

ving her audience a treatise on capitalism and its discontents, the bition evoked the American open road, but in a fractured, disassembled state—torn apart and under duress.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler

John Ashbery

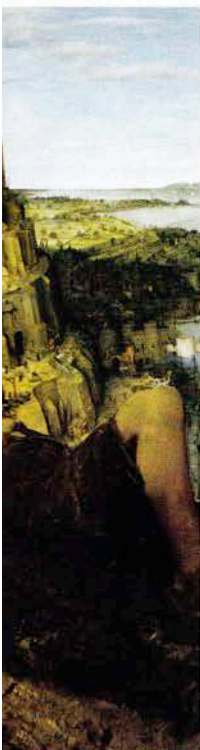
TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

age, by its nature a hybrid art, reveals that a whole is always composed of a series of conflicting, complementary parts. For this reason, it might come as no surprise that John Ashbery, arguably the most essential poet in America, is also a collage artist, for his poetry has always been a conflation of various discourses and modes. The experimental and the traditional have long maintained an uneasy but generative truce in his work. For instance, Ashbery might use the sestina, a form dating to the twelfth century, to relate the misadventures of Popeye.

Ashbery's recent collages, presented at Tibor de Nagy, are generally light in tone; like his poetry, they weave together high culture and pop sensibility with élan, generating the kinds of surprises that one gets from bringing together, say, Buster Brown and Parmigianino's self-portrait. They are also frequently self-referential; for example, Parmigianino's painting is the subject of Ashbery's canonical poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." Art-historical influences are everywhere evident: Max Ernst, of course, as well as Picasso and Braque, Joseph Cornell, and Joe Brainard. Given Ashbery's important relationships with countless artists throughout his life and his years spent as an art critic, art history is neither academic nor monolithic for him; it is a lived experience of conversations and encounters. Likewise, the playful referentiality of these collages never fully conceals the fact that the real stakes are deeply personal. This blurring of self and culture

als itself in the various half-remembered images that occur and throughout the often relatively spare collages. Twice among the fifty-one works appears a photograph of May Lillie (taken by Erick W. Glasier, an early-twentieth-century circus photographer) in a girl's garb, pointing her gun directly at the camera. This image of an early forgotten sharpshooter, its specific references almost buried, lives in the mind's recesses as a collusion of cultural materials and personal associations. Pop culture for Ashbery is inextricable from the fragments of memory.

Promontory, 2010, offers the most poignant, moving image in the show. Against a digitized print of Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, 1563, a young boy lies on his back amid a clutch of wildflowers, his hands shielding his eyes from the sun. It is hard not to read this as an allegory of Ashbery himself. "Yet I cannot escape the picture / Of my small self at the bank of flowers," he writes in his poem "The Picture of Little Boy in a Prospect of Flowers." With fraught nostalgia, *Promontory* sends the viewer back to that small self loafing among a bank of flowers while a tower is built in the background, a tower to ascend to heaven, a tower that will fall and, in falling, give rise to infinite shards of language



and meaning, every part a memory of that central promise of wholeness. It is haunting to consider that for Ashbery, art—in whatever form—is a longing to be a child, dreaming of language, just before so much loss, so much fragmentation changes everything. The light of such work projects another kind of dream, one in which art is recollecting—in every sense of the word—both the possibilities of what is to come and the material fragments of who we once were, the self glimpsed through incremental choices of composition and assemblage.

—Richard Deming

Rancourt/Yatsuk

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

The commodity promises so *very* much. It beats a drum of necessity—fulfilling real requirements for food, housing, and clothing—yet it sings a cloying song of desires beyond need, converting ineffable longings into cold, hard cash on the barrelhead. Justin Rancourt and Chuck Yatsuk's recent performances, including the ninety-minute live action *Black Diamond*, 2011, explore the commodity's interpellation of subjects as buyers, probing the gap between its claims of pleasure and contentment and the struggle to find an identity outside of consumption. The show is about a pyramid scheme and its cast of huckster salesmen (con artists, really). Rancourt and Yatsuk enact roles of slick and not-so-slick promoters of a multilevel marketing scheme—the business model associated with Tupperware or neighborhood Avon cosmetics sales parties—that hawks "Omega Club Amazon Blend" açai drinks that will change your life and make you rich beyond your wildest imaginings. It's an appropriate time to give audience members a lesson in the mechanics of manipulation; just a few blocks downtown, the protesters at Occupy Wall Street have been attempting to pull away the veil of neoliberalism's hypnotic suggestion that if you fail in this economy, it's your own damn fault.

For the past several years, the duo have staged similar performances and installations about capitalism's compulsion to make a quick buck and ride the wave of boom times, riptide of the bust be damned. In a previous work, *Phase IV*, 2008–2009, they drew on the history of predatory real estate speculators in their native Florida, building a version of a cheapo tract model home at Art in General in Manhattan (full disclosure: I invited them) and populating it with a down-on-his-heels real estate shark and his cost-cutting construction crew. The model home had all the amenities of a brand-new tract house, but the perks were all facade—the sales office for the tract was outfitted with fake marble and chintzy plastic fixtures, while the back area was a



Rancourt/Yatsuk, *Black Diamond*, 2011. Performance view, October 27, 2011. Buddy Budansky (Justin Rancourt).

deteriorated shamble covered in ripped plastic tarps bordering a swamp. Likewise, in 2010 they staged a series of performances, also at Kate Werble Gallery, about self-help speakers and the subgenre of management workshops that use mantric repetition and hypnosis to compel clients to “direct-response” action (e.g., “Write the check NOW!”).

Their performances exhibit scarily persuasive acting, with tag-team patter familiar from all sorts of get-rich-quick audience manipulations, from time-share resort schemes to “going fast” QVC-product sales. *Black Diamond* features a basic rags-to-riches narrative of overcoming personal adversity by internalizing marketing slogans, coupled with a mesmerizing light-and-sound show and hyperbolic testimonials from former losers moving their way up the Ponzi ladder to “Black Diamond” status. The show begins with a meet and greet, the business-suited actors giving confident handshakes and upper-arm squeezes to the assembling “guests” while providing cocktails from a delicious “Amazon Blend” that the audience soon learns has life-altering properties. As the lights dim and audience members take their seats before a projection of a huge rotating diamond casting glittery shards of light through the space, the two artists present a narrative—the story of “you,” first at rock-bottom and broke, then moving through an epiphany of your “unlimited income potential,” and, finally, crowned king of the world when you’re on “the private jet to Bora-Bora.” Rancourt and Yatsuk stage a kind of gonzo aesthetics, an immersive environment that demonstrates the total absorption the culture of the “Omega Club” demands. But beyond immersion lies faith: the blind faith of the desperate ready to believe that self-actualization through financial success is the miracle that will allow them to overcome social determinants such as poverty or a lack of education. Rancourt, as Buddy Budansky, the head promoter/CEO of Omega Club, performs the condescending familiarity of the rich to the plebes, a kind of “Don’t you hate it when your limo is late?” blather of privilege. But Rancourt’s Svengali-like exertions as the charismatic face of the brand, and Yatsuk’s convincing take as a recent convert willing to bet it all to be in the “Omega Family,” reveals just how hard entrepreneurial stratagems in capitalist economies must work to part the poor or the feckless from their cash.

—Eva Díaz

Manfred Mohr

BITFORMS GALLERY

Though he is one of the pioneers of digital art, Manfred Mohr has remained on the margins of its histories. This compact exhibition—a retrospective in nuce—goes some way in bringing him to the fore. Roughly forty years have passed since “*Une esthétique programmée*” (A Programmed Aesthetic), 1971, Mohr’s landmark exhibition of computer-generated art. Held at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the show featured a magnetic tape drive and computer plotter machine—programmed by Mohr—that executed algorithmically determined drawings in real time. Long before the computer had been rendered personal, Mohr’s practice wrested it to new ends.

“What do you think about aesthetic research carried out with the aid of a computer?” prompted a large placard installed in that show, on which viewers were encouraged to record their reactions. The palimpsest of witticisms and quips (on view here) ranges from the bemused to the outraged. The transformation of the French query—“*Que pensez-vous de la recherche esthétique faite à l’aide d’un(e) ordina(i)teur(e)*”—speaks volumes in its own right; if no rendering in English quite translates the mordant elision of *ordinateur* (computer) to *ordinaire* (ordinary), the curt crossing-out of “aesthetic” gets the

point across. The puns and proclamations are not all negative, however; they register everything from apprehension at the prospect of the human’s eclipse to neo-Dada salvos welcoming the perceived de-skilling entailed in Mohr’s work. Like many of these statements, the panel’s frayed, sprocket-hole-riddled computer paper—a material that decades ago seemed coldly, even threateningly, official—appears quaint with the patina of the outmoded.

This sprawling register provided an auspicious touchstone for the work on display, from Mohr’s early sequential line drawings to his hypercube and graph-theory work to more recent experiments using pigment ink and LCD. In a divided room tightly packed but not cluttered, the scope of media and materials was nothing less than stunning: drawings, etchings, lithographs, collage, sculpture, computer printout, laser-cut steel sculptures, silk screens, and—rounding things out—few canvases in acrylic. That one of the earliest works on display should be a tempera painting—*Schriftbild*, 1964—seemed fitting. Its gestural improvisations suggest a kind of exorcism of the spontaneity of the hand. Mohr’s subsequent efforts, seems to have been absented entirely to this day, Mohr—who began, in fact, as an action painter and a musician—claims more of an affinity with Pollock than with Duchamp or Judd. This is true even at the height of his programmed aesthetics. In *Blending a musical score sprouting errant filaments*, *P-159-A*, 1971, a plotter drawing sewn with thread. Its mix of linear exactitude and organic effervescence recalls something of Eva Hesse’s *Metronomic Irregularities*, 1966, which formed a playful, tacit critique of Minimalist dogma.

For the artist, numerical code is no less an inexorable conveyor than verbal language itself, and hence mined with the same artfulness, even potential lyricisms. His work derives not from the over-suppression of artistic agency but from its filtration through algorithmic code. In this regard, he highlights the necessary distance of repetition—the metaphorical dimension of language itself. Rather than short-circuiting signifying capacity, the artist’s *Cubic Limit* works produced between 1973 and 1978, bring it to a higher mathematical level, which extremes touch: A cold dissection of the cube into infinite variable dimensions coalesces into a dense visual pattern at the center of the field. More recent, animated works, such as *P-1411-e*, 2001, use software to picture the eleven-dimensional hypercube and other complex geometric analogues, with elements of the representations randomized. The play between the aleatory and the inexorable—manifested in colored, formal facets—brings these latest efforts back to Mohr’s early interest in gestural procedures.

Mohr’s imagery most often recalls contemporaneous experiments by Hélio Oiticica and his Neo-concrete colleagues, though it is closer in process to Gyorgy Kepes’s prints from the 1950s—arbitrated by various automated apparatuses, from the X-ray and microscopic photography to sonar and radar. By foregrounding the mediation of an intermediary device, Mohr’s method, however out of the anonymous or machinelike, likewise underscores the mediated nature of language in aesthetic production. The fruits of that method are as strikingly and compellingly formal as they are conceptual—revealing the nature written into the system from the start.

—Ara H. M.

