



# New York PRESS

JUNE 1-7, 1994

NEW YORK'S FREE WEEKLY

VOL. 7, NO. 22

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### The Deal of the Art: Malling the Museums

ART SHOPS HAVE PROLIFERATED WITHIN the mega-museum, and in small not-for-profit spaces as well. From the exalted Metropolitan Museum to the alternative Exit Art/First World, everyone's got one—and if they used to have one, now they have two or three or more. MOMA and the Jewish Museum, to name two, have outlet shops next to their main branches, while the Met has 15 shops nationwide. At the downtown designer museums—the Museum of African Art, the New Museum and the Guggenheim Soho—you have to go *through* the shop to get to the collections. Some visitors never get that far.

The museum shop is now the subject of a spoof, so you know it's definitely a *thing*. Sam Wiener's show at the Alternative Museum through June 25 (594 Broadway, between Houston and Prince Sts.) ambitiously calls itself *Art Depot: An Exhibition Which Satirizes the Museum Gift Shop and the Commodification of Art*.

It successfully does both. Almost *too* successfully. According to Andrew Perchuk, museum curator, "It took Sam 18 months to prepare this show, and in that time most museum stores have outstripped the parody."

The main gallery of the Alternative Museum has been filled with slickly-made art products, simply displayed and packaged in generic cardboard boxes a la Home Depot.

The consumer browses through an inventory that includes *Pony Expresso*, a mailbox in the form of the horse in Picasso's *Guernica*; *Rockabilly & Rockabilly Jr.*, rocking hippos based on the Met's mass-produced copy of an ancient figurine; *Déjeuner sur l'Astroturf*, *Reglued Schnabel Plates* (available in bridal patterns); and just in time for summer, Rob Ryman and Ad Reinhardt t-shirts (white-on-white and black-on-black respectively).

Like a Letterman monolog, the quality laughs just keep coming. And to make sure you get the joke, each item and its allusions are explained in user-friendly prose and mounted in clear, unbreakable lucite stands (not on sale).

The staff of the museum has been sucked into the satire; they spend portions of busier days cruising the floor like salespeople on commission. Perchuk is ready with a clipboard to keep track of inventory. Biggest sellers: the Leon Golub wall clock and the "Jumping Giaco's"—a children's squeeze-toy with a Giacometti figure rather than the usual clown flipping on a string.



As soon as you enter the Guggenheim Soho you're confronted with the big-ticket items: a series of fine ceramics created by various artists including Cindy Sherman, Roy Lichtenstein, George Segal, Arman, Dan Flavin, Komar and Melamid and Joseph Kosuth. A sales attendant with an indecipherable ac-

cent, named Roberto, is quick to point out that the Lichtenstein Limoge piece and the Segal homage to Cezanne can both hold flowers in water ("Look honey, they're functional too!"). Objects range in price from \$750-25,000. Kandinsky was kind enough to return from the grave to design a set of plates (in keeping with his Bauhaus principals).

They have a nice collection of art books, a magazine rack, scarves, postcards and the usual well-made tchotchkes. In case you aren't sure what a candlestick or piece of jewelry has to do with the museum, there are breezy descriptions mounted in clear, unbreakable lucite. (These descriptions also help the museum beat paying UBIT—Unrelated Business Income Tax.)

It's true that without expanded museum stores, increased admission costs and other related phenomena, many spaces would go

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belly up. In 1990, the NYS Council for the Arts cut funding to all institutions in half. The NYC Department of Cultural Affairs gives 85 percent of its budget to 32 cultural institutions—organizations owned by or operated on property of the city, plus Lincoln Center. Though NYC's cultural budget is relatively large, second only to the NEA's (which is smaller than many around the world, including Berlin's municipal art budget), over 400 organizations are left to compete for the remaining 15 percent of available funds.

To cope with dwindling monies and increasing costs, museums hit the usual list of suspects until they're punch-drunk. Since there's a limited pool of rich people with deep pockets, institutions have had to try making money the old-fashioned way. They turned to marketing strategists and their ilk to help them do it. In so doing, they may have infected themselves with a cancer.

Business folk are nice people, to be sure—some of my best friends have jobs—but many came of age during the era of "better living through better management" and, as a breed, may not be generally characterized by their oversensitivity. The goal of maximizing earning power by any means necessary allows no sense of limitations as to what should and shouldn't be sold. It wasn't a pitching coach who thought of converting the home plate backstop into a rotating billboard.

As museums' sales staffs grow, their agenda begins to conflict with the curatorial staff's. Whose museum is it, anyway? And for what purpose does it exist? As many museums now find themselves run by MBAs rather

than MFAs, the answer, increasingly, is to generate revenue.

Museums have been transformed from cavernous bastions of academics, school kids, tourists and art fiends into corporate entities functioning under the dictum "Grow or Die." Growth increases costs, which increases the need to generate income, which increases the need for a sales staff. (Part of the Guggenheim's dash for cash is a need to pay off a \$100 million bond they floated to fund their expansion program.) One envisions a day when the museum sprawls out like an amorphous mall, filled with pre- and post-exhibit satellite stores and franchised outlet boutiques; a day when sensational multi-media presentations will rejuvenate dull old relics of ancient civilizations for audiences who spend their time yammering at each other over the strains of their record-a-tour walkmen, anxious for the opportunity to get out of the show and get on with their shopping.

One of the more surreal aspects of *Art Depot* has been visitors' responses. Many are heedless of the irony dripping off the walls and go directly into shopping mode. What has been revealed is how well-programmed viewers already are. Few seem to notice the mock exhibit that's been crammed into a small room at the back of the space—styrofoam spoofs on the work of Richard "Rusty" Serra—and if they do they're relieved to find out it's a send-up and they don't really have to look at it.

More disturbing is the fact that there's a real exhibit off to the left of the main gallery, Craig Pleasant's *Dwelling*, and, though Perchuk says it's well attended, I fear it's lost in the shuffle—just as I fear most work may be as viewers increasingly tune in for the commercials and neglect the show.

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*Art Depot* uses the big Art History Museum In The Sky as its point of reference. Its jokes are facile; the viewer knows most of the works from Modern & Contemporary Art History 101, and if he doesn't, the descriptions set him right. The consumer is protected in feeling that he didn't have to learn much more about art than he did in college to be hip to the allusions in a *neo-Dada* show at the *Alternative Museum*.

And since none of the works alluded to are on hand, the buyer doesn't have to feel guilty about shooting his viewing wad in the shop. The real artworks need only function as advertisement. Few would ever dream of owning a Giacometti, but that's okay; few imagine meeting Michael Jordan, but we can buy his shoes.

The art world plays an inside game. Way inside. There are several ways to get in the game: you can fuck your way in, be born into it, work support staff, or you can buy your way in. Buying art confers, for some, a measure of acceptance. You buy into the level at which you want to be approved.

Museum shops are well aware of how to spread acceptance to the masses. Buying art products confers a bit of insiderness on the consumer, suggests they are people of *taste*. Copies and other referents take all the danger out of owning art. The work referred to is already approved of by *trained art profession-*

*als*; the consumer avoids the muss and fuss judgment entails, as well as the jagged edges original, unsanctioned art contains. Nothing that requires a greater commitment than detached irony. In this prophylactic age, museum gift shops are totally safe.

People feel more comfortable buying art from a gift shop than from a gallery. An extreme elitism has been created whereby potential art lovers feel they aren't qualified to buy art. People are scared to walk into galleries. There are gallery spaces, still lost in the 80s, expressly designed to intimidate. Most galleries are staffed by friendly and very dedicated people; on the other hand, some of the scariest people in the world sit behind those inordinately high counters. There's a platinum blonde frontman at Mary Boone's who always makes me want to shit my pants.

In addition to gallery tude, anyone seeking guidance or entree from art magazines is likely only to be further befuddled. A lot of hip art writing alternates between pure cheese and pure insider gibberish—one doctoral candidate talking to another, competing to see who can break more rules of expository writing. All too often criticism is about itself. To these critics, artwork serves the function pornography does the masturbator. Works are sought that serve the critic's agenda, regardless of merit; hence the proliferation of naked emperors.

Overall, the public is made to feel as if they need be rich-collectors-in-the-know in order to buy art. As Perchuk tells me, "No one I know buys art, and they all work in the art world."

Ironically, as I make my rounds of exhibits I'm surprised at how reasonable art prices are. Small spaces off the beaten path, and numerous Soho galleries, carry strong work priced from \$100 to \$1000. Less than a couple of pricey gift-shop curios.

Despite the posturing of art world fops, there is no mystery to viewing art. Most of us feel comfortable critiquing music and film, and can do so at a fairly elevated level. Few, however, feel comfortable approaching fine art this way. While "I don't know anything about art but I know what I like" is akin to saying "I don't know how to read, but I know a good book when I see one," there is no huge mystery to appreciating art. You learn to read. If you're moved by a piece but cannot figure out why, you look for props; galleries and museums bust their humps to put together guides and critiques that succinctly sum up what's going on. You ask questions of the art molls, and if they give you tude, you don't patronize their gallery. They'll perk up. It gets pretty boring preening in a gallery if no one comes in to see you in your Versace pantsuit.

Certainly art is a commodity. I'd rather sell my paintings than teach, contort myself for grants...or write about art. I'd rather my work be seen than not. The question is not one of artists retaining control of the means of production, but of the art world regaining some connection to an audience beyond itself, the rich and the corporations.

I think I'll hire me an MBA and rent out space on my next canvas. Call it *Still Life with Corporate Logo*.

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