

NEW YORK LETTER

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I am tempted to agree with one visitor I overheard at the Guggenheim Museum's *Amsterdam-Paris-Düsseldorf* exhibition recently who said, "Why are they showing *that* here?" Indeed, despite the chauvinism behind such a question, the generally low level of the exhibition's quality does make one wonder why. Though it was rewarding to have Joseph Beuys included in an exhibition here at long last, and to see the work of Dieter Rot, Marcel Broodthaers, Ben Vautier, Sigmar Polke, and Christian Boltanski as well as of other, lesser known artists not previously seen on any scale in New York, the show failed to do their work justice. It also added little to our knowledge of the work of those European artists now familiar here, like the Bechers, Klaus Rinke, Jean-Michel Sanejouand, Jean-Pierre Raynaud or Konrad Klapheck.

Amsterdam-Paris-Düsseldorf did exactly what its European organizers, Blaise Gautier, Fritz Keers and Jürgen Harten feared it would do. Limiting the show to movable objects did tend to make us see the artists individually rather than as nationally united or derived, and what's worse the artists appeared to be heavily oriented towards a retardataire Dadaist and Surrealist sensibility. Most of the sections had the air of being mini-retrospectives, interesting for historical reasons, but very damaging to the images of the various artists as viable members of the avant-garde. This, I think, is the main reason why the show hasn't caused even a ripple in the New York art world.

It would definitely have been to the artists' advantage, as was pointed out by the organizers in their catalogue introductions, to have been present in order to make new art for the show instead of being represented as they were. Even so, Joseph Beuys looked very good (perhaps because he did precisely the sort of subversive thing in absentia that he might have done in the flesh), as did Dieter Rot (in a beautiful Cornell/Magritte way), Ben Vautier (in old-fashioned Lettriste style), and Jean-Michel Sanejouand (who was probably the only artist included to benefit from the increased exposure).

All in all, though, the show had a somewhat stale air. When art depends to a large extent on its innovative importance within the history of art, as Conceptual art most assuredly does, it necessarily suffers from this sort of presentation. The paintings and "straight" sculpture included suffered, on the other hand, by comparison with what is happening, and has been happening here in the same media for more than twenty years, which is far superior. Europe's particular prominence at this point, and its only hope of wresting attention from the continuing preeminence of New York art lies in the exploitation of the new avenues of approach offered by conceptual media. Made in the limited confines of a small studio or practically anywhere out of anything, dependent only upon precious notions of veracity, nostalgia, model-making, and note-keeping, European Concept art can be equally as important as anything we might produce in the same vein. Unfortunately, its interests were not served in this exhibition.

Videotape cassettes are a very "in" thing right now, both at home and in the art gallery. Few people don't know at least one person who owns a videotape machine, and hundreds of artists are experimenting with them to record or to produce art works. The funny thing is that very few people, either at home or in the art gallery, really seem to want to sit down and watch the results. Sheer boredom seems to circumscribe the attention span of even the most ardent art lover or regular home television enthusiast.

The average television watcher demands a high level of professionalism from his television entertainment. This is probably one of the main reasons why flawed, accident-full, live TV has gradually been eliminated in favor of pre-taped TV programming. The home videocassette has personal, nostalgic, recognition and humor-oriented uses. Interest in it, like interest in home movies or vacation slides, tends to be extremely short-lived due primarily to the low level of competence that goes into its production. The professionalism it lacks, present in Hollywood movies as it is in network television, is a sort of "poor-man's" substitute for art.

In an art gallery the opposite is true. There the slick professional look is anathema. It is precisely what the artist must subvert in order to make his work transcend ordinary TV and enter the higher realm called Art. The artist utilizes every natural means at his disposal to reinforce the distinctions between what he is doing with the medium of videotape and ordinary television. He uses bad sound, poor image resolution, distortions of endless variety, a clumsy plot structure or no plot structure at all—

anything to convey the appearance of being handmade. The inevitable result of all this is, naturally, that few people are willing to subject themselves to lengthy exposure to the kind of visual and auditory discomfort (not to say occasional trauma) in the usual "artistic" videotape.

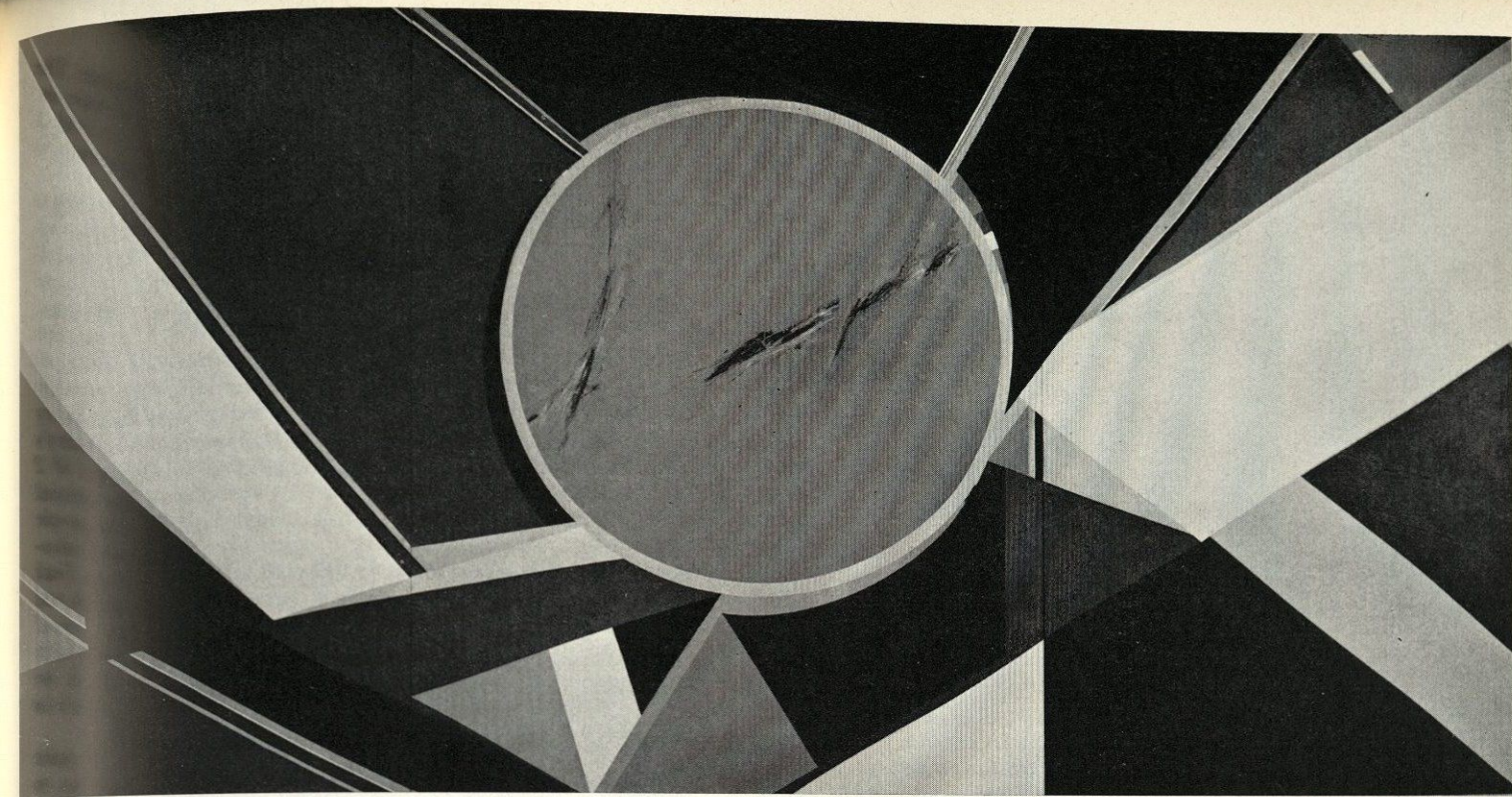
The videocassettes exhibited on four separate TV screens at the Leo Castelli downtown gallery were played on excellent equipment, with none of the technical errors or misfortunes that commonly beset technological presentations of art. Benches were conveniently provided, the room darkened, and you could smoke. In spite of it all people rarely sat still for even an entire five minute tape. Some of the videotapes by Joan Jonas and Richard Serra, like *Anxious Automation* and *Vertical Roll*, used such brutally loud, smashing sounds and such kinesthetically painful imagery that this was not at all surprising. Others, like Richard Landry's *Sax* and *One Two Three Four* or Bruce Nauman's *Studio 1 & 2* seemed very long for the amount of visual and auditory material presented, and consequently became too boring for most people to sit through in their entirety. But all of Keith Sonnier's videotapes—*TV In TV Out*, *Money Ribbon*, and *Mat Key Radio Track* seemed to hold their audiences well. Using color and black and white, still and mobile units, in complex collages of visual material (some immediately recognizable, the rest emerging with familiarity) and disjunctive, elliptical auditory material he weaves beautiful and compelling conglomerates that are rich in associations as well as satisfying on a purely formal level.

Joan Jonas' *Left Side Right Side* and *Mirror Check* make fascinating explorations into recent kinesthetic approaches to dance. She uses the camera and various devices like mirrors to upset the body's normal sense of equilibrium which is dependent upon a priori sensory expectations that are derived from behavior patterns impossible to eradicate. The disquieting effects she produces are augmented by images akin to Picasso's double-faced figures and to ancient Janus-head statues. Robert Morris also explores aspects of modern dance in his *Neo-Classic*, which is far and away the best of the tape cassettes on view. A single figure at a time and a huge, human-sized cylinder open at both ends comprised the visual material. The cylinder viewed clearly, without any distortion, and from a firmly structured sequence of angle which seemed to exhaust all possibilities. It was seen rolling slowly from side to side in and out of the picture frame. It was viewed coming toward the camera and rolling away from it. It was seen inside and out, occupied and empty, as an open and closed, linear and volumetric, static and active, menacing and playful object of twenty-first-century multiplicity and stony Egyptian impenetrability. Viewed any other way than by Morris' videotape camera, it would not have conveyed the same wide range of temporal and spatial phenomena; Morris would have had to compensate differently in order for the image to communicate his message. When any medium is used to its full expressive extent, like this, it is being properly used. Clearly videotape has great potential. Morris only proves that there is no necessity to exploit the self-conscious look of having been handmade to achieve that potential.

Large Works, a seven-man guest exhibition at the 141 Prince Street Gallery, like many of the new co-op galleries that have appeared on the New York scene this season, proves that when first-rate artists are given the opportunity to show works of their own choosing in a good space, the results can be absolutely terrific. Edward Clark, who'd had a one-man show in the same gallery during September chose the participating artists and organized the show. It includes the work of four painters and three sculptors of very different persuasions, and yet the show has an overall quality of warmth, energy, and complexity.

Edward Clark, who is probably even better known in Europe than he is here, having spent a large portion of his adult life in Paris and exhibited frequently there, shows the latest in his new series of rectangular paintings characterized by a reduction in the emphasis on his familiar oval. It now appears only as a thin, broken line passing over and beneath the horizontal striping that flashes from left to right across the canvas. His richly faceted surface—the result of numerous passes across the surface with a 4' push-broom loaded with various acrylic pigments—changes from hot pink over a wide expanse of linearly defined whitish space of indeterminate hue.

The diagonal dynamism of Budd Hopkins' *Homage to Francis Kline*, a 17½' triptych, has a velocity similar to that of Clark's horizontal banding. Hopkins concretizes the monumental thrust of Abstract Expressionism into huge planes which are activated optically by vibrant color juxtapositions along their hard edges, as well as by the passage of stripes and loosely brushed areas through their midst. The multi-levelled compositional structure and the space of this painting is too complex for analysis here, but a dominating, centralizing circle draws its clashing disparate



Budd Hopkins. *Homage to Franz Kline*, 1971. Oil/canvas, 8'6" x 17'6". Included in the recent exhibition, "Large Works" at the 141 Prince Street Gallery

elements together into a single image of hierarchical force, and the red, brown, orchid coloration unites it visually.

Bill Hutson, also better known in Europe than here, is showing for the first time in New York. His *Watermama*, a 17½' long cruciform wall construction of dyed and painted cloth, emphasizes a contrast between horizontal and vertical thrusts. At each end of the wide horizontal swath of colored fabric is a gestural effulgence of bunched material; the crossing is marked by a similar excrescence; but the double vertical units are curiously unadorned. Instead their "base" has been dispersed to isolated positions on the floor at either side. The work is based on a modular system which permits partial construction in the studio and decisions about the final configuration to be made on the exhibition site. This new method of improvisational painting, first devised I believe by Alvin Loving, is valuable because of the strong sense of immediacy it generates.

Donald Judd's massive, impassive sculpture, which dominates the space of the gallery consists of four earthy brown, baked enamel on steel, 39" cubes. They are separated by 10" intervals in a row along the floor and convey strong sensations of weight and mass, of space claimed both literally and emotionally. They are concerned with geometrical clarity, order, and infinite extensibility. The modular, hence continuable nature of the work also operates inversely to reinforce the solid impact of its presence as a particular object in an unrepeatable temporal-spatial situation.

Ray Kelly, like Bill Hutson, is a young artist whose work is not well known here, unlike that of the other five, familiar names on the New York art scene. Each of his two sculptures consists of a 39" wide panel of fiberglass and polyester resin—one predominately green and the other brownish—set on edge between heavy curving strips of aluminum. These bands continue past the ends of the fiberglass sections to curve around in simple supporting arcs to the floor. The works convey a strong impression of spring-like tension which is set into relief by the lyrical criss-crossing of colored bands within the fiberglass areas.

Alvin Loving's free-form, assembled painting construction of strips of varicolored cloth is anchored firmly to the wall but reaches out into the real space of the room across ceiling and floor as well. It is a literal, three-dimensional transcription of pictorial-spatial interaction. He began to work this way last year in order to free himself from the rigid confines of shaped canvas so that he would be able to adapt to the spatial needs of any given site, and this particular work shows just how beautifully effective his new improvisatory technique can be.

Peter Pinchbeck's *Painting in Space*, on the other hand, is a pre-conceived construction intended for fabrication at a later time in aluminum. It is composed of three unfinished 2 x 3" boards—one painted chartreuse acrylic, one pink and the other aqua—which have been hooked together and suspended from the ceiling in a huge geometric "u" shape the open ends of which are spaced 25' apart. It reads both as line and as the shaping edge of a giant invisible plane.

Willem de Kooning may be the foremost living New York painter, but his dialogue has always been with the European masters of the past. Perhaps, at least in part, because he lived in Holland until the age of 22, he seems to have been particularly engaged with the art of Rubens and Rembrandt. This has become especially clear with his recent work. His snapping wiry line has broadened into a thick stroke; his contrast-rich color of former years has been replaced by hues of much closer value; his women (like himself) have moved to the country, landscape indications taking the place of former hints at studio interiors; but basically his development has been a non-development. His exhibition at the Allan Stone Gallery covers well over thirty years of work. It includes oils, pastels, drawings, and monotypes from many of the years between 1932 to 1968. The show proves, as all his exhibitions do, that he has always been a marvelously fluent painter of incredible technical accomplishment, a great colorist working between indescribably sweet-sour yellows, red-pinks and blues with contrasting black and white accents, and, most importantly, one of the major draftsmen of this century.

The two earliest works in the show—a tiny, 1932 oil of a farm scene painted in deep reds, greens and browns, and a Picassoid 1937 geometrical abstraction in blue and yellow—provide keys to his vocabulary of forms that work for the rest of his oeuvre. The basic units in all his work are certain elongated curves that swell outward at the ends of their "u" shapes which he locks into firm horizontal and vertical structures. With passing years these structural grids became increasingly implicit. By the late forties he had fused these curvilinear and straight forms into rhythmic totalities like the magnificent *Untitled* of 1948 on view which was formerly in the collection of Mary Abbott. His forms continued to loosen and by the time of the Women drawings and pastels in this show—the early 1950's—his dominating monumental females had more landscape than figural overtones. In the later fifties he began painting his "parkway" landscapes, a few oil studies for which are included in the show, in which the breadth and active expanse of the American landscape is seen through the blurring frame of a car window tearing past it.

De Kooning's exhibition at Stone ends approximately where his recent Janis Gallery exhibition began—with the recent sun-drenched paintings of women. They are generally seated, frontal, pink and fleshy, and loosely painted in a wildly expressive manner. In these paintings, as in all his work, organic multiplicity and simultaneity functions to keep all frames of reference in a constant state of flux. A line is also a brushstroke, a finger, an arm or a branch. Or it may be only an outline around another larger form. Read differently, the same line may be an indication of direction, velocity, perspective or the passage of time, without any specific descriptive power. The same ambiguity is always true of a given area of color. It is constantly challenged and altered by its neighbors and by the overall hotness, pinkness, redness or harsh yellowness of the painting. The figure itself, as a totality, is equally hard to discern and to hold in the mind's eye—one