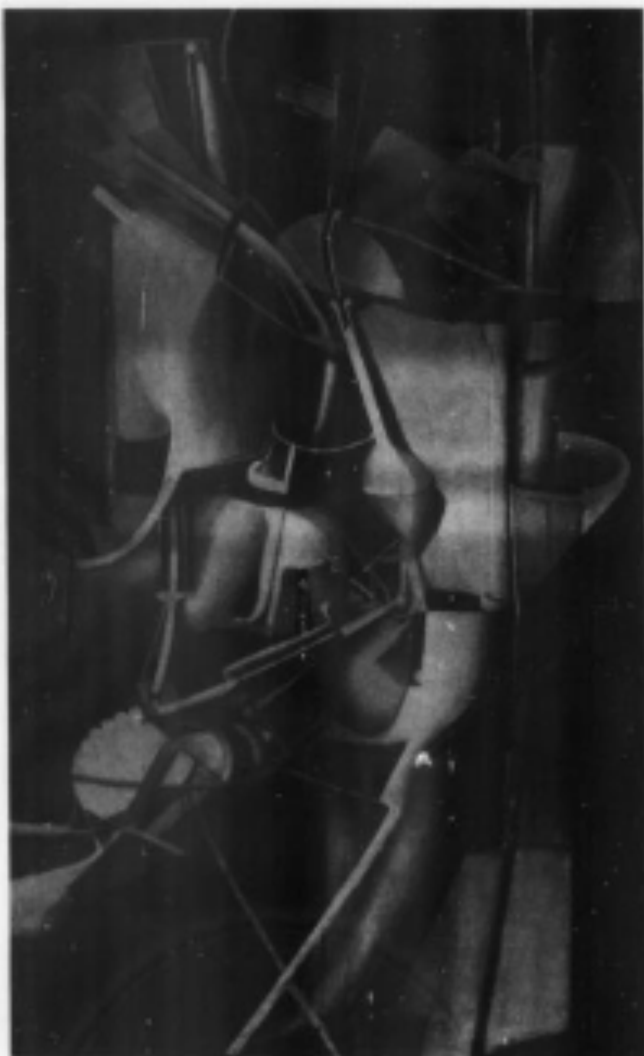

Duchamp. *The Bride*, August 1912 (Munich). Oil/canvas, 89.5 × 55 cm. From the Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Nagare. *Large Bachi III*, 1973. Black granite, tan granite base; 79" × 30½". Staempfli Gallery

NEW YORK LETTER

APRIL KINGSLEY

For New Yorkers this should be the year of the "art idea", what with Duchamp at the Modern and Beuys around every corner. Both artists represent an aspect of the voguish notion of democratization in art. For the former, art could be made out of anything at all; for the latter, anyone at all can be an artist. It's interesting, in this light, that both have been given so much attention as personalities—an élitist attitude. Duchamp's retrospective opens with an elaborate homage to him in the form of documentary photo-enlargements, paintings and drawings of him by friends and admirers, crowned by Curator McShine's execution of a Duchamp idea for an installation in which the ceiling is covered with open parasols hung topside down.

A handsome catalogue with numerous laudatory, critical and scholarly essays on Duchamp, plus another host of homages by friends and followers (this time in words) accompanies the show (which originated in the Philadelphia Museum of Art). It is the joint endeavor of Anne d'Harnoncourt of the Philadelphia Museum and Kynaston McShine of the Museum of Modern Art, where it nearly wasn't shown due to a long strike by part of the museum staff which delayed its opening. McShine's installation tends to be somewhat pedantic (I didn't see the show in Philadelphia) with extensive labels explaining many works, often with quotes from the artist. It is a textbook example of how to install an extremely complex artist's work in such a way that people on every level of cultural awareness can get something out of it.

Hofmann. *Green Table*, 1937. Casein/plywood, 60" × 48". Emmerich Gallery ▶

This is all to the good since hordes of visitors to the show have been streaming in to see it ever since the doors opened, practically trampling the Miró show which occupies an unfortunate position on the path to it. I believe that there can be only a handful of "cultured" New Yorkers who remain unaware of it, and most such people have probably already seen it at least once. Considering the esoteric content of this work one wonders why it is so popular. I think it has something to do with the public's need for shock and titillation. The mass hysteria currently surrounding the film version of *The Exorcist* indicates this. People are going to see the Duchamp show *expecting* to be upset by it. I suspect that few have been. His anti-art gestures have been so thoroughly institutionalized by now that their effectiveness cannot be rekindled. This despite an installation which stresses those objects (the urinal, bicycle wheel, bottle rack, shovel, etc.) which caused such furor in their day. Unfortunately, the cumulative effect of the hundreds of small objets d'art and non-art which were the spin off from, and side issues to, Duchamp's major works seemed very slight. They seemed charming, naughty, scientifically, nostalgically or art historically interesting, but hardly the stuff of greatness. As someone (it may have been Sherman Drexler) was overheard to say, "He parlayed a work block into a career." The stress is put on this lesser side of Duchamp's œuvre because of its considerable influence on younger artists. But an artist still has to stand or fall on the basis of the actual objects—the art—he produced (influences are for historians to trace).

Probably no one in the history of art (except, perhaps, Leonardo da Vinci) has been more aware of the role of the masterpiece than Marcel Duchamp. No one has so self-consciously produced them and surrounded them with documentation. He made books of notes, plans, diagrams, notions used, discarded, and re-used prior to, during and subsequent to each Great Work. Replicas in endless editions were produced in the wake of the *Large Glass* and in his old age Duchamp spent many precious hours discussing it with scholars so that they, too, might expand its significance like circles in a pond after the plop of a stone. A great work *should* allow of endless variation and interpretation—the *Large Glass* easily permits it—and no one understood that better than Duchamp. It is unfortunate that New Yorkers were only given a transparent photographic reproduction of it instead of one of the excellent replicas that exist. The other work which Duchamp intended to be his last masterpiece (but which fell short) is the *Etant Donnés: 1° La Chute d'eau, 2° Le Gaz d'éclairage,* but visitors were given so little information about that piece that few were probably able to figure out what it was to be like at all. It was marvelous, though, to have *The Bride, The Passage from Virgin to Bride* and the *Network of Stoppages* all together as these are truly great paintings. I only wish they had been given more emphasis in the installation.

As I am no Duchamp scholar, I shall refrain from going into detail on the exhibition's numerous complexities and fine points, including, as it did, everything from student work to an old man's doodlings. Two patterns emerged with great clarity: the everpresent erotic content of his work; and a formal obsession with a "V" or cone shape often presented multiply in the form of radiating spokes of a wheel. It is the basic composition and/or compositional unit of many early paintings, but it becomes explicit in the *Chocolate Grinder, Bicycle Wheel, Bottle Rack, Hat Rack, The Network of Stoppages* and the watermill wheel, oculist witnesses and sieves in the *Large Glass*. The frequent occurrence of this configuration in Duchamp's "found" objects ought to have the effect of making their choice seem a little less arbitrary than Duchamp's rhetoric would have us believe. In general, I would say that one thing the exhibition accomplishes is to make the public aware of how much art the alleged "anti-artist" produced.

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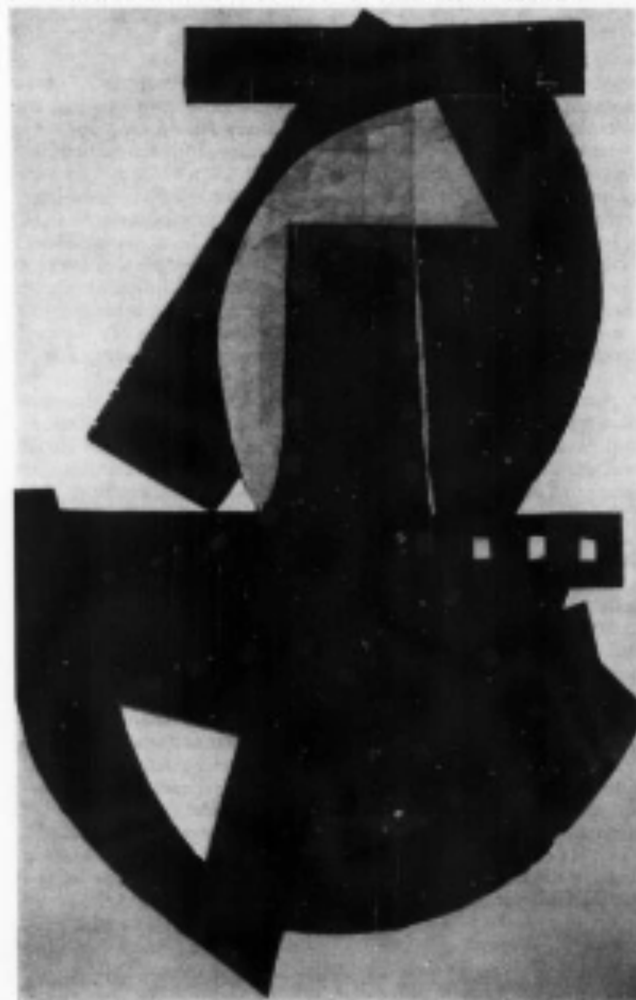
Joseph Beuys, another legend in his own time, has been making a large number of guest appearances around town—at the Ron Feldman Gallery, at 112 Green Street, The New School, in his hotel and elsewhere—and has been photographed, filmed, video-taped and interviewed ad infinitum. John Gibson mounted the only show of his work, and it consists of multiples, many of which have been seen in New York before (some in Gibson's "Beuys I" show last year). These objects are editions made of the spin-off from Beuys' political activities—posters, records, tapes, documents, music, mementos, performance props, etc.—and their status as art objects is essentially a matter of Beuys' signature. Beuys allegedly considers his direct dealings with "the people" a

Bellmer. *Portrait of Unica,* about 1961. Pencil. Sidney Janis Gallery

Bultman. *Skyhook,* 1973. Collage, 74" × 48". Martha Jackson Gallery



more important art activity than creating art objects. Considering the boring pedantry of his "Socratic" discussions with people here, I would guess that he is probably more effective at turning people off art than at inspiring them. His manner is didactic but he has no consistent program for, no solutions to, no productive ideas about the future he claims to be so concerned about. Setting himself up as a "modernist" messiah manipulating the media for some vague ideology concerning freedom, the only message he manages to get across is his face. Although I resent such a pretentious approach to art (artist as Christ-figure and savior), I am grateful for his ineffectiveness as a preacher and for the diminishing influence of his work on younger artists here.

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Masayuki Nagare's elegant stone sculptures at the Staempfli Gallery are, we are told, to be considered merely as "stones" and the visitor is asked to "please touch" them. Though some of his granite surfaces receive high polish (by the hands of women in his home town of Aji on the island of Shikoku in Japan) he often leaves dull, roughly chiselled or worn areas "as is" for haptic contrast. This attitude toward stone as a living thing to be approached with respect (which pervades Shintoism and the art of Japanese rock garden construction) also figured largely in Brancusi's thinking and, to some extent, in Arp's and Noguchi's attitudes towards their materials. There is something in it of a feeling for the classical fragment, I think, for a part of some beautiful whole, that implies a continuing existence (life) outside the actual object. It is as though "golden" forms were passed from age to age in sculpture by means of the cherished broken bit. Then, too, an unfinished look naturally creates tension in this age of machine tooling and plastics. Nagare utilizes traditional Japanese techniques to produce works that have modern geometrical overtones while relating formally to Japanese ritual objects such as swords, axes, lute picks and daggers. Some shapes—*Moon Path*, *Machine for Magic*, and the *Study for the Plaza of the Bank of America*—emphasize horizontality in particularly inventive ways. While not always on a par with some of the related sculptural ideas of Noguchi (and having no connections like him with Surrealism), Nagare's quirky articulation of blocky unitary shapes is often brilliant.

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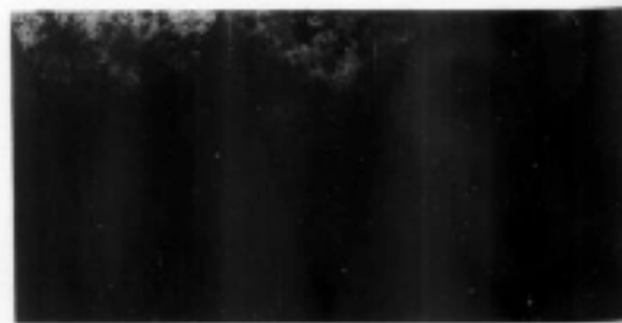
The exact opposite end of the art spectrum from Nagare is occupied by Red Grooms. His all-American grotesqueries are both hilarious and frightening, like Coney Island on a 95° summer Sunday. Nothing could be further from the natural serenity of a hand-rubbed Japanese rock than Grooms' *Discount Store* with its leering candy counter saleslady looming over her visitor-customers and threatening to crown them with a box of popcorn. It is apparent in his large New York Cultural Center exhibition how easily Grooms operates over the whole range of media, from the diagram to fully 3D theatrical stage sets. His stylistic range is also very wide, extending from cartoon caricature to primitivizing Expressionism. The show includes 2 large environments, *The Discount Store* and *The City of Chicago*, which must be experienced by walking through, around, up and over them, plus a number of small works—tableaux, dioramas, animations, and props for performances and films he has done. The emphasis on environments and performances (Grooms uses the former as sets for the latter and them films the whole thing) has its foundation in his apprenticeship in the late fifties ambience of funky "happenings" where all manner of usual and unusual activities became grist for the art/theatrics mill. In his show at the John Bernard Myers Gallery, which ran concurrently with the Cultural Center exhibition, there seemed to be a new emphasis on portraiture in his work. Two all white cut and molded paper tableaux highlighted the show, one a portrait of Matisse in his garden aggressively protected in the rear by his wife. But one work there, a portrait of his daughter Saskia "by her Dada" points, I think, to the essence of Grooms' style. It hints at the irreverence for art with a capital "A" that the Dadaists had and which I feel Grooms shares. The snake-like hairs wriggling from Saskia's head and threatening to turn the viewer to stone remind me of a Surrealist nightmare, too. The Cultural Center show, entitled "The Ruckus World of Red Grooms" is so crowded with work that it's difficult to grasp this handle on his work except from its oppressive sense of horror vacui. Ruckus, significantly, is
(*Continued on page 58*)

Lyston Wells. *DM 73*, 1973, Photo-sensitized linen and acrylics, 84" × 72". Cunningham Ward

Leatrice Rose. *Slanting Rays*, 1973. Oil, 67" × 54". Landmark Gallery



Leo Manso. *The Elements*, 1972. Acrylic and oil, triptych, 60" × 120". Frank Rehn Gallery ▶

Red Grooms' alter ego. He is an ugly mischievous clown somewhat akin to W.C. Fields in his aggressive deviltry and his pleasure in putting something over on the gullible. He is a Dada personality, a latter day American Ubu, who personifies the outrageous side of Grooms. This aspect and the nightmarish quality of some pieces, seems to me to be at least as important as Grooms' often praised quaintness and hearty humor. His work is many faceted, like that quintessential American theatrical form—the vaudeville extravaganza.

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Lois Dodd and Leatrice Rose have a great deal in common. Both are good solid representational artists who have been on the New York art scene since the late fifties. Each relies on the visual material immediately at hand for her subject matter. Neither has received the critical attention that is her due. Leatrice Rose (showing at the Landmark Gallery) paints her Westbeth studio apartment where light streams in from two sides. She finds her kitchen sink as interesting to paint as a figure. Her best paintings, in fact, are figureless interior scenes pervaded by a warm light that bathes everything with a golden grayness. In *Slanting Rays* this sunniness is explicitly depicted across flat white architectural surfaces. In other paintings she attains a Mondrian-like formal purity. She does this without sacrificing the "realness" of her subjects by changing emphases, eliminating formally extraneous material, and by simplifying the color range and blurring details. Thus a foreground chair can become part of a table in the background, so that space is flattened and organized in terms of vertical and horizontal accents, without losing its identity as a chair. This ability to manipulate forms, along with the limpid clarity of her light, are the essential ingredients of her personal style.

Lois Dodd also composes beautifully, but, with the exception of her studio interiors, seems to be a less interesting colorist. Her woods landscapes with solitary unoccupied chairs are especially dull in this respect. Unlike Rose, Dodd doesn't celebrate the beauty of simple household objects. Instead she invests them with a definite air of significance, as though their import were about to become apparent. She does this by using mirrors to reflect parts of the room not included within the confines of the picture space. This simple device places the viewer in the middle of the picture psychologically, and makes him feel aware of things that aren't there. It sets up an aura of expectancy. (It is, incidentally, a device Velasquez used in *Las Meninas*.) Dodd's windows, which are the picture, but within it at the same time, have a similar effect—causing the viewer to be aware of multiple realities. Her figure drawings are excellent, but as she doesn't include figures in any of the large paintings (which I think is a wise decision) it is impossible to say how well she might handle the many problems they would create.

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Fritz Bultman (Martha Jackson) and John Grillo (Landmark) also invite comparisons. Fifty-five and fifty-seven years old respectively, both artists have had long and richly varied careers on the New York art scene during which they worked with similar intensity in three mediums—painting, sculpture and collage. It would be fascinating to see large retrospective exhibitions of both artists' work, though Bultman, perhaps, is more the sculptor and Grillo the painter. Bultman's recent show of oversize collages, for instance, besides being a smashingly beautiful exhibition, established new heights for the medium. Although he is obviously taking his cue from Matisse's late cut-outs, Bultman rejects representation and the simple figure/ground relationships of a silhouette that Matisse loved. An "S", "T" or "Y" shape appears in most of Bultman's complexly overlapped and interwoven collages. Coloristically, red, white and blue works against black, tan, brown or ochre like major and minor chords in music. All the collages are made of beautifully painted drawing-pad paper, the ring binder holes on one side of which are frequently retained in the finished works. These holes are read as the small end of the scale range against the large expanses of painted paper. The next step up in scale is made to the square "dots" which seem like sprocket holes in a film strip and recall Leger's use of similar devices in paintings like *The City* to create a sense of measured time and vertical motion. Bultman's earlier collages (the show covers nine years of his work in this medium) are composed in terms of the rectangular framing edge and tend toward overcrowding and stiffening symmetry. It was when he freed himself from that convention and upped his scale to free-form seven and eight foot works that he really began to do great things with the medium. The new collages are composed in terms of themselves—part to part and part to whole. The frame is added later. Despite this procedure (which could easily lead to additive decoration) Bultman's heraldic, frontal images operate effectively in terms of the figure/ground relationships and reiterate the framing edge with carefully placed rectilinear accents. I think they are destined to be influential works.

It's interesting that John Grillo has often been an important influence on other artists here too. The brilliant, sunfilled abstractions he painted with such bravura in the fifties and early sixties were especially effective in this regard. It would be marvelous to see the best of them and the loosely torn paper collages, the bronzes and painted furniture assemblages, and the hard-edge, brightly colored geometrical polyptychs of recent years all together. Grillo doesn't ever seem content to remain with one style or medium for more than a few years. His show at Landmark in January was another complete surprise. After working abstractly for about 20 years, he suddenly reverted to figuration; after having been, above all, a colorist all these years, he switched to black and white. And, like many of the etchings he had been producing more or less as a side line over the years, the new work is erotic. Except for one huge tondo depicting highly stylized figures interlocked in sexual embraces which was painted predominantly in pink and yellow and with the clarity of his hard-edge style, all the new works were large charcoal drawings. The amazing thing about Grillo's handling of charcoal, though, is how painterly it is. He works the surface over with steel wool and erasers alternately smoothing and roughening it to produce a velvety texture which seems like a substitute for skin. Despite their deeply shadowed chiaroscuro treatment there is no illusionism here. The only "photographic" quality they have is their lack of focus. Bodies are distorted to fill the picture rectangle or to accomodate the symmetry he tends to prefer. This lends them an abstract appearance which makes them evocatively rather than specifically erotic.

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Lynton Wells (Cunningham Ward) continues to paint grisailles on photosensitized linen (reviewed last May in this column) though the abstract painterliness which was formerly confined to highlights and emphases seems now to be taking on more pictorial importance. At the same time the photographed scene beneath is becoming more specific, as if to compensate. Instead of being "touched up" pictures of pictures, the new work is pictures within pictures in the Cubist sense of simultaneously presented realities. The painterly activity on the foremost plane is now being organized into rectilinear structures that are satisfying in themselves. Behind these configurations, as though through frosted glass, we glimpse a strange world (presumably the artist's studio) where music stands, trucker's skids, microphones and meeting room furniture are scattered about like still life objects on a table. The spot-light glare which illuminates the scene lends a dramatic quality to the activities or performances we might imagine occur in the setting. The microphone picks up the sound of echoed hollowness—the sound of a broken stick or wood, a falling chair, or a footstep in a cold and empty loft space.

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Leo Manso is also involved in dichotomous realities, only for him they are Eastern and Western esthetics. A well-known New York painter and teacher for many years, Manso, who is 60 years old, leads a double life in the sense that he devotes a large part of his time to travel in the Far East with his wife who is a serious collector and exhibitor of Primitive and Oriental ritualistic art objects. This involvement with Oriental cultures has led Manso to attempt to reconcile Western pictorial accomplishments with Eastern thought. His use of hard and soft edges, geometrical calculation and accidental effects, hot and cool colors, and contrasting haptic qualities within a given painting has become a visual metaphor for this reconciliation. *The Elements*, one of the largest works in his recent show of paintings and collages at the Frank Rehn Gallery, is a triptych that has infinite lateral extensibility and yet is hierarchically organized. In it the Tantric symbol of masculinity (the upward pointing triangle) is treated as pure geometric form while the feminine symbol (an inverted triangle) is handled with soft, atmospheric painterliness in a variety of lush colors. In this age of reduced painterly problems the courage of Well's and Manso's attempts to reconcile

apparently contradictory elements more than compensates, I think, for the unevenness of their results.

Compared to the coloristic richness of Manso's work, Peter Lobello seems like a strict minimalist but he compensates for paucity of color by the lyricism of his formal means. In a special exhibition at the City Center on 55th Street which is part of a project called Art in Public Places, Lobello showed six *Quadrants* and some drawings. Each *Quadrant* was taken from an elipse so it was right-angled and asymmetrical, and no two *Quadrants* were alike in size or shape. They were made of imperceptibly articulated cotton duck stretched over thick wooden frames; their creamy pinkish white coloration standing in for the sheen of matte finished metal in which the artist envisions them. Despite their construction they functioned as true reliefs. As an ensemble they had a musical quality, spaced along the wall with only their lowest points aligned like pieces of musical notation on a stave. One's eye moved up one swooping curve and off a few feet up into the air to the top of the next and slid down its curve to be picked up again by the next, and so on. Their soft coloration and subtle differentiations enhance this lyricism. Lobello, who is better known for his lustrous machine-finished metal sculptures, shows in these unassuming pieces that his strength as a sculptor is independent of process.

And lastly, two major gallery shows on 57th Street—Hans Hofmann at Andre Emmerich and Hans Bellmer at Sidney Janis. The Bellmer show is a large retrospective of one sculpture and 83 paintings, drawings and graphics executed over the course of about 35 years, whereas the Hofmann show is limited to paintings done between 1936 and 1940. It would hardly be fair to judge Hofmann by this particular sample. Aside from the prevalence of his clashing red/green and purple/yellow color chords, and some prophetically loose paint handling, none of the pictures are particularly good Hofmanns. The cluttered studio interiors and busy landscapes crudely outlined and scribbled over have an all-over agitation which presents the viewer with an emotional *horror vacui*. The show functions best as a reminder that Hofmann's superb achievement in his old age was the outcome of a liftime spent in an heroic effort to concentrate his talents and energies. It is as though he was under such pressure to set his ideas down on canvas during all those years when teaching occupied much of his time that he packed all his ideas into each painting he got a chance to paint. When he was free to paint all the time he could make a detail of one of these paintings work as a complete thing in itself, and work magnificently.

Bellmer's production, unlike Hofmann's, is narrowly consistent both in its subject matter and in his handling of it. Obsession rules it all. Ever since the mid-thirties when he moved to Paris with his beautiful doll-like wife (who died in 1938) he devoted himself to ringing endless changes on the theme of the adorable, perverse child-woman. There is no depth to which this creature will not sink in her sexual depravity and no physical transformation of her anatomical parts to which the artist's imagination will not rise in order to depict it. Her surroundings (when presented) are nightmare tunnel perspectives fanatically rendered, but never realistic. This is in keeping with the fantastic mutations his female undergoes when eyes become vaginas, mouths turn into anuses, breasts proliferate, fingers sprout and penises invade her in impossible places. We can see her cells, bones and babies with X-ray vision. All this is rendered with repetitive parallel lines, overlappings and interweavings that tend to obscure the image slightly but which are perfect vehicles to transcribe the artist's perverse sadomasochistic vision. His drawing style is basically that of an illustrator, even to his use of chinese white for highlights. His line is uninflected the way his whole œuvre has been. It is interesting that the most explicit depictions of Surrealist nightmare visions were produced by minor artists like Bellmer and not by great Surrealists like Miró or Arp. Perhaps it was necessary to have a narrowly limited esthetic to accomplish such depictions.