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REPORT FROM VIENNA

L.A.: The Dark Side

Fighting West Coast clichés, a group of L.A. artists featured in last year's controversial "Helter Skelter" exhibition brought new works to Europe for a show called "LAX."

BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

With the opening up of Eastern Europe, Vienna is at a unique moment in its long and varied history. No longer the end of the road, the Austrian capital has become a jumping-off point for the hordes of Western tourists invading Prague, Budapest and points east. And after decades of languishing in the shadow of Paris and Cologne, Vienna is eagerly waking up to its own renewed importance as an international art center. Sensing the city's affinity with an emerging American scene, the Galerie Krinzinger and the Austrian government this winter hosted "LAX," a two-day symposium on contemporary Los Angeles art, featuring L.A. artists, critics and collectors.

A related group show at Galerie Krinzinger served as a refined and estheticized version of "Helter Skelter" [see *A.A.A.*, Nov. '92], the controversial exhibition organized last year by curator Paul Schimmel at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The MOCA show was instrumental in exposing an emerging group of L.A. artists to international attention; works by Mike Kelley, Nancy Rubins, Lari Pittman, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon and Jim Shaw have since been seen in shows all over Europe. Yet despite its effectiveness as a promotional tool, "Helter Skelter," with its Charles Manson-inspired title and bad-boy stance, epitomized the way that group shows can misleadingly pigeonhole complex work. The exhibition was further burdened by a catalogue that mixed reproductions of the art works with cliché-ridden fiction by writers of the Charles Bukowski school. Happily this smaller show in Vienna was almost entirely devoid of bombastic analysis of "fin de siècle Los Angeles" and offered a European audience a rhetoric-free look at powerful works by eight of L.A.'s most interesting artists. Dislocating—or decontextualizing—the work only made it look stronger.

As *Los Angeles Times* critic Christopher Knight pointed out at the "LAX" symposium, since there is as yet no established history of California art, glib critical generalizations embracing Hollywood, Disneyland, the Manson Family and now last year's riots have been all too easy to make. As part of Knight's effort to de-ghettoize L.A. art, he explored the referential complexity of the *Heidi* installation presented here by Kelley and McCarthy. As Knight pointed out, all of these L.A. artists accumulate materials from diverse sources, piling up diverse and contradictory cultural messages that acquire new meanings as they rub up against each other. Critic and curator Ralph Rugoff also emphasized the range of references, drawn from both art history and the "garbage of everyday life," that these artists use to create impure, fragmented works that cannot easily be tied to any of the usual genres.

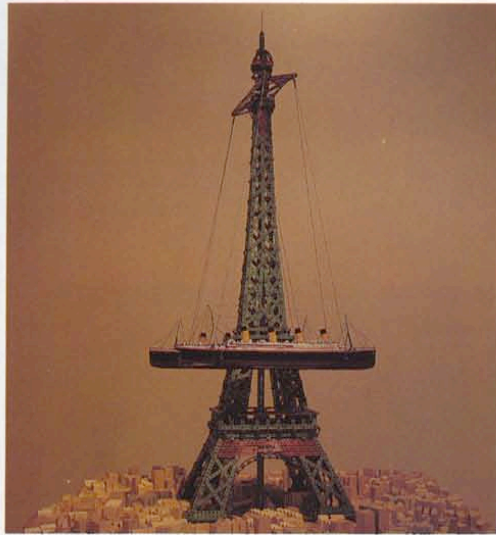


View of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy's *Heidi* installation, 1992, showing (from left to right) *Peter the Goatherd*, *Heidi/the Sick Girl* and *the Grandfather*.

A recurring theme of the "LAX" symposium was the influence of Viennese Actionism on this new, "dark" L.A. art. The link with the taboo-toppling '60s performances and socio-religious rituals of Hermann Nitsch, Otto Mühl, Günter Brus and Rudolf Schwarzkogler is a provocative one. While in Vienna, the American artists made a field trip to Nitsch's dramatic castle at Prinzendorf, the current scene of his elaborate, days-long actions. Several of the L.A. artists have acknowledged Actionism as one of the sources of their work, and McCarthy and Kelley even participated in a 1978 action by Nitsch in California. In an earlier, Nitsch-inspired performance related to his exhibit in the "LAX" show, artist Jeffrey Vallance doused his face in espresso on the steps of the Vatican to create a series of "Veronica's Veil" self-portraits on Italian silk. The perverse surrealism of Jim Shaw's "Billy" series is in the mode of Günter Brus's incredible drawings of the '70s, which illustrate Rube Goldbergesque

devices for self-mutilation and baby torture. Paul McCarthy's performances—his hilarious and sublime ketchup rites and hot-dog rituals—are uniquely American takes on early filmed actions by Mühl.

Nevertheless, at the symposium Chris Burden pointed out that since he was trained as a Minimalist sculptor, the root of his performance work was very different from the theatricality of Actionism. As attempts to "get to the core of sculpture," his performances of the '70s also placed much less of an emphasis on photographic end results. Ultimately, perhaps the most significant affinity between Vienna and L.A. is in the artists' shared experience of producing work in cultural backwaters; both the Viennese Actionists and the current L.A. artists have had to fight to draw international attention to art based outside the usual power centers. The plus side of underdog status however, is a feeling of community impossible to achieve in New



Chris Burden's *Another World*, 1992, approx. 7 feet high without base, shown still (above) and in motion (right). Courtesy Galerie Krinzinger.



York or Paris. As Lari Pittman put it, this group of L.A. artists is united by their sense of “non-apology.”

“Non-apology” certainly defines the stance of Burden, whose unwavering individualism set the tone for the other artists attending the symposium. At the Galerie Krinzinger, Burden offered a sculpture called *Another World*. Like his hanging sculpture *Medusa's Head* in “Helter Skelter,” the new work is a symbolic depiction of 19th-century technology turned to nightmare. Above a toy-block model of Paris stands a 7-foot Eiffel Tower built from a European version of an Erector set. Attached by chains to its top are two 30-inch models of the *Titanic*, which a motor sends whirling in a circular orbit around the tower. With a centrifugal lurch, the death ships swerve upward into their dangerous trajectory, the potential for catastrophe evoked with every turn of the carnivalesque whirligig. Intricately rendered and beautifully executed, the piece follows in the wake of Burden's *The Other Vietnam Memorial*, in MOMA's “Dislocations” show [see *A. i. A.*, Jan. '92], to continue the artist's updating of the genre of history sculpture.

The sculptural work of Nancy Rubins—whose epic stack of white-trash trailers and water heaters stole the show at “Helter Skelter”—is both completely process-oriented and oddly formal. In “LAX” her trademark heavily scrawled graphite drawings were layered onto the gallery wall, spreading irregularly up the frilly molding and onto the ceiling. Resembling gigantic chips of peeling metallic paint, the loosely pinned drawings were movable forms whose surfaces emanated a shimmering glow. Each sheet of paper is so fiercely and obsessively executed that the pencil marks tear through the paper. In the symposium Rubins emphasized the importance of physicality in all her work: she feels that her installations in a sense recharge the spent energy of the

discarded appliances she uses as raw material. Temporality is also part of the process; the knowledge that her sculptures will be moved and probably “rejunked” lends her massive constructions a haunting sense of vulnerability. This spring, for an adjunct commissioned piece to be located in the branches of some trees near one of Vienna's indestructible World War II bunkers, Rubins has chosen to use local materials: colored mattresses and Sacher tortes.

“LAX” included the most complex collaborative piece to date by Kelley and McCarthy, a video performance and installation titled *Heidi: Midlife Crisis Trauma Center and Negative Media-Engram Abstraction Release Zone*. Shot in the Galerie Krinzinger, the fragmented video retelling of the classic *Heidi* novel by Johanna Spyri continues Kelley's investigation of the split between nature and culture and McCarthy's psychosexual deconstruction of family relationships. The set, which was left in situ as part of an elaborate installation, consists of a shack that is part Swiss chalet, part stripped-down facade of the famous American Bar designed by Viennese modernist architect Adolf Loos. The Alpine setting provides the kitschy environment to which the novel's citified sick girl comes to recover. Here Grandfather (McCarthy), Heidi (Kelley) and the Sick Girl (a wax dummy wearing a Madonna mask) enact a wacked-out triangle of social dysfunction. The scenario centers on Heidi's desire to violate “nature” by ornamenting herself with a tattoo. Here Loos's essay “Ornament and Crime” is quoted to the effect that ornament is the enemy of civilization, the sign of erotic impulses that may be natural in the child but are degenerate in the adult. This absurd, sexually charged moral struggle continues until the bodies of both Heidi and the Sick Girl—at this point represented by two masked mannequins—are literally dismembered.

The fragmented pieces become prey for the demented delectation of the horny Grandfather.

Kelley's first full-scale performance in six years marked a return to the raw rhetoric of his “pre-doll” performance/installations such as *Monkey Island* and *Plato's Cave*. McCarthy's interest in parodic narrative and film techniques organizes the *Heidi* video: the use of freeze frames, slow motion and cheesy dissolves is straight out of low-budget horror films. (Indeed, the perverse family scenes of dismemberment and coprophilia are lifted from Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.) The installation at Galerie Krinzinger also included three bulletin boards filled with postcard references for the video's imagery, especially its depictions of the body; represented were works by artists ranging from Edward Burne-Jones to John Miller, from Hans Bellmer to Kiki Smith, from Egon Schiele to Gilbert & George. Paul Thek's 1968 installation *The Tomb: Death of a Hippie* (the subject of a recent essay by Kelley) is a key referent for the chamber in which the Sick Girl is ensconced, with Thek's decomposing, gender-confused hippie signaling an earlier moment of cultural collapse.

On the heels of his exhibition of works based on the Shroud of Turin in Turin's Castello di Rivoli, Jeffrey Vallance quickly keyed into Vienna's collecting mania: this city of vitrines has over 30 museums displaying everything from bird eardrums to Beethoven's skull. For “LAX,” Vallance meticulously re-created two of the Vienna Schatzkammer's prize possessions: the Holy Lance (supposedly used to pierce Christ's body) and the local version of Veronica's Veil. Working with a blacksmith and local craftsmen, Vallance created three perfect copies of each relic, recalling the real historical confusion about the objects' authenticity. Yet Vallance's works seem purged of all irony. He has pushed his anthro-

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pological study of Catholic rituals to the brink of a twisted faith. His stated intention was to add his own versions to the five Veronica's Veils and three Holy Lances currently vying for "authentic" status across Europe. With deadpan audacity, Vallance sees his replicated relics as having acquired a kind of sanctity through the complex process of re-creation.

The Vienna show marked the debut of Lari Pittman's huge, outrageous painting *Untitled (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*; at 8 feet by 21 feet this is his largest canvas to date (and an early choice for this year's Whitney Biennial). The painting chronicles the adventures of a long-nosed Pinocchio as he follows a white, target-strewn pathway to oblivion. Along the road there are light-bulb boob/eyes, orifices from which spiral piles of beautiful feces festooned with pearls, a menacing noose and four warning signs. This hectic visual activity is rendered in pungent synthetic colors and crisp stenciled motifs. The white target pattern that Pinocchio travels along is itself a narrative device; this is a life (and a painting) moved by decoration. The virtuosic layered texture of rain/teardrops in the background of the painting extends the possibilities of acrylic as a medium; each drop contains a series of concentric droplets, yielding a finicky sculptural effect. While at the symposium Pittman insistently associated his work with gay politics, this claim is belied by his painting's deliciously polymorphous sexual content; the orifices he depicts are in no way gender specific.

"LAX" also presented six large black-and-white paintings from Jim Shaw's "Horror Vacui" project, which chronicles in fragmented comic book form the story (co-written by Benjamin Weissman) of a serial killer, a special-effects man and a mad chemist whose lives come together in a single bizarre moment. In Vienna, Shaw also introduced a new body of work: realistic pencil drawings of his dreams, each labeled with a short verbal description. These works achieve the surreal displacement of Shaw's earlier "Billy" series without a fictional filter. His straight delivery of genuinely odd dream-work—one drawing shows Raymond Pettibon in a cave listening to Beatles records, in another we see Shaw himself lying in bed with fish popping out from under the blanket—breathes new life into the genre of clinical surrealism.

The exhibition concluded with an installation of drawings by Raymond Pettibon in a labyrinthine hallway on the entry floor of the gallery. Pettibon, who is at once the most accessible and the most elusive of these L.A. artists, continues his attempt to pull off a dazzling feat: a revival of the traditional lyric poem in the form of one-page illustrated texts. With his surprising control of both verbal and visual rhetoric and his references to everything from John Ruskin to Gumby, Pettibon attains a new blend of culture beyond high and low.

For American visitors, the symposium provided the unique experience of hearing the L.A. artists summarize their own careers in 20 minutes. This task was approached in various ways, from the matter-of-fact Burden to the vociferous Pittman to the otherworldly Pettibon. From the artists there was a sense of pleasure and relief that their work was reaching a European audience; they saw this event, ironically, as a stepping-stone to greater respect in New York.

For the Austrians, the "Helter Skelter" catalogue had provided the only previous exposure to the L.A. scene, undoubtedly setting up expectations that "LAX" would be some kind of apocalyptic event. Yet the elegant space of the Galerie Krinzinger tamed the beast. Indeed, this improved miniversion of the ill-curated "Helter Skelter" was downright civilized.



Jeffrey Vallance: *The Sudarium of St. Veronica, 1992*, paint on linen, wood, brass, cameo, 22½ by 19 inches. Photos this page courtesy Rosamund Felsen Gallery.

The lofty gallery could even be imagined as a cathedral (albeit part of some Church of the Poisoned Mind) outfitted with Vallance's *faux* relics, and with the two extended "arms" of Burden's sculpture suggesting a crucifix. Stretching the mind a bit further, you could almost see Pittman's painting as a gigantic altarpiece, Shaw's canvases as nave panels, Rubins's drawings as a wall and ceiling relief, Pettibon's installation as set in a catacomb and Kelley/McCarthy's video performance as a Passion Play. If art's function is, as Kelley stated at the symposium, "to lie and reveal lies in other aspects of life," these artists know how to conjure up the setting for doing just that. □

"LAX" was presented at Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna, Nov. 4-Dec. 22, 1992.

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Lari Pittman: *Untitled (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation), 1992*, acrylic and enamel on 4 mahogany panels, 96 by 256 inches overall.