

The School of L.A.

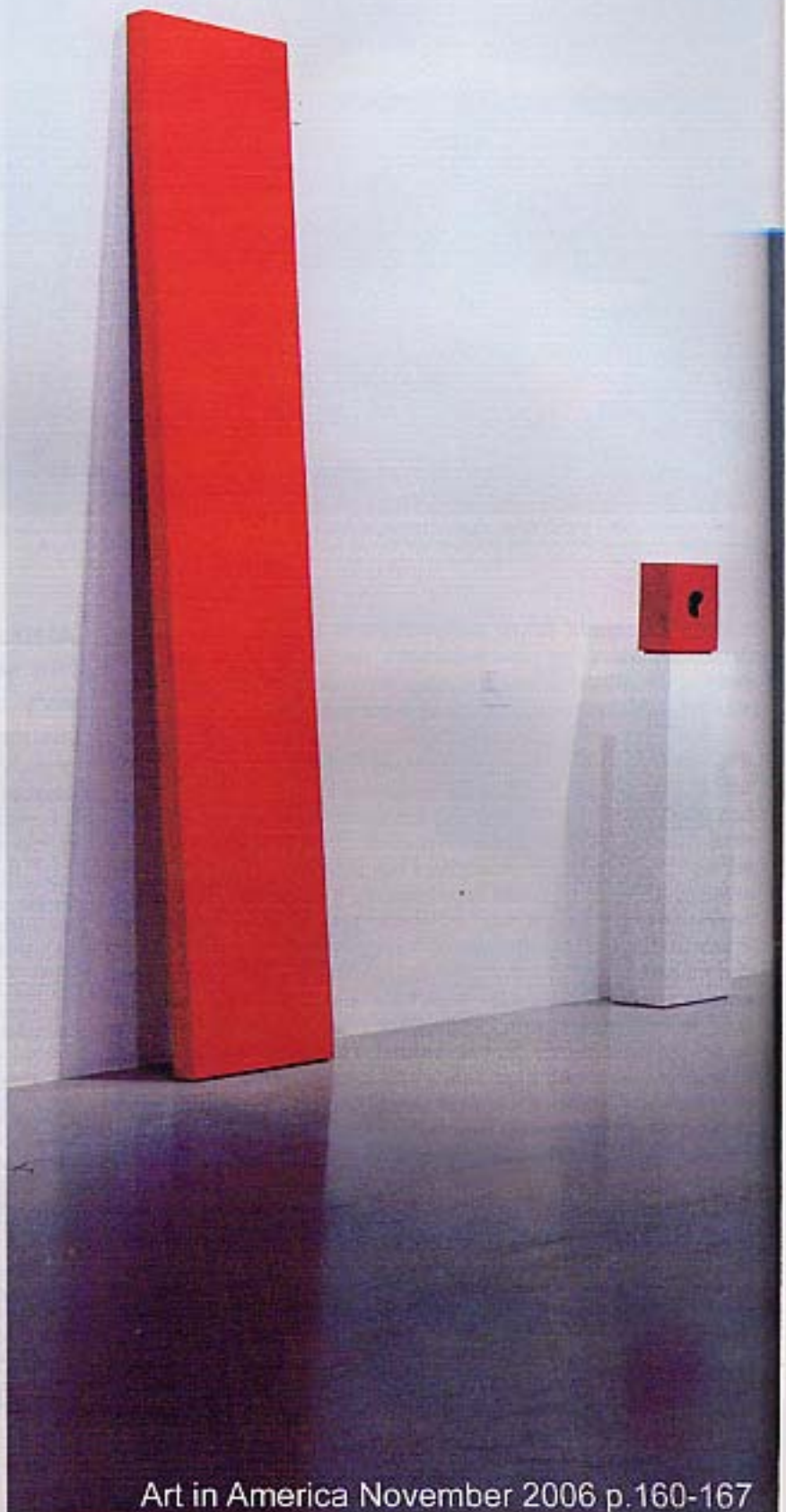
A major exhibition at the Centre Pompidou surveyed the art made in Los Angeles between 1955 and 1985, providing an invigorating look at the rogue energy of the West Coast scene during that legendary period.

BY BROOKS ADAMS

I spent a good part of the fall of 2001 sitting in Paris cafés reading books about Los Angeles architecture. At the time, this struck me as highly ironic, given Paris's legendary status as a cultural magnet. It then occurred to me that my own quirks reflected a broader shift in the contemporary art world; away from New York and toward Los Angeles (not to mention London, Berlin or Beijing), as a new paradigm of a decentered art world. Even pre-9/11, I had wanted to get out of Manhattan for a while. But now here I was in the City of Light, feeling that I had to get up to speed on L.A. art history. As far as the period of the early 20th century was concerned, L.A. seemed particularly strong in the areas of architecture, design and the movies (but that is another subject).

Little did I know at the time that a curator at the Centre Pompidou, Catherine Grenier, was already planning an exhibition about art in Los Angeles, and her efforts bore fruit last spring. "Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of an Art Capital" might have been one of those bland catchalls, almost like a TV travelogue, that tries to convey the essence of a city in a condensed time frame. Instead, it turned out to be a surprising and invigorating, if diffuse, art-historical survey. This show seemed intent on establishing a mythic narrative, even as it subverted it. Though only loosely chronological and intermittently revisionist in its inclusions (Grenier pretty much cleaved to the party line of contemporary art heavy-hitters), the show looked and felt like a brisk French historical primer, full of fun facts, pertinent dates and colorful personalities. We got to witness the emergence of figures like Ed Kienholz, Robert Irwin, James Turrell, David Hoekney, Ed Ruscha, Lynn Foulkes, Vija Celmins, John Baldessari, Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy, Bill Viola, Eleanor Antin, Rachel Rosenthal, Matt Mullican, Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon, Jim Shaw, Charles Ray—all in a newly synthesized reconstruction of the "local" context.

Grenier curated some very good shows while at the Pompidou; this was her last, and she left for the Ministry of Culture before the show was over. Her "The Pop Years," seen in the summer of 2001, was encyclopedic and revelatory in its international scope. Similarly, her sweeping reinstallation of the permanent collection in 2005—"Big Bang: Creation and Destruction in 20th-Century Art"—highlighting broad humanistic themes like primitivism and archaism, sex, war, melancholy and reenchantment, was also a surprise hit, and suggested all kinds of unities and continuities in the iconog-





View of "Los Angeles 1955-1985: Birth of an Art Capital," showing (left to right) two sculptures by John McCracken, Ken Price's sculpture Pink Egg, 1964, Billy Al Bengston's paintings Humphrey and Busby, both 1968; at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.

By positioning L.A. as a new art capital of the postwar decades, this show challenged the dominance of New York, implicitly allowing Paris to hope it might again become a center of gravity.

reply of modern art. Now that she is in charge of programming for the "Great Nave" of the Grand Palais, I trust that her shows there will continue to lend even more vitality to the Paris art scene.

The L.A. exhibition, though not the first of its kind, was a tremendous validation of the Los Angeles art world by one of Europe's largest modern-art museums and was, in fact, a de rigueur pilgrimage destination for many a serious Angeleno art professional, artist and collector. "Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960-1997," on view in May '07 at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark and later at the Hammer in L.A. [see *A.I.A.*, Apr. '08], was a more conventional blow-by-blow survey and came right up to the present—i.e., the late '90s. Grenier's show, covering only three decades, was more idiosyncratic and more inclusive, and also planned as a one-time event; I couldn't conceive of this show traveling, and certainly not to the West Coast, where it would be much too polemical and ribald in content. When the exhibition finally opened in March, Paris was momentarily galvanized by a flood of great living artists and venerable L.A. dealers, but tongues were clucking during the opening festivities—no VIP privileges for normally pumpered L.A. collectors, a long line for everyone to see the show—with Parisian and Angeleno art worlds commingling meanwhile at the museum's enormous sixth-floor restaurant, Le Georges, waiting to get into the exhibition on a rainy night.

The smartest thing Grenier did was to resist bringing the exhibition up to the present, for that would have been chaos indeed. By isolating the work within a discrete time frame, she allowed us to see anew all the craziness that animated L.A. during that period. In her catalogue essay, Grenier writes: "It is vital . . . that the French and European art public should attain . . . a deeper appreciation of an era—prodigal and fascinating, yet little known—with so much to offer in terms of expanding and enriching our awareness of contemporary American art."

Embedded within this assertion is an oft-stated fear (nowhere mentioned in the catalogue) that Paris has become provincial. Why else the whole concern for "art capitals," mentioned only in the show's subtitle but implicit throughout? Paris, of course, still considers itself an art capital, but there is a widespread cultural cringe among the French when it comes to understanding contemporary art; they are the first to admit they just haven't learned the material. As the old story goes (a story nowhere invoked in Grenier's catalogue), Paris lost its preeminence as the center of the art world to



Allen Ruppersberg: Photograph, receipts, plates and various artifacts from the recurring project AI's Café, 1969-95.



Vija Celmins: Tulip Car #1, 1966, oil on canvas, 16 by 27 inches. Edward R. Brodka Collection.

New York after 1945. By positioning L.A. as a new art capital, Grenier scrambled this by-now canonical narrative, giving the lie to the preeminence of New York and implicitly allowing Paris to hope that it might again become a center of gravity in the contemporary art world. Acknowledging that L.A. contemporary art has since the '60s been thrust upon the world stage, Grenier was quite right to offer a brisk and efficacious history lesson about its origins—a Gallie cram course full of enough lubricious and French-friendly material to keep the students awake.

The period covered by the show begins in the mid-'50s, evoked in the catalogue as a mythic, and to me highly dubious, predawn of West Coast art (the Ferus Gallery, founded by Ed Kienholz and Walter Hopps, opened only in 1957), and ends with a moment that witnessed a push both for coalescence and critical mass with the opening of Arata Isozaki's Museum of Contemporary Art building in 1985. The

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Documentation of Guy de Cointet's *The Paintings of Sophie Rummel*, lecture performance by Viva, Los Angeles, April 1974. Courtesy Ctrns Gallery, L.A.

resulting exhibition mainly followed the standard L.A. art narrative, a kind of visual procession of well-known moments and movements (Ferus Gallery, Light and Space, Finish Fetish, Conceptualism, Cal Arts, Feminism, video and film, performative installations and High Camp, to name only a few), with a handful of quirky choices thrown in. Most of those larger groupings have become the stuff of recent art history, and Grenier's show was at its best when evoking the sheer variety of artistic practice that characterized the more distant decades, particularly the 1960s and '70s.

The installation made for a kind of continuous present. All manner of new juxtapositions became possible in the tightly packed display, which for once at the Pompidou was not overly large (though if you delved into the documentary materials and tuned into all the available monitors and headsets, you could still find Beaubourgian dimensions to the exhibition). Interior windows linked early and late parts of the show. A Tony Berlant house sculpture, *Georgia* (1966), had a view of some '80s Lari Pittman paintings. Homoerotic photos by Edmund Teske from the '60s hanging in the same corridor provided a quick detour straight to Pittman's gay imagery. Jonathan Borofsky's sculpture *Chattering Man with Two Stretcher Frames* at 2,645,313 (1983) was visible yawning through

had his first retrospective at the Pasadena Museum in October 1963, as well as Niki de Saint Phalle, Arman and Martial Raysse, all of whom showed at the Dwan Gallery in those years (though none of them was in Grenier's show). Even a cursory glance at the bird imagery of Ed Ruscha's early *Angry Because It's Plaster, Not Milk* (1965); the conceptual word paintings of John Baldessari; and the large comb sculpture of Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Comb)*, 1970, found them looking all particularly Magrittean in this context. (A retrospective of Celmins's drawings appears at the Pompidou this fall.)

In the L.A. show at Beaubourg (and in a concurrent gallery show at Air de Paris), I witnessed a virtual rehabilitation of the semi-forgotten French figure Guy de Cointet (1934-1983), who worked almost exclusively in California in the 1970s. De Cointet's inscrutable series titled "The Paintings of Sophie Rummel" (1974), a group of red hard-edge paintings with number sequences on them, along with a video documenting Warhol superstar Viva's lecture involving the works, were shown opposite the photo-and-text pieces of another émigré to L.A., the Dutch-born Bas Jan Ader, also the subject of much current fascination [see *A.L.A.*, Feb. '04].

Parisians are already well-versed in certain aspects of L.A. art. Over the past five years, I have seen excellent shows of emerging and established L.A. figures on rue Louise Weiss in Paris's 13th arrondissement, where bimonthly Saturday-night openings feel like Santa Monica's Bergamot Station on a good day. During the L.A. show, for

instance, Allen Ruppersberg's new work (also at Air de Paris) highlighted the historical importance of his early art-as-life experiment, *Al's Café* (1969-95), a mock-commercial enterprise visible today only through the documentation and relics on view at Beaubourg. James Turrell's light installations (one was installed at the Atelier Brancusi, which was closed every time I went by) are regular standbys at Almine Rech. I first saw the shipwreck and pirate paintings of the young L.A. painter Whitney Bedford (not in the Beaubourg show) at Art/Concept in Paris, months before she got noticed in New York or L.A.

In the official Parisian museum world, events were carefully planned to coincide with the L.A. exhibition. Mike Kelley (whose show at Ghislaine Hussenot was timed to the Pompidou opening) in June did a special installation, *Profondeurs Vertes*



Bill Viola: *Anthem*, 1983, NTSC U-matic video, 11½ minutes. Centre Pompidou.

(Green Depths), at the Louvre that coincided with two other exhibitions there, "Les artistes américains et le Louvre" and a show of American paintings from the Terra Foundation in Chicago. The Jeu de Paume hosted a traveling selection of Ruscha's photographs that was chockablock with ancillary evidence confirming the artist's status as the reigning Pop-Conceptual painter. Particularly charming were his Atget-esque early travel snaps of shop windows and the Paris Metro sign, which crops up in later drawings, also on view in the Jeu de Paume show.

Last winter I finally got a ticket to *Tristan and Isolde*, a collaboration of Peter Sellars and Bill Viola [see *A.L.A.*, Apr. '05] at Opéra Bastille, after a sold-out first run the spring before. Viola is a particular favorite of Grenier's; one of his video installations, *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001), concluded "Big Bang." But where does Viola's work really come from? The answer is Los Angeles, via the West Coast experimental film and video scene, as well as conceptual and performance art of the 1970s, including such disparate figures as Baldessari, McCarthy, Kenneth Anger and Bruce Nauman. All may have inspired the young Viola (though nothing causal is suggested in Grenier's show or catalogue), and all were



Jock Goldstein: *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, 1975, 16mm film, 2 minutes.



Rear wall and plinth, left to right, three works by John Outterbridge with David Hammons's *Injustice Case*, 1970, and *The Door (Admissions Office)*, 1969; at the Pompidou.

Black artists' work of the '60s and '70s—such as David Hammons's *Injustice Case*, which invoked the Bobby Seale trial—was shown with earlier work by Ferus Gallery artists.

included in the show, as was Viola's 1983 video *Anthem*, which was given its own room.

What a great work, I thought, seeing *Anthem* for the first time in the Paris show: so taut, poetic and disciplined. The imagery of a Korean-American school girl screaming her head off under the Piranesian vault of L.A.'s Union Station—intercut with slow-mo footage of the city's archaic oil rigs, close-ups of an open heart beating in the midst of an operation, and a luscious cantaloupe being sliced—has in retrospect an unforgettable air of grandeur. *Anthem* provides a glimpse of a major artist's oeuvre in formation, and, together with early works by Baldessari, McCarthy and Kelley was quite a lesson in artistic development.

Grenier's show had one of the best first rooms I can remember. Three works with lots of red in them were pitted against one another: Ruscha's *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (1962), with the 20th Century Fox logo half-painted, half-penciled in; John McCracken's shiny, abstract, horizontal wall relief (untitled) from 1973; and Jack Goldstein's film *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* (1975), which features the roaring lion on a red ground without the lettering. Immediately, boundaries between film, painting and sculpture, abstraction and figuration, appropriated Hollywood imagery and high modernist content were erased, and a new kind of "total work of art," laid-back, laconic yet content-heavy, was put forth: thereafter, everything seemed possible.

A succession of galleries breathtakingly alternated between messy and clean, which made for a sweeping visual sense. Yet this kind of thesis-antithesis presentation is by nature not historically accurate. Within each room, there was considerable chronological leeway. For example, in one gallery devoted mostly to assemblage, black artists' work of the '60s and '70s was placed side by side with earlier work by artists generally associated with the Ferus Gallery. The artists of color included here—David Hammons, Betye Saar, Joe Boreal and John Outterbridge among them—were repre-

sented by very strong assemblage works, often with anti-American iconography: Boreal's *Focke-wulf FW 109* (1960), a hanging scrap-metal sack with a swastika on it, was named after the legendary German fighter plane of World War II. Hammons's *Injustice Case* (1970), with its body-printed image of a bound and gagged figure on a transparent support framed by a cut up American flag, brought back the era of the Bobby Seale trial. (I'd never realized Hammons started in L.A.) These pieces effectively upstaged better-known works by Kienholz, George Herms and Wallace Berman on view. (As I learned from director Alfred Pacquement's introduction in the catalogue, the museum has had a commitment to Kienholz's work since the '70s, and the Centre Pompidou owns an important installation, *While Visions of Sugar Plums Danced in Their Heads*, 1964, which was also in this room.) Berman's work (including examples of *Semina* magazine, photographs, collages and the film *Aleph*, shown on a small monitor), in particular, deserved more space to unfold. (The traveling show "Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle" was recently curated by Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna for the Santa Monica Museum of Art [see *A.L.A.*, Apr. '06]. Though the exhibition is not coming to Europe, its excellent catalogue was on sale in the Pompidou bookstore.)

Next came a "clean" room devoted to Finish Fetish, which also included many works by artists not associated with that movement. Here two of Billy Al Bengston's heraldic abstractions, *Humphrey* and *Busby* (both 1963), looked superbly crafted and suggested abstracted sentinels; the chevrons at the center of each hint at some lurking macho, militaristic content. Next to these, two early ceramic sculptures by Ken Price, *Red* (1962) and *Pink Egg* (1964), looked just as impeccably licked and abstracted, if more late Surrealist in their biomorphic forms. Across the way, Judy Chicago's *Bronze Domes* (1968) on a mirrored table-top seemed with hindsight to suggest breasts or bras on display. (One of Chicago's plates from *The Dinner Party* of 1979 was included in the later feminist section, where it stole fire from the more pallid productions of other artists who, beginning in the 1970s, worked out of L.A.'s Women's Building, of which Chicago herself was a founder.)

Then followed the world of '60s abstract and figurative painting, which included the work of

Llyn Foulkes, David Hockney and Ruscha, among others. Foulkes's *Cardinal Rock* (1969) recalls a blowup of an Yves Tanguy moonscape. (Interestingly, the catalogue reproduces a shot of Foulkes's work on view at Durthea Speyer's Paris gallery in October 1970, and it has been in the Pompidou collection since 1978.)

The selection of late '60s video and Conceptual art included at least one very scabrous work, Bruce Nauman's *Black Bally* (1969), in which the artist is shown smearing his testicles with black paint. Here, too, were early works by Douglas Huebler, such as *Variable Piece #1 (Paris)* of 1970, which incorporates a map of the city. In this gallery, there was one masterpiece of early video art that I had never seen before, Baldessari's *I Am Making Art* (1971), in which the artist slowly waves his arms around, as if in a trance, seeming to bestow art upon the empty studio. Next came a welter of '70s work, where things got at once documentary and oddly disembodied.

In this section there was a considerable *terrain vague* between documentary and art videos, and the two genres began to intermingle. One episode of Jean-Marie Drot's French TV series "Le Raid Américain" (1976) presciently covers the '70s L.A. art scene, featuring many interviews with artists and starring a stunningly glamorous and franco-chattering Barbara Rose as commentator. (Having watched this video soon after seeing the Cindy Sherman retrospective at the Jeu de Paume in June, I found Rose's performance, and her visual similarity to Sherman's early self-disguise, particularly hypnotic.) Elsewhere you could tune in to video interviews of such mythic figures as Joan Didion, James Ellroy and Hockney talking about L.A. In our age of reality TV, these period documentaries have taken on the allure of art, and in the show, even such powerful artifacts as Chris Burden's *Documentation of Selected Works* (1971-74), a black-and-white video of his excruciating early endurance and high-risk performances, tended to pale by comparison.

A particularly strong experimental film component was essential for Paris, with its championing of cinema as the *septième art*. Missing, though, was any representation or discussion of the French Nouvelle Vague directors' early critical writings about Hollywood "film noir." (This was pointedly not an exhibition about either the Hollywood system or its influence in France.) An unlikely linchpin of Franco-American alliance was Kenneth Anger's film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954-78), in the Pompidou collection. In this



John Baldessari: *Kiss/Pankle*, 1984, oil-tinted black-and-white photographs, 80 by 72 inches overall. Toni and Martin Sosnoff collection.

George Herms: *Greet the Circus with a Smile*, 1961, mixed mediums, 68 by 28 by 20 inches. Menil Collection, Houston.



context, the film seemed to stand at the nexus of the French and American avant-gardes; it's one of those mythic works that seems to unite past and present, West Coast and European sensibilities. At times it looks like a '20s silent film, at others like Jack Smith's '60s *Flaming Creatures*. The film spans a good part of the era in question and attests to myriad links between the seemingly disparate cultures of Paris and L.A. In 1954, when Anger began to make it, he had already been touted at the Cannes Film Festival (in 1949), and by the time he finished it, Los Angeles had a fully developed underground film scene of which Anger was



Edward Kienholz: *White Visions of Sugar Plums Danced in Their Heads*, 1964, mixed-medium installation, 70 1/2 by 141 1/4 by 106 1/2 inches. Centre Pompidou. Photo Philippe Migent. © CNAC/MNAM/RMN.

Judy Chicago: *Bronze Domes*, 1968, mixed mediums, 38 by 30 by 30 inches. © ADAGP, Paris.





Michael McMillen: *Mike's Pool Hall*, 1977, peephole diorama, 9 by 20 by 20 inches.

the prized avatar and bad-boy guru, who had authored *Hollywood Babylon* (Volume 1 was first published in France in 1959 but not did not see print in the U.S. until 1975). With its thrumming rock-music score and its imagery of men in neo-18th-century wigs and court costumes, drag queens, magi and ephelic blondes, the film is redolent of both Versailles and the Hollywood Hills. It camps all the standard Hollywood studio tropes and sends up the high-serious French Surrealist canon as well; it's definitely a post-Cocteau statement, deeply informed by the maker of *La Belle et la Bête*, who championed the young filmmaker early on. Anger's authority today feels at once fresh and archaic; the film stars such mythic figures as Anais Nin as the Moon, and its narrative is based on the Aleister Crowley book also titled *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*. At Beaubourg, you could buy a postcard with the image of a leather boy from Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964; not in the show), and muse upon the director's enduring fashionability. (He was also in *Day for Night*—a François Truffaut film that served to title the 2006 Whitney Biennial.)

In the context of the show, I could see how Anger's example must have been seminal for the early performances and films of Paul McCarthy, represented here by the outrageous, polymorphous and onanistic video *Sailor's Meat—Sailor's Delight* (1975), which documents an early performance by the artist, bewigged, strapping on a dildolike sliced-open sausage, prancing around in a black-lace negligee and pantomiming an orgasm in the mud. (Another very strong piece—remember how good McCarthy was at the outset?)

Spawning a tradition of campy outrageousness, Anger's *Inauguration* was played in a loop in the show with Norman and Bruce Yonemoto's under-known, hour-long video *Garage Sale* (1976). With its story revolving around Goldier Glitter, an ex-member of the Cockettes, a San Francisco-

based transvestite group, the video's unforgettable imagery includes, among other sequences, two kittens getting naked in a microwave. Screening *Garage Sale* in an American museum would be unimaginable today, and it suggested that Anger's legacy is more alive than ever. This was a show of dioramas and peepholes, everywhere suggestive (though nothing is made of it in the catalogue) of the seminal influence of Duchamp's last work, *Étant donné*, on all kinds of art since the late '60s. Kienholz's work, of course, is also at the origins of the diorama esthetic, but the tendency toward corridors and false rooms in the '70s became even more marked in the show, with excellent examples of otherwise disparate works by William Leavitt, Michael McMillen and Eleanor Antin. The installation of Antin's *100 Boots* (1973) was visible only by peeking through a door that was cracked open. There you saw an old sink, a mattress on the floor and a lot of boots; the most powerful sensation was the smell of rubber.

Next to this early work by Antin (a legendary figure whose oeuvre deserves to be better known outside the West Coast), Mike Kelley's visionary early installation *Monkey Island* (1981-83) looked almost antiseptic, although the presence of a few beer cans on the floor (mysteriously placed under wire covers) did suggest how this generative installation-performance might have kicked ass at the time. (The work's bottle-shaped canvases also rhymed with the shaped-metal constructions of Robert Therrien nearby.) Kelley's importance today—tangible even in a relatively static early work, *Performance Related Objects* (1977-79), which the Pompidou has recently acquired—was continually reaffirmed.

Was sculpture an issue in this show? Not really, except insofar as it contributed to the "total work of art." I would be hard-pressed to say

who were the sculptors in the lineup. Is Mike Kelley a sculptor? Is Jeffrey Vallance's *Blinky the Friendly Hen* (1978-89), that strangely visceral, real-life chicken documented in a full corridor of paraphernalia, a sculpture, found object or relief? (All of the above, and more, I'm tempted to say.) The assemblage esthetic blurs all such distinctions from the outset; then Finish Fetish blurs the line between art and craft. A signal sculptor such as Nancy Rubins was present only in one film of an installation, *Big Urs* (1977-78). Allan McCollum, later to become a conceptual object-maker, was represented by the very early *Martensque Constructed Painting* (1970-71), and Charles Ray by one still-life sculpture, *How a Table Works* (1986). In fact, the works in the show tended to militate against the idea of static sculpture, giving precedence instead to the performative prop or socially relevant tool. Peter Shelton's abstracted body sculptures of the mid-'80s often look as if they might be worn. (A catalogue photo of the transparent resin *Clearbelly* of 1983-87 depicts just such a performative event at the L.A. Louver Gallery).

Shelton's discrete objects were a discovery for me in the show, where they packed a sculptural punch in one of the last rooms, shared with Therrien's ambiguous, abstracted work. Several aspects of the L.A. story didn't come through with enough resonance. The Light and Space section was just too crowded and cramped; the kind of subtle sensation engendered by such works couldn't unfold properly in the show's conceptual-circus ambience. The decision to put

Nancy Rubins: *Big Urs*, 1977-78, electrical appliances, rebar, mixed mediums, 12 feet high; shown on video at the Pompidou.





Kenneth Anger: *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome, 1953-78, 16mm film, approx. 40 minutes, Centre Pompidou.*

Bruce and Norman Yonemoto: *Garage Sale, 1976, video, 21 minutes.*



several of Larry Bell's glass cubes on a unified low plinth was also a mistake, which seriously messed with the sculptures' integrity as discrete objects (his smaller cubes are typically shown on individual pedestals, as one 1965 photo in the catalogue of a Pace Gallery installation demonstrates). There were also a few signs of prodigal waste. Did there really have to be two red works by John McCracken in the show, two tondo works

by Robert Irwin, two totemic assemblages by George Herms?

Similarly, the feminism section of the '70s seemed overly confined in a gallery devoted to the Women's Building. Although I enjoyed watching documentation of performances by Nancy Buchanan, Rachel Rosenthal, Barbara T. Smith, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, the limiting of feminism to such figures seems wrongheaded,

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Kenneth Anger's example must have been seminal for the early work of Paul McCarthy, represented here by the outrageous performance film, *Sailor's Meat—Sailor's Delight* (1975).

Paul McCarthy: *Sailor's Meat—Sailor's Delight, 1975, video of performance, 44 minutes.*

