

ARTFORUM

MAY 1985 \$5

INTERNATIONAL



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MAY 1985

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Subscriptions: Orders, inquiries, and address changes should be sent to ARTFORUM, PO Box 980 Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

Enclose mailing label with address change. Within the U.S., missed issues must be claimed within 45 days of date of publication; abroad, within 90 days. Single copies and back issues available prepaid from Artforum, 205 Mulberry St., N.Y. N.Y. 10012.

Complete volumes, index (1962-68), Laurence McGilvery, PO Box 852, La Jolla, Calif. 92038.
Distribution: U.S. and Canada: Eastern News Distributors, 111 Eighth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.
International: Boarts, 1633 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10019.

Microfilm: Xerox University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. Microfiche: Bell & Howell, Micro Photo Division, Old Mansfield Rd., Wooster, Ohio 44691. ARTFORUM is indexed in the Art Index, ARTbibliographies MODERN and RILA.

Artforum (ISSN-0004-3532) is published monthly except July and August for \$36.00 per year (\$50.00 outside the U.S.) by ARTFORUM, 205 Mulberry Street, New York, N.Y. 10012. Typesetting by Gendell Graphics, Inc., New York, N.Y. Printed by the City Printing Co., North Haven, Conn. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: send address changes to ARTFORUM, PO Box 980, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

Books: Alexandra Anderson on *Earthworks and Beyond*; Maurice Berger on *Ficciones, The Painting of Modern Life, and The Real World of the Impressionists*; Greil Marcus on *Correspondence Art, Forbidden Dreams, James Dean, The Rap Attack, and Return Engagement*; David Salle on *Gemini G.E.L.*; and Frederic Tuten on *The Hypocrisy of Justice in the Belle Epoque* 2

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Sigmar Polke, *Lager (Camp)*, 1982, acrylic on cotton, 158 x 99".

New York

SIGMAR POLKE, Mary Boone Gallery:

Sigmar Polke's work has surfaced here somewhat too belatedly for us to get a clear view of his conceptual strategies unimpeded by the work of his imitators, the recently arrived late Francis Picabia, and the homogenization that the gallery has effected on all these artists. Polke himself seems to have participated in trans-Atlantic Ping-Pong for the past twenty years, and the work remains based in a loose collage of image and materials that we associate with both the sociopolitical strategies of Dada and with the stylistic maneuvers of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Nevertheless, we are encountering a sensibility that is not American, and should consider whether some of the uncanniness of Polke's work may reflect a certain cultural estrangement.

It may be difficult for us now to imagine how the sudden influx of American wealth and consumerism affected the psyche of a postwar Europe stricken with dispossessed populations and real material hardship, and in which ideological conflicts were—and still are—lived out, and not simply a matter of intellectual rhetoric. We should be cautious, therefore, about confusing the ironic tropes in Polke's work with the current hip cynicism that empties truth, or value, from everything, leaving only posture and style—an attitude that is possible to hold only if one is already in a position of privilege. We might consider, also, that the borrowing of American styles and motifs by European Pop artists was as much a reflection of a fantasized notion of American culture

as were the films of the French New Wave, which were responses to the fascination with Hollywood movies which the war had withheld from European audiences. In other words, the concept of American life derived from its images, synthetic materials, and design until comparatively recently still represented a sense of freedom for peoples whose own cultures had lost their centers.

Polke's work now seems, however, symptomatic of the change in European consciousness that we have been witnessing in recent years: a self-assertiveness no longer enamored of the American dream, and desiring to reclaim its own identity. The pall of deathliness that clung to the recent selection of his work nevertheless suggested an irremediable loss. Integrity cannot be recuperated either by neo-Expressionism's nostalgia for a mythic past, for this is heavily implicated in the ideology that produced the concentration camp (*Lager* [Camp, 1982]; *Hochstand* [Highstanding, 1984]), or by a deceiving American paternalism. The smiling face that Reagan holds up to the Europeans (in *Reagan 1-3/Das Problem Europa/Sargdeckel* [Reagan 1-3/ The Europe problem/Coffin Lid, 1980]) melts into a death mask across fading motifs of the Wild West, and ends up as a thermonuclear obfuscation. Faced with the mortality predicted by the vanitas (candle and footprint), Europe is reduced to a decorative ornament and its utopianism to a pastiche of its abstract art. The coffin lid waits to nail down the remains.

Culture itself provides no solutions. In *Die Lebenden stinken und die Toten sind nicht anwesend* (The living stink and the dead are not present, 1983) both the high art of Gauguin and kitsch elephants are

anti-Germanic implication—its irony concerned both to make a virtue of German coarseness and to put it in its place. Like many of the German conceptualist painters, he struggles with German national identity, trying hard to save what is best in it.

Traditional German spiritual identity is premised on a mystical relationship to the depths, which reveal themselves through that coarseness which is the sign of will, that is, of ego that has the full force of instinct at its command. In this sense, Tannert's paintings are profoundly political in their engagement with German romantic conceptions of Nature as Being. They understand that the civilization/nature dialogue is only the surface of the German sense of nature; more basic is the German sense of privileged relationship to the impenetrable coarseness of being. This is exactly why in German thought it is dangerous to be German, and yet being German is the only way "to be." The socioesthetic message of Tannert's paintings is that Germany remains dangerous because it still believes in asserting primitive being.

MARTIN JOHNSON

Martin Johnson saturates us in language to the point of vertigo. Every currently "in" style and type of image, every kind of surface and rhythm of paint, a seemingly inexhaustible mixing of high-art and kitsch modes of representation, are all brilliantly manipulated in fast-paced, punning works. Many of them have interchangeable parts, and seem like only gratuitously different hands in a game of solitaire. These paintings are polysemous manipulations obsessed with the plasticity of language and meaning—in Johnson's words, a "visual jazz ... stretching and testing the limits of meaningfulness." Accident is seriously involved in this text, as is temporality: Johnson "embosses" some of the drop-cloths he paints on with white dots on a black bar, symbols for the mechanical conception of time, and contrasting with the unpredictable duration of the chance event. Chance plays a major role here—it's almost a formula; it has been ordained that everything be left to chance. This effect shows up perhaps most obviously in the bits and pieces of lettering, which do and do not add up to familiar words, memorable phrases, aphoristic statements. The language has the faded quality of a half-recalled insight, resembling the flotsam and jetsam of words of wisdom on ancient monuments.

Meaning has seeped out of this language, yet it remains peculiarly moving, touches some blind reflex of an obscure feeling. Like the works as a whole, it is terribly familiar, but it has the force of a blurred concrete poetry. Thus the works have an aura of both profundity and banality. They are a cynical invitation to invent one's own image, make up one's own story—a kind of linguistic and visual doublespeak. Everything here is trivialized into a fragment, a trace, and these traces are organized in a semiotic joke—free-floating signifiers in search of a signified—and then let loose like balloons to see how high in the stratosphere of meaning they can rise. Each image is like a half-dumb gesture that just might make sense, a sort of visual Delphic oracle which rings peculiarly flat but calls forth our best interpretive powers. Johnson's works await the seer who will make sense of them, yet they're not quite senseless in themselves, but resemble oddly shaped parts of a puzzle that when finally put together is discovered to constitute a familiar picture of the world.

Seeing these works, I thought of a police lineup in which none of the faces were quite recognizable but all were sort of familiar, or of baseball cards, which were exciting to collect only so long as the set was incomplete. Johnson deals with the instant passé; in our artistic and social worlds that means everything, yet just because it is everything it remains peculiarly mysterious. Each work is a tease, like a penny arcade game, and the exhibition as a whole was a carnival scenario, the stage set for some gala punk masque of fortune. The figure of the Joker from the Batman comic strip seemed to me a major clue to the show, and the general aura of macabre clowning was of its essence. The near garishness of the works, the obvious desire to dazzle, and the peculiarly fetishistic focusing on individual objects or configurations are powerfully witty in effect, all the more so because the wit is felt but not always analyzable. The words "Sears and Bikinis" make a certain sense together, their juxtaposition with the vaguely monstrous striped face of the sun perhaps still makes some sense, but the whole thing next to a schematized image of what can be understood (no doubt à la Rorschach) as a symbol of a fiery female genital and a penis, beneath which the words "Xerox Open Wide" are stenciled, makes little direct sense. As one goes from image to image within the same work, one is not always sure to what point they are being

accumulated, yet the tension mounts, even if the final reading is unclear.

To call these works "dadaistic" has some appropriateness for their institutionalization of the antiinstitutional. But unlike traditional Dadaism, which had a certain aura of know-nothingism to it, these works have a know-it-all aura which makes them even more vicious in their insight into the institution of art. Dadaism wanted to dismiss and shatter that institution, and ended in nihilism. But Johnson knows that nihilism is a lame-duck position today. Whatever one does ends up in the institution of art, so why not continue to labor within it, the canker in the rose that adds to its rosiness, or, better, Jonah trying to gnaw through the side of the whale while knowing he never can? Johnson gives us a rich manure of images which, spread on the field of art, helps raise a single flower of scorn, and that's the prizewinner these days.

—DONALD KUSPIT

TED ROSENTHAL, Salvatore Ala Gallery; FRANK STELLA, Knoedler Gallery:

TED ROSENTHAL

There are quite a lot of graffiti artists around, many of whom never wrote graffiti, but there aren't many graffiti sculptors; Ted Rosenthal may be the only one. (Actually there must be two—someone lashed some very nice garbage-bag men to a Cyclone fence down my street once.) The Dominican social club across the street from where I live was bombed once, but the only time I've ever seen the bomb squad around here was when they removed a bombish-looking Rosenthal sculpture from the wall next to the large billboard at Broadway and Houston Street. Rosenthal also mounted some large pink steel penises on lampposts around town which were favorably reviewed in *The Village Voice*, which quoted a "local feminist": "Notice that it's pointed inward, attached by its tip, not its base... It's not aggressive in that position. It's like satisfied—it's happily parked."

In this exhibition Rosenthal showed larger works—a chandelier, a fountain, and what can only be described as sculptures. In materials and in spirit Rosenthal's works are both heavy and light: dense steel here, plastic hose there; monstrosity here, giggles there. Rosenthal makes light of what's heavy. Most of his creatures are monsters—surrealistic monsters of the id combined with a bit of heraldry and a lot of cartoon sensibility.

Your Mother, 1984, combines expressionist dislocation with something very reminiscent of *Road Runner*—cartoon star Wile E. Coyote. Here is a figure that has been steamrollered and comes up smiling. Mother rests on two stockinged legs and two sandaled feet, but she has six hands, and her trunk and head are on sideways. She is made of corrugated steel plate, the nonskid kind used for floorboards in bulldozers and oil rigs. Her steel hair is flames or an aura. Each of her six hands is stigmatized with a large steel rivet. The piece is about the suffering that only mothers suffer, and about the ritual games children of all ages play, beginning with the words "your mother."

Rosenthal also deals with fathers in *These Were My Dad's Conference Chairs*, 1985, a large piece requiring a corporate-sized home. Three modern, formerly plush swivel chairs are attached like a train and mounted at the top of an inclined ramp. Armatures hold masks where a sitter's head would go, as in salon hair dryers. One looks like a combination gladiator's helmet, Italian priest's hat, and death's-head, with refrigeration-coil horns. Another suggests a welder and a sea anemone. The chairs sit not on their original casters but on heavy-industry wheels that are too big and strong for them. Handcuffs, Sterno cans, and heavy levers are attached. If this train of chairs were released from its moorings it would roll down the ramp into a four-sided trap of steel fence on wheels, which could be an instrument of torture or an industrial hatter's device. Again, it's funny and charming but the gravity never goes away. Like the moored chairs, it has potential energy.

Rosenthal's pieces are funny and targeted but they are also beautiful. The florid twists of foliage, fish, penises, and flames in heavy-duty metal are perfect. The paint is bright and cartoony but it's also wackily almost gorgeous. Apparently Rosenthal loves flowers. I asked the gallery staff if *Watering the Lawn*, 1985, his fountainlike piece, was functional. Apparently it not only waters grass but uses a Rosenthal-designed nozzle to water the most delicate flowers without roughing up their petals.

FRANK STELLA

I'm having a drink with Peter Bömmels, a painter from Cologne, and he says, "Keith Haring is not a painter. He's a designer."

I say, "Well, I don't know. You could say the same thing about Roy Lichtenstein then."