

ART

# Planes...in...Spaaace

By April Kingsley

Museums can make or break art styles. They can kill a movement, as MOMA did Op Art, or prophesy and even generate future art, as Kynaston McShine did with "Primary Structures." Museums can also put on shows of past art that are so amazingly in tune with current ideas and tastes they enable us to see new art with new eyes. This is what Margit Rowell has done with *The Planar Dimension: Europe, 1912-1932* at the Guggenheim Museum (1071 Fifth Avenue, to May 6).

The concept of the show is ambitious: to chart the heretofore untraced development of two-dimensional, planar, "Cubist" sculpture through its Constructivist radicalization into "conceptually generated nonobjective motifs"—and further, to a cross-national, cross-style use of space as the new material of sculpture and of modern experience. The Russian concept of "truth to materials" went hand-in-glove with the Cubist concept of composing with space by using planes to define volumes. This union produced a wealth of visual innovation, all over Europe, more by far than we were ever aware of before.

Though we have come to expect scholarly brilliance and clear-sighted connoisseurship from Rowell, she has outdone herself with this show—discovering splendid but largely unheard-of artists such as Katarzyna Kobro and Laszlo Peri; amplifying better-known artists like Joaquin Torres-Garcia, Kurt Schwitters, Julio Gonzales, August Herbin, and Max Ernst with marvelous atypical works; and confirming the greatness, even out of context, of well-known artists such as Picasso, Arp, Calder, and Miro. Despite the robust company of experimenters they keep, these masters' works have an unlabored rightness and audacity that makes them stand out.

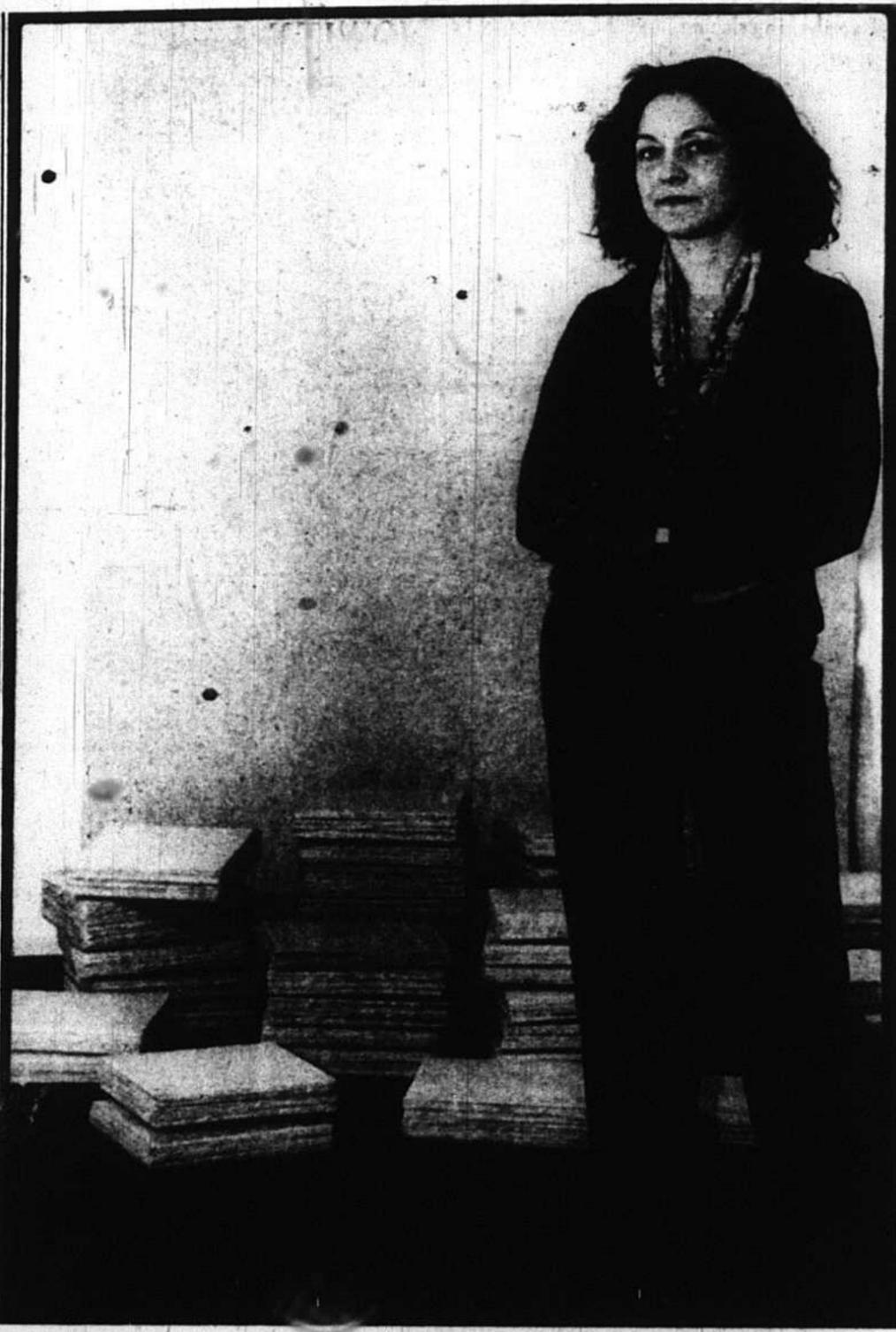
Vantongerloo and Rodchenko are under-represented in the show (undoubtedly due to practical difficulties rather than oversight), but one hardly notices, perhaps because they related to '60s Minimalism whereas so much of the work in the show connects directly with current art events. Balla's *Tree and Rose*, for instance, relate both to recent small-scale sculptures and to the floral emphasis in pattern painting in the Whitney Biennial, while his *Fist; Force Lines of the Fist of Boccioni, 1915*, is an apparent source for JUDITH MURRAY's paintings there and in her current show at Pam Adler (50 West 57th Street, to April 21). Murray's dynamic lines of force in beige, red and white cut in and out of thick, matte-black picture space, folding

it, tearing it, and enclosing it as if it were solid matter. These lines energize her tightly controlled paintings very much the way negative space is energized in Balla's sculpture.

FRANK STELLA's *Indian Bird Maquettes* at the Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, to May 1) share obvious, though probably unconscious affinities with Jean Arp's reliefs at the Guggenheim (both structurally and coloristically), with Vladimir Tatlin's *Counter-Reliefs's* space-grabbing brazenness, and with Iwan Puni's and Henri Laurens's decorated surfaces. Laszlo Peri's *Three Part Space Construction 1923* has a fortuitous counterpart in ROBERT SCHECHTER's *Indian Paintbrush* mural at the Soho Center for the Visual Arts (114 Prince Street, to May 5), in D. Jack Solomon's encrusted relief paintings recently at Pam Adler, and in much of the work now at the Whitney, including the wall-painting geometricities of Dorothea Rockburne and Mel Bochner. Their patent neo-Constructivism has many adherents among developing artists such as JOHN SPENCER, whose paintings at the SVA Gallery (260 West Broadway, to April 14) are overshadowed by the more idiosyncratic pieces of Amy Sillman, Lawrence Fleming, and Gary Sherman.

VITO ACCONCI's *The People Machine*, a gigantic metal construction at Sonnabend (420 West Broadway, to April 28), looks for all the world like a blown-up Tatlin or Moholy-Nagy. A huge flag draped on the ground is attached by cables in tense suspension to various metal units—a swing, a giant ball and arcing plane, and a series of flat slabs, one in front of each window. The cables invade each area of the gallery, pass out the windows up the building's facade, and disappear somewhere on the roof. One imagines the following action: The flat arc and ball are pulled back (bow-fashion), catapulting the "people" on the slabs out their respective windows, raising the flag, and setting the observation-platform swing into motion. Navigating the unavoidable cables is a hair-raising experience, but Acconci has often intimated his audience in the past. It's just that he has replaced simple psychological pressure with threatening mechanical equipment, resembling a Rube Goldberg contraption, a Robert Morris plaything of the gods, or a pageant by Albert Speer.

This sample doesn't exhaust the connections between old and new work in "the planar dimension," but a broader view shows the more profound legacy of this modernized



DEBORAH FEINGOLD

Michelle Stuart's *Ledgers* whisper tales of bloody sacrifices in pre-Columbian days.

approach to sculpture: not only Constructivism, but construction; not only Assemblage but assembling; not only mixed materials, but multimedia and pan-medium art. MICHELLE STUART's show at Droll/Kolbert, (724 Fifth Avenue, to April 28) is a beautiful case in point. Her tall, stately, hanging-scroll pieces move from two into three dimensions as they curl out from the wall. Made of graphitelike shale and other rocks pounded, pulverized, and rubbed into muslin-backed paper, they are drawing-painting-relief sculptures. So are the new bipartite *Ledgers*, which also seem like books despite their unreadability, and are, in fact, records of specific sites—Tikal and Jocotan. They seem

to whisper tales of bloody sacrifices and beautiful ceremonies in those pre-Columbian days. Stacks of booklike units join with hanging pieces or photographs to complete composite works, and unique, fetishistically decorated books are sculptures in themselves. Photography, playing an increasingly important role in Stuart's work, is central to her published books; the latest—"A Complete Folk History of the United States at the Edge of the Century," consists only of old sepia photographs and postcards of American scenes around 1900.

Though Stuart's means of visual presentation seem radically various, her ideas have a rock-hard consistency. She is concerned with

layering, interfacing, and the reciprocity between nature and art, time and space, the spiritual and the physical, fact and fiction, past and present, the primitive and the sophisticated. *Stone/Tool Morphology* forms the conceptual core of all the work on view. Photos of all the sites she's visited to take material for the pieces in the last three years (from the Serpent Mound in Ohio to Guatemala) are juxtaposed with small reliefs of the rock-tool shapes (arrowheads, chippers, knives) common to the sites at various levels of their development.

Today's best artists are all multivalent, reflecting the diversity of modern life in mixed manners. It all started when Picasso's guitar broke the unified solid core of tradition some 70 years ago.

Note: I wish to make clear that I dissociate myself entirely from Richard Goldstein's implication (*Voice*, April 2) that when Donald Newman titled his recent show at Artists Space "The Nigger Drawings," he did us the favor of neutralizing the word nigger of perjorative, racist implications. Saying it's chic won't make it so, any more than Newman's droll intentions or twinkling eyes will blind us to his affront to black people. Artists Space is publicly funded and therefore responsible for its actions to the whole community, not only to the fair-haired few it chooses to exhibit.

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