

## ART REVIEW

## The New, Irreverent Approach to Mounting Exhibitions

By ROBERTA SMITH

The idea that the contemporary art exhibition is a malleable form to be approached creatively is hardly new. It has asserted itself at regular intervals for most of the 20th century, or at least since the Dadaists and then the Surrealists started making their presences felt. But lately, in certain museum and gallery shows, the convention of the exhibition has seemed more up for grabs than usual: something to be played with, rethought and reshaped like an artistic medium.

A recent prominent example was "Rolywholyover: A Circus," the continuously adjusted extravaganza of object and event at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo last summer, which the composer John Cage set in motion just before his death. (Still touring, it opens at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in May.) Eccentric in a different way was "The Spatial Drive" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992, a show devoid of wall texts or labels; for information about the art on view, one turned to the museum's guards, who had all the answers.

Shows like these have perhaps been influenced by the grassroots activities of young artists and dealers who, released from the pressures of a high-powered art market, shall we say, have approached show time with an irreverent, improvisational self-consciousness. Over the last few years, there have been additive exhibitions, which take shape while the show is on view (like "One Thing Leading to Another" at the 303 Gallery in Manhattan in 1992). Another variant might be called the insinuated exhibition, in which works of art are displayed in a space already occupied by other things. An example is the group show several artists mounted in and around a solo exhibition of Ron Gorchov's paintings at the Jack Tilton Gallery in Manhattan in 1991. (Last fall also saw artists living in their exhibitions at Exit Art/The First World and the New Museum, as well as exhibiting work in rented trucks parked on the street.)

At the moment two more departures from the exhibition norm can be seen downtown, one a conversation between curators, the other a conversation between cultures.

"It's How You Play the Game. . ."

at Exit Art/The First World in SoHo is an additive affair, an exhibition as work in progress as well as a kind of chess game between four curators, three from prominent uptown museums, who have been responding to one another's choices of artworks with further selections of their own since early December.

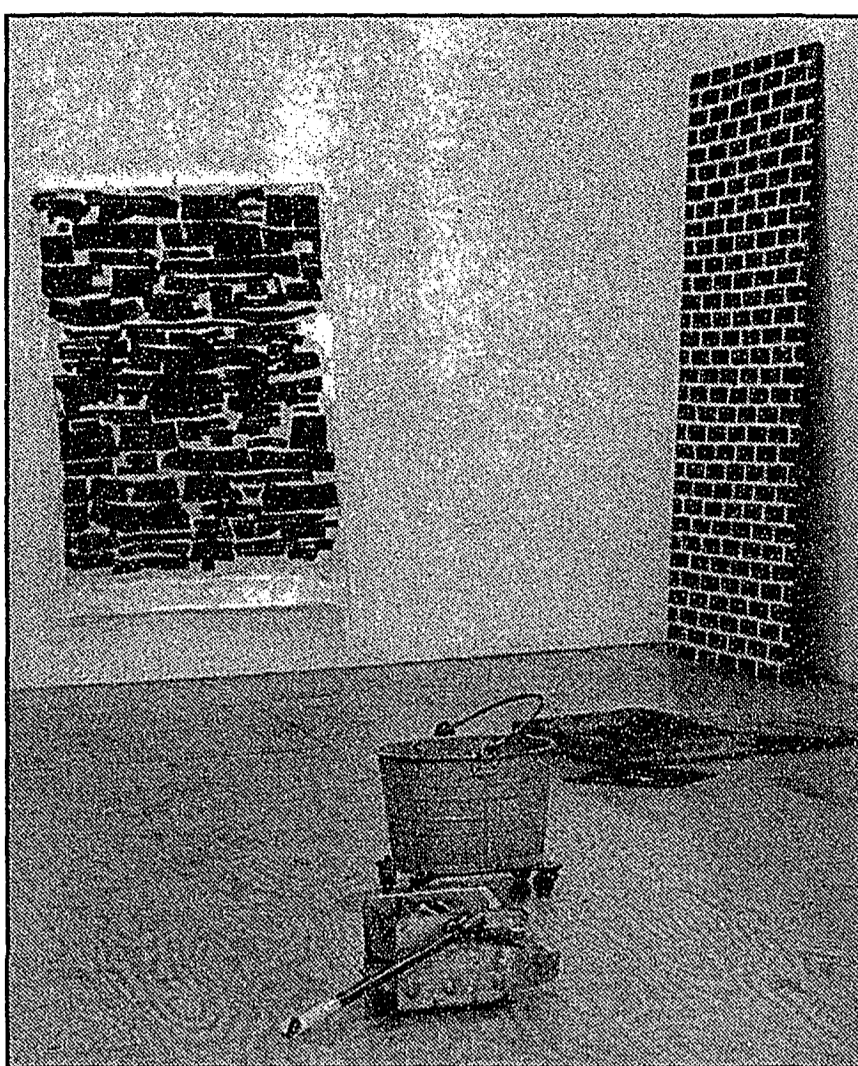
The other, an untitled effort of the insinuated variety, is a witty and subtle game of solitaire by the installation artist and sculptor David Hammons (whose work is also included in the Exit Art show). This occurs at Knobkerry, the TriBeCa store of Sara Penn, a dealer in African and Asian art and artifacts, where Mr. Hammons has orchestrated a kind of Easter egg hunt that includes both rearrangements and temporary assemblages of Ms. Penn's frequently impressive inventory as well as some artworks of his own.

## Exit Art

The players of the "Game" at Exit Art are Thelma Golden, of the Whitney Museum of American Art (organizer of the current "Black Male" exhibition there); Robert Storr, curator of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art (where his most recent effort was "Mapping"); Nancy Spector, a curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and — working as a curatorial unit — Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo, the husband-and-wife team who founded and now direct Exit Art.

The show that they have built together started out as a shadow of its present self with a mere four works and has lately grown to a robust, ecumenical, if sometimes rag-tag collection of 53 works by 34 artists, and counting. It ranges through most of the possible art media (including video and performance) and touches on numerous current trends (from the hyper-real to the resolutely abstract to the political). It includes works made in situ (like Kim Jones's fabulous battle drawing), little-known efforts from the recent past (Vito Acconci's incised door) and unusually good works that seem to be fresh out of the studio (this is especially the case with Faith Ringgold, Dennis Kardon and Ida Applebroog).

One can approach the show on a



One corner of the constantly evolving show at Exit Art: "I.D. Tarp," left, by Brad Kahlhauer; a Vito Acconci work from the project "Octopus," right, and Sergio Vega's "Paradise Island," foreground.

work-by-work basis, or cross-reference its contents by style or medium. It can also be deciphered, following the color-coded labels, as a series of simultaneous group shows that reflect the sensibilities of the individual curators. Ms. Spector, for example, has a clear preference for pieces of a Minimal-Conceptual nature: her choices so far include works by Roni Horn, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Janine Antoni, Jim Hodges and Georgina Starr, an English artist represented by a 20-minute video in which she leans against a wall crying softly. Many of Ms. Golden's choices, which

include Ms. Ringgold, Nan Goldin, Oliver Herring and a newcomer, Cirilo Rayos Domine — who crochets athletic supporters from unraveled lace doilies — frequently address ever-present issues of race and gender, but in a way that has a great deal more stylistic breadth than her "Black Male" exhibition uptown.

But the "Game" is most entertaining for the way its conversation breaks down into a series of smaller discussion groups: clusters of artworks unified by a certain theme, material or formal device that

change shape and direction with each addition. In the back gallery, for example, realism as well as depictions of bricks or grids unify a wall that includes the tiny portrait-scenes of Mark Greenwald, a tondo by Martin Wong, an installation painting by Y. Z. Kami and an abstract painting by Jack Whitten that loses some of its abstractness in this company.

A cluster in the front gallery revolves around tears as a theme and glass as a material, beginning with the dramatically rendered crying faces of Ms. Applebroog's watercolors, chosen in the first round by Ms. Ingberman and Mr. Colo. From the other curators came: Ms. Starr's crying video; a sculpture made of dozens of big glass tears, by Kiki Smith; an untitled wheel made from empty liquor bottles and resting on a pile of coal, by Mr. Hammons, and "Ikon," a tiny sculpture of a single eye that cries real tears, by Mary Carlson.

While Mr. Hammons's piece becomes a stepping-off point of another sequence that includes Mr. Jones and Mr. Acconci, the glass-and-tears group is finished off by a work by Mary Del Monaco that consists of dozens of hand mirrors strung from the ceiling by their handles. Their shimmering plentifulness echoes Ms. Smith's floor piece, while their reflections enable viewers to compare their own eyes to Ms. Carlson's. Most important, the mirrors' suspension sends one's gaze eerily, yet unerringly, back to the image of a figure hanging upside down that appears on one of Ms. Applebroog's watercolors. (It is hard to believe that Ms. Del Monaco's work, which is a bit simplistic on its own, will ever look quite as good as it does here.)

This exhibition is hardly perfect: the back gallery, for example, doesn't "cluster" as well as the front one. But that's the point. It's interesting to see curators step outside the confines of their usually slow-moving institutional schedules and pre-ordained checklists to respond reflexively, making it up as they go along.

## Knobkerry

At Knobkerry, Mr. Hammons engages in a similar, also responsive form of thinking out loud, and seems very much at home. He is, after all,

well known for juxtaposing culturally charged objects and materials in ways that startle: one work consisted of fried chicken wings wired to an Oriental carpet at regular design-conscious intervals. Here, he echoes that combination by adorning a kilim rug with about two dozen drumsticks (the kind used on drums) and titling it "Carpet Beater."

Working on a number of different levels — as artist, expert window-dresser and general smart-aleck rearranger — Mr. Hammons then proceeds to infiltrate much of the store, crossing racial, cultural and geographic boundaries, mixing old and new, high and low, East and West. He converts a deflated basketball into a rice bowl and places a tiny lounge chair with chewing gum on its underside in a glass case whose shelves hold Japanese dolls, Indian bronzes and African figures in wood and iron.

Most startling of all, he temporarily turns dignified African masks into fountains. As might be expected, Mr. Hammons's own works, which have always begged the distinctions between contemporary, folk and so-called primitive art, nearly blend into the surroundings.

Sometimes his efforts are too casual: an old group portrait of a black family doesn't do much hanging within the folds of a Japanese kimono, and a pyramid of toilet paper looks plain silly. But often there's a double-edged quality to his decisions: covering the bottom of a small Shinto shrine with black-eyed peas is at once obvious and didactic in the political sense, and beautiful, even reverential, in the visual one.

Committing numerous acts of sacrilege, depending on one's religious or esthetic viewpoint, Mr. Hammons gets away with them because of an evenhanded playfulness. While seeming to hold nothing sacred, he implies that everything is, and this, may be the message in the bottle of his strange, nearly invisible exhibition.

"It's How You Play the Game. . ." at Exit Art/The First World, 549 Broadway (near Prince Street) in SoHo is on view through Feb. 11; David Hammons's exhibition at Knobkerry, 211 West Broadway (near Franklin Street) in TriBeCa, is on view through Jan. 28.

## PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

## 2 Young Inventions In Flight Together

By CHARLES HAGEN

The astonishing photographs taken by Jacques-Henri Lartigue at the turn of the century have an undeniable charm. Given a camera at the age of 7 by his father, a well-to-do businessman, the young Lartigue made candid images of people strolling along the beach or promenading on Parisian boulevards, unaware of the young photographer aiming his camera at them; free of artificial posing and stylistic overlays, these well-known images appear utterly transparent, slices of a world that disappeared long ago.

Lartigue (1894-1986) was also passionately devoted to the world of speed ushered in with the new century, and it is this side of his precocious vision that is presented in "Flights of Fancy," the delightful exhibition at the French Cultural Services. Lartigue followed with intense interest the many attempts, some serious and some silly, to conquer flight in the wake of the Wright brothers' first successful efforts in 1903; between 1904 and 1922 he recorded many early fliers and their rickety machines, as well as experimental models that he and other members of his remarkable family produced.

The sense of excitement and uncertainty that surrounded pioneering efforts to fly is evident in photographs Lartigue made in 1904, when he was 10, showing Gabriel Voisin as he launched himself and his delicate glider from the top of a sand dune. Voisin's craft traveled only about 10 feet in the air, but Lartigue captured the glider as it floated above a cluster of eager onlookers.

This telling gesture, of bystanders looking up at a tiny aircraft overhead, is repeated in pictures from the following decade. In 1912, Lartigue recorded a crowd of people craning their necks to see a Blériot monoplane flying over Vichy; in a similar scene from the year before, women in flowery hats and men in dark suits gaze up at the blurry shape of Maurice Farman's biplane as it passes overhead.

Lartigue and his brother Maurice (nicknamed Zissou) closely followed



A detail of a photograph taken by Jacques-Henri Lartigue in 1904, when he was 10, showing Gabriel Voisin's first flight in a glider.

the exploits of early aviators, and also designed and built their own scale-model planes. One, shown in a photograph made between 1905 and 1909, had semicircular wings, while another looked like a dragonfly, with translucent wings that curved up at the ends.

The brothers also built larger versions of their inventions. In a series of shots from 1909, Lartigue photographed a backlit Zissou chasing a large model biplane around a Paris courtyard; in a 1914 image, Zissou, an intense-looking young man dressed all in white, is shown sitting at the controls of his new full-scale glider on the family estate in Rouzat, in central France.

Other forms of aerial innovation also captured Lartigue's attention. In a marvelous shot from 1906, he photographed contestants in a balloon race floating above the rooftops of Paris, delightedly waving at the camera, and a few years later, he recorded the lumbering forms of dirigibles being towed into their hangars.

Like his photographs of race cars, bicycles and other inventions of the modern age, Lartigue's pictures of airplanes evoke the heady time before World War I when the promise of new technology had not been tempered by a realization of its potential for destruction. The sense of boyish wonder apparent in the early photographs is long gone from a 1916 picture of Lartigue himself, dressed in uniform and standing beside a Sopwith biplane mounted with machine guns.

Part of the sense of discovery apparent in Lartigue's early photographs comes from his use of a hand-held camera, then a recent invention. The best of his pictures suggest the coming together of a young artist, an innovative technique and new and contemporary subjects, a

combination that led to marvelous and surprising images.

For a later series of photographs of aircraft, from 1922, Lartigue employed a panorama camera, a format he would use for many years. These pictures of a gathering of experimental craft lack the sense of uncertainty that characterize the earlier images, but the feeling of adventure remains strong.

Lartigue's photos are often held out as examples of what a dedicated but untutored artist can achieve in photography. The reality is more complicated, though; even as a child, Lartigue had a strong artistic bent, and he later studied painting at the Académie Julien in Paris.

He also was almost obsessed, from an early age, with recording his world. He kept detailed diaries all his life and as a child would draw every scene that he photographed, in case his pictures didn't turn out.

Other family members, equally fascinated by the wonders of the new century, encouraged him in his passions. Airplanes, and the sheer possibility of flight, provided Lartigue with a supreme subject; when he confronted these marvelous machines with that other, equally remarkable device, the camera, he encapsulated both the energy and optimism of the modern age.

"Flights of Fancy," a show of Jacques-Henri Lartigue photographs organized by the American Federation of the Arts, remains at the French Cultural Services, 972 Fifth Avenue, at 78th Street, through Jan. 20. After its New York City exhibition, sponsored by Chase Manhattan Bank, the show travels to San Francisco International Airport (Feb. 25 to April 22), the Fresno (Calif.) Metropolitan Museum (May 20 to Aug. 4) and the National Air and Space Museum in Washington (Sept. 1 to March 1, 1996).

## ART REVIEW

## David Smith's Anti-Medals

By HOLLAND COTTER

The American artist David Smith (1906-1965) was a busy man in the 1930's. He not only worked hard to forge a major abstract sculptural style, but also produced one of the more intriguing examples of political figurative art to emerge from the prewar period.

"Medals for Dishonor" was the title he gave to a series of 15 small cast-metal narrative reliefs on antiwar themes that he completed between 1937 and 1940. Densely symbolic, bitterly satirical in tone, they were created in off hours, at night and on weekends, using such unorthodox media as dentist's drills and jeweler's tools. And the results may have been cast in part from melted-down family silver belonging to his wife, Dorothy Dehner.

All of the medallions are on view, for the first time since the early 1940's, in an in-depth, carefully researched show installed on two floors of the Matthew Marks Gallery on Madison Avenue. Organized by the Henry Moore Center for the Study of Sculpture at the City Art Galleries of Leeds, England, the exhibition includes both a wide array of sketchbook studies for the medals and news photos and medical textbook illustrations that Smith used as sources for his unsettling images.

The meanings of those images are not easy to grasp at a glance. Smith spent 1935-36 in Europe, where he saw the rise of Nazism and the approach of World War II. Like many American leftists who came of age in the Great Depression, he at first viewed the war as a product of global corporate greed: it was a rich man's fight in which capitalist America, like fascist Germany, was already ideologically implicated and could redeem itself only by refraining from direct participation.

This political view helps to account for the seemingly incongruous jumble of themes — from Ku Klux Klan vigilantes to bombed European hospital boats — that make up Smith's antiwar, anti-fascist, often anti-American vision. It was only when the horrific realities of Soviet Communism under Stalin were revealed in the 1940's that Smith, like many of his colleagues in the art world, saw the war in a different

light and retreated, chastened, from his Popular Front stance.

Whatever the details of their period politics, however, the visual impact and ethical urgency of the reliefs remain strong. In format, they were modeled on World War I French and German propaganda medals that the artist saw in the British Museum. Smith updated his images, however, to reflect more recent examples of germ warfare and genocide (Guernica, the Basque capital, was leveled the year he began the series), as well as the bellicose rumblings emerging from such interested parties as the American weapons industry.

Smith's didactic subjects take fire in his jam-packed compositions and his vivid expressionist style. His early training as a cartoonist comes through in the brisk, flippant sketches for the medal "War Exempt Sons of the Rich." His exposure to the

Throughout, eroticism and violence are often interchangeable, and the world depicted has the hallucinatory squalor of a Bosch landscape.

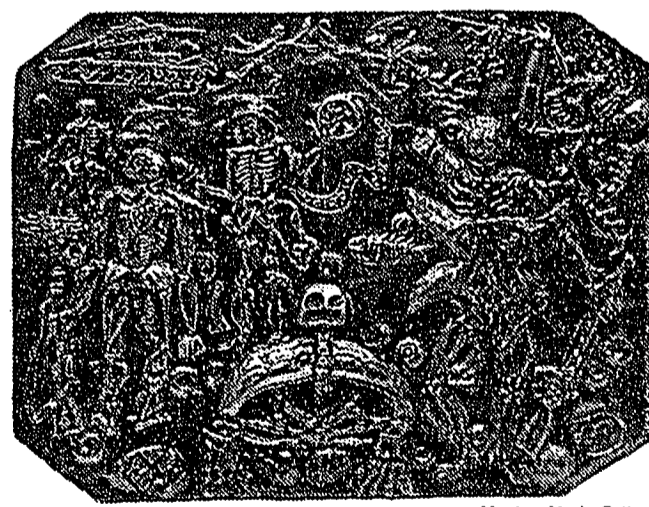
In these bronzes, each of which is less than a foot wide, narrative details are often hard to make out. Smith provided short statements explaining each medal, but for sheer visual legibility the drawings included in the exhibition prove invaluable. In them, one sees not only compositions in progress, but also the final versions executed to the last detail in Smith's firm if stylistically changeable hand.

For the drawings and medals alike are unquestionably the work of an artist in transition, sifting through influences from Picasso to Grosz to popular illustration. As a result, the works vary in effectiveness, going from an ingeniously fluid emblem of press censorship to a clunky neo-classicizing indictment of prostitution. While there is much to admire, there is no point in claiming that this material represents Smith at his best. Had he stopped working at this point, his career would have earned barely a footnote in the history books.

But the medals are fascinating, nonetheless. They offer a retrospective lens on sinuous half-abstract and abstract forms Smith subsequently produced: he really was always a draftsman and painter who happened to have turned his attention decisively to sculpture. And the medals have an ethical intensity that corresponds to much art being produced today.

The themes of "Medals for Dishonor" — racism, sexual violence, the mutilated body, disease and mortality, all shot through with a dark humor — are precisely those found in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial of two years ago, and the way they were dealt with by America's greatest postwar sculptor was as graphic and angry as anything in that controversial show. What goes around comes around, as the saying has it, and Smith's images of war-as the symptom of deeper political disease still make sense.

"David Smith: Medals for Dishonor, 1937-1940" remains at Matthew Marks Gallery, 1018 Madison Avenue (near 79th Street), through Jan. 28.



"Munition Makers," a bronze work from David Smith's "Medals for Dishonor" series.

Social Realism of W.P.A.-era painting is evident in "Death by Bacteria," with its smoothly modeled Big Brother hands holding test tubes. And apparent everywhere is his debt to Surrealism, the ubiquitous style during Smith's European sojourn.

All of these factors are at the service of highly charged images. "Munition Makers" is a danse macabre of gun-toting skeletons; "Death by Gas," a manic mélange of plucked chickens and giant peach pits. "Reaction in Medicine" has a labyrinthine hospital operating room doubling as a morgue, and in the ghastly "Bombing Civilian Populations" a woman stands with her womb cut open to reveal a fetus.