A LABOR of LOVE

January 20–April 14, 1996

Chelo Amezcua
Imogene Jessie Goodshot
Arquero
Alan Belcher
Robert Brady
Darren Brown
Bette Burgoyne
Larry Galkins
Rene David Chamizo
Dale Chihuly
Pier Consagra
William Copley (Cply)
Jacob El Hanani
Tom Emerson
Diana Frid
Carmen Lomas Garza
Chuck Genco
Nile Giuliani
Michael Harms
Bessie Harvey
Mary Heilmann
Oliver Herring
James Hill
Indira Freitas Johnson
Jane Kaufman
Larry Krone
Paul Laffoley
Dinh Q. Lê
Charles LeDray

Liza Lou
Michael Lucero
Raymond Materson
Josiah McElheny
Sana Musasama
Richard T. Notkin
Manuel Pardo
Elaine Reichek
Faith Ringgold
A.G. Rizzoli
Diego Romero
Richard Rule
Alison Saar
Kevin B. Sampson
Beverly Semmes
Judith Shea
Kazumi Tanaka
Kukuli Velarde
Margaret Wharton
Robin Winters
Willie Wayne Young
Daisy Youngblood

The New Museum
OF CONTEMPORARY ART
585 Broadway, New York, NY 10012
A Labor of Love

For some years now in my public lectures on contemporary art, I've introduced the thorny issue of “quality” by explaining what I think Americans consider important in works of art. Usually the explanation accompanied a slide of a 1972 Richard Tuttle work consisting of a two-inch piece of rope attached to the wall horizontally by a small nail. More recently I've added, by way of comparison, a slide of Jeff Koons's Puppy, 1993, a thirty-three-foot-high shaggy dog made of five flowers.

I begin my talks by suggesting that Americans value art according to three standards. The first is “How long did it take to make that?” If the answer is “A very, very long time,” that's good. If the answer is four minutes—or worse, four seconds—you're in trouble. The second factor is size—the larger the better, the best being nothing short of monumental. If, alas, it's neither of these, then ideally the artwork should be made of precious materials (gold or jewels will do nicely) to have any validity at all. This view of things usually gets a laugh, because the audience recognizes that it's true, and that it doesn't make much sense as a measure of what constitutes “art.”

This picture of American aesthetic sensibility has proven a useful means of introducing audiences to the appreciation of contemporary artworks that are neither labor-intensive nor fashioned from precious material. After a while, however, I began to ask what was on the other side of my setup. Was I unwittingly promoting the idea that if a work of contemporary art does, indeed, take a very long time to make, is large, and/or uses precious materials, then it's not a good work? That if it was created with the aesthetic preferences of a potential audience in mind, it should be dismissed as crassly commercial?

A Labor of Love grew out of my interest in confronting the contemporary art world's bias against popular tastes and opinions. While talking to Liza Lou in her San Diego studio, it occurred to me that her project, a twelve-foot by twelve-foot headed kitchen that's taken her over five years to make, was the answer. Such a work isn't just exemplary, it's a monster paradigm. The creation of her Kitchen was hardly market-driven—to the contrary, because it is so large and labor-intensive, it's virtually impossible to sell for a price that would reflect even a modest hourly wage for the artist. As to whether or not the work is “good,” that was moot, since I could barely tear my eyes away from it, even after an hour or so of looking.

A Labor of Love is for me a new line of investigation in an otherwise long-term exploration of the ways in which art and daily life—from the mundane to the profound—are inextricably woven. The separation and hierarchization of categories of artmaking correspond to divisions found in all aspects of contemporary American life, affecting the way we think about everything from the clothes we wear to the politicians we vote for. A Labor of Love is an exhibition of labor-intensive and/or handcrafted work that challenges the definitions and categories that have kept the worlds of craft, folk, “outsider,” and decorative arts apart from that of fine arts and have created a stifling polarization between so-called avant-garde and traditional artistic practices. Today, American artists from a variety of backgrounds and cultures are recouping once-deni-grated skills and processes in order to examine critically the relationship between the visual arts and everyday life; their work destabilizes artistic boundaries in order to reflect, comment on, and critique other kinds of boundaries in the lived world of social relations.

Like the artisanal and handicraft skills of pre-Industrial America, which became increasingly devalued and rare in the wake of new technologies, most contemporary forms of craft, folk art, and decorative arts are still seen as inferior to work in the high art tradition. In part, this is due to the conventional Western distinction between process and product, whereby the functions of applied arts, craft, hobby, folk art, and popular culture (in which process and product are inextricable from each other) have come to be considered as different from those of fine arts (wherein product is generally privileged). This distinction presents complications when considering artists who draw upon cultural traditions that fall outside the mainstream Western canon and who view artmaking as part of a living cultural heritage.

Increasing numbers of contemporary artists are using traditional craft-oriented skills and/or processes—many of them learned early in life, from older family members—in innovative and content-driven ways. At the same time, artists coded as “outsiders” or “folk” artists have become more vocal about their attitudes and motivations, refusing to have themselves or their work defined by others, thus further breaking down distinctions imposed on their work from outside. A Labor of Love is an investigation and an inquiry; it's not intended to be a definitive or prescriptive exhibition, but there are a few parameters worth mentioning. First, I've chosen to focus for the most part on work that is likely to be unfamiliar to The New Museum's usual audience, as well as to folk and craft aficionados. Second, rather than narrowing the selection to a few quintessential examples, I've opted to
show the work of many artists because the terrain is so rich and so varied that it requires an equally diverse selection of work to represent it. And third, the exhibition consists of work made in the United States. The extraordinary political and economic transitions taking place in America at the present time have made the arts a crucial locus of independent, even oppositional, thought and expression, particularly in the light of the harsh and sometimes repressive criticism they’ve been subject to.

We’ve installed the pieces in a variety of quasi-domestic settings in order to encourage visitors to spend time looking, listening, talking, and making work of their own. Live and recorded programs of folk music, workshops in dollmaking, and demonstrations of several fascinating forms of “body art” have been integrated into the exhibition to indicate some of the many ways in which the issues in A Labor of Love are reflected in popular forms not usually associated with the visual arts.

While raising critical questions about the role and function of art in today’s society, the individual works in the exhibition are compelling in a direct and plausible way. Some of them, like Raymond Materson’s two-inch embroidered narratives, Jacob El Hanani's unbelievably detailed ink drawings, Jane Kaufman’s elaborate pictorial quilt, Charles LeDray’s tiny, worn suit of clothes, or Liza Lou’s “kitchen,” are so labor-intensive they belong in a kind of Ripley’s Believe It or Not of what the human hand can accomplish. Others are marvelously interactive, like the magical “illusion machine” that Chuck Genco spent five years making or the exquisite chest of drawers within drawers within drawers crafted by Kazumi Tanaka. Some pieces are deeply spiritual: Kukuli Velarde’s “angels” are meant to protect and nurture visitors, while Sana Musassama’s ceramic “totem” is a powerful guardian figure as well as an investigation of contemporary sculptural concerns. There are miniature figures; furniture made from common but unconventional materials; blown-glass pieces created with vastly different intentions and results; paintings, drawings, and weavingsthat use traditional forms to provocative ends; and garments of uncommon function and variety.

I hope that visitors will find in these works a commonality with their own labors of love, those pleasurable and productive activities in which we can both lose and find ourselves, and that speak to our deepest creative and expressive impulses.

Marcia Tucker, Director

**Corporeal Crafts**

Body crafts such as razor haircuts, nail design, and body painting are art forms that seldom make their way into museums. The reasons for their exclusion are many, the most common being that artistic endeavors played out on the body are too vulgar or base to be considered fine art. Nonetheless, these forms of body adornment consist of deftly and artfully rendered images and designs done on small and contoured surfaces. Body artisans attend to minute details, carefully tailoring the design to the living landscape, creating a site-specificity of the decorative. The New Museum has invited a series of these artists to perform their respective crafts on willing visitors in the Window on Broadway.

While the social significance of adornment has been probed by feminists and cultural critics, the focus has been on mostly the “beauty industry” rather than alternative body crafts. Constituting a visual language, adornment signifies membership, status, and locale, as well as a site of pleasure and self-identification. Furthermore, the institutions that have evolved around the practice of body crafts, such as barbershops, nail salons and beauty parlors often serve as community centers where friends and strangers share news and anecdotes or debate politics. Some traditions of body adornment are performed almost exclusively in the domestic sphere, such as Yemeni body painting which adorns the hands and legs of Yemeni women to mark special occasions like weddings.

Through audience participation, Corporeal Crafts invites visitors to engage in an expanded lexicon of artistic practice that encompasses the physical and sensual as well as the intellectual.

Isabel Venero, Curatorial Intern
Public Programs

Colliding Worlds
A series of discussions organized for *A Labor of Love* by The New Museum of Contemporary Art in collaboration with the American Craft Museum.

**Distinctions and Beyond**
Monday, January 29, 1996
6:30 p.m.-8:30 p.m.
at the American Craft Museum, 40 West 55th St.
Artists, critics, and museum professionals explore the complex interrelationships among folk, craft, and fine art discourses with April Kingsley, curator at the American Craft Museum, and others. Free with Museum admission.

**Tied to Tradition**
Thursday, February 1, 1996
6:30 p.m.-8:30 p.m.
at The New Museum of Contemporary Art
Artists and cultural critics discuss traditions of folk, craft, "outsider," and fine art with Joanne Cubbs, curator of folk art at the High Museum; Michael Cummings, artist and quilt maker; Harryette Mullen, cultural critic and professor of English at UCLA; Joanna Osburn-Bigfeather, curator of fine art and director of the American Indian Community House Gallery/Museum. Tickets $7 general, $5 students, seniors, members. Tickets sold in advance at the Admission Desk during Museum hours; no reservation or ticket orders by phone.

Workshops

**Doll Workshops for Adults**
Saturdays, February 10 and 24, 1996
12:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.
at The New Museum of Contemporary Art
For *A Labor of Love*, multimedia artists Lisa Bradley and Larry Krone conduct workshops using found and personal objects. Workshop participants are requested to bring in small objects for doll making. Free with Museum admission. Reservations only.

**Educators' Workshops**
March 9, 10:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.
at The New Museum of Contemporary Art
March 31, 10:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.
at the Jewish Museum, 1109 5th Ave.
April 21, 10:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.
at The New Museum of Contemporary Art
Curator of Education Brian Goldfarb and teachers from the Museum's High School Arts Program facilitate workshops with a selection of artists from *A Labor of Love*. Free with Museum admission. For reservations or more information, call the Education Department, (212) 219-1222.

Corporeal Crafts in the Window on Broadway
A series of body crafts performed for (and on) willing visitors. Free.

**Nail Art**
by Nails & Designs by Gee Gee & Co., Inc.
Saturday, January 20, 1996
12:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.

**Razor haircuts**
by Astor Place Hairstylists
Saturday, February 17, 1996
1:00 p.m.-6:00 p.m.

**Artist Talk**
Artist Liza Lou talks about her beaded *Kitchen*.
Saturday, January 20, 1996
1:00 p.m.-2:00 p.m.
Free with Museum admission

The New Museum of Contemporary Art
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New York, NY 10012
Information (212) 219-1355
Offices (212) 219-1222

Hours
Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday:
12:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.; Saturday: 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m. free; Monday and Tuesday: closed.

Admission
$4.00 general; $5.00 artists, students, seniors; Members and children under 12, free.

Directions
Subway: Lexington Ave. line (#6) to Spring St. or Bleecker St.; Broadway line (N/R) to Prince St.; 8th Ave. line (A/C/E) to Spring St.; 6th Ave. line (B/D/Q/F) to Broadway/Lafayette. Bus: #1/5/6/21 to Houston St. or Broadway.

Group Visits
Guided group visits are available for adults and students grades 7 through 12.

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Front cover:
Liza Lou *Kitchen*, 1991-95 (detail)
beads, plaster, wood and other materials

Nole Giuliani *Untitled (shoes)*, 1990
Dried banana peels, red thread, myrrh resin
Photo credit: Paul Boyer