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**NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN**

**FINE ART**

**(Painting)**

**KIENHOLZ**

**Post-War American Assemblage**

**by**

**Ruth Fitzgerald**

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## INTRODUCTION

Kienholz's works - particularly his assemblages of the late 1950's and the tableaux of the 1960's, find their most significant equivalents in such literary texts as Norman Mailer's essay "*The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster*" (1957) and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and other Poems* (1956).

By defining Beat as a broad cultural movement, it becomes evident that the Beat sensibility extended well beyond the literary accomplishments, permeating many forms of artistic expression transforming American artistic life. One of the most revolutionary achievements of the Beat era was a change of venue for art: out of the academies, museums, and concert halls and into the streets, coffee houses and night clubs. Artists, film makers, jazz musicians, and poet-performers gathered in these alternative venues which created a setting for aesthetic exchange among artists in all media. Another part of the circuit of informal meeting places was the artists co-op gallery. Kienholz had established his own forum for vanguard art. His Now gallery emerged in the Spring of 1956. Remodelled from the Turnabout Theatre on La Cienga Boulevard, it soon expanded to include the lobby of the Cornett movie house which he called the Cornett Louvre. Kienholz's first professional show in Los Angeles was hung in Von's Café Galleria, a beat hangout coffee house.







Working in Los Angeles in a non-theoretical way, Kienholz formed a strong counterpart to environmental developments that were taking place in and around New York. In 1958 Kaprow had constructed the first of his environments. Kaprow had a "show" at the Hansa Gallery in 1958 that consisted of a complex, collaged environment with random sounds from a radio. Soon he was envisioning non-narrative theatrical events to be performed with these collage environments, - commonly termed "Happenings". Kienholz drawing upon a vernacular source for inspiration, made an equally important contribution to the rise of theatrical assemblage.





## CHAPTER 1

The Beat Culture:

America in the Fifties





In an influential article called "The legacy of Jackson Pollock", Allan Kaprow claims that Pollock had pointed the way for the post-1945 American assemblagists. Pollock's mural-size paintings and their extension into the viewers' space had a dramatic effect on Kaprow's perception of his environment. He writes:

Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-Second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odours, touch, objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things... (Kaprow, 1958, p. 56-57).

It was by applying the action theory to Pollock that Allan Kaprow arrived at the theoretical basis for "Happenings", which had existed as Dada and Surrealist "manifestations" and were described - though never realized - in more evolved form by Schwitters.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Schwitters, Merz-bau, opened up a whole series of possibilities, which neither Schwitters nor the other painters of his generation realized. Apart from being prototypes for the Happening environments (Allan Kaprow EAT 1964. Environment), the Merz-bau and Schwitters's other work anticipated such experiments in environmental sculpture as that of Henri Etienne-Martin in France and Herbert Ferber in America, also pointing the way for the reliefs and free-standing objects of Rauschenberg and others.







Kaprow said that Schwitters "actually conceived Happenings but never did them. His writings about possible activities are almost like pre-Happenings. (Hapgood, 1994 p. 24).

Kaprow produced the first public Happening as such - called *18 Happenings in 6 parts*, at the Reuben Gallery in New York in October 1959. Like many artists at this time Kaprow felt the need to go beyond the conventions of both gesture painting and junk sculpture. "The 'Act of Painting'," he wrote in 1958, "the new space, the personal mark that builds its own form and meaning, the endless tangle, the great scale, the new materials, etc. are by now clichés of college art departments" (Kaprow, 1958, p. 26). Kaprow's concept was based on John Cage's experiments with chance and improvisation both derived from Duchampian precedents.

For Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine and Robert Whitman, Happenings were an extension of their object oriented assemblages that included every day detritus. It reflected American "throwaway culture" according to Kaprow and kept the line between life and art as indistinct as possible (Hapgood 1990 p. 25).

This Dada notion to destroy the boundary between art and life is interpreted by Rauschenberg in this statement, "painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in the gap between the two." Also Rauschenberg's statement that "a pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric" echoes Schwitters's 1920 declaration, "I







take any material whatsoever if the picture demands it. (Tomkins, 1980, p. 182).

In fact on seeing a Schwitters show, Rauschenberg said that he "felt the whole exhibition had been made just for him."<sup>2</sup> (Seckler, 1966, p. 74).

In *Blue Bird*, 1922, (Pl. 1) Schwitters used ticket stubs, calendar leaves and labels to construct his space. The stamp of the object's past and its associative power played as an important role in the choice of the object, as did its form.

Oldenburg also argued for the extension of the role of the painter and did so in terms of a theatrical conception.<sup>3</sup> "Happenings", he said "came about when painters and sculptors crossed into theatre taking with them their way of looking and doing things" (Henri, 1974, p, 86).

Like Oldenburg, Kienholz compared his construction to paintings:

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2. Several of Rauschenberg's works from the early 1950's show clear affinities to Dada. In particular his erasure of a drawing by de Kooning in 1953 where the parallel is clearly with the moustache and goatee that Duchamp added to the Mona Lisa, or André Breton's erasure of a blackboard by Francis Picabia in 1919. Schwitters 1920 essay "Merz", advocating the combination of any and all material to make composite art works was included in Motherwell's DADA Anthology and was widely circulated in the late 1950's.

3. Oldenburg attended Kaprow's first New York performance, 18 Happenings in six parts in 1959. In the Winter and Spring of 1961-63 Oldenburg presented a series of Happenings at the Ray Gun Mfg. Co., a store where he sold handmade painted plaster foods and clothes. This blurring of the boundaries between the arenas of art and life is a characteristic that Oldenburg's "Store" shared with Kienholz tableaux, according to Pincus, 1990 p. 37.









Plate 1. Blue Bird, (1922).







"I still today (1977) think of myself as a painter. I don't think of myself as a sculptor; I mean, I understand the contradiction. But when I'm fibreglassing a piece, I go to the trouble of building the piece. And when I get it built, then I paint it. And that essentially is the painting gesture."<sup>4</sup> (Pincus, 1990, p. 36).

In 1957 Walter Hopps and Kienholz co-founded the Ferus Gallery (1957-1966). The opening exhibition, *Objects of a New Landscape Demanding of the Eye*, presented Kienholz, John Altoon, Billy Al Bengston and Craig Kauffman, (also present were painters Richard Diebenkorn and Hassel Smith). Kienholz was to stay on as gallery artist until 1961 but he remained Hopps' partner only until 1958.

In 1961 Kienholz was included in the highly influential Museum of Modern Art Exhibition "The Art of Assemblage", organized by William Seitz: a vast survey of collage and assemblage produced throughout the twentieth century. The exhibition placed Kienholz in the company of Picasso, Schwitters, Duchamp and Cornell.<sup>5</sup> Seitz identified two fundamental aspects of assemblage: (1) They are predominantly assembled rather than painted or drawn, modelled or carved. (2) Entirely or in part, their constituent elements are pre-formed natural or manufactured

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4. Until 1959 Kienholz had conceived of himself as a painter. He would use a broom to disperse a layer of dark pigment over his assemblages giving the work an expressive painterly appearance.

5. Cornell's Habitat Group for a shooting gallery, 1943, was owned by Walter Hopps, (then co-founder with Kienholz of the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles) and shown frequently. In 1967 Cornell was given a retrospective at the Pasadena Museum.







materials, objects or fragments not intended as art materials (Seitz, 1961, p. 6).

Kienholz was represented by a pair of works, *John Doe* (Pl. 2) and *Jane Doe* (Pl. 3). According to Walter Hopps *John Doe* himself was Kienholz's "quintessential male figure, quotidian and absurd. His name is both all-purpose forensic designation for unknown victims and the nickname for that American everyman beloved of advertisers and marketers" (Hopps, 1996, p. 33).

Kienholz's American everyman was a grotesque composite. *John Doe* (1959) is an assemblage consisting of a mannequin resting on a baby stroller dripping paint as if it were blood. *John Doe* has a cross instead of a heart and a passage directly connects it to his detachable erect penis.

He represents a ruthless attack on the archetypal American male and is the first of Kienholz's aggressor figures. By juxtaposing the baby stroller and mannequin Kienholz portrays his everyman as infantile. The cross and dripping paint comments on religion and violence.

*Jane Doe* (1960) is Kienholz's quintessential passive object. A female child mannequin's head is attached to a small cabinet covered with a bridal gown. Beneath the gown are three drawers which contain metaphors for the three stages of womanhood. By opening the drawers to reveal *Jane Doe's* most secret possessions and symbols of her life the viewer assumes the role of aggressor.

*Boy Son of John Doe* (1961) (Pl. 4) is a grotesque outgrowth of his parents. His father's baby-stroller is







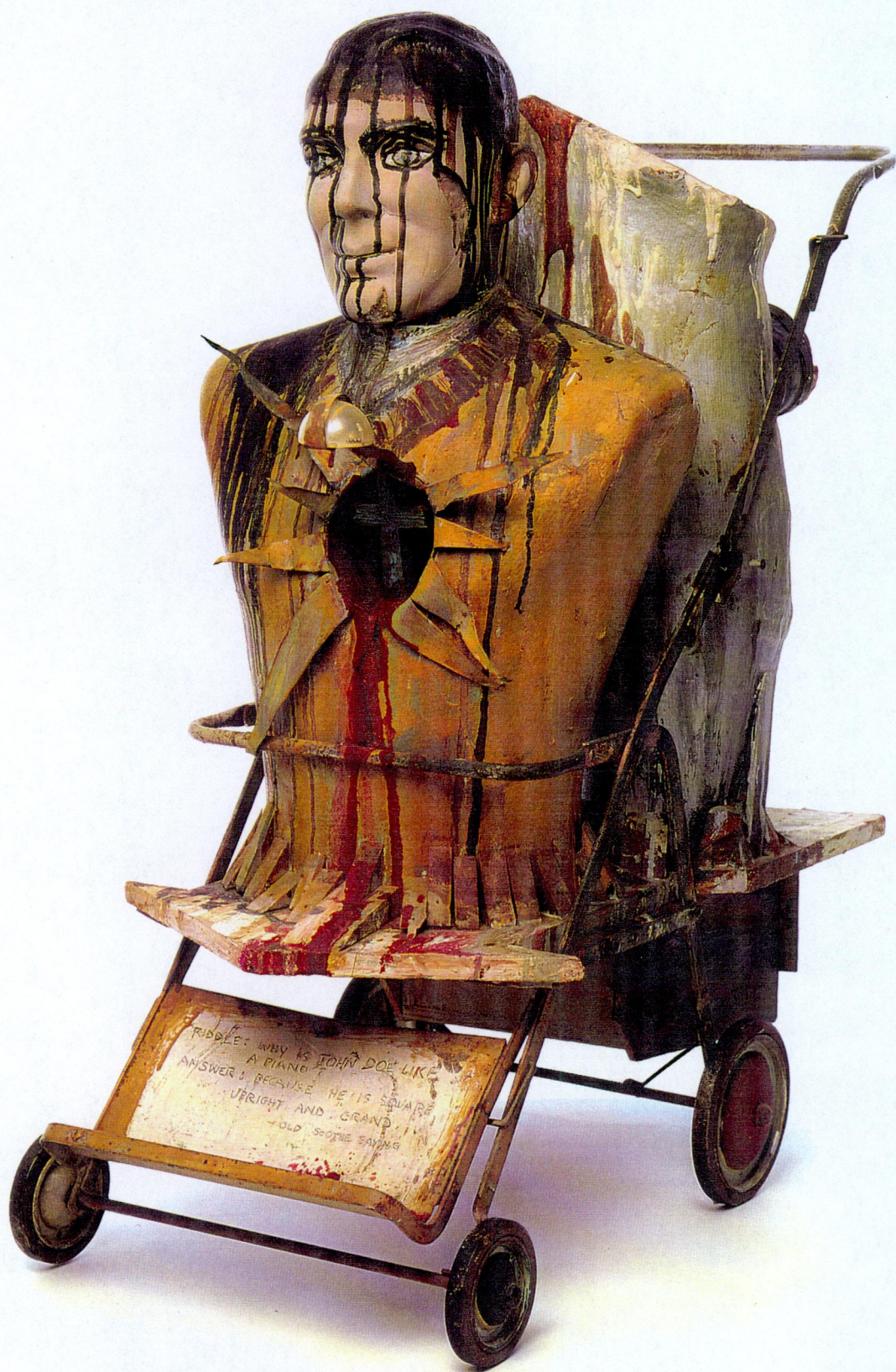


Plate 2. John Doe, (1959).









Plate 3. Jane Doe, (1960).







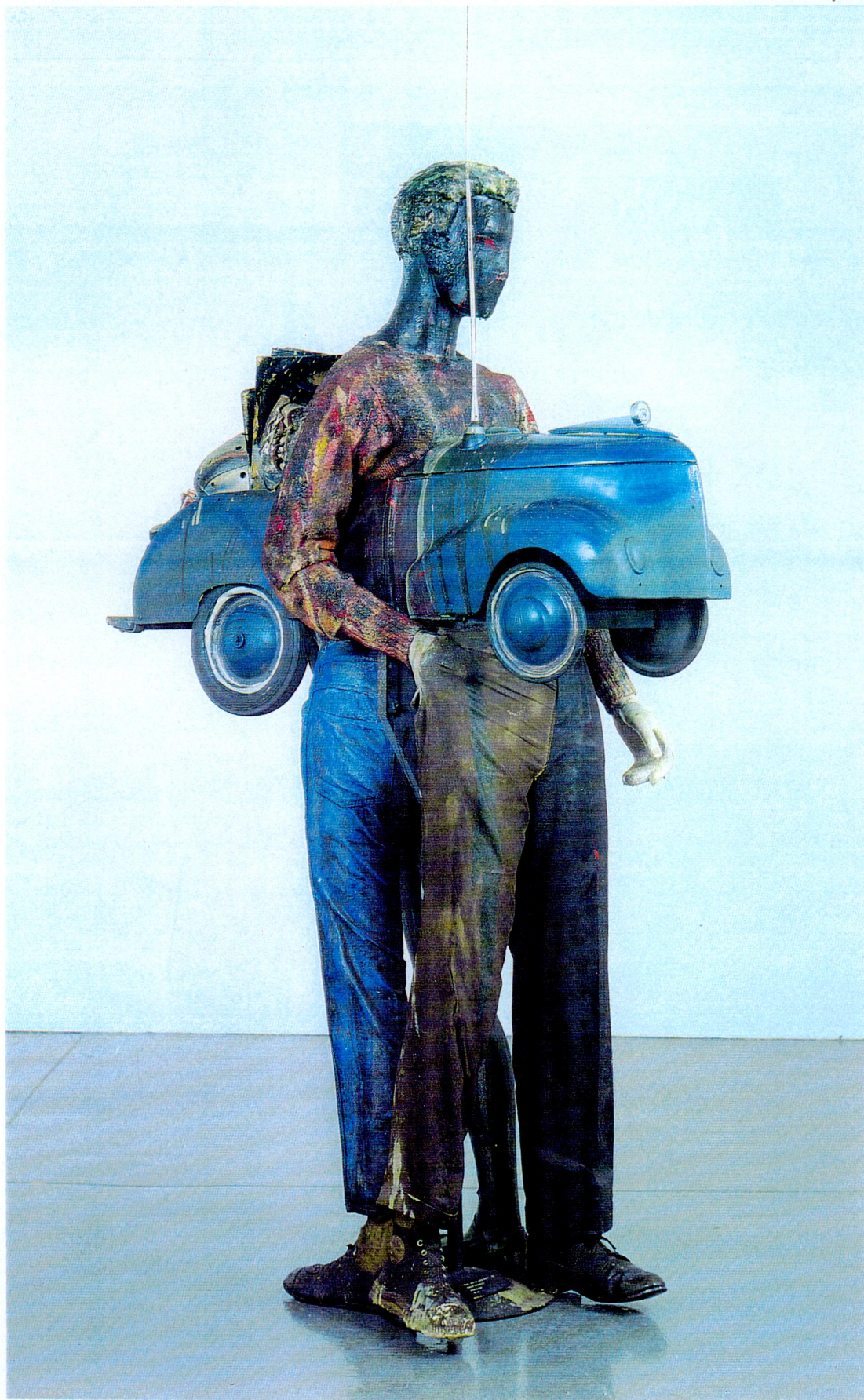


Plate 4. Boy Son of John Doe, (1961).







replaced by a toy car, attached at waist to a tall mannequin. The trunk of his car contains artefacts of American adolescence, by which he defines himself; beer cans, cigarettes, condoms and a paper-back book entitled, 'The Impotent Fear Through the Erogenous Zone'. *Boy-Son of John Doe* like his dysfunctional father before him and his victimized mother, re-affirms the cost of male domination and female victimization, as a central theme in the Doe trilogy. The Doe trilogy dramatizes a dark vision of American society. The American public looking at *John Doe and Jane Doe*, saw a strange and pathetic view of themselves. According to Maurice Tuchman these works represent a turning point after which "references to the artist's memories, needs and anxieties become increasingly frequent" (Tuchman, 1966, p. 7).

Seitz suggests that we might do well to look for analogs other than in the visual art for the work of particular assemblagists. He writes in his essay for *The Art of Assemblage Catalogue*:

As element is set beside element, the many qualities and auras of isolated fragments are compounded, fused or contradicted so that - by their own confronted volitions, as it were - physical matter becomes poetry. Directed, intentionally or unconsciously, by an artist's intellectual position, emotional predisposition, or any other conditioning attitude or coloration, a vast repertoire of expression - exultant, bitter, ironic, erotic, or lyrical - can be achieved by means different in kind from that of painting and sculpture, but akin to those of literature. (Seitz, 1961, p. 86).







The strongest contemporary parallels for Kienholz's Doe Trilogy can be found in texts that express the Beat sensibility of the late fifties and early sixties.

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked", Allen Ginsberg wrote in "Howl". They "were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue ... or run down by drunken taxi-cabs of absolute reality" (Ginsberg, 1956, pp. 9, 14). With these writers Kienholz sought to expose the sordid aspects of American society. The grotesque *John Doe* is a visual equivalent of the archetypal citizen of Ginsberg's city in "Howl".

The alienated Beat culture of the period revolved around the writers Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Laurence Ferlinghetti, but also embraced John Ashberry, William Burroughs, Norman Mailer and Kenneth Rexroth. The Beats expressed the desire for social change in a society they perceived to be oppressive. In the process they created their own vocabulary to express their experience of the struggle against conformity, mechanization and materialism.

"The dog trots freely in the street and sees reality", Ferlinghetti wrote,

He will not be muzzled ....  
a real live  
    barking  
            democratic dog  
engaged in real  
            free enterprise  
with something to say  
            about ontology







*something to say  
about reality (Ferlinghetti, 1955, p. 67-8).*

The Beats advocated art, poetry and the splendour of the human soul, Kenneth Rexroth sums up this view, "Against the destruction of the world there is only one defence, the creative act" (Rexroth, 1970, p. 3).

Searching for a forum for their work poets joined with artists to found "alternative" galleries: The King Ubu Gallery and The Six, promoted both the literary and visual arts. These became sites for frequent poetry readings, creating a firm bond between art and poetry. With the Beats, Kienholz shared a strong distaste for the state of post-war American society. He found the example of the beats to be inspirational in this regard. One of the figures of the West-Coast counter-culture was Wallace Berman, who, according to John Coplan "established assemblage in California as a poetic art with strong moral and spiritual overtones". Coplan's traced Californian assemblage to the late 1940's vernacular drawings and junk sculpture of Wallace Berman, writing that, "Berman had a strong and direct influence on Kienholz, Bruce Conner and George Herms, - the whole movement beginning in Southern California around him and spreading to San Francisco" (Coplan, 1964, pp. 26-27).

Berman's earliest assemblages date from 1949, but he did not show them publicly until 1957 at the Ferus







Gallery.<sup>6</sup> The show was officially closed. Berman was arrested for displaying lewd and pornographic material. Kienholz, Robert Alexander, Arthur Richer, John Altoon and David Meltzer were present. Berman provided a valuable precedent for Kienholz, if only by example he was the first of the West Coast assemblagists. Poet David Meltzer was to recall that Berman's art provided Kienholz with "permission" to do something other than paint little figurative pictures or create abstract constructions. The closing of the exhibition convinced Berman to make art only for those who would accept it and to cease exhibiting publicly, taking the only direction Duchamp eventually thought was possible - going underground, deifying the artist. Kienholz was the exception to this tendency. Kienholz was intent on forcing his work into a wider public arena. Kienholz's art was predominantly a socially critical art. It confronted us with the darker aspects of contemporary American life. Berman's message was that the life of the artist was spiritual and that the rewards of the quest were non-material. *Homage to Hesse* (1949 modified 1954) (Pl. 5) attests to Berman's early interest in both spiritual and earthly matters. "Art is love is God" was the unifying principle in Berman's art. For Berman, spirituality was inseparable from art. Kienholz rejected this notion of artist as spiritual visionary.

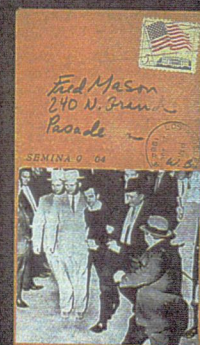
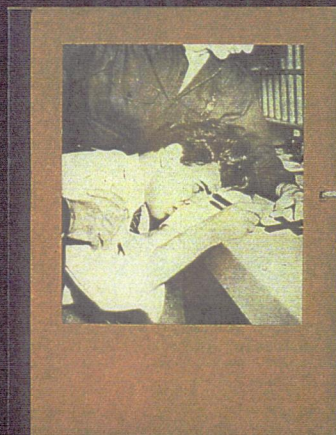
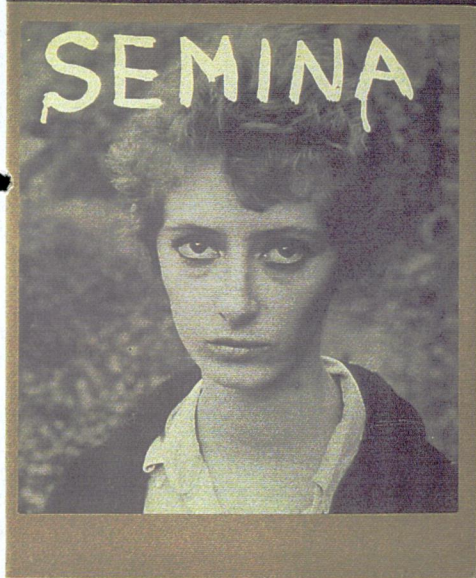
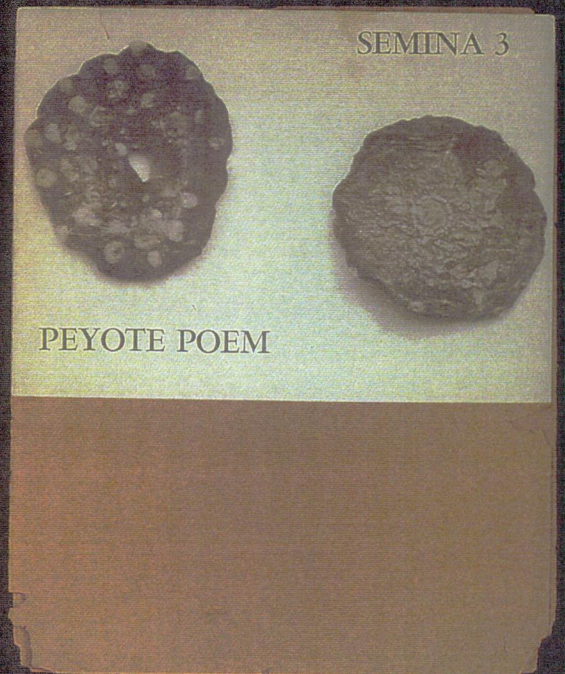
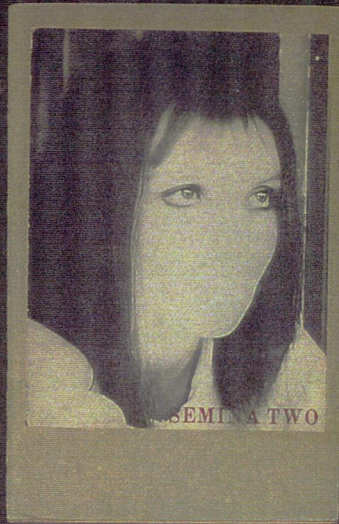
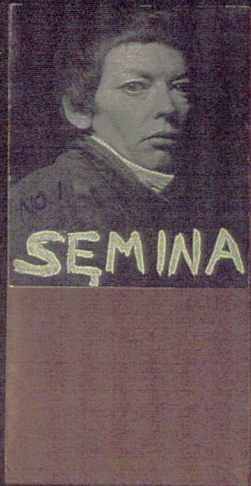
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6. The Ferus Gallery also hosted readings for a number of poets, including Michael McClure and Robert Duncan. Both of these figures were intimates of Berman, and both numbered among the writers who published works in the artists irregularly published text magazine - *Semina* (1955-1964). *Semina* embodied Berman's idea of a multimedia community.





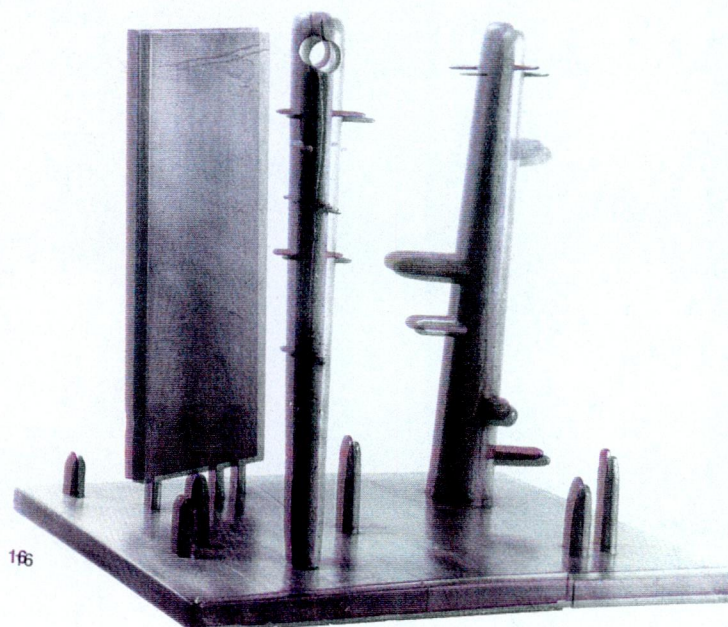












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Plate 5. Homage to Hesse,  
(1949 modified 1954).









The Ferus Gallery regrets that  
due to the arbitrary action  
of the L.A.P.D. the Gallery  
will not open until









## CHAPTER 2

### Sculpture as Social Criticism







The 1956 performance of the costumed Georges Mathieu making action paintings before an audience at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt in Paris had a catalyzing effect for French artists, just as Kaprow's first happenings did for artists in New York at the end of the fifties. Like Kaprow, Mathieu made American action paintings the basis for greater direct engagement and a new theatricality. The Nouveaux Réalistes were a group of artists who were exploring various alternatives to abstract painting. According to art critic Pierre Restany the group expressed a new reality, a sense of nature as urban industrial and public, and available to everyone directly without recourse to painterly or illusive means.

Restany explained their aims as "Quantitative instead of qualitative expression, [with] respect for the intrinsic logic of the materials it employs..." (Restany, 1963, p. 104). Among the principal artists associated with Nouveau Réalisme were Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, Raymond Hains, Arman, Ben Vautier, Daniel Spoerri and Niki de Saint Phalle.

One of the first important exhibitions juxtaposing many Neo-Dada artists, Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York was organized by Restany in Paris for the Galerie Rive Droite in June 1961. At this time Rauschenberg, Tinguely and Saint Phalle collaborated on Happenings in Paris and New York.<sup>7</sup> In October, many of the Nouveaux Realists

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7. These performances were variations II June 20, 1961 at the Théâtre de l'Ambassade des Etats-Unis Paris, and The Construction of Boston, May 4, 1962 at the Maidman Playhouse, New York.







participated in the Museum of Modern Art's influential show 'The Art of Assemblage', where they were seen collectively for the first time in the United States. In 1961 the Pomona College Art Gallery in Claremont mounted its survey, The Object Makers: Attitude - West Coast. This exhibition featured Kienholz, Bruce Conner, Llyn Foulkes and George Herms. For three weeks in March 1962 the Everett Ellin Gallery sponsored dances and lectures by John Cage, Jean Tinguely, and Niki de Saint Phalle. The Dawn Gallery exhibited Rauschenberg and the Ferus Gallery Kienholz's first major tableau *Roxy's*. Writing in Arts Magazine at the time of these exhibitions, Gerard Nordland declared it to be a concentration on 'Neo Dada' activity which could not be ignored (Nordland, 1962, p. 102). The art of the objet trouvé (found object) has of course its origins in Dada and Surrealism. However the relationship between Kienholz's art and these movements is a problematic one. Duchamp's principal artistic contribution was the ready-made, manufactured objects that Duchamp selected and exhibited as art-works. The most notorious was *Fountain*, (Pl. 6) a common urinal exhibited in 1917 in New York. The organizers, the Society of Independent Artists, rejected the urinal after they claimed they would accept and exhibit any work submitted. Duchamp himself replied:

"They say that any artist paying six dollars may exhibit. Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and was never exhibited. What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt's fountain:-







Fountain by R. Mutt

Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz



THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS

Plate 6. Fountain, (1917).







1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was a plagiarism, a piece of plain plumbing.

Now Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers' show windows.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view - created a new thought for that object.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges" (D'Harnoncourt and McShine, 1974, p. 283).

This aspect of the ready-made is ambiguous and troubling however, because it is often interpreted as the artist elevating a common object to the sanctified status of art. André Breton's 1934 description of the ready-mades as "manufactured objects promoted to the dignity of objects of art through the choice of the artist" undoubtedly perpetuated such an idea (Tomkins, 1966, p. 36). Duchamp himself claimed that with the ready-mades he wanted to lower the status of the artist in society, to de-deify the artist and even to eliminate art entirely (Roberts, 1968, p. 63). Although the objet trouvé is often the point of departure of Kienholz's assemblages, and to that extent relates his methods to those of certain Dada artists, his tableaux reveal a deeper pre-occupation with cultural problems than with aesthetic ones. Duchamp once stated that in 1913 he was visually indifferent when he attached a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool; it was "a distraction"







(Cabanne, 1971, pp. 47-48). Kienholz's concern is, ultimately, always with meaning, the work expressing deep emotional involvement with his chance finds.

Exhibitions of many Nouveaux Realists were held at the Dawn Gallery in Los Angeles (which had been founded by Virginia Dawn in 1959 and was directed by John Weber starting in 1962, with Kienholz as his gallery assistant).

Nordland also noted Tinguely's connection with Dada chance operations. Motion and "anti art-aesthetic forms like mechanical drawing, found objects [and] industrial forms ordained as art" (Nordland 1962, pp. 102, 103). Kienholz certainly appreciated Tinguely's art of motion and chance, to the extent that he collaborated on a piece with Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle in 1962.<sup>8</sup> By late 1962 Kienholz, Tinguely and Saint Phalle would all be showing at the Dawn Gallery, and as Kienholz would recall of that time "Virginia Dawn was responsible for the whole influence of Europeans on the West Coast, I mean she brought a whole cultural dimension to Los Angeles that no one else did"<sup>9</sup> (Pincus 1990, p. 34).

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8. Niki de Saint Phalle's principal contribution to Nouveau Réalisme were the tir paintings, works designed to be completed using rifle fire. Saint Phalle characterized these paintings as "a fundamental criticism of abstract expressionism, an alternative to action painting, a demonstration of the readymade." Niki de Saint Phalle, Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 1981, p. 15.

9. In 1963, the Surrealist dealer Alexander Lolas (through arrangement with Virginia Dawn) was the first in New York to give Kienholz an exhibition. Marcel Duchamp saw that show, which included Roxy's, and liked it, according to Walter Hopps (See Clearwater, West Coast Duchamp, p. 88). Duchamp lived in New York from 1954 until his death in 1968 and knew many of the younger artists. Duchamp "was always an ardent supporter of Happenings and had .... a prodigious patience in lending his time to them", according to William Copley. "THE NEW PIECE", Art in America, Vol. 57 (July-August 1969), p. 36.







In 1966 Kienholz was the subject of a huge one-artist show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art curated by Maurice Tuchman. Comprising forty-six pieces it was Kienholz's first museum retrospective and an excellent survey of his work from 1956 to 1965. The show opened amid a flurry of controversy and condemnation. Members of the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors condemned its subject matter and questioned whether it was art. After much discussion a compromise was reached and the exhibition remained open to the public. The controversy centred on *Back Seat Dodge '38* (Pl. 7), which depicted a pair of lovemaking teenagers strewn across the back seat of a truncated car. According to Maurice Tuchman, the piece represented "the lifestyle of a rural adolescent generation in the forties" and was a recreation of a "specific historical moment" (Tuchman, 1966, p. 8).

Between 1963-67 Kienholz created the Concept Tableaux, a set of ideas for proposed tableaux. A brass title plaque and a document describing the work could be purchased, and the buyer was also given the opportunity to finance the works' realization. Kienholz felt that tableaux could be collectable as concepts, perhaps because his working method had been so well established by his earlier tableaux.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Four Concept tableaux have been realized. The Commercial #2, sold to Reinhard Onnasch; The State Hospital, sold to the Moderna Museet Stockholm, The Art Show, completed in 1977 and the Office Building sold to Virginia Dawn and never realized.







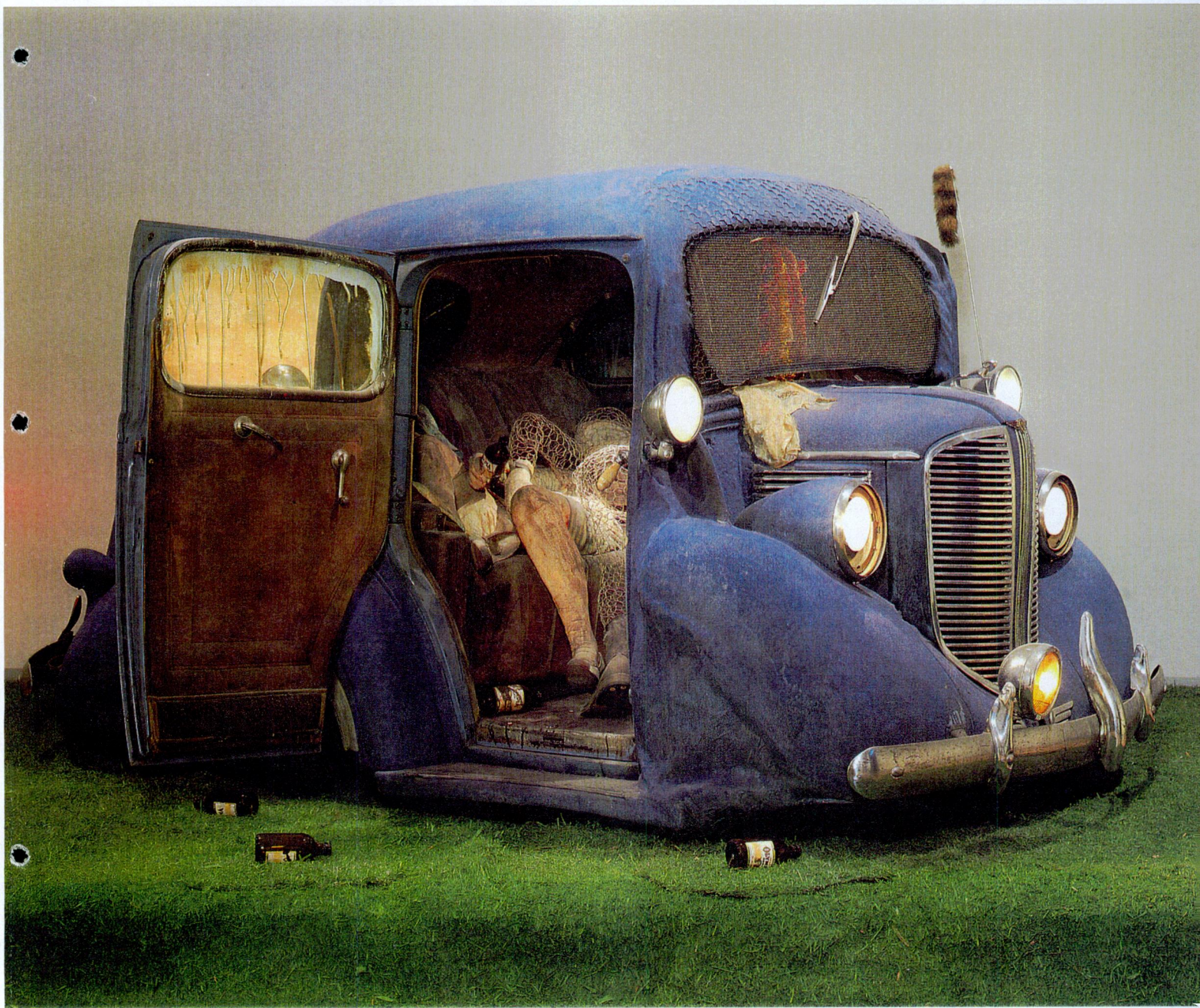


Plate 7. Back Seat Dodge '38, (1964).







Kienholz explained.

"I should be able to trade in just the ideas rather than in the physical presence" (Pincus, 1990, p. 54).

The Concept Tableaux can be seen as grand-scale variations on the theme of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. In both the *Cement Store #1* 1967 and the *Cement Store #2* 1967 Kienholz proposed for both stores the following:

The buildings, businesses and inventory must be purchased and left intact. The windows will be replaced by clear plexiglass or bullet proof glass to withstand internal pressures or malicious breaking. The doorway will be board formed in such a way to allow the door to swing both ways. A section of roof will be removed and the interior of the store will be filled with concrete completely covering all merchandise, cash register, records, etc. The roof section will be replaced and repaired. The board forms at doorway will be removed, the hardened concrete now making it impossible to enter the building (Pincus, 1990, p. 62).

The two works clearly illustrate Kienholz's wish to create tableaux that merged with the man-made world and interacted with its surrounding landscape. Each store was to have been a found monument of public art.

Harold Rosenberg was particularly interested in the Concept Tableaux and argued that:

Art communicated through documents is a development to the extreme of the Action Painting idea that a painting ought to be considered as a record of the artist's creative processes rather than as a physical object. The sculpture Oldenburg made to be buried underground has become an influential work through hearsay.... One step further and the







work of art need not even be made; the creative act can consist of a proposal for a work. Not long ago, Kienholz exhibited a score of framed sheets describing projects he was prepared to execute (Pincus, 1990, p. 55).

The 1966 Los Angeles County Museum retrospective was the starting point for the "11 + 11 Tableaux" exhibition organized by Pontus Hulten.<sup>11</sup> The art world of post-war Western Europe - both artists and institutions, particularly those in Germany embraced Kienholz's art. This recognition of Kienholz climaxed in Harald Szeemann's vast and controversial Documenta 5 of 1972 in Kassel Germany. Kienholz presented *Five Car Stud* (1968-1972). *Five Car Stud* was to be the only environmental scale tableau completed in the years between his major European exhibition 11 + 11 Tableaux and 1973, when he left Los Angeles. *Five Car Stud* is a graphic depiction of hatred and violence. Its uncompromisingly cruel scene undoubtedly reflected a disillusionment with the current state of American society. It offers a very bleak prediction for the future of America, Kienholz perceived the state of American society to be tragic. *Five Car Stud* was not based on any historical incident, but as with *Roxy's* and *The Back Seat Dodge '38*, the chosen setting is explicitly American.

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11. Beginning in 1970 the exhibition travelled to the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; the Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf; Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris; Kunsthaus Zurich and the Institute of Contemporary Arts London. It was the most thorough introduction to date of Kienholz's work to the European public.







Edward Kienholz is solely credited with authorship of works before 1972; in 1981 Kienholz added Nancy Reddin Kienholz's name retroactively to all of his output after 1972, and all subsequent work was signed by both.<sup>12</sup>

In 1973, Kienholz received a Fellowship to work in Berlin, from the Deutscher Akademischer Austravschdienst (DAAD) program, developed by the cultural ministry in Berlin under the direction of Karl Ruhrberg. The Kienholz project for DAAD was the building of *The Art Show*, a concept tableau which was originally developed in Los Angeles in 1963. Kienholz's Fellowship ran out in 1974 with *The Art Show* still unfinished (it was not completed until 1977). At this time Edward and Nancy moved from Los Angeles to Berlin (West) and since this time spent six months of each year in Berlin and six months in Hope, Idaho. This six months schedule continued for the next twenty-two years. Thus *Five Car Stud* marks the culmination of one era and the onset of another, for Kienholz. It was the last major tableau he constructed in Los Angeles from the time he departed in 1973, until he and Reddin Kienholz began constructing scenes from materials gathered in Sponkane in 1979, when the work turned away from the iconography of American life.

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12. On the occasion of The Kienholz Women exhibition at Gallery Maeght, Zurich, Edward Kienholz made the following statement: "...I further feel I no longer have a man's right to signature only my name to these efforts which have been produced by both of us. Hence this exhibition is by Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz and is so signed". (See The Kienholz Women Catalogue, 1981, Maeght, Zurich for complete statement).







1973 - 81

Berlin

The shift from the American context and the new set of objects and fresh iconography provided by the Berlin setting of the seventies seems to have encouraged a fresh approach to both the form and content of the work.

Thus *Volksempfänger* (Peoples' Radio Receiver, first exhibited in Berlin National Galerie in 1977) not only introduced a new formal discipline into the works but also reflected a deep concern with the events of recent European history and in particular the Second World War. The pieces in the *Volksempfänger* series are *The Kitchen Table* (1975) (Pl. 8), *The Iron Stand* (1975), *The Cage* (1975), *The Bench* (1976), *The Ladder* (1976), *The Washboards* (1976) (Pl. 9) and *Mother with Child with Child* (1976) (Pl. 10).

In the series, the radios become metaphorical representations of the German male; his female counterpart, the ideal German wife and mother, is signified by a washboard, symbol of household drudgery as Nancy Kienholz has noted:

*The Volksempfänger* are not in reality figurative pieces, but if you think of the radios as representing German men and the Washboards as German women you will better understand the series (Hopps, 1996, p. 259).

Kienholz's obsession with the media (televisions, radios, newspapers, etc.) has been consistently present as









Plate 8. The Kitchen Table, (1975).







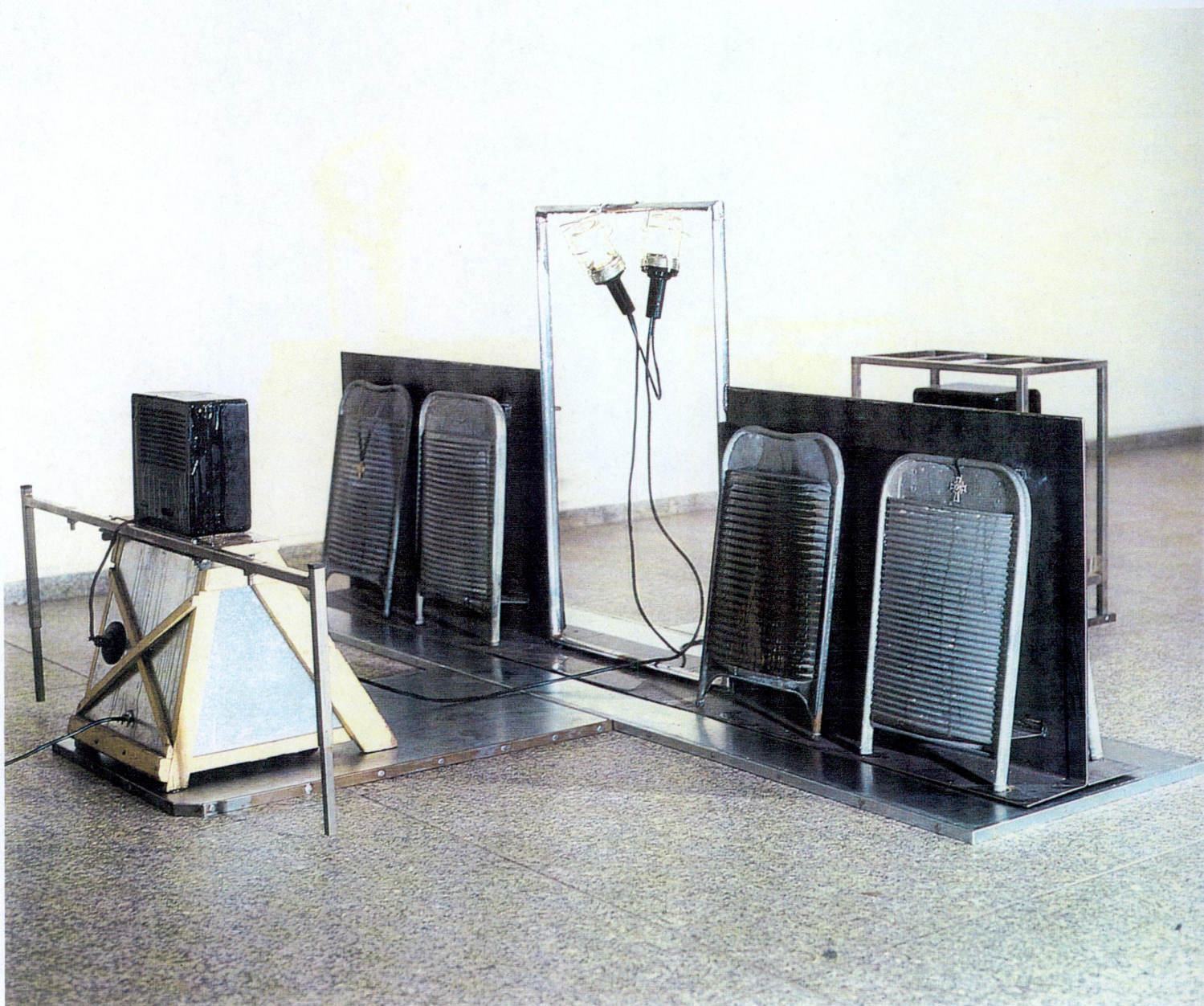


Plate 9. The Washboards, (1976).







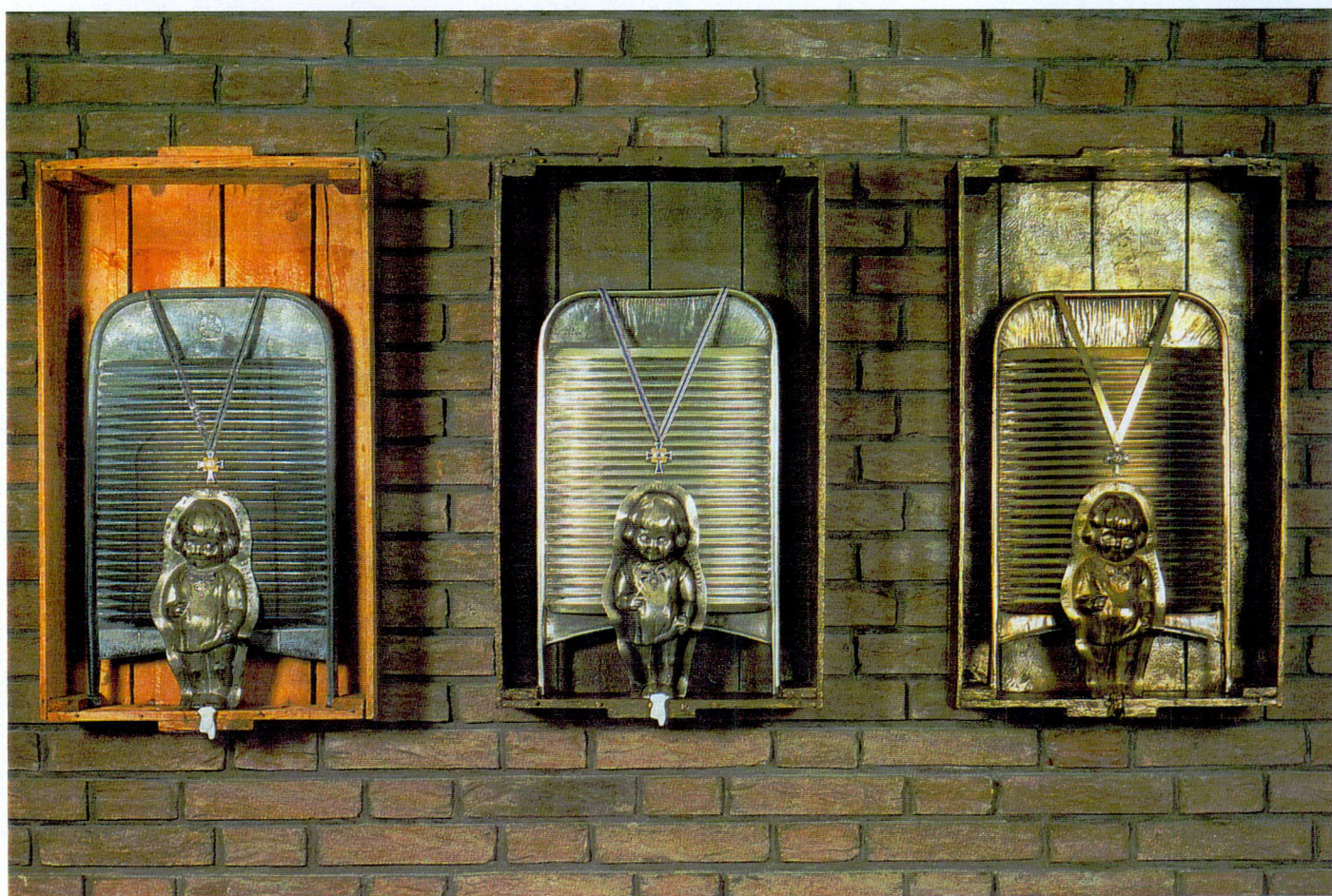


Plate 10. Mother With Child With Child, (1976).







elements in his work. The media problem is extensively treated by the Kienholzs' in the *Volksempfänger*s.

Describing the *Volksempfänger*s, Nancy Kienholz has said:

The *Volksempfänger*s radio has a very interesting historical destiny. I believe it was the first time an entire nation was controlled by the media (Hopps, 1996, p. 259).

The *Volksempfänger*s series set out to explore the implications of the exploitation of the mass media by the state for propaganda purposes. It consists of various assemblages of pre-war German wireless receivers, which broadcast passages from Wagner's operas in lieu of the Nazi propaganda which they had been designed to transmit.

In some of the assemblages from the series the radios are combined with household objects such as tables and chairs, lamps, firescreens, cupboards, shelves, tools, ladders and old photographs. In *The Washboards* (1976) eight washboards are attached by electrical cords to a radio. The Washboards are a symbol of Motherhood. Hanging from each is a Nazi Medal of Honour for the German women bearing Aryan children, (a bronze medal for four or five, silver for five or six, gold for eight or more). The work thus commemorates the women who were compelled to live under National Socialism.







## CHAPTER 3

### Walk in Environments







In 1958 - the same year Alan Kaprow organized his First Happening on George Segal's Farm - Segal himself began making, three dimensional figures out of wire, plaster and burlap. "They looked to me as if they had stepped out of my paintings", he recalled explaining that his "decision to enter literal space was determined by strong urges for total experience" (Geldzahler, 1964, p. 26).

The "strong urges for total experience" that Segal spoke of when referring to his plaster figures were a defining feature of the Happenings in New York. Segal's tableaux came from a desire for a total walk in environment. Segal explains:

If I was prevented from making the illusion of going into the canvas space, I felt the only place I could go was forward from the wall. Logically that demanded sculpture.... it demanded that the sculpture occupy my own space, that there be no pedestal, that there be no psychological distance. It implied environmental art (Beal, Friedman, 1978, p. 60).

Kienholz's own experience can be related to Segal's. Kienholz recalls how -

As time went on the relief structures got more and more intricate and protruded further and further into the room until they finally demanded floor space (Pincus, 1990, p. 16).







Assemblage, happening and environment were all closely related during this period as a passage from Kaprow's book reveals.

Assemblages may be handled or walked around, while environments must be walked into. Though scale obviously makes all the experiential difference in the world, a similar form principle controls each of these approaches, and some artists work in both with ease. (Kaprow, 1966, p. 159).

Segal acted in several of Kaprow's Happenings and absorbed some Happening ideas in his work, exemplified by the placement of plaster figures in front of some of his paintings, creating a three dimensional situation where the viewer may interact. Soon he began constructing environments of real objects. *The Subway* (1968) (Pl. 11) was a ready-made environment for Segal. It contained all the necessary elements and he had only to isolate a section and choose the human form to occupy it.

Both Kienholz and Segal employ a heavy emphasis on theatricality in their work.

The formal composition of *The Sponkane Series*, as opposed to *Roxy's* or *The Back Seat Dodge '38* draws parallels to the work of Segal. *The Sponkane series* relies on specificity of detail for effect rather than on the shock tactics that gave Kienholz his early notoriety.

The emphasis is on poignant rather than horrific imagery. If the attention to detail and human scale is consistent with earlier tableau the figures are not. Rather than making them grotesque or repulsive Kienholz rendered *Sollie* and *The Night Clerk* human. *The Night Clerk at the Young*









Plate 11. The Subway, (1968).







*Hotel* stands slouched over a counter, reading a Pulp Magazine in a tableau that recapitulates the scene almost as the Kienholz's found it.

*The Spontane Series* is a group of four works from 1979 to 1983 dealing with a run down section of the city Kienholz grew up in. In their encounters with this group of buildings in Sponkane, they had in actuality happened upon settings that offered a different means for presenting themes established by earlier tableaux. Segal's concern is also with his surroundings. In relation to *The Diner* (1964-66) (Pl. 12) Segal explains.

I came from a proletarian, knockout poor background. So I decided that I would deal with the imagery that was immediately around me. I wanted to deal directly with how I felt about familiar places (Friedman, Beal, 1979, 37).

Both *The Diner* and *Night Clerk at the Young Hotel* capture a particular aspect of American life. The Sponkane series epitomizes Kienholz's "American" style. From the time the Kienholz's established a studio in Berlin 1973 and throughout the 1970's much of their energy had been devoted to tableaux made in Germany. But with the Sponkane Series they both revived and expanded their concern with American Culture.

Even though Segal had abandoned painting in favour of making sculpture he never could free himself of painterly attitudes. Like Kienholz his sculptural work retains many characteristics of his original medium. We should recall Kienholz's own claim that he thought of himself as a







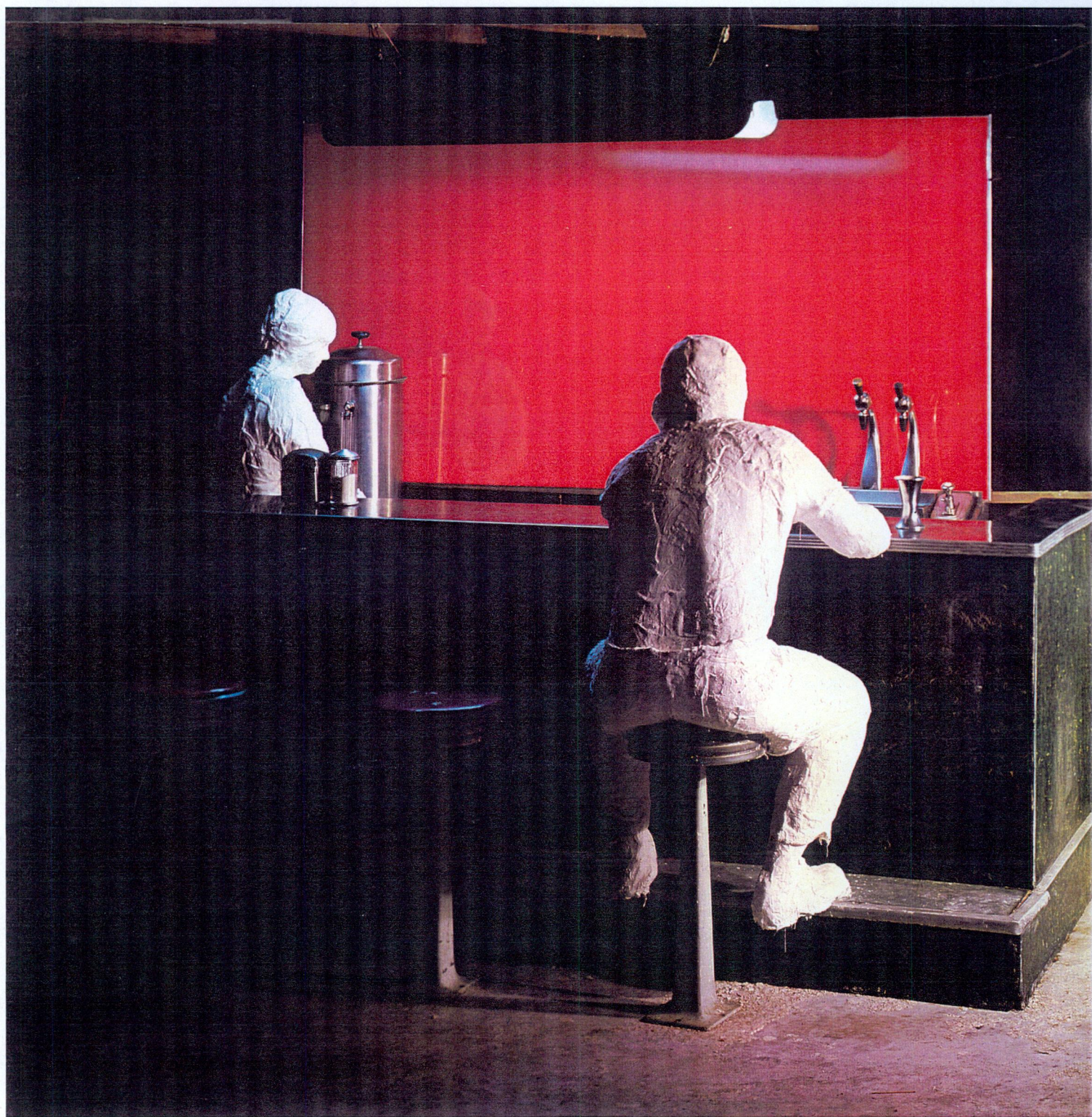


Plate 12. The Diner, (1964-66).







painter working in three dimensions. Though it is possible to approach most Segal environments from the front or side, it is rarely possible to do so from the rear. His arrangements are usually confronted directly like a picture. This contributes to the drama of the piece. This compositional device is evident in most of his large sculptures, from the early *Gas Station* through *The Butcher Shop*, *To All Gates* and *Gertrude: Double Portrait*.

In *Sollie 17* (1979-80) (Pl. 13), Kienholz also makes use of this compositional arrangement. The viewer approaches the piece from afar since there is only a single wall and an extending floor which appears more like a stage. On the left side is a closed door, on the right *Sollies* partly open one. Between them rests a single chair. The chair stands as an isolated object in the otherwise bare section of corridor. The space of life is signalled as an absence not a presence. The tableau contains a loose narrative since there are three versions of *Sollie* within the reconstructed version of this room. The room is constructed in three tapering sections which fit together and give the illusion of perspective. Each of the black and white photographs that serve as heads are mounted so as to read in a formally continuous manner, with the corresponding figure.

To see the scene within, the viewer must peer around the edge of a door. A plexi glass wall blocks further access to the room the three figures inhabit. This is an acutely voyeuristic way to view the interior of this tableau.









Plate 13. Sollie 17 (1979-80).







The powerful use of voyeurism in *Sollie 17* inspired the Kienholz's to create a piece in which voyeurism was to play an even more central role. *The Pedicord Apts*, (1982-83) comprises a section of a rooming house. The walls and ceiling were built to taper towards the rear which emphasizes the perspective of the piece, as if all lines go to one centre diminishing point. Entering the environment through a lobby the viewer encounters a corridor of apartment doors which are closed and in fact cannot be opened. As visitors stop and lean into each doorway a laser beam is broken which activates an electronic button that triggers sound from behind the doors; a television set, a couple arguing, a dog barking, a woman crying.

*The Pedicord Apts*, though it reveals affinities with both *Sollie 17* and *Night Clerk at the Young Hotel*, is more strongly linked to the former for it manipulates one's physical position to intensify the concept of viewer as voyeur. (It is especially true in these interior/exterior works that the viewer is assigned to a certain viewing position). Voyeurism becomes the environments central theme, because only the viewer's inquisitiveness can activate the sounds behind the doors.

Like *The Pedicord Apts* and *Night Clerk at the Young Hotel*, *The Jesus Corner* (1982-83) (Pl. 14) is from a specific area in the city of Sponkane. Many of the buildings referred to by the work no longer exist. The Kienholzs' reconstructed fragments of the buildings in this area represent an effort to pay homage to the citizens of that neighbourhood. *The Jesus Corner* is a reconstruction









Drawing for the Jesus Corner









Plate 14. The Jesus Corner, (1982-83).







of a store window display by a man named Roland Thurman. It is a total found environment, a virtual readymade. *The Jesus Corner* is a store front window, and a make-shift shrine to Jesus.

This tableau is not a devotional work rather it pays tribute to Thurman who amassed and assembled this window. There is no evidence of condescension as Kienholz explains: "I want it understood by anyone who sees *The Jesus Corner* that there is no intention on our part to ridicule the efforts of Roland Thurman..." (Hopkins, 1984, p. 17).

The collective tone of these tableaux reflects sadness more than anger. Yet if the tone of these tableaux differs from those of the 1960's and early 1970's, the cast of characters does not. Society's most marginal types are presented once again. Thus in formal strategy alone, Segal's figures mirror the presentation of Kienholz's tableaux.

Segal emphasizes formal presentation over and above social context. Segal's work is not concerned with isolation and alienation. Many of the themes he pursues are not profound or heavily symbolic situations: acrobats, jazz musicians and any number of his female nude compositions. Segal has said about *The Diner*, "I don't care about any specific soap opera that might be taking place ... you can imagine 48 different plots". Segal's work also incorporates abstraction, he casts ordinary figures in everyday posture in plaster and places them in reconstructed environments. They serve as a kind of habitual reflection on society with an aura of the







spiritual, but also as an arena for abstract formality. Segal explains: "There's as much happening with abstract formality as there is with the literary or psychological... in trying to weave them together until they can't be separated (Tuchman, 1983, p. 47). Thus Segal's approach contrasts strongly with Kienholz's commitment to an intensified version of the social scene.







## CONCLUSION

Writing of the Human Scale exhibition in *Art in America*, Robert Silberman pointed to the Kienholzs' impact on the art of our era. Commenting on the tableaux of the 1960's, Silberman wrote:

These works stand out because of their audacity, their horrific but often darkly humorous view of the world.... If in today's art world, they don't appear quite as exceptional as when they first appeared, that is a testimonial of sorts to the success of Kienholz - and other artists - in extending the boundaries of art. But if the art world has changed, so has the artist. (Silberman, 1986, p. 138):

If the tone of the work has altered, becoming more reflective in tone and informed by sadness rather than anger, it has remained equally effective.

It is true that Edward Kienholz's use of assemblage is not far removed from Dada and Surrealist precedents or from the work of Robert Rauschenberg. And the use of life-size human figures created through plaster moulding encourages comparison with George Segal. But the anti art stance of the Dadaists and Surrealists seems a more self-conscious and generalized reaction against traditional art than the Kienholz tableaux. With Segal the emphasis is on formal presentation over and above social context, whereas Kienholz depicts actual social situations. Kienholz's tableaux reveal a deeper preoccupation with cultural problems than with aesthetic ones.







As with earlier assemblages the more recent tableaux are concerned with tragic circumstances of society's victims, of its marginal citizens. Poverty is the theme of *The Merry-Go-World Or Begat By Chance And The Wonder Horse Trigger* (1988-92) (Pl. 15). The "Merry Go World" addresses the arbitrary unfair distribution of wealth in the world, and is a means of examining how destiny is determined by an "....accident of birth" - that economics can be destiny.

The *Merry-Go-World Or Begat By Chance And The Wonder Horse Trigger*, affirm that together the Kienholzs' have continued to explore themes central to the earlier work.









Plate 15. The Merry-Go-World or Begat By Chance  
And The Wonder Horse Trigger, (1991-94).



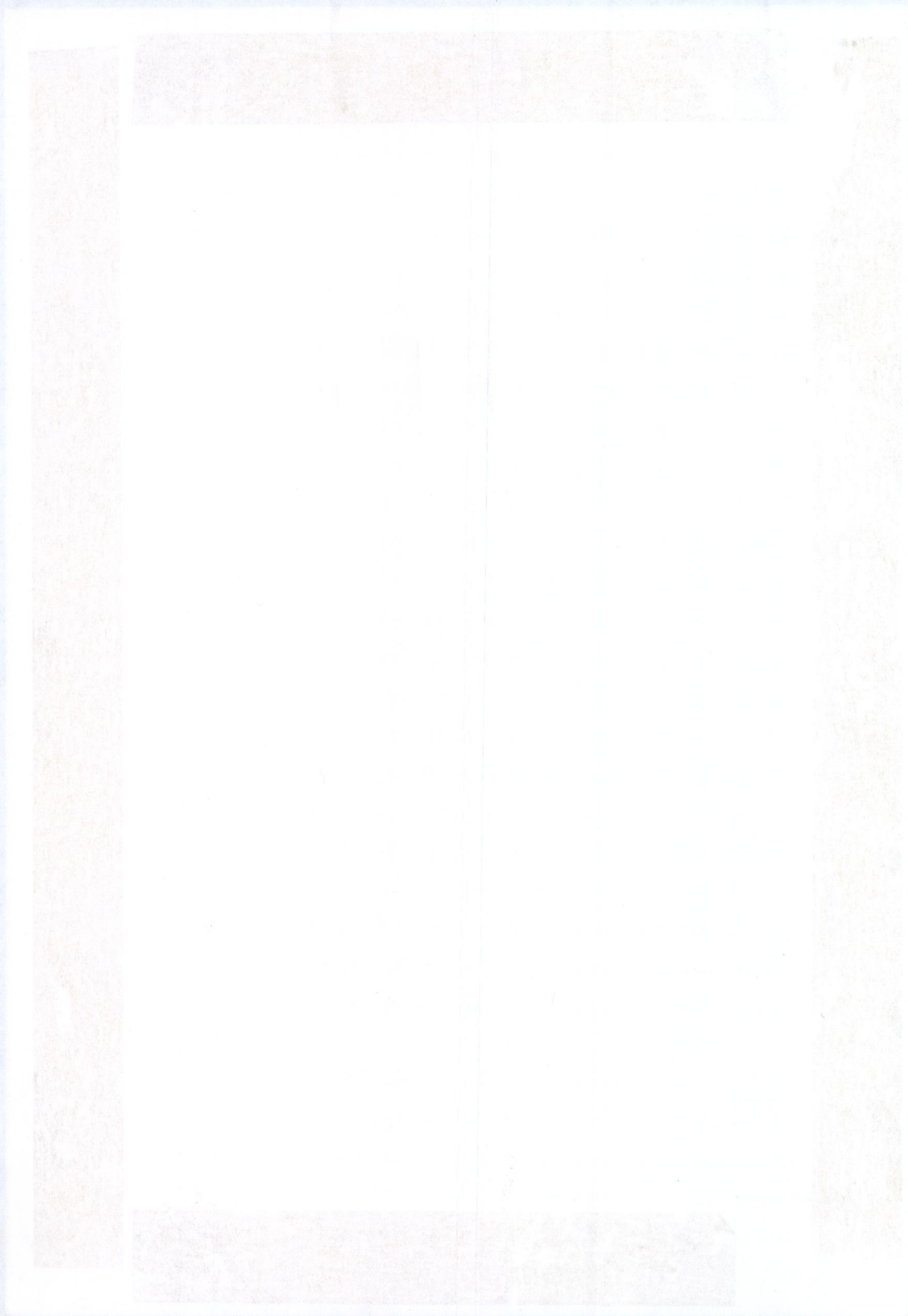






*The Merry-Go-World or Begat by Chance  
and Trigger the Wonder Horse (detail)*







Dublin Corporation and The Director of the  
Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art  
request the pleasure of your company  
at the opening of the exhibition



**The Merry-Go-World Or Begat By Chance  
And The Wonder Horse Trigger**  
and  
**Mono-series**

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by  
**Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz**

The exhibition will be officially opened by  
Her Excellency Mrs Jean Kennedy Smith  
Ambassador of the United States of America

on  
Tuesday, 28th May, 1996  
at 6.30 p.m.

Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz  
*The Merry-Go-World Or Begat By Chance*  
*And The Wonder Horse Trigger*  
1988-92 mixed media assemblage (detail)  
reproduction courtesy LA Louver Gallery, California

**R.S.V.P.**  
Charlemont House  
Parnell Square North, Dublin 1  
Tel: 353 1 8741903  
Fax: 353 1 8722182











*The Merry-Go-World or Begat by Chance  
and Trigger the Wonder Horse (detail)*









*The Merry-Go-World or Begat by Chance  
and Trigger the Wonder Horse (detail)*







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