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ENTRIES: CUTTING EDGES

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10 February 1979

A slide talk on his remarkable sculpture by Richard Fleischner—who might pass for William Wegman's twin—the young site sculptor working in Rhode Island: the talk held at the Max Protetch Gallery. (Paula Cooper began this extra-artistic gallery function; she has for several years opened her space to dance and music. All that seems more natural in Soho than uptown. In Soho dance and music are more immediately grasped as somehow being part of the dialogue between painting and sculpture. Soho has had for years flourishing performance art centers such as the Kitchen, not to mention other less well-known alternative spaces.)

Fleischner clearly is a key figure in a school of sculptors including, say, Alice Aycock, Alice Adams, Mary Miss, George Trakas, Jackie Ferrara, not to mention figures working in the Midwest whom they may not know, say, Michael Hall or Ed Levine. Behind much of this work stands Robert Irwin and the heroic figure of Robert Smithson as well—the latter even more legendary for an untimely death. Oddly, there was no mention of Robert Morris—we were eating hamburgers after Fleischner's lecture—though he is part of this, too—and Michael Helzer was rejected as being a one-shot artist (untrue). There are many differences, of course, and, as a group, they are hardly cohesive. I wish, for example, that Fleischner thought less in "plan," more in "elevation." Or, at present, a certain "literary" excess in Aycock's work is off-putting. But for all that, these "constructionists" represent the cutting edge of the art of the late Seventies; they are its most seriously progressive group, the one least marked by petty M.F.A. amalgams, the least soft-centered trend. (Mel Bochner, it is reported, has had, as always, a last word on this "cutting edge": as once he coined the term "joke art" for certain aspects of the Conceptual movement, he is, I am told, speaking of the work of this group as "house art.")

24 February 1979

... Last night at the Kitchen: Eleanor Antin as Eleanora Antinova. Imagine an artistic Bronx girl come of age in the 1950s. She read Romola Nijinsky's biography of her great husband and Karsavina's *Theater Street*. She is drawn to the arts and to the myth of modernism—Stravinsky, Diaghilev, the première of *Le Sacre du printemps*. All this, were it not enough, is later compounded by the provocations of the Feminist Movement (in which she plays a central role) and the Conceptual Movement (equally central—the *One Hundred Boots*, for example), not to mention the permutations possible to Feminism and Conceptualism combined. One begins to grasp the drift of Eleanor Antin's awkwardly strong balletic play *Before the Revolution*. In it she fully answers the need for a fervent honesty and integrity, purging, as it were, the already duplicitous overgrowths of a co-opted Feminist Movement. There are girlhood clues: cut-out dolls are now used to signify historical characters, the cut-outs'

paper tabs replaced by literal clothespins to hold the wooden template garments to the stage figures.

All this and more is backcloth to Antin's essentially literary frame of mind; she is, after all, developing a complex performance as she did before in *The Angel of Mercy*, a play based on the life of Florence Nightingale (with a brilliant photographic analogue stylistically derived from the work of the great Victorian photographers, Roger Fenton, Hill and Adamson, Julia Margaret Cameron, etc.).

In *Before the Revolution* Antinova is made out to be a black dancer. At one point in the course of the play she addresses the audience commenting on her interlocutor's—Serge Diaghilev—so-called "dilettantism." Antinova recites the now-familiar litany of Diaghilev's great discoveries to countermand the charge: Nijinsky, Stravinsky, Karsavina, Bakst, Grigoriev, Pavlova, introducing into the list her own name. For an instant I was perplexed and, returning home, I checked the index in Grigoriev just to make sure that Antin's black Ballerina Assoluta had never really existed.

There are really many problems. As a playwright Antin is not good enough; as a performer not bad enough. There is a kind of amateurishness necessary to the success of the conceptual performance, necessary to bring it off with any flair or style. Antin's ambitious love of it all has the effect of demoting her work to a kind of embarrassing enthusiasm. Generally, the conceptual performance succeeds only when it is truly awful, for in that way the artist is disguised, covers his or her tracks. The truly awful in this kind of performance permits the artist to be taken seriously in a way that competency does not. Ironically, when the artist is obviously good and when the ambitions are obviously elevated (as they are in this instance), the conceptual performance fails.

3 March 1979

To the Dia Foundation underwriting of Robert Whitman's *Palisade* at the Hudson River Museum—hired buses through driving rain pass the slums of Yonkers. The performance trivial in the extreme, hence "just right." The sensibility was still that of Black Mountain, of Rauschenberg, of Abstract Expressionism. A dark atrium was hung with a scrim that rose and lowered at expressive intervals. These gauzy screens had all manner of film, photographic slide, shadow and light, mirror-like deflected beams projected on them. The images were largely those of floral close-ups, of roses and chrysanthemums. The "cast," like Noh players clearing the sets, hung about, not really aimlessly but in that mindless disaffected way deemed necessary to such performance—casting shadows, deploying gauzy swathes of cloth upon appropriately located lines to catch image and light.

Certain movements were striking, as when the balcony fes-

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