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EDWARD KIENHOLZ

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BY

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- 2 In Dublin, at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, January, 1981
- 3 Artforum, October, 1962, p.34
- 4 Twaites, Anthony John, " Kienholz and Realism, " Vol.8 / Part 6 - 1973
- 5 (to Barbara Catoir, interview with Edward Kienholz Kunstwerk
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- 6 Interview in the Douglas Hyde Gallery, February, 1981
- 7 (Maurice Tuchman, Edward Kienholz, Los Angeles County Museum
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- 11 Edward Kienholz - The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin -
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I N T R O D U C T I O N

In dealing with Edward Kienholz I have attempted to cover as much as possible about the man and his work. I chose him because certain aspects of his work have considerable relevance for me. It became necessary in doing this thesis to elaborate on these aspects which interest me.

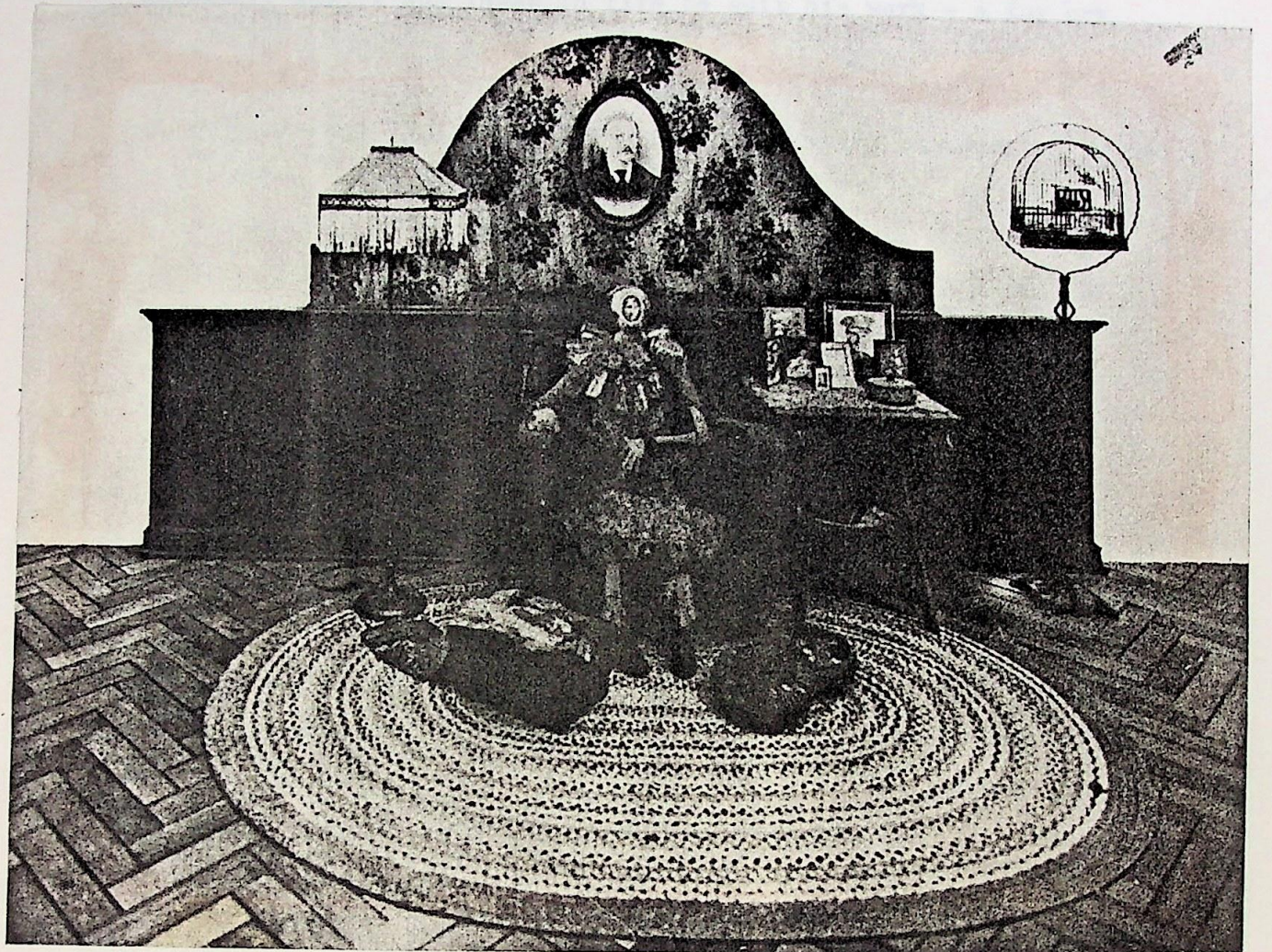
As a photographer/collage person and maker of three dimensional pieces, my own work varies in approach, but the initial conceptions are often very similar. Photography may be set up from preplanned ideas, three dimensional pieces I make more or less from preconceived ideas also. Like Kienholz, when working on a three dimensional idea, I do not make preliminary sketches. I often feel my work (i.e. photography and mixed media) are very closely connected to film stills. Some of Kienholz's work I see in the same manner, pieces like " The Wait ", (fig.1), " Middle Islands ", and " Blue Boy and Pinkie ",.

In " The Wait " Kienholz explores the mindlessness but also the tenuosness of the present. A skelatal old lady, (body made from cow bones) wears around her neck a bundle of jars containing a lifetime of memories. Inside her fishbowl head is an old photo of a pretty woman - an image of the woman as she was and as she desperately chooses to see herself today. The Chirping Canary makes the contrast between the living and dead terrifyingly disturbing. Anyone having seen the film " Psycho " will remember how well Hitchcock explored the pathology of this ' memento mori ' which Kienholz evokes so well.

Working as Kienholz does on a large scale is not an easy way to work at all. Kienholz's method of working and manner of accumulating ideas interests me a great deal. Somehow from even back to his

(Fig. 1)

THE WAIT



earliest years on the family farm in Idaho, North East Washington, right up to the present, he seems to have been absorbing all the necessary skills and ideas in life to suit his work - a far cry from the confines of an art college.

Of Swiss German extraction his family were small farmers and he could fix anything from a fence to a cultivator by the age of ten, turning broken down machines into new ones. Following his schooling in Fairfield, he spent a short time in two Colleges and by the age of twenty six he moved to Los Angeles and the following year began to produce his first wooden relief paintings, holding his first one-man show in 1955. In his early twenties he supported himself doing a wide variety of jobs which no doubt provided him with important insights into the subjects and materials that were later to form the basis of many of his mature works. His jobs included used car and vacuum repairer, cleaner, salesman, orderly in a mental institution (which gave rise to " The State Hospital "), window display designer and manager of a dance band. Approaching his thirties, Kienholz's relief constructions began to evolve into fully three dimensional assemblages and by 1959 - 60 he was beginning to see himself as much in terms of a sculptor as a painter.

In 1961, Kienholz's first major environmental assemblage - Roxy's - heralded in the decade in which he was to make his name as an artist of international standing with a spectacular series of Tableaux which included, amongst others, " The Birthday ", " While Visions of Sugarplums Danced in their Heads ", " The Back Seat Dodge '38 ", (all of 1964), " The Beanery " (1965) and " The State Hospital " (1966). By 1971, these Tableaux had toured the Capitals of Western Europe, not only introducing Europeans to Kienholz but also stimulating the latter's interest in Europe and European problems.

His move to living in Berlin in the '70's was decisive event since from 1973, the artist and his family were to divide their time equally between his studio in West Berlin and their new American base in Hope Idaho. This change of environment is discussed in Chapter II. (Surrealism).

Chapter I of the Thesis is ' Realism ' which is covered in depth discussing objectivity and subjectivity including various pieces e.g. " The State Hospital " and devices which Kienholz employs to enforce this Realism. Chapter II deals with Surrealism - this does not imply that Realism is strictly confined to Chapter I. As the thesis progresses it becomes obvious how each chapter is interwoven between comparisons and contrasts.

In tracing Kienholz's surrealist connections it became necessary to trace the many other connections from Dada to Pop Art. Again pieces are discussed at length and major comparisons are offered between Kienholz and Salvador Dali, the Spanish Surrealist painter and Luis Bunuel, the Spanish film director. Kienholz's move to Berlin in the '70's and his more subtle approach around the same period is discussed with " The Middle Islands ".

This leads on to Morality and the seriousness with which Kienholz approaches his art and his role as a moralist. It deals with the controversy and uproar surrounding him and the power of his work to challenge larger issues such as censorship, government control of the arts and the recurrent question " What is art ? ". His attitude to Women is discussed with various pieces mentioned where he involves himself with the plight of women. His stance in these issues is compared and contrasted to that of Bunuel.

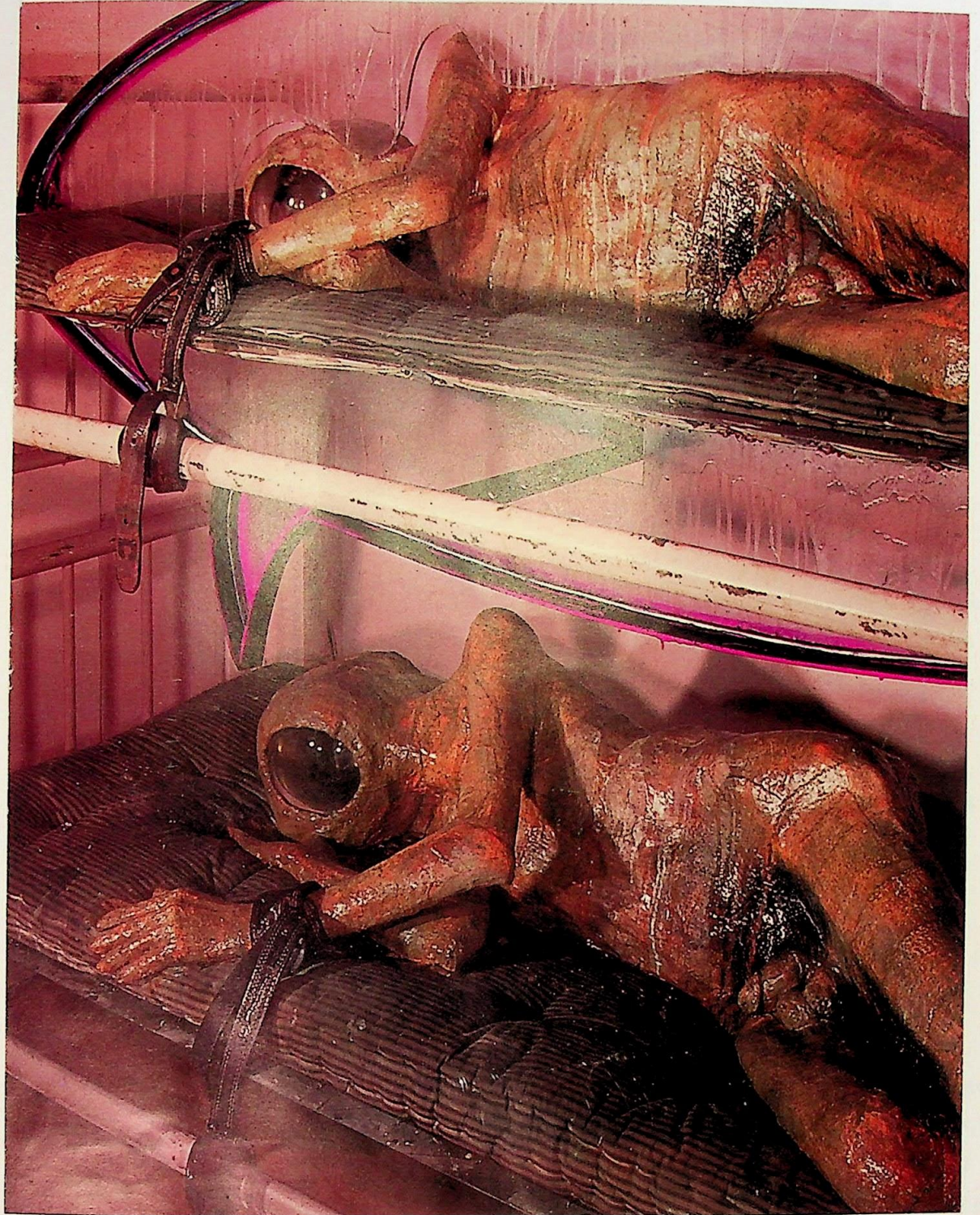
The Kienholz exhibition in the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin in February, 1981 contained various major pieces which I have dealt with under the various headings. At this stage under the heading Kienholz at the Douglas Hyde Gallery February '81, I discuss " The Art Show " - the largest piece at this exhibition and his largest piece to date. Public reaction to the show comes next and finally Kienholz the man concludes.

CHAPTER IREALISM:

The reality imposed upon us through our everyday life varies from one individual to the next. Leaving aside the primary functions of all humans i.e. sleeping, eating and excreting, what remains throughout each day is coping with work, leisure time, friends and social entertainments. For financial survival, life necessitates 'work' and, for the vast majority work occupies a good two-thirds of their existence. More often than not our lives become subordinate to our work. This work which claims so much of our time is very often dissatisfying or unfulfilling. Our lives become taxed by demands and needs. Our realities are very often in danger of becoming rooted within the problems of day to day living. Continually we find ourselves subjected to rules and regulations and the inescapable powers of the Media. The mediocrity and narrowness of our lives often induces us to shirk away from any real confrontation with life. "Human kind cannot bear very much reality" ⁽¹⁾ (T.S. Elliot, Murder in the Cathedral). Someone who has understood that statement very well is Edward Kienholz. This statement "Human kind cannot bear very much reality" is in one sense very true. Reality can be dull, boring, repetitive and often downright painful. But in fact, whether we can bear it or not, survival forces us to undergo many painful situations. So whether we choose to bear them or not, the fact remains that we all at some stage have borne pain, terror, emptiness. Whatever method we have chosen to push these unpleasanties aside is our own peculiar way of coping. But what Kienholz does is he objectively surmises all and in a tight but compassionate balance between objectivity and subjectivity creates tableaux which arrest time and place and people in moments of horror, despair or even sardonic humour.

(Fig. 2)

The State Hospital



He reminds us that " Human kind cannot bear very much reality " in such works as " The State Hospital " (1964 - 66).(fig. 2). This work almost evokes the same feeling of helplessness on the viewer as on the man huddled naked and miserably thin on the bottom bunk of a two bunk institution bed. The viewer for that instant feels helpless to intervene with the situation. The door of the cell is locked. As you stand and look in the small window space on the door you are confronted with a reality Kienholz worked with (having worked as an orderly in a mental institution). On the bottom bunk is the shrivelled up figure of an old man, coated in a slimy greenish substance. The head is a fishbowl where a black fish swims endlessly inside.

On the top bunk the image is duplicated, but what remains in ones consciousness is the black fish swimming endlessly around the small fishbowl in the mans head. The helplessness and seeming eternity of the situation is appalling. The top figure is encased in a kind of plastic bubble (similar to ones in cartoons) (Kienholz) representing the mans' thoughts. Both lie strapped to the bed - the table is just out of reach and the bedpan looks as if it could scarcely be used.

In looking at Kienholz's ' work ' one is filled with dread, guilt and revulsion. One does'nt tend to sympathize with the artist himself - instead Kienholz's tableaux become the target of his rage and we in turn are filled with that same intensity as we look at the works.

There is a strong sense of the theatrical present in many of Kienholz's tableaux. It is interesting to note that Kienholz coined the name (tableau) after the staged, costumed stop action presentations seen in his youth in rural churches and grange halls. He is a bit like a stage designer run amock, dispensing with actors because objects tell about the human presence so much more ghoulishly and truly than does

(Fig. 3)

Couple with Shopping Bag



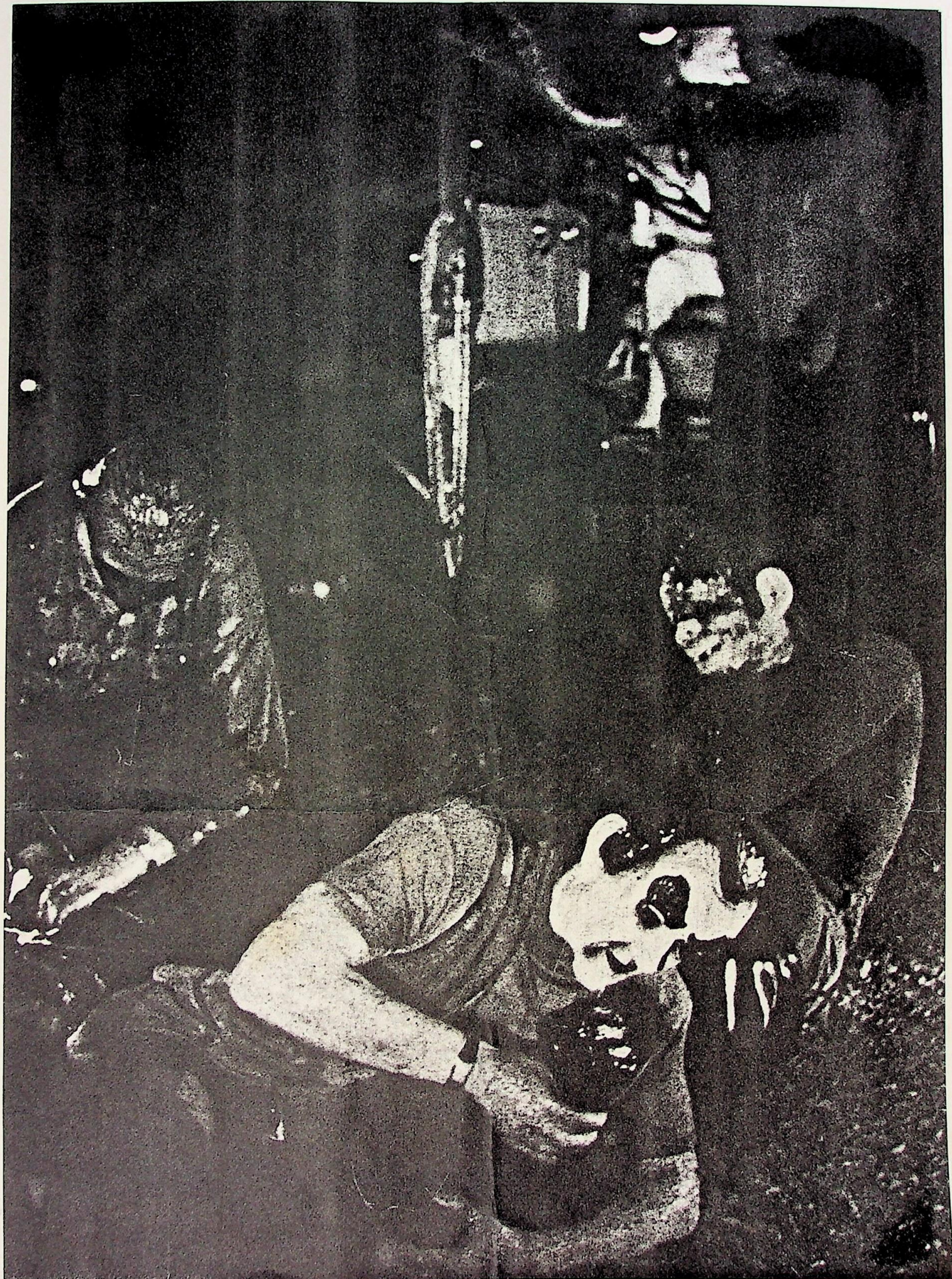
action itself. Kienholz when asked ⁽²⁾ whether he was bringing art any closer to theatre, replied " No, I am bringing theatre closer to art ".

The frozen figures he employes dramatize the situation so that we (the viewers) find ourselves thrust into the role of actors. The dread and guilt we feel throughout Kienholz's work are linked with a third more pungent particle - our sensory capacities. This he achieves through tacility. The stench of urine, sweat, - the whole feeling of a room without oxegen, all pervade the State Hospital. The slimy substance (resin) is reminiscent of afterbirth. This ability of his to make objects real through sweat, stain and grime seems to be the obverse of the tasteless, synthetic items that Kienholz claims clutter the piggishly littered American Interior. In an interview with Arthur Secunda, John Bernhard, Charles Frazier and Edward Kienholz ⁽³⁾ Kienholz said " I like things because I like the patina objects acquire. For example, a new cloth lacks all traces of human presence. On the other hand, if a table is fifty years old then it will have places where children dug in their teeth. Then you can tell by looking at it whether it was nicely or badly treated. It takes on an aura ".

Amongst the Documenta Exhibition in Berlin, 1972, Kienholz features with other three dimensional realists like Duane Hanson and De Andrea. T.A. Tuaites ⁽⁴⁾ turns to Kienholz as the best example of a living realist. De Andrea, Duane Hanson ^(fig. 3) and Kienholz had cast figures from living models dressed (undressed) and coloured to the life. However, there the similarities ended. De Andrea and Hansons' works purported to be lifelike (portraits of the nude couple, the portrait of the artist and the bowery bums). So effective was the result that the pieces ended up looking like a perhaps better attempt of a Madame Tussauds. The approach of the self-styled realists have a certain weakness (for the viewer at least) because in reproducing effigies of human creatures,

(Fig. 4)

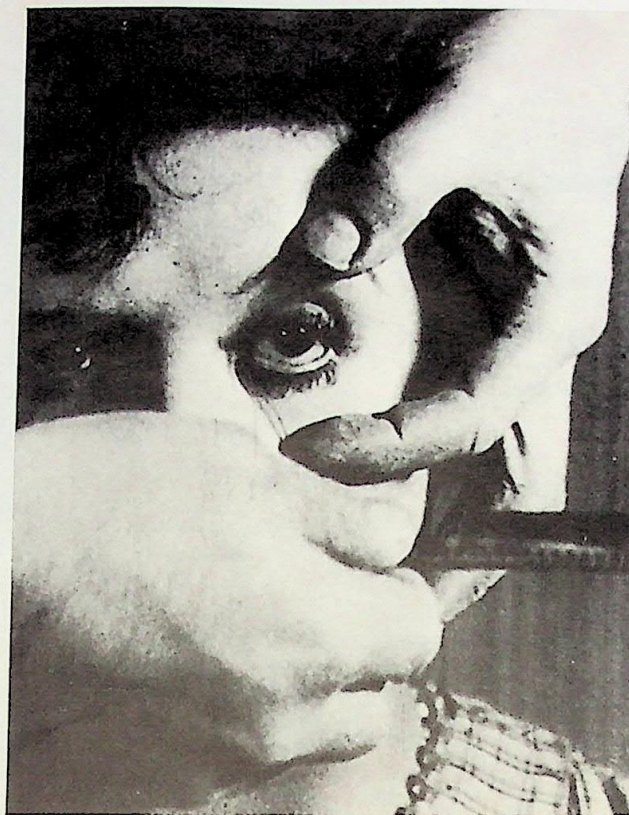
The Five Car Stud



the habiliments, circumstances and the cosmetics give rise all the more to the experience of a moment embalmed. Thus one's responses tend to attune themselves as to a conventionally staged theatre vignette and judge on the grounds of plausibility and naturalness. Kienholz seems to possess an innate understanding that a pictorial reality depends on a tension between the real (the materially actual) and the abstract (symbolism and invention). In Kienholz's piece ' The Five Car Stud ' we see the figures clothed, body casted and coloured in a naturalistic manner - however, on their faces are rubber masks. Suddenly in comparison to the others the effect is the opposite. The piece is moving, violent and dramatic. Granted the theme is very different but if it were the theme alone Andreas' figures should provide some sort of a satisfactory sensual or sexual stimulus instead of remaining waxlike and unalive. A better clue is given when Kienholz writes in his text " ... actually there is no Black man". What appears to be the victim is in reality the three separate White figures (each part of the Blacks body) shoved up against a central ' pan body ... in a human torso form ... filled with black water. Floating plastic letters spell out N.I.G.G.E.R. Even the shrieking head in the piece is not naturalistic but composite of inner and outer form '. By doing so the focal point and subject of this terrifyingly realistic work is an abstraction.

(Fig. 5)

Un Chien Andalou



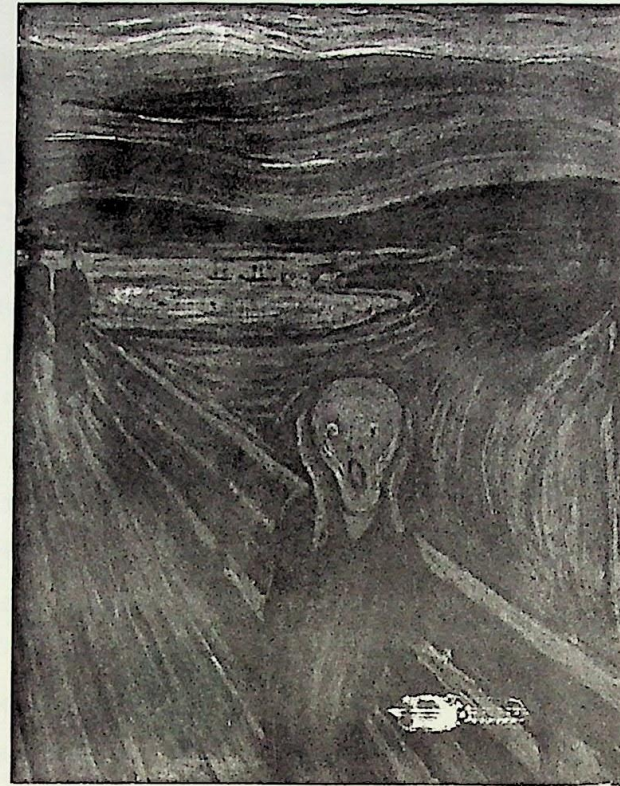
(Fig. 6)

The Birthday



(Fig. 7)

Der Schrei



CHAPTER II

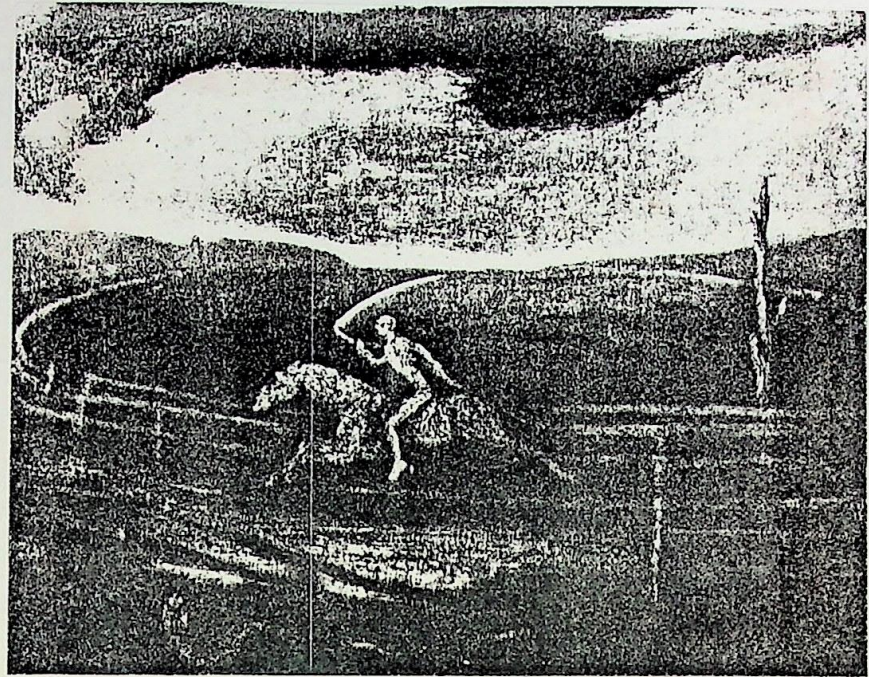
SURREALISM:

Throughout many of Kienholz's tableaux there is a quality that pervades - an illusory yet grippingly real relocation of time and place, the present dissolved in a nightmare environment of other alien and dead being. The chirping canary in the "Wait" surrounded by the faded bric a brac of her cramped life makes an already skeletal old lady look like "remains" that indicate the mindlessness but also the tenuousness of the present. During his talk in the Douglas Hyde he agreed that there was a certain Surrealistic approach in his work. Certainly I feel that it is this which makes his work so arresting and provocative and moves it way beyond merely shock level. "I do not shock just to shock. I pursue it with a goal with which I intend to get the attention of the viewer so that I can talk to him." (5) Looking at various works his monstrous devices provide an almost hallucinatory experience similar to experiences in films like the English Dead of Night, Hitchcock's Psycho and various Bunuel films e.g., Un Chien Andalou, (fig. 5) also to the surrealist artists like Dali and Duchamp. Without seeing the piece "The Birthday" (fig. 6) the name suggests a memorable, happy occasion. Kienholz ensures his witnesses will remember with the ironic picture he presents of a woman alone in childbirth. The room has the antiseptic air of a hospital with uniform black and white tiles. The static dummy figure lies perfectly still whilst an explosion of giant curving plastic arrow sprouts from her belly representing birth pains and a bubble her cry. Here the non visual reality sounds, pains, emotions is translated into form with a directness akin to Edward Munch's 'Der Schrei'. (The Scream) (fig. 7) These contrasts between actual and symbolic objects are the only language of objective Realism.

Kienholz when questioned (6) (in the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Feb. 1981) about any favourite piece of work he could remember chose a scarcely

(Fig. 8)

Death on a Pale Horse



(Fig. 9)

Cathedral



(Fig. 10)

Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lane Green Valley



well known piece by the American painter Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847 - 1917). There is a subjectiveness and romanticism about this mans work which seems to heighten the paradox surrounding Kienholz's own subjective/objective approach. The particular work he mentioned was Death on a Pale Horse (fig.8) (The Race Track). This choice I find particularly interesting for a number of reasons. Having read a lot about Jackson Pollack (fig.9) (1912 - 1956) the Abstract Expressionist, I discovered that he too had been very interested in this American painter. Pollack through studying with Thomas Hart Benton (fig.10) (a Regionalist who painted in a coarse undulating style) had been introduced to many of Bentons own influences in art - Rubens, Michaelangelo, Rembrandt and particularly El Greco. Like Benton, Pollack could identify with these masters. They often employed agitated sweeping arabesques and heavy contrasts to shape tempestuous or mystical images. At the same time, an interest in the subjective and romantic led to an interest in the American painter Albert Pinkham Ryder. Pollacks work progressed into what he became famous for - his Action paintings. But Kienholz's earliest works attest to the influences of Abstract Expressionism. Begun in the mid fifties his work consisted of odd shaped irregularly notched canvases to which were attached scraps of plywood, all covered with broadly brushed areas of muddily coloured paints. Interest in gesture went hand-in-hand with a concern for texture, as Kienholz enlivened his surfaces by adhering wood scraps to them. Kienholz described his painting process in the fifties as a means of " getting into the painting, swimming around in it like a bathtub " (7). The connections between this process and Jackson Pollacks stand undisputed. " I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or the floor ... On the floor I am more at ease, I feel near, more a part of the painting since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting ". (Possibilities 1947/48) (8) Of course Kienholz's environmental art allows both artist and spectator to be literally in the work.

(Fig. 11)

The End of the Bucket of Tar



At this stage a quotation by Edward Lucie Smith is relevant. In the article " The Context of Modern Cinema " (9) Armes speaks of how in the 1950's and 1960's film makers and modernists could now look back on fifty years of development of their art. As Lucie Smith points out " No longer is it a question of reacting against nineteenth century romantic or naturalistic viewpoints, for contemporary developments are invariably a reworking of themes already explored in earlier modernist movements. As Lucie Smith says ' abstract expressionism is rooted in surrealism; assemblage and Pop Art reached back beyond surrealism to Dada, Op Art and Kinetic Art are founded on experiments made at the Bauhaus; minimal art interestingly combines both Dada and Bauhaus influences.' (10) These statements have particular relevance to Kienholz since his name has been linked with Dada, Pop Art, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism etc. Certainly the object *trouve* is often the point of departure of Kienholz's assemblages and to that extent relates his methods to those of certain Dada artists. However, Kienholz is not interested in a purely anti-art stance. He wishes as he says himself to use " pertinent arrangements of his chance finds " (11) Whilst the Dadaists like Kurt Switters and Duchamp used readymade objects and rubbish for collages Kienholz takes his role as an artist and moralist far too seriously for this. He concentrates on picking discarded bits with a firm goal in mind. Talking about a particular piece ' The End of the bucket of Tar ' 1974 (fig.11) (exhibited in Rosc 1980) Kienholz says speaking about the bathtub he used in the piece " I liked the overall coffin-like shape of the object and the *blackness* inside " (12) At a later stage he " spotted the contents of an apartment being put on the sidewalk for removal. On top of the pile was an album depicting a mans lifetime spent in the military ". (13) Having found this album provided him with the necessary information to use with his bath. Behind his studio in Hope, Idaho he saves up all these ephemera from chicken wire or gerbils (stuffed) to photos and discarded furniture possibly for 20 years or more before reassembling them. Shortly after his arrival to Dublin in February, 1981 he homed in on a nearby tip saying to the young Douglas Hyde Gallery Director, Sean McCrum, " You never know you might find some art in there ". Like much of the Pop Art of the Sixties Kienholz tableaux

of this period suggest the alienation of the consumer in a capitalist world and these same works revel in the vulgarity of recent or contemporary cultural phenomena. However, unlike the cool, slick, ironic approach of Pop Art, Kienholz's approach can be viewed as the grotesque or other gothic realist approach. Kienholz's brutal visual anecdotes belong to an American moralizing tradition and comment on such topics as the abortion underground, patriotism, eroticism and phsyic disintegration. Pop artists, like their Dada forbears, are more interested in objects purely as objects, Kienholz is much more interested in them for the stories they can tell. Referring back to " Death on a Pale Horse " again numerous associations can be made between Ryder and Kienholz and Kienholz and the Surrealists. Like other works of Ryder this work looks as if it were dreamed. In actual fact, the painting was created in response to the death of a waiter Ryder knew, a man who gambled his savings on a horse race, lost his money and committed suicide. The painting, the rider, the horse and the track represent the operation of an inevitable process, the universal necessary passing away of lives dependent upon the race of Death around a magic circle. Despite the fact that both this particular work was not dreamed and that Kienholz has stated he does'nt dream ⁽¹⁴⁾ or at least remember his dreams (since we all dream) it would appear that both draw subconsciously from their dreams.

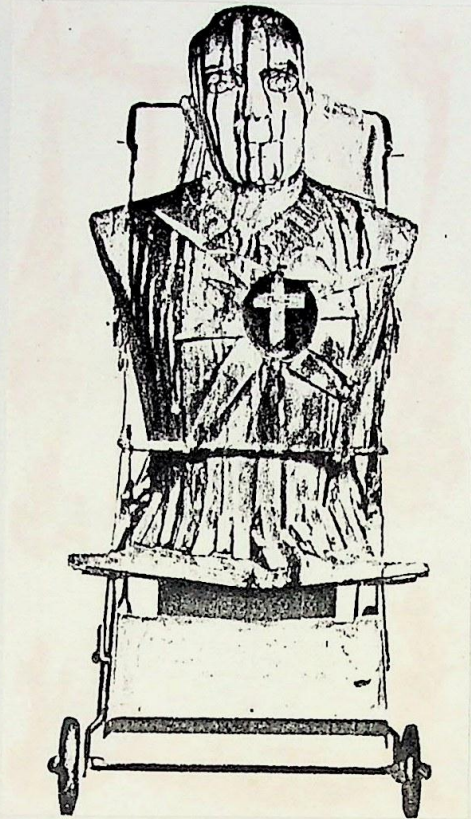
The Small Oxford Dictionary explains surrealism as a 'movement in painting, literature etc. seeking to express subconscious activities of mind by representing phenomena of dreams. Having stated already that the contrasts between actual and symbolic objects are the only language of objective realism they also have something in common with Surrealism. Two trains of association collide into each other. With the Surrealist masters this gives the famous fusion of reality and dream. Kienholz too is concerned with shattering the stereotyped cliches of everyday. But in his earlier works, at least during the Sixties - ' The State Hospital ' ' Barneys Beanery ', ' The Birthday ' etc., he is less concerned with the limits of consciousness than with what Ernst Toller called " the lazy heart ", the failure of imaginative sympathy. However, it is interesting that decisions for Kienholz's vocabulary of forms occur within the context of the Surrealist movement. For example, the chicken wire figure of The Back Seat

Dodge " has a rare precursor in a chicken wire torso included in a 1946 New York Window display by Duchamp and Eucrico Donati for the second edition of Andre Bretons Surrealism and Painting. But the most likely source for Kienholz's use of chicken wire is in its use as a building material on the ranch of his youth and as an armature for constructed forms. However, there are other suggestions of links between Duchamp and Kienholz. It was Duchamp who said " A painting that does'nt shock is'nt worth painting " ⁽¹⁵⁾ Kienholz's awareness of Duchamp's work is difficult to assess. In the late Fifties and early Sixties, a number of contemporary artists became interested in Duchamp partly because of a translation into English of Robert Lebel's important study of the artist. Moreover, Kienholz was a close friend and business partner of Walter Hopps who organised the major Duchamp show at the Pasadena Museum in 1963. However, Hopps in his essay ⁽¹⁶⁾ infers that Kienholz's contacts with Duchamp's work was minimal but does remark " Not surprisingly Duchamp expressed an interest in (both Segal) and Kienholz, although he did not know them very well ⁽¹⁷⁾ Kienholz denies any significant knowledge of Duchamp's work in the late Fifties or Sixties. There are other links which I must add here in connection with Salvador Dali the famous Spanish Surrealist Painter and the equally famous Spanish film director Luis Bunuel.

Common to nearly all of Kienholz's environmental tableaux is a disparity between authentic objects and apparitional figures, a coming together of somewhat distant realities on a single plane, which initially evokes traditional modes of surrealist juxtaposition. As Dali and other Surrealists practiced it this principle was intended to invest objects with magical and metempirical significance and this alteration of sensibility was designed to prod the viewer into envisioning what could be and not simply what is. But the narrative and topical nature and overriding principles of visual unification - elaboration in Kienholz militate against a purely poetic reading of his environments. However, iconographic connections between Kienholz's work and that of Dali's (amongst other Surrealists) certainly exists. Dali's sculpture " The Venus de Milo of the Drawers " featured at the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris is a forerunner of Kienholz's assemblages. Jane

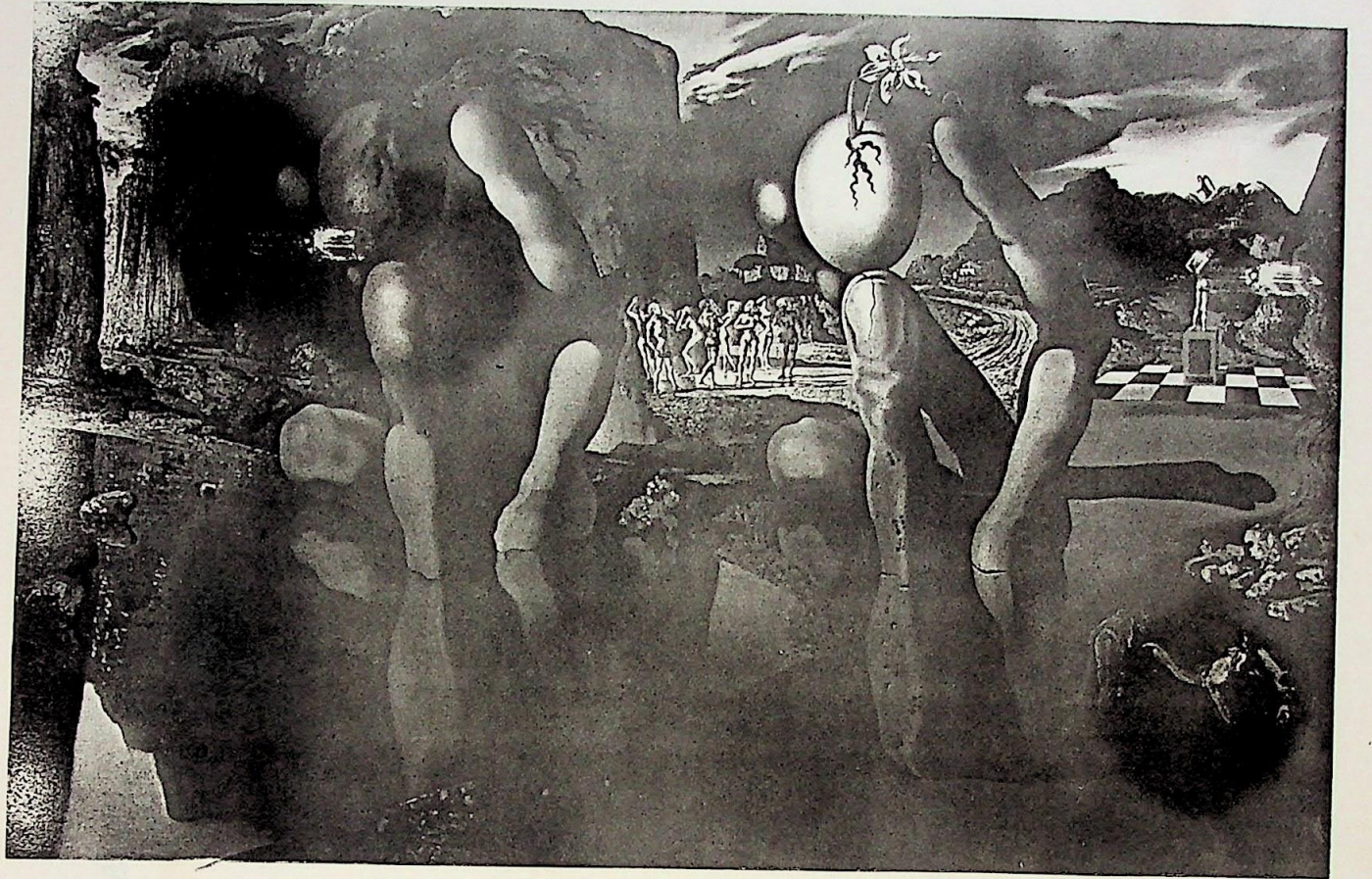
(Fig. 12)

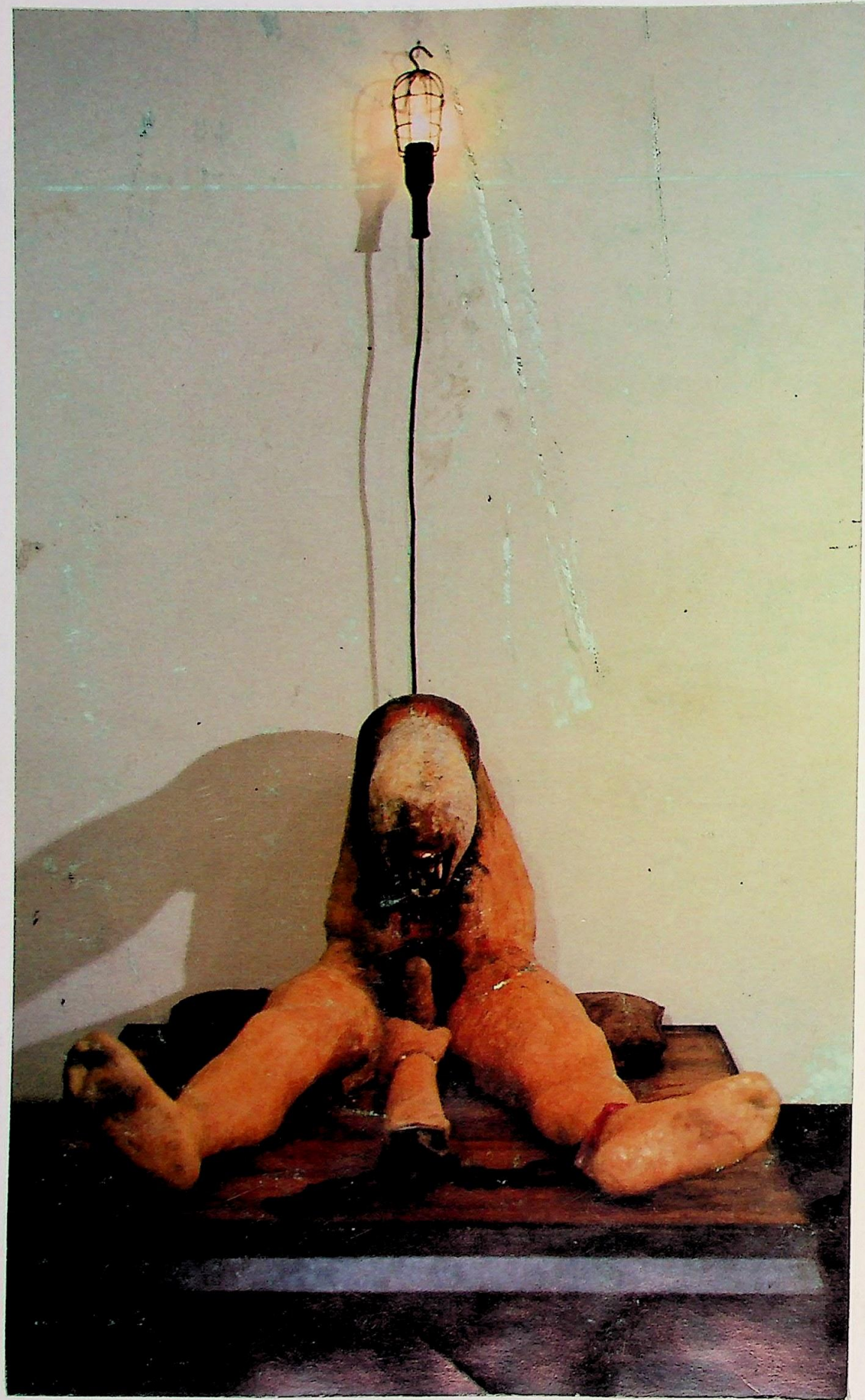
John Doe



(Fig. 13)

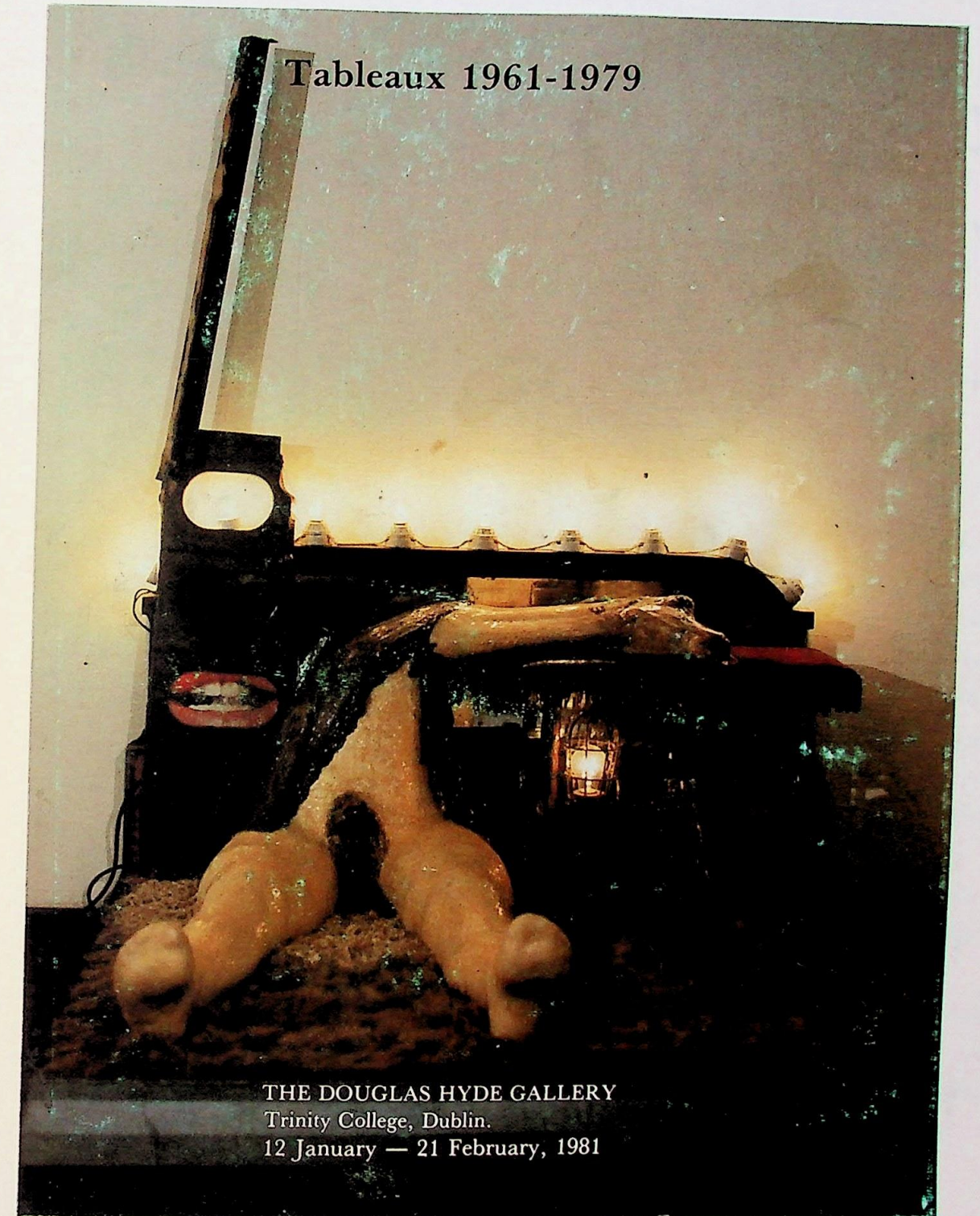
The Metamorphosis of Narcissus





(Fig. 14)

The Middle Islands



Doe (1959) and John Doe (^{fig. 12} 1960) which are both fitted with drawers containing disturbing objects. At the same exhibition Dali exhibited his " Rainy Taxi " which has striking visual parallels with " Back Seat Dodge 38 ". In " Rainy Taxi " we see an abandoned cab in which a shark headed chauffeur and a sleazy blond female are ensconced in a bed of lettuce and live Burgundy Snails - the piece is rigged up to unleash torrential downpours on its two mannequined occupants. Whilst the fantastic and obstruse nature of Dali's ^(fig. 13) work does not offer a clear cut interpretation of his art " Rainy Taxi " like a variety of his other works evokes a vengeful apolalypse in which Nature, once the victim of Technology now takes her revenge. Again it is unlikely that Kienholz was aware of " Rainy Taxi " since it was not particulary known before its exhibition at the Museum of Modern Arts, Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage Show in 1968. However the penchant for sometimes macabre or obscene themes, the use of dummies and even the use of live creatures (Dalis' Burgundy Snails in " Rainy Taxi ") Kienholz's canary in the " Wait " all suggest that both artists shared related ideas.

On an invitation (arising out of the Documenta Show already mentioned, which featured " The Five Car Stud ") by the German Academy to live in Berlin what initially was intended to be a year stay resulted in a total division of living time between Idaho and Berlin. The move seems to have been a tremendously healthy and invigorating one - his ghosts of the West Coast more or less exorcised " The Middle Islands " ^(fig. 14) 1972 marks a change, quite subtly in Kienholz's work, moving closer to the controlled horror of Dali's earlier work and Luis Bunuels films. Having seen " Middle Islands " in the Douglas Hyde Exhibition February, 1981 I can positively say . the experience is hallucinatory. There is a considerable shift of emphasis in the work - in both formal organisation and in the handling of images and thematic motifs. Gone is the obviousness of the typical tableaux of the Sixties - representation gives way to suggestion and the enviroenment is much less enclosed. The half animal, half human creatures in this piece rest on forms that are bedlike rather than true to life beds, that furnish the rooms in say ' The State Hospital ' or ' While Visions of Sugar Plums ... '

Also the image the tableaux proposes to us is much more ambiguous than that of Kienholz's earlier tableaux. When viewing this piece there is a privacy of interpretation allowed to each person viewing. A rack lies on the wall directly over a rack lying on the ground at each end of the piece. In between on the left sits a torso melting into a Beaverlike neck and head. The mouth is agape revealing grinning canines impaled in a juicy red grin. The legs are spread in anticipation and the large penis stands erect. The figure is plonked on a hard wooden surface with a sturdy cushion supporting it underneath. In between the calves is a large female hand (wearing a gold feminine watch) trying to grasp the symbol of masculine potency - the arm is a stump fortified with strong iron at the elbow and attached to an iron lock which surrounds the left leg. Overhead a phallic type light casts a clear shadow of itself plus a greatly distorted shadow of the beavertype head and neck which heighten the whole lascivious stance of the thing. Between that figure and the next one representing the female is a blank space, consisting of the two roof racks again. The next figure has a terrible beauty about it. The pathos one feels when looking at it is unforgettable. The experience when beholding such an image is a totally personal one but echoes of the image of the skinned and severed donkeys' head rolled into the room on a grand piano in Luis Bunuel's film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) came to mind. The pathetic equine neck lying passively on the red plush cushion possesses a controlled horror. The glassy vacant stare of the think reminds one of dead cows. The synthetic, ultra feminine lingerie type cape and spread legs revealing a gaping vagina has that feeling of expectancy and dread because one knows that the expectations will not be fulfilled. The dreadful silence is heightened for me by the little details - the synthetic fur carpet, the beauty of the antique plush cushioned affair and mirror backing the lights at the back suggestive of a moviestars dressing room and I think above all the slanted stick of wood overhead which I find very suggestive of one of those cuts for a films. The manner in which it hangs suggests it could fall and cut (literally) any minute. The old fashioned black wired lamp has a certain phallic quality about it and certainly the most obvious piece of imagery in the whole piece - the luscious lips and teeth serve as a mockery to the crisis of the whole thing. A device I noticed Kienholz using in this one

The Remembered Halls of Child

is also used in the one called " Childhood Memories " (also at the Douglas Hyde Feb. 81) i.e. the idea of something on wheels creating a sort of treacherous foundation on which someone leans. In the " Middle Years " the almost dying head lies helpless on a plush cushion which one would normally assume should rest on legs like the stool it purports to be. Instead it rests on wheels and has a sort of pulley on the front which almost provokes the viewer to pull it merely to see would the head slump to the ground - so great is the reality. Another two roof racks are positioned next to it in uniform pattern with the other two. In the front of the piece not to be overlooked is what looks like to me to be some sort of a pelvic bone. I since discovered that it is the sharp underside of a surfing board. Again the possibility of a definite metaphor is there but the interpretations may vary. Somehow the blank space where two of the chrome racks occupy in between the male and the female serve as a space for thought. It also, of course, heightens the sense of aloneness both are forced into through their own private turmoils at the onset of the menopause. There is a paradoxical quality about the whole think - that feeling of togetherness and separation, the couple giving nourishment to each other's despair. The beauty/ugly association here, is a constant feature in Kienholz's work. He has said himself⁽¹⁸⁾ " When I was young I was determined to paint as ugly as possible because I imagined that I would understand what beauty means through ugliness. When you make something ugly and call it art then it automatically becomes part of a larger entity which one calls art history or culture and it becomes part of a system through which it criticizes itself. If it continues as a representation of art, it could perhaps trigger the following reaction, these things are so goddamned ugly that they are actually beautiful and this starts a vicious circle, the work changes the aesthetic criteria for what is ugly and beautiful. Without being conscious of it initially and without strong intellectual intention, I have contributed to the idea of the beautiful and the ugly ".

(Fig. 15)

Le Journal D'Une Femme de Chambre, 1963

C H A P T E R I I I

MORALITY

The connections between Salvador Dali's work and the Spanish film director Luis Bunuel go back to Bunuel's student days in Madrid. Having met Dali, Bunuel went to Paris in 1924 having attained a degree in History. In those years Paris was the centre of new artistic schools such as Dadaism and Surrealism and after seeing Fritz Lang's *Der Mode Tod* (1921) (*The Tired Death*) and Rene Clair's *Entr' Act* (1924) Intermission he got the impetus to enter the world of cinema. His first film *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) An Andalusian dog was made in collaboration with Dali. Breton, guru of Surrealism hailed it as the first surrealist film. Throughout his career up to date Bunuel (having been steeped in a Catholic tradition - born in Calanda, 1900 - a little village well known for its spectacular Holy Week Processions. At the age of six he attended the Jesuit College for seven years) has attacked the Establishment, the bourgeoisie, the church and the army. Like Kienholz there is a shock element - erotic love versus bourgeois respectability, the Church as ally and alibi of temporal power being a temporal power itself, the bourgeoisie as prisoners of their self-protective rituals.

Like Kienholz Bunuel is often aggressive and pitilessly ironic in his approach. *Le journal d'une femme de chambre, 1963* (*A maid's diary*) (fig. 15) is a magnificent black humoured representation of the rural French political atmosphere of the 30's which amounts to a piercing denouncement of Church and bourgeoisie. In his film *The Young One* (1960) Bunuel attacks American racism and its social hypocrisy and self worshipping. Both Bunuel and Kienholz share this concern with exposing what they deem to be the hypocrisies and lies. Kienholz has ambitiously stated " My work is devised to show life stripped of sham and hypocrisy " (19).

(Fig. 16)

Bunny, Bunny, Your So Funny



(Fig. 17)

Back Seat Dodge '38



" The Big Eye " (1961) is one of Kienholz's diatribes on the Art world. In this piece Kienholz describes how objectors to his art became his victims. This assemblage consists of a T.V. screen transmitting the image of a script dialogue with characters like Ed Kienbusch (a carpenter) defending his art against the critics and bores. Part of the dialogue goes like this-Kienbusch : does my art offend you? the things disgust you? the shapes obscene? Clod Certainly not! Kienbusch Then why be so critical? Does it hit too close to home old bean? (boxes his ears with a jack plane) I warn the world of brutes who find my kind of art a joke and seek to crab it that if the jesters persistent tis my habit to make him out a fool with my special brand of ridicule " (20)

The words of this dialogue turned out to be very prophetic in a way for Kienholz. Two years later in San Francisco attempts were made to censor, on the grounds of obscenity, his Bunny, Bunny, Your so Funny (1962) (fig.16) an assemblage consisting of a waist to knees fragment of a female mannequin to which is attached steel wool pubes and chicken wire mesh stockings all mounted horizontally on a spindly legged wrought iron base. But it was to be his " Back Seat Dodge 38 " (1964) (a tableau of lovers in a cars rear seat) that was to spark off an uproar that, in fact, made its deriders out to be fools. A movement spearheaded by Warren M. Doru, a member of the L.A. County Supervisors Board, who also happened to be running for Governor of California attacked Kienholz's one man show in Los Angeles County Museum in 1966 as pornographic and singled out 'Back Seat Dodge' and 'Roxy'^(fig.17) as the most offensive works. The whole thing mushroomed into an often comical battle involving the County Supervisors, the Museum Trustees, the Museum staff, art critics and historians, local civic leaders and the general public. The issue became a contentious topic among religious leaders, it provoked numerous political and satirical cartoons and even featured in numerous sermons. Cartoons with captions such as " It's awful close the door!! " became daily topics. Regarding the controversy Kienholz said " I am very unhappy that there is a controversy. I am not interested in that kind of publicity. It can only hurt not help. People may now come to see my work for the wrong reasons " (21). But in fact the uproar

provided Kienholz with a larger audience to address and since one of the major issues in his art is its ability to subvert expectations, the controversy ^{could} and be seen as optimizing the impact of his work. The initial shock element of Kienholz's work allows him the scope to confront a captivated audience with larger cultural issues. The initial charge of obscenity was eventually subordinated to larger issues such as censorship, government control of the arts and the recurrent question "What is art". The consequences of Dorns crusade was not the closing of the exhibition but the closing of the door of the Dodge (to be opened only during official museum hours which were restricted to those eighteen years or older). The actual piece " Back Seat Dodge " consists of a 1938 Dodge on a bed of bright green artificial grass. Inside is a couple - a beer drenched chicken wire male and plaster female involved in sexual activity from head to toe. Their heads are fused into a single faceless head with (an almost impossible to see) snapshot of fornicating genitalia suggesting the fantasy reality interface of sexual activity. The authenticity of the details in the piece locate it within the precise temporal framework of the late Thirties and mid Forties. The Dodge, a racoon tail hanging from the cars antennae, scattered satellites of Astroturf nestling a strewn 1940's Olympia beer bottle and above all, the one shoed 40's style shoes of each (engaged in a careers) which lend about the only genuinely sensual feel about the thing. John Steinbecks oft quoted remark in Cannery Row comes to mind that " most of America's children were conceived in Model T-Fords and not a few of them were born in them ". The time freeze surrounding the piece and its figures Mildred and Eugene evokes an older generation which suggests Kienholz is addressing that generation whose sexual initiations often took place within the automobile. Yet it is these very people who twenty years on were critisizing the new Morality (especially the sexual morals) of the Sixties generation. Despite the fact that the work evokes the Forties Kienholz does not allow one to slip into nostalgia. To escape it he includes a Sixties radio and mirrors which reflect the spectators as he experiences the work. The use of mirrors is a common device of

of Kienholz and serves to heighten the awareness of the viewers perception of the tableaux an effect which can be called reverse voyeurism. The voyeuristic element is an integral and crucial part of Kienholz's tableaux. The very creation of a three-dimensional construction which in its displacement of actual terrain and in its inclusion of identifiable everyday objects suggests an approximation of and this an identification with the real world. The appeal of voyeurism is the result of a complex interaction between involvement and non-involvement. The viewer can absorb the piece unnoticed by the object of his fixation. By partaking purely on a psychological level we find a sort of reassurance which prevents the possible distractions or imperfections of the flesh to intrude on fantasy. The sense of power for the viewer is heightened by the knowleged that we are gazing at an essentially private act. Conventional veneers are stripped off as individuals engage in their deepest desires and enact their wildest fantasies.

However, Kienholz ambigiously destroys our sensation of immunity invariably in his art. The mirrors found in a number of works provoke a consciousness that we are exposing ourselves as we delve into the darkest secrets of others. In the ' Dodge ' a bank of mirrors line the autos interior window, between the legs of the woman in ' The Birthday ' a mirror, the same device is seen in the ' Middle Islands ' and ' The Remembered Halls of Child (1980) ', amongst others. This issue of reverse voyeurism had a lot to do with the controversy over the Exhibition of ' Back Seat Dodge 38 ' in 1966. Whilst supervisor Dorn and others posed the question of whether this was moral or not, the real issue of the work is who is moral or not? Kienholz is exposing the middle aged protectors of the public morality and they know it, even more disturbing he reveals them in the location they felt most secure - the car (a private anonymous, intimate, physical and psychological sanctum). While both Kienholz and Bunuel are engaged in moralizing, certain themes take on greater precedence with both. Bunuel when asked about morals said " What for the bourgeoisie is moral is what is immoral for me and what you have to fight against " (22). It has often been said that Bunuel has been saying the same things for fifty years in his films - It is true he has been attacking the Establishment, the bourgeoisie, the church and the army but in an inevitable way like Kienholz his style is allowing itself change - in this case from the

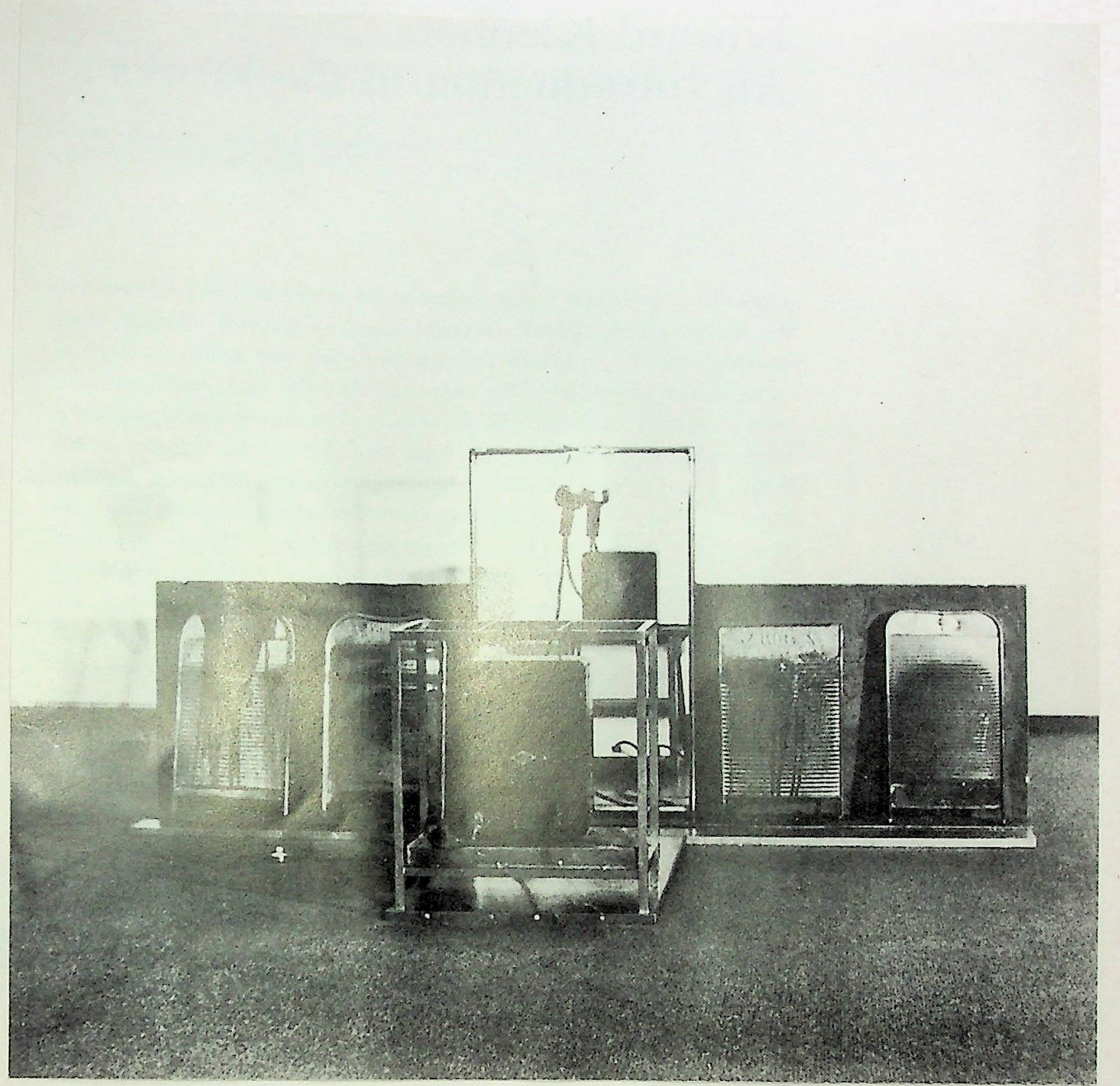
(Fig. 18)

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie



(Fig. 19)

Volksempfängers Series



(Fig. 20)

The Queen of the Maybe Day Parade



savage indignation in his earlier work to a new and lighter style as seen in ' The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie ^(fig.18). The approach of Kienholz and Bunuel towards women is curious in its similarities and differences. The exploitation of woman kind whether sexually, emotionally, socially or politically has been a persistent theme of Kienholz's work from the early Sixties onwards. In ' Roxy's ' we witness a supine woman clamped to the sewing machine in the centre of the piece. To the side of the room a military jacket hangs on a coatstand bearing witness to a sort of male guilt presence whilst reducing the woman to the statu^s of sexual machine by the male species. In the ' Birthday'1964 a woman is left to endure the agonies of childbirth.. Again the guilty presence of the male is felt through a note from the absent father.

Dear Jane,

I could'nt come down now because Harry needed me here.

Ma says she might make it later.

Keep a stiff upper lip Kid. (ha - ha)

Dick.

'The Wait ' concerns itself with an old lady left to face her imminent death with only a stuffed cat and caged canary to conform her. In the 70's further elaborations of the woman as victim theme are continued.

'The Middle Island ' despicts the female on one level during the crisis of the menopause. By 1977 a subtle but no less appalling exploitation of women in Nazi Germany is seen in the Volksempfengers series (fig.19) 1977 using assemblages of metal washboards and fertility medals. The sublety of Kienholz's approach in the 70's is again to be seen in " The Queen of the Maybe Day Parade " 1978. ^(fig.20) Mixed Media.. Here he concerns himself with the plight of the housebound wife or war widow whose fantasies and anguish are with their bodies, subtly made to merge with the domestic furniture of their environment. Bunuel's women play their part in an overall theme which purports to ridicule the Church and

(Fig. 21)

Belle de Jour



bourgeoisie. In ' The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie ' the contradictions of appearance and reality in high society are pushed to hilarious extremes. Under a charming facade we see the bourgeoisie indulging in discreet drug smuggling, adultery and murder. In ' Belle de Jour ^(fig.21) a novel by Joseph Kessel, Bunuel chooses to change the ending of the book because morality is saved. The book tells the story of a woman who loves one man with her heart and a few dozen others with her body and feels badly about it. Bunuel sidesteps sin and guilt, for him they are obviously luxuries with which the human race has been bewildered for too long. His film tells the story of a liberation from the moral handcuffs of social caste by means of a personal sacerdoce, a self-fulfilment. Like Kienholz Bunuel threatens us with dreamlike dislocations of space and time and free association of incongruous i.e. violent erotic images. Bunuel probes beneath the surface and we become voyeurs to our own darkest desires and the corruptness we practice. In a way, Bunuel is the more objective of the two whilst Kienholz explicitly denounces the exploitation of women. Bunuel is merely concerned with showing women as erotic powerful beings whether or not he feels we are downtrodden becomes irrelevant.

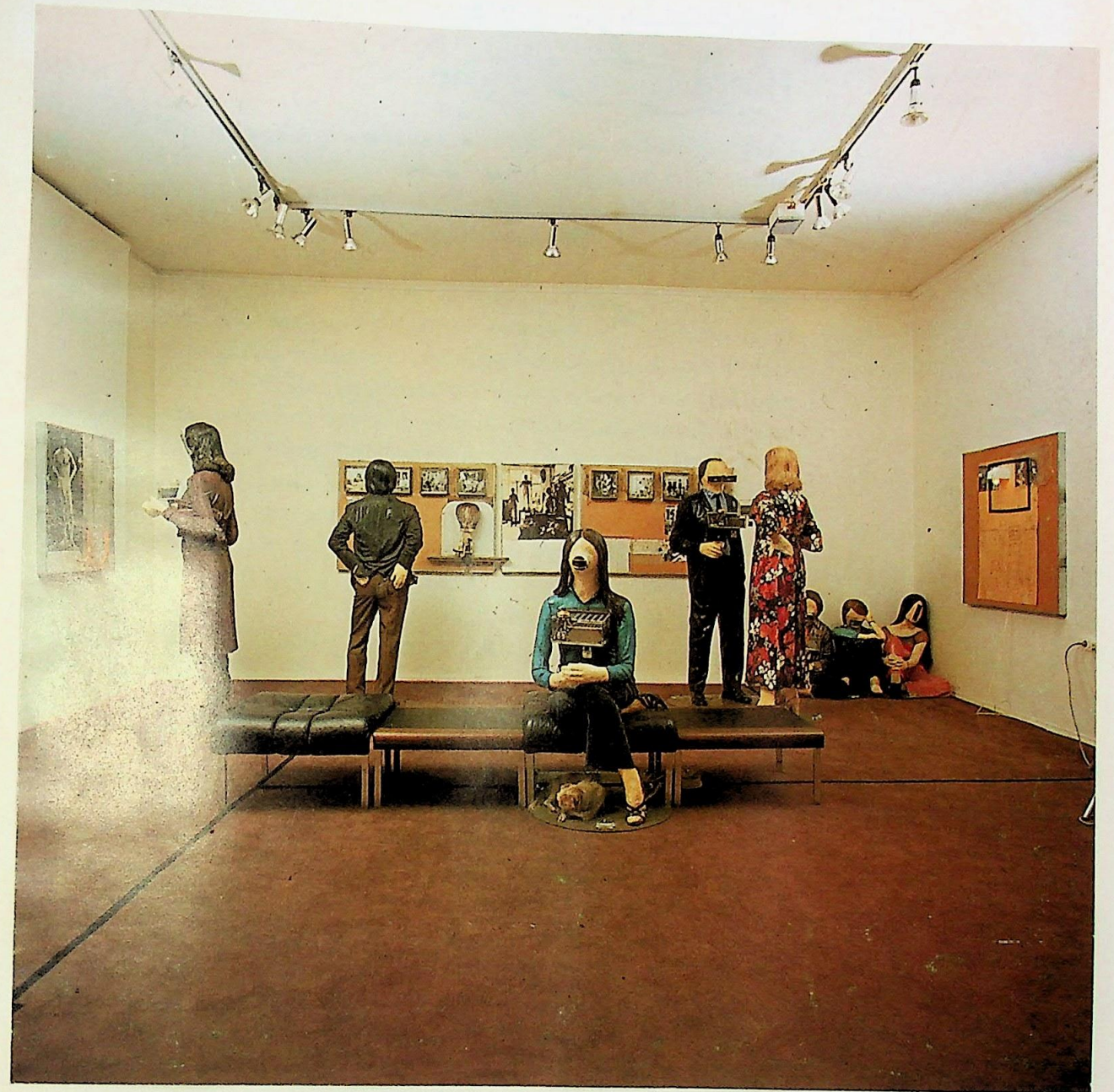
(Fig. 22)

The Rhinestone



(Fig. 23)

The Art Show



CHAPTER IV

The show of Kienholz's work in the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin February, 1981 covered a wide timespan from 'The Nativity' 1961 one of his earliest full scale tableaux to 'The Rhinestone' (fig.22) 'Beaver Peep Show' 'Triptych' and 'The Remembered Halls of Child' 1980. Seeing various pieces assembled together after depending on photos of his work in the past was an experience not to be forgotten. Two of the few Concept Tableaux that were materialized feature in the show, 'The Art Show' and 'The State Hospital' already mentioned. 'The Art Show' is certainly the most ambitious and elaborate of Kienholz's pieces. The skeletal idea of this show was conceived in 1963 but it was not realized until after Kienholz moved to Berlin in 1973. By 1967 the idea had been transformed into a concept tableau and exhibited in that form in many large shows of the early Seventies. During the mid-Sixties, Kienholz involved himself in Concept Tableaux in which an idea an idea of a particular tableau would be sold, the realisation of the work being postponed - in most cases, indefinitely.

'The Art Show' (fig.23) was brought to one stage of completion in 1977. The piece consists of plaster cast figures representing 'art world' types as a traditional gallery opening. Fitted with tape recorders which spout as Kienholz put it "all the art review garbage such as found in most contemporary art magazines" (23) from mouths (the only facial feature) fashioned from automobile ventilators these arty people inhabit a gallery space housing actual contemporary art.

He later abandoned that idea, replacing Christian Carry's work with detail photos and drawings of the various stages of the actual making of the piece. The construction of the 19 different plaster figures (based on various members of Kienholz's family and friends including amongst the celebrities, the artists Kwardo Paolozzi and Yoshi Iida, took three years (October, 1973 - May, 1976) Of any of Kienholza pieces this particular one (the longest and propably most troublesome piece) holds very little fascination for me. This tablezux and some other tableaux from the Sixties seem overprogrammed, saturated with significance by a plethora of detail - whilst initially guaranteeing the overall authenticity of the work ultimately tended to disperse rather than concentrate its fundamental energies. The obviousness of the piece as an attack on the ' art world types ' merely becomes bland and inoffensive.

Public reaction to the piece and in fact to the whole show were extreme to say the least. Some people felt that Kienholz work seems imbued with a patina of the Sixties. In a way this is true, but it's with such pieces as ' Back Seat Dodge ', ' The Art Show ', ' The Birthday ' where they are too liter to cope with the aftereffects of the initial shock of the viewer. Of any of the pieces I heard people mention, ' The State Hospital ' seemed to trigger off huge reactions here. In The Sunday Tribune of 18th January, 1981 an article and some coloured pictures from the Exhibition appeared. Stephen Dixon wrote referring to this piece " Incidentally one of them, ' The State Hospital ' rather too shocking to show here - depicts a naked, excrement stained, incarcerated figure lying on the skimpy mattress of an institution and has a relevance for this country unimagined by the artkst when he created it back in 1966 ". I think this piece somehow hit home in a country such as Ireland where much reform is needed in instutitions such as mental hospitals and I suppose it has come to the stage where people know someone who has been in and out of such places with various atrocities to report. When I was growing up the stigma attached to people with nervous breakdowns or people locked away was appalling. Fortunately this sort of thing is coming out into the open, generally speaking there is more of an awareness by the public of the defects these places may have and the need for change.

Kienholz talked about this piece in detail at the show since people seemed more curious, fascinated or repulsed by this piece than any other. The actual man in the piece had been a patient for many years and was dying of stomach cancer. Kienholz got to know him and liked him a great deal and when Kienholz mentioned making a piece to do with a patient in a mental hospital such as him, the man offered to be cast for the two figures. Another piece which seemed to fascinate all and sundry from the most cynical to the most naive was 'The Remembered Halls of Child' 1980. Again listening to Kienholz talk about the piece is fascinating because like a great story teller, he conjures up all the little bits of information that went into making the piece. Meeting Kienholz it is very easy to believe he could construct such a think. A large jovial looking person, one is struck by the positive belief he has in himself and the ability to command an audience with his directness and in such a humourous fashion. On looking at the piece, I felt enthralled, memories, forgotten details flooding the mind. I became a child again. In the piece a moment of growth of two children is crystallized for eternity. A little girl stands on an antique horse over which she has dropped her skipping rope whilst the boy stands behind the glass of the bay window amongst a colourful jumble of toys. In front of both faces are black and white photographs of the children. Behind the toys we also see an interior of an old house, staircase, reminiscent of hidden nooks and crannies. There is a beautiful touch to the piece - the smashed window with the net curtains blowing gently by a hidden fan. The piece is disturbing but not in any depressing way - more a sharp reawakening of our senses, as we enter the fantastic world of a child again. Again in this piece, Kienholz uses a mirror placed strategically towards the back of the piece and in which the intent viewer is suddenly confronted with his or her own reflection. As early as 1956 Kienholz was involved in controversy as a gallery operator. Beginning with the Now Gallery in 1956 and later with the famous Ferus Gallery in 1957, jointly run with Walter Hoppes, Kienholz pioneered a forum for exhibition of avant garde art in California.

During the opening season of Ferus, Wallace Berman's show of assemblages and collages with sexual and religious themes was confiscated and closed by the Hollywood Vice Squad. His devotion to alternative gallery schemes continues in two recent projects. ' The Art Show ' and the ' Faith & Charity ' in Hope Gallery.

Throughout Kienholz's works runs a kind of acid humour. He has been compared to Lenny Bruce in his process of victimization and unsparing humour which explains in part their respective harassment by the authorities. One such example of Kienholz's sardonic humour is seen in ' Roxy Whorehouse ' - amongst all the squalor and clutter of the meat trade a tiny detail could almost be overlooked. A poignant letter written by the younger sister of " Miss Cherry Delight " and stuck by the recipient into a bottom drawer.

A great artist is rarely confined in the limits of a style or movement. For Kienholz, Realism is not a style or even a method - it is an attitude. An attitude towards reality. That is the meaning of Kienholz's Concept Tablezux which he presents with his usual humour almost as prospectuses. In fact, the size and cost of his tableaux must make them difficult to produce, except on commission. Choosing to spend your life ' making art ' can often be a terribly isolating occupation. On meeting Kienholz the notion of the artist in the garret instantly dismisses itself. Kienholz enjoys meeting people so he surrounds himself with friends and family. An account written by Kienholz of the lengthy processes involved in the ' Art Show ' makes fascinating reading. I find it fascinating because he made the process of creating a piece (that could be arduous and terribly frustrating for one person to tackle on their own) into an enjoyable project for one and all. Kienholz says " My initial intention was not to make personal portraits as such, but to cast only my friends, as I like being with them and enjoy working round ". The realization of this piece depended on the interest and dedication of his friends, wife Nancy and children. Kienholz says " The physical work starter in Los Angeles automobile graveyard one hot afternoon, Rick Cohan, my son Noah his friend Jay Smith and I ripped 50 air conditioning vents out of an many disabled autos ". Throughout the

account are humorous anecdotes fondly recalled of that entire timespan between May, 1973 and May, 1977. His wife Nancy took photographs from start to finish, the children helped with the casting and actually were cast themselves also. Friends worked on the sewing of the clothes, the wigs and mouthpieces. " Karl Ruhrberg was the first figure case in 1975. Karl jumped and danced around the studio, was completely uninhibited and looked a lot like a classic '56 Lincoln Continental, complete with spare tyre. " Casting Erika Billeter made for another interesting studio day. I must say it is much more pleasant to cast nice pretty ladies than it is to work on their hairy masculine counterparts ". Later he recalls " the apartment was beginning to get crowded with all the sculptures standing around. It was like living in the middle of a perpetual party. We often speculated on a burglar's reaction if he made the mistake of breaking into our house some dare night ". By November, 1976 " Nancy is compiling her individual photo scrap book which she will present to each model as a thank you from us for their help and involvement " The constant devotion which seems to exist between Kienholz / family, Kienholz / his work, family / his work, friends / family / work, is awesome. There lies the mans success - what more can I add? Appropriately his summary concludes

" IN PEACE

EDWARD KIENHOLZ "

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