

# ARTISTS PROJECTS

In 1986, The New Museum began lengthy discussions in-house and with its Artists Advisory Board concerning the nature of exhibitions. Inspired by the desire to expand the Museum's boundaries both physically and conceptually beyond the realm of traditional exhibition formats, these discussions asked a variety of questions, such as: "Instead of doing 'exhibitions,' what if the Museum focused on ideas, events, and situations?" From these discussions came a letter, sent to nearly two hundred artists, asking them to submit proposals for "experimental and provocative projects...which would utilize the Museum's space and resources in challenging ways." The guidelines were deliberately vague; for instance, the project could be of any duration, or it could be a collaboration involving individuals from communities and fields other than the art world. In response, almost fifty proposals were received, and many have been scheduled within the next eighteen months. Thus, The New Museum is proud and pleased to inaugurate a new and ongoing program, "Artists Projects," with the following events and programs initiated by Stephen Taylor Woodrow, Art Parts and May Stevens.

## THE LIVING PAINTINGS

Installation by Stephen Taylor Woodrow  
February 3-14

"The Living Paintings," a piece by four British artists under the auspices of Stephen Taylor Woodrow, has reinstituted the tradition of the *tableau vivant* in a contemporary context.

This is their first installation in the United States, and consists of the artists, entirely painted (including matching contact lenses) and altogether silent, hanging high up on The New Museum's main exhibition gallery walls for the entire time it is open to the public. Part theater, part performance, part "pure" painting taken to its (il)logical extreme, "The Living Paintings" plays with the interstices between reality and illusion, dramatically underscoring the fact that both are variable constructs.

In other installations members of the group have hung immobile from the walls of public spaces (including parks and shopping centers) in or adjacent to a number of British art organizations, remaining there for up to five hours at a stretch. They move only to be fed and, on occasion, to reach out speechlessly to greet or otherwise physically interact with a startled viewer.

Certainly this kind of work lends itself to being seen as "gimmicky," a latter day attempt to *épater les bourgeois*. And depending on who's doing the looking, this seems a perfectly logical response to seeing a number of people thus deployed. However, anyone interested in the function of museums in relation to the "public" (an elusive, hybrid being whose homogeneous character is entirely illusory) might see Taylor Woodrow's work as a perfect bellwether for the art of our own time. This is a case where

the artists, themselves admittedly curious to find out what it feels like to be a work of art, are able to garner an immediate response from the viewers—and even contest it.

In fact, "The Living Paintings" holds the viewer's attention for longer than most "inanimate" works of art do, since the accepted hierarchy between viewer and object is subverted and redefined. The viewer generally is considered the active, "knowing" subject, who determines the amount of time spent engaged with the work and his or her own response to it. The work's response to the viewer is, on the other hand, generally not an issue. Here, however, the terms of the interaction have changed.

As soon as it is discovered that the object being viewed is alive, then we, as viewers, feel ourselves to be equally the objects of the work's viewing. We are being observed in the act of observing, therefore the nature of our observation is drastically changed.

This rupture with one of the inviolate rules of the museum or gallery space, that of



*The Living Paintings*, detail. (Photo: Action-Plus, London.)

the fixed active/passive relationship between the work and the audience, challenges the way that meaning is created. Meaning is now interactive rather than reactive, fluctuating rather than fixed.

In this sense "The Living Paintings" may well be the perfect postmodern post-holiday greeting. Composed equally of nightmare and daydream, hallucination and vision, entertainment and critique, it is an allegory of our times. Each configuration of the piece, each event or movement that takes place within the framework of the "painting," each interaction between artist and viewer doubles in on itself, creating a densely textured, variable arena in which anything can, and does, happen.

**Marcia Tucker**  
Director

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## ONE PLUS OR MINUS ONE

Installation by May Stevens  
February 19-April 3

May Stevens began her career as a painter in the early 1950s, but as happened with so many women artists of her generation (Louise Bourgeois, Sylvia Sleigh, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Ringgold, Nancy Spero, Ida Applebroog), she was "discovered" only in the mid-1970s. Discovered, however, is the wrong word; young, usually male, artists are discovered. "Emerged" might be more appropriate, but this is also one of those art world clichés reserved for the young, often male artist. Perhaps in Stevens's case, it was more a matter of self-discovery—that journey so many took in the 1960s, which led to a new awareness of art as something not separate from everyday life. But this isn't it either; for Stevens was a committed "political artist" already in the 1950s, and as a socialist was well-versed in matters of art and politics. Her journey of self-discovery (a naive concept, anyway) had begun long before the great days of 1968.

Artists such as May Stevens "discovered" themselves and each other in the early 1970s within the arms of the Women's Movement. They "emerged" not merely as individuals but as a collectivity, not thanks to curators, critics and dealers but thanks to their own efforts. It was not so much a matter of self-discovery but of pushing-out, forming alliances, assuming responsibility for one's own life and work and the construction and reception of that life and work—self-determination rather than self-discovery. As Susan Griffin has observed:

Whether we separated ourselves entirely from men or not, we had succeeded in making a separate movement which had the flavour of a separate place, a nation, a world.... But above all we had created for

ourselves a measure of independence, a culture within a culture that allows us to question all that we were taught, and to think in new ways about the world.<sup>1</sup>

And as Stevens recently remarked:

I was working on the Big Daddy paintings at the time the Women's Movement began in New York, around 1970, 1971. This was a series directly critical of the U.S. war in Vietnam. When some women already active in the Movement saw these paintings they called them anti-patriarchal. I had always called them anti-establishment. So we made common cause.<sup>2</sup>

May Stevens's socialism and feminism began to coalesce specifically, overtly, obviously, in 1976 with a page-piece, *Two Women*, produced for the first issue of *Heresies* magazine, published in 1977. There she juxtaposed for the first time images of Polish/German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), a woman of Jewish descent who devoted her life (and death) to the struggle for socialism, and of her mother, Alice Stevens (1895-1985), a woman of Scottish-Irish heritage who raised a family in the working class suburbs of Boston and then lived out her life in hospitals and nursing homes, "eating the food, waiting for change, forgetting more each day, sliding toward a slimmer consciousness, slipping softly away." This conjunction of two lives became, a few years later (in 1980), a now classic artist's book, *Ordinary. Extraordinary*. It is, Stevens explained, "an artist's book examining and documenting the mark of a political woman and marking the life of a woman whose life would otherwise be unmarked." The weaving together, not in any harmonious fashion but discontinuously, fragmented, abruptly, of these two women's lives, both ordinary and extraordinary, occupied Stevens for nearly a decade, resulting in a large body of work which is remarkably diverse, varied and heterogeneous to the extreme.<sup>3</sup>

In Stevens's latest project, *One Plus Or Minus One*, Alice Stevens is absent, and Rosa Luxemburg, a leader in the Social Democratic Party, steps into the center, heroically and tragically. Two enormous photographs are placed nearly side by side, billboard-like. In one, captioned "The Second International," Rosa is a single woman among men, attending the Congress of the Second International in Amsterdam in 1904 as a delegate from Germany and Poland. In the other, labelled "Eden Hotel," she is absent, "replaced" by a waitress also in the company of men—the murderers of Rosa Luxemburg and her colleague Karl Liebknecht—celebrating the day after the heinous event (January 15, 1919).



May Stevens, *One Plus or Minus One*.  
Sketch for "Eden Hotel," 1987, mixed media, 6 x 9-1/2".

In the initial "sketch" for this project, the two photographs were unaltered and simply juxtaposed, accompanied by a series of questions; for instance, "What is the relationship of the woman to the men, in the photograph on the left; in the photograph on the right?" At this stage, the work, in certain ways, was a continuation of the "Ordinary. Extraordinary" series; that is, two women's lives juxtaposed—Rosa's and an anonymous waitress, who was a kind of stand-in for Stevens's late mother, Alice. In the final version, the photographs have changed. They have been stylized; each is more muted, darker, pointillist, and the questions have been eliminated as "too obvious." In place of the latter is substituted a text, which states in part: "A woman within or in juxtaposition to a patriarchal system; ...Presence, absence, substitution, proportion, quota, power, powerlessness." The work is not only a juxtaposition of two women's lives (in fact, as would be expected, the waitress now seems almost implicated in the crime), but rather a re-examination of history from a socialist-feminist perspective, designed for today: "Rosa Luxemburg flared across the European dark like a meteor, an aberration. Her murder restored the usual dark. The waitress brings her tray. The usual faces look out. Order is restored in Berlin. In Chile. In El Salvador."

Very recently, claims have been made for Stevens's work of the last decade to have negotiated a path between both first and second generation feminism, and modernism and postmodernism. For example, Patricia Mathews observed that "Stevens has redefined the meaning and nature of traditional narrative structure," and "the complexity of composition with each work...often reveals characteristic Postmodern techniques of disruption, disunity, and discontinuity."<sup>4</sup>

I have no intention of denying Stevens's "innovations," nor her position within the feminist community. But I do wonder why

her recent critics are so desirous to place her so firmly in the postmodern camp. The evolution of *One Plus Or Minus One*, for example, reveals in many ways a classical modernist. That is, in its earliest manifestation as described above, it was intensely didactic, a work of conceptual agitprop, or as Stevens originally described it, possessing "an aura of detection, of clues, of murder...." In its final version, it is more

"May Stevens;" it possesses that signature style that we have come to recognize as hers: in Lisa Tickner's words, "provisional forms of coherence in the patterns of darks and lights, in an implied narrative sequence, in the nostalgia common to old letters, fashions, and faded photographs."<sup>5</sup> It is more a part of the oeuvre; it is more fixed (and recognizable) as a work of art; it is, in a word, "modern."

My point is not to deny May Stevens her place within the postmodern canon (her sympathy to both theory and practice is well-known), but merely to call for a more precise application of theory—an appeal not to academicize a work, a career, a life. What is significant to me is not May Stevens's relationship to postmodernism but how she has made her way, in a career that spans almost forty years, through the enormous pressures of life in a so-called community which thrives on polemics; which does not recognize and encourage difference; which is racist, sexist, and classist; which is all too often heartbreakingly silent. What I admire about Stevens's work is the devotion contained therein—to commitment, to progressive politics, to painting, to women, and finally, to history as something more and less than the sum of its parts. Esther Parada has observed:

How do women enter history? In whose words, whose images, under whose editorial knife? The works presented [those of May Stevens, Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly, Linn Underhill and Parada]...create a verbal/visual collage intended to examine the construction of public memory. Each in its own way questions the manner in which images are made, selected and circulated to form our consciousness of women's lives.<sup>6</sup>

What is significant to me is not the difference between "the nihilist and sensationalist stance of Salle, Fischl, Mariani, and Chia" and the "totally other intention" of Stevens's work.<sup>7</sup> Rather, it is Stevens's and others like hers and not like hers. For like



"Red Rosa" and Alice Stevens, women such as May Stevens are not ordinary but extraordinary.

## William Olander

Curator

### NOTES

1. Susan Griffin, *Made from this Earth*, New York, 1982, p. 11.
2. Juliet Steyn and May Stevens, "Another America," *Fires*, Spring 1987, p. 26.
3. See the exhibition catalogue *May Stevens: Ordinary. Extraordinary, A Summation 1977-1984*, Boston University Art Gallery, 1984, and Josephine Withers, "Revisioning Our Foremothers: Reflections on the Ordinary. Extraordinary Art of May Stevens," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. XIII, Fall 1987, pp. 485-512.
4. Patricia Mathews, "A Dialogue of Silence: May Stevens' Ordinary. Extraordinary, 1977-1986," *Art Criticism*, Vol. III, Fall 1987, p. 35 and p. 37.
5. Lisa Tickner, "May Stevens," in *May Stevens: Ordinary. Extraordinary, A Summation 1977-1984*, n.p.
6. Esther Parada, "Women's Vision Extends the Map of Memory," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. XXVI, Winter 1987, p. 196.
7. Patricia Mathews, p. 40.

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## NITELIFE

Three evenings of new and experimental performance

April 7-9 • Special Museum Hours: 9-12PM

Even eighteen months ago, no one would have believed it. There were too many, and another opened, it seemed, almost every week. They had names like "Civilian Warfare," "B Side," "Fun," and "Cash." These were the now-defunct galleries of New York's East Village, a major component of that phenomenon most often described as a bohemian Renaissance taking place in the "slums" of the Lower East Side. The galleries were often linked to clubs—Limbo, 8 B.C., Pyramid—which provided like venues for performers, which were not available in the so-called mainstream. The clubs, and what was happening in them, were often the focus of the media, some of which were exclusively committed to the East Village scene (the original *East Village Eye* and *N.Y. Talk*). And then, like a clock out of order, it just stopped. As Michael Musto wrote last year in *The Village Voice* (April 28, 1987):

The pained wail of nightlife right now merely echoes all the arts it brings together. Musicians without recording contracts have to open their own clubs just to have a place to develop a sound to get recording contracts; Soho losers who clamored to get their work into East Village galleries are now whiting out the words 'East Village' from their resumes; and while fashion isn't in as bad a way as the other art forms,

it's reached the point where anyone wearing designer solid black isn't laughed out of town anymore.

I am not writing an obituary of the East Village because, of course, it's not really dead, it has just gone elsewhere—to Soho and points uptown. I possess no nostalgia for the scene, never having been a devoted participant and never naive (or willful) enough to believe in a new bohemia without recognizing its complicity with the gentrification of a neighborhood which was originally and predominantly working class. Rather, I refer to the death of the East Village merely as a metaphorical reference point for the Museum's project, ironically called "Nitelife." For we too are implicated in the rise and fall of various cultural phenomena in subtle and complex ways.

On the one hand, by presenting "Nitelife," a project devoted to new and experimental "live art," the Museum is fulfilling its role quite neatly as an institution. That is, it is appropriating and validating as officially "avant-garde" activity which was previously and primarily subcultural (there were certainly authentic subcultural forms developed within and marketed by the East Village phenomenon). It introduces this activity with much fanfare into the mainstream and makes it palatable, no matter what happens, to its largely middle class audience.

On the other hand, long before the East Village became the site of a Montmartre-style *la bohème*, art spaces, like The New Museum, were the only available locales for the kind of "live art" which became the staple of clubs and discos. Few of these, however, with the exception of P.S. 122, are willing any longer to present new work which has not already been validated in another arena—Karen Finley, for instance, plays the Kitchen only after several years on the club circuit; Eric Bogosian plays the Public Theater after years of performing in art spaces and colleges around the country; or Ethyl Eichelberger plays Lincoln Center only after years in repertory with the late Charles Ludlum's Ridiculous Theater Company. Without the downtown clubs as venues (the Pyramid is one of the few left), the opportunities are slim, to say the least. One of the reasons that current art activity is so focused on the traditional commodity forms of painting and sculpture is that few artists are willing to pursue a career devoted to ephemeral art in an era clearly unsympathetic and nonsupportive. Thus, in classic fashion, an organization such as The New Museum can still function as a genuine "alternative" by presenting, with its tongue self-consciously in its cheek, a temporary home for a project like "Nitelife."

## William Olander

Curator

## MUSEUM NOTIONS

An installation by Art Parts  
February 3-April 24

The New Museum is pleased to present "Museum Notions," a unique store created specifically by Art Parts for our members and viewers. We know you will enjoy this remarkable collection of items fabricated especially for the contemporary art lover. Affordably priced, these special objects, apparel and ornaments are well within the reach of any budget: you can become a contemporary art collector or tap "Museum Notions" to sizeably—and economically—augment the art you already own.

Art Parts—artist Diana Shobrys—is uniquely qualified to tastefully provide a store in a museum setting. Art Parts understands good taste, establishing an "Office of Aesthetic Appeals" in 1984 to educate the public regarding aesthetic regulations, publishing the "Chicago Aesthetic Code" and issuing "Style Permits" and "Violations." For Chicago's Randolph Street Gallery, Art Parts created a wholly-owned subsidiary to sell "Aesthetic Assurance Policies" to the public. Appropriately located in a booth at the successful and art-filled 1985 Chicago International Art Exposition, Art Parts salespeople provided coverage for any aesthetic choices, an "Aesthetic Assurance Certificate," suitable for framing, and "Seals of Quality Aesthetic Assurance" which could be affixed to art items. More recently, Art Parts organized an "Amazing Offer for Artists Only." This installation, part of Ed and Nancy Kienholz's "Chicago Art Show Gallery" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, offered instant, personalized exhibition catalogues, complete with computer-generated, individualized essays.

In order to establish a more readily identifiable image for The New Museum, Art Parts has designed a Culture Vulture, emblazoned on items to be sold at "Museum Notions." Just as the Metropolitan Museum of Art has its cat, and the New York Public Library its lions, The New Museum will have a mascot. But rather than an art object from our collection, or statuary guarding the entrance,

The New Museum's Culture Vulture stands for much more—a symbol for the rapacious and predatory appetite of the contemporary art scene, as well as a nudge at the Museum itself for its role in the promotion and validation of the contemporary art commodity.

"Museum Notions" knows it will be difficult to compete with the substantially larger and more prestigious stores at the Met and MoMA. Yet, rather than knocking off beloved and revered masterpieces, "Museum Notions" hopes to offer up-to-the-moment reproductions of contemporary artworks, the originals themselves mass-produced, and a range of newly-commissioned objects. Please come and buy a key-chain, T-shirt, soap or selection of fine jewelry—these tasteful and classy art items make great gifts—and celebrate Art Parts debut in New York, art capital of the world. Your purchases will also aid The New Museum in its quest to exhibit and document the art of our time.

**Lynn Gumpert**  
Senior Curator

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## Artist Biographies

### STEPHEN TAYLOR WOODROW

Stephen Taylor Woodrow was born in 1960 in Kent, England. He has been creating and touring with performance works since 1980. Woodrow is currently performance-artist-in-residence at South Hill Park, Bracknell, England.

### MAY STEVENS

May Stevens was born in 1924 in Boston, Massachusetts. She began exhibiting in 1951 and has had several one-person shows. Stevens currently lives and works in New York.

### ART PARTS (DAINA SHOBRYS)

Daina Shobrys was born in Chicago in 1952. Since 1980, she has created installations, special arts projects and publications in the Chicago area. Shobrys currently lives and works in Chicago, Illinois.

### WOLFGANG STAEHLE

Wolfgang Staehle was born in 1950 in Stuttgart, West Germany. He moved to New York in 1976. He has exhibited video works nationally and internationally since 1980 and currently lives and works in New York City.

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## REQUIEM

Video Installation by Wolfgang Staehle

In Wolfgang Staehle's video installations, tiny portable monitors are paradoxically fixed in position, posited as sculptural objects. Camouflaged "surround sound" audio equipment, a hidden video transmitter and lighting work to map out the area of the gallery itself, defining it in part as the airspace of audio and visual transmission. Often anachronistic in relation to one another, the various components combine to produce a system of references and reflections that is both a closed circuit (into which the viewer steps) and an open set, characterized by disjunction, dysfunction and incongruity.

Staehle appropriates image sequences and soundtracks from other historical periods as well as from other media (broadcast television, silent film, painting, the phonograph). Across the screens, snippets of borrowed imagery repeat incessantly, derailed from the meaning conferred on them by their original context. Modern life materializes in this body of work as a series of symptomatic tics, at once meaningless and meaning laden. Identifiable in terms of the media and periods from which they have been dislodged, shards of action and of the social structure remain stranded from, and yet compulsively eloquent of, their history.

The monitors miniaturize and domesticate the appropriated imagery. The darkened gallery, however, and accompanying silence or classical music soundtrack elevate the fragments to a consecrated status. They achieve the condition of the relic, with the monitor as reliquary or vitrine.

In "Requiem," his installation for The New Museum, Staehle places 'painting' on video display. Mounted on a tripod and anchored by cable to the Die Hard automotive battery on which it runs, a single monitor broadcasts a bold, static pattern in the shape of a cross. As Brahms's own Requiem fills the dimly lit gallery, geometric abstraction's monumental canvas is reduced and rendered obsolete by video technology. Produced on a color monitor, the black-and-white figure would seem to contradict the fundamental properties of video, and to speak only ironically of the end of painting. By working quite literally against the grain of his medium, however, Staehle discovers a link between the theoretical intentions of modern painting and television's appeal, a link that in turn enables the insertion of a critical distance between these two mediums, on the one hand, and the concerns of video as art, on the other.<sup>1</sup>

The pattern on the monitor in "Requiem" is generated with the wipe function of a special effects editor, a function used for achieving a transition between scenes or

shots. Here, the transition remains unresolved, arrested mid-way, and the only 'shot' shown to the viewer is that of the function itself. The image on screen, however, is in fact not simply static, but 'live': transmitted and broadcast second by second, dot by dot. Endlessly recreated by the electronics, the arrested video 'wipe' approaches a place outside time, a place of the unchanging perpetual present. Painting's quasi-transcendental 'frozen moment' is recollected, and re-presented under video, while video's tendency to collapse time into the present tense is placed in perspective.<sup>2</sup>

The viewer's absorption by the field or screen, to the neglect of the frame and its surroundings, is one of modern painting's most vaunted aims. It is also, in an altered form, one of television's most infamous, alarming features. Through the monotony of the image, the imposition of Brahms's Requiem and other ambient factors, Staehle interrupts the fascination exerted by the electronic imagery. The absorptive impulse is invited by the screen, but also deflected, tripped up. This particular perpetual present finds itself embedded in real time, a 'frozen moment' that runs on batteries and balances between an ironic, and a respectful, attitude towards its past. It is in the space surrounding the monitor, where the various elements converge and collide, that Staehle's installation engages its audience, urging a peripatetic response to the spectacle of modernity, to history on (and the history of) T.V.

**Laura Trippi**

Curatorial Intern

## NOTES

1. On the relationship between broadcast television and video art, see David Ross, "Truth or Consequences: American Television and Video Art," in *Video Culture*, edited by John G. Hanhardt (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Smith Books, 1987), pp. 167-178.

2. On the collapse of temporality into a perpetual present as characteristic of video, see Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in *Video Culture*, *ibid.*, pp. 178-192; and John-Paul Fargier, "The Hidden Side of the Moon" in *The Luminous Image* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1984), pp. 36-45.

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The individual views expressed in the exhibitions and publications are not necessarily those of the Museum.