiguous edge that leaves the viewer with certain options for deciphering such deceptive simplicity. Less involved with conscious political commentary than with the broader issues of political idealism, the pursuit of pleasure and the unrealized dreams of the upwardly mobile American, *Collision House* is not dependent upon its spatial context for content; there is a slightly nomadic quality in the two aluminum house structures that are connected by cable and activated when the viewer pedals a bicycle. Acconci turns the tables on us. The exhibition's other installations promulgate a physical passivity on the part of the viewer, whereas Acconci's work remains incomplete until activated through direct participation. □



FRANK O. GEHRY and MICHAEL MERITET: CONNECTIONS, drawing, at Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

Collaboration: Artists & Architects, the centennial exhibition of the Architectural League of New York, is at the Dallas Museum of Fine Art through September 27. The show, originating at the New York Historical Society last March and traveling to fourteen other cities, explores the history and future collaboration between artists and architects. The collaborative projects, commissioned by the Architectural League, present work by twenty-two American artists and architects including Charles Moore, Michael Graves, Emilio Ambasz, Hugh Hardy, Cesar Pelli, Frank Stella, Alice Aycock and Richard Serra. The next west coast stop is the Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, October 10-November 15.

Vito Acconci, "Collision House," 1981, installation at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

