

Edited by Vince Aletti

Choices

An Opinionated Survey of the Week's Events

Art



D. JAMES DEE/LAURENCE MILLER GALLERY

Gary Brotmeyer's Hugo Ball Sound Poem Suit

Marcel Broodthaers: For Broodthaers amateurs, the complete prints offer an entrance to his acerbic investigations of identity, inauthenticity, and indexical absurdity—complete with cross sections of his Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, and cow charts labeled as breeds of cars. Through July 12, Michael Werner Gallery, 21 East 67 Street, 988-1623. (Levin)

Gary Brotmeyer: Brotmeyer transforms the people in antique photos and postcards into anything from a Cubist collage to a Gregor Samsa beetle. He armors them in Man Ray's iron and Picasso's guitar. These small drawings, collages, and objects are smart, silly, and seductive: it's hard to resist a mini-Duchamp bi-

cycle wheel on a stool with matchstick legs and a bottle-cap seat. Through July 31, Laurence Miller Gallery, 138 Spring Street, 226-1220. (Levin)

'Decorous Beliefs': Is this what the '90s is about? It's not exactly in a gallery, it's barely a show, and it may just be the first politically *incorrect* exhibition (before you sign the guest book, peek at its cover). This raw loft strewn with negligent, nasty, instant works—Devon Dikeou's meat thermometers and carving table, Andrea Zittel's house flies, Craig Kalpakjian's fingerprints, John Lekay's kinetic vibrators, Tamas Banozich's personal ads on dangling tags—can leave you guessing what's art and what's part of the grungy space. But there's an undeniable sense of fresh exhaustion that can stop you in your tracks. Through July 7, Natalie Rivera Gallery, 89 Greene Street, 641-1070. (Levin)

Howard Halle: The floor is carpeted with a wall-to-wall lawn of sod. The walls are studded with suburban nameplates, mail-order address signs, and metal letters—spelling out the sloganeering titles of self-help books. Politically correct earthwork verges on generic farce in this installation, but the grassy odor is undeniably real. Through July 13, Randy Alexander Gallery, 270 Lafayette Street, 941-9094. (Levin)

July 3 - July 9, 1991

The Negligent Aesthetic

Kim Levin fights back the torpor of a New York summer with some surprising "sleepers".

It's an odd moment in New York. Between the 80s and the 90s something changed irrevocably, and that realisation is beginning to sink in. In one sense New York has, forgive the expression, painted itself into the umpteenth corner. There aren't any East Village galleries any more in the East Village. SoHo galleries have been dropping like flies — closing in the middle of the season, or moving to try their luck elsewhere (Paris, Madrid, Los Angeles). But it's not just the comatose market. It's more like post-war trauma, environmental fatigue, sheer exhaustion. New World Order? Forgive it. It's the spluttering collapse of the modern era. Even the latest revival of the Mary Boone rumours couldn't rouse any enthusiasm.

The major event of the spring season, the Whitney Biennial, was a big letdown. This is the show the New York art world loves to hate, but what the 1991 Biennial exposed all too well was the sense of sheer exhaustion. In an antidote to the Biennial boredom PS1 managed to rouse itself from financial despair to mount "New York Diary: Almost Twenty-Five Different Things". This was an eccentric show of 25 fresh installation works curated by PS1's two guest curators from Eastern Europe (Ryszard Wasco from Lodz and Zdenka Gabalova from Prague). The show had a loose energy, alive with natural substances and processes. One work-in-progress was painted by the droppings of four live doves, another was attacked behind glass by a colony of ants. There were smells of incense, spices, shredded rubber and sounds — among them an operatic Artaud narrative emitted by a forest of hanging speakers and a shelf of screeching hearing aids imprisoned in goblets.

Uptown at the Museo del Barrio, Puerto Rican artist Pepon Osorio's unexpected five-year retrospective was the sleeper of the summer. His fabulous transformed objects and installations — a sofa, a bicycle, a bedroom, a chandelier, each embellished with trinkets, statistics and handwritten narrative texts — proved that the personal and the ornamental can be political. Celebratory and sad, playing on the colonised conditions of Puerto Rican excess, the show opened with a lacy bassinet that spoke of infant mortality and ended with *The Wake*, an unforgettable funeral parlour



Pepon Osorio, *La Cama*, 1987, mixed media installation. Courtesy: the Artist

installation that addressed AIDS in the Hispanic community.

The Gulf War intruded into nearly everything on view during the spring. "Splatterpunk" may be the popular new genre of Hollywood film, but in the art world, Splatterworks — the early 90s variant of late 60s process-oriented scatter pieces — were everywhere in New York. There was a spate of installations that were atomised, barely existent flung-together scatter pieces, desultory arrangements of construction materials, glitter, underwear, electrical components, disembodied wax body parts, ordinary objects. I doubt that it was mere coincidence. The war must have made artists realise that in the real world deconstruction means demolition.

I first noticed it in February with Thom Merrick's floor installation at Pat Hearn: unrecognisable bits and pieces of deconstructed motorcycle strewn across the gallery's white floor and titled *Desert*. Then there was

Mathew McCaslin's sprawling installation of electrical wires and circuitry (take that, Peter Halley) at Daniel Newburg Gallery. Karen Kilimnik's scattershot installation at 303 Gallery — strewn with plastic eggs, toy guns, glitter, Napoleonic imagery, music (*I Don't Like Mondays*) and random shotgun holes in one wall — had overtones of violent narrative as well as disintegrated order. Even John Armleder weighed in with a lightweight reconstruction of an early work that was little more than a ladder and some glitter in a couple of heaps on the floor.

It is not that the negligent aesthetic is particularly new — we've already seen it in the work of artists like Martin Kippenberger, Georg Herold or Cady Noland. But current events made it infinitely more relevant. Art's critique of its own commodification was already being superseded in New York by more pressing concerns: social, racial, sexual, cultural inequities; the deteriorating

environment; an incurable disease. Issues of authorlessness were being overthrown by issues of ethnic identity. Appropriation was being overthrown by ecological art. Simulation was giving way to medical and spiritual metaphors. In fact, political correctness is becoming so pervasive in New York art that it threatens to become academic, if not generic. And worse, intolerance is increasing exponentially from all sides: the latest instance is a Washington DC museum official's effort to censor an early Sol LeWitt homage to Muybridge, which she decided was offensive on feminist grounds.

In mid-June the first intentionally politically incorrect group show by ten artists, titled "Decorous Beliefs" opened in a raw loft space in SoHo — strewn with perverse nastiness — the guest book cover was that of *Mein Kampf*. It was hard to tell what was art and what was part of the grungy space: a strained tablecloth with a meat-slicer by one artist, from which roast beef sandwiches were dispensed at the opening; the tags bearing personal ads (alluding to the 80s craze of people advertising themselves like commodities) hung in odd places by another artist; a couple of copulating dildos on the floor; some lesbian graffiti drawings on the window glass. "This group of work rejects the current frenzy to present art that addresses social, political and environmental issues in a manner deemed 'correct' by a corrupt society" declared the press release. The *fin-de-siècle* mood in decaying New York is one of mourning, warning, denial, hostility and foreboding. But I sense something stirring, as if the current exhaustion were masking a defiant new throwaway aesthetic of trashy objects and conceptual rubble transformed by rage and outrage and a new generation of artists, who are post-politicised and nihilistic.

