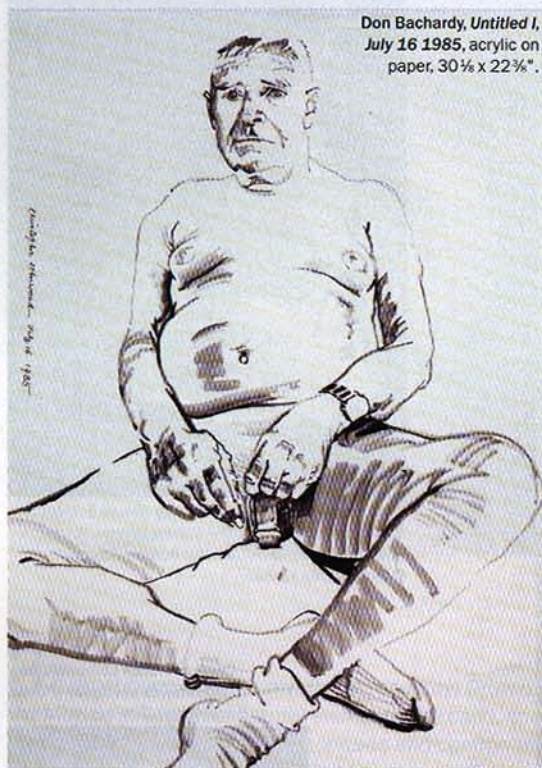




Matthew Higgs

MATTHEW HIGGS, A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO *ARTFORUM*, IS AN ARTIST AND CURATOR AND THE DIRECTOR OF WHITE COLUMNS, NEW YORK'S OLDEST ALTERNATIVE SPACE, WHICH WILL CELEBRATE ITS FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY IN 2010. IN 2009, HE ORGANIZED LUCAS SAMARAS'S EXHIBITION "PARAXENA" FOR THE GREEK PAVILION AT THE VENICE BIENNALE.

1 Don Bachardy (Cheim & Reid, New York) Bachardy's wrenching, nearly life-size drawings of Christopher Isherwood, his partner for more than thirty years, were made shortly before the celebrated writer succumbed to cancer in 1986. Simultaneously portraits of life and reflections on the imminence of death, Bachardy's rarely seen and profoundly observed images of the ailing Isherwood are, to my mind, among the most poignant and emotionally complex works of the twentieth century.



Don Bachardy, *Untitled I*, July 16 1985, acrylic on paper, 30 1/2 x 22 3/4".



James Castle, *untitled* (girl in green dress with collaged printed-paper legs), n.d., cardboard, paper, parchment paper, newsprint, string, watercolor, 21 x 10 1/2".

2 James Castle (Philadelphia Museum of Art) Organized by Ann Percy, this exhilarating retrospective provided a unique opportunity to fully consider one of America's most idiosyncratic self-taught artists. Castle (1899–1977) was born profoundly deaf; he had little schooling and no artistic training. Working with found and improvised materials—a combination of soot and spit was his preferred medium—he created drawings and constructions mirroring his everyday life in rural Idaho. As a sustained visual account of a time and place, they are remarkable for their keenly perceived particularity; as an independently developed body of work, they are staggering in their ingenuity.

4 Ree Morton (Generali Foundation, Vienna, and the Drawing Center, New York) Over the past decade, Morton's genuinely eccentric work has slowly been coming into focus—a trend culminating this year, when it was the subject of two compelling and complementary survey exhibitions in Vienna and New York, the former (curated by Sabine Folie) focusing on her rarely seen installations and sculptural tableaux, the latter (curated by João Ribas) on her expanded approach to drawing. We can only wonder how her art might have evolved had she not died prematurely—in a car accident in 1977, at the age of forty—but the work that she did complete in her short career is nothing short of perfect.

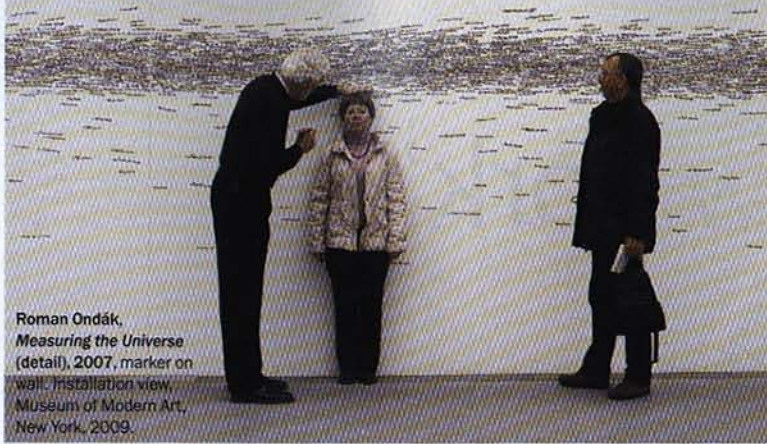


Ree Morton, *The Plant that Heals May Also Poison*, 1974, enamel, glitter, lightbulbs on wood and plaster, 46 x 64".

Throbbing Gristle (pictured: Genesis P-Orridge) at Le Poisson Rouge, New York, April 17, 2009. Photo: Christopher Baker.



3 Throbbing Gristle in concert In April, Throbbing Gristle arrived in New York to play their first American concerts since they disbanded in 1981. Their three radically different performances (two at the Brooklyn Masonic Temple, one at the West Village's Le Poisson Rouge) traversed their recorded output, from caustic post-punk anthems like "Discipline" to a complete rendition of their 1980 sound track for Derek Jarman's *In the Shadow of the Sun*. After they had played one set at the Masonic Temple with the house lights on—a strangely disconcerting act that engendered considerable audience unease—it was clear that the group, famously denounced by a British politician in 1976 as "the wreckers of civilization," had lost none of their ability to provoke and entertain.



Roman Ondák, *Measuring the Universe* (detail), 2007, marker on wall. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009.

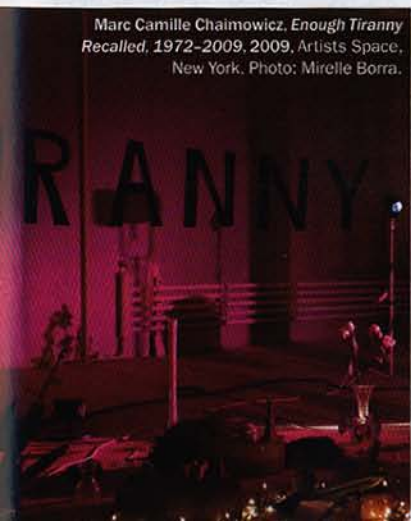
5 Roman Ondák (Czech Republic and Slovak Republic pavilion, Venice Biennale, and Museum of Modern Art, New York) In Venice, Ondák brought the Giardini into the relatively pristine confines of Kathrin Rhomberg's Czech and Slovak pavilion, creating a seamless transition between exterior and interior. At MOMA, working with curators Klaus Biesenbach and Jenny Schlenzka, he offered the latest manifestation of *Measuring the Universe*, 2007, a dense wall drawing created from the accumulated inscriptions of visitors' heights and first names—a collective self-portrait of sorts. Ondák's deadpan, poetic work is both charming and charged, an unlikely combination that could easily fall flat in less sensitive hands. And it is also, to judge by the enthusiastic reception of these projects, that rare thing: genuinely popular conceptual art.

Niki de Saint Phalle, *tir neuf trous* (Shooting Nine Holes), 1964, paint, plaster, and plastic on plywood, 27 1/4 x 20 1/4".



7 "Target Practice: Painting Under Attack 1949–78" (Seattle Art Museum) "Target Practice," curated by Michael Darling, was an astute exhibition that considered a range of challenges to painting's hallowed status in the postwar decades. As such, the galleries were filled with paintings and paintinglike objects that had been subjected (by Iain Baxter, Marcel Broodthaers, Lucio Fontana, Asger Jorn, Lee Lozano, and Niki de Saint Phalle, among others) to any number of indignities—tearing, burning, shooting, hammering, and other defacements and defilements—all reverberating with the social upheavals of the era in which they were carried out.

9 Marc Camille Chaimowicz (Artists Space, New York) A revisitation of a work originally staged in London in 1972, the same year Artists Space opened its doors, Chaimowicz's *Enough Tyranny Recalled*, 1972–2009 was an immersive installation that inaugurated the program of the venerable NYC nonprofit's incoming director, Stefan Kalmár. Chaimowicz's Proustian entanglement with his own legacy set up a conversation between the work's past, present, and potential future(s): a pertinent dialogue for this alternative space at the threshold of a new chapter in its history.



6 Basil Wolverton (Gladstone Gallery, New York) Gladstone's inspired alternative to the typical guest-curated summer group show was a survey of drawings by legendary underground comic-book artist Wolverton (1909–1978). Assembled by Cameron Jamie, himself no stranger to the subterranean, this was a timely, incisive homage to a hugely influential figure in comics and postwar American art alike. Jamie, for one, tenderly acknowledges him as "my Picasso"; Peter Saul, Mike Kelley, and Ed Ruscha, among many others, have also long acknowledged the impact of *Mad* magazine's maddest visionary.



Basil Wolverton, *Smacker*, ca. 1950, ink on paper, 11 1/2 x 7 1/4". © Glenn Bray and Wolverton Estate.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 2008, color photograph, 61 3/4 x 60".

8 Cindy Sherman (Metro Pictures, New York) I first encountered Sherman's work in 1982, when I came across an issue of ZG magazine with the artist posing as a young Marilyn Monroe on the cover. In the ensuing years, the experience of getting older in parallel with Sherman's characters has been uncanny. In her latest works, among the best of a storied career, her subjects—here, subtly grotesque ladies of leisure—appear finally resigned to, if not exactly thrilled about, their encroaching mortality.

10 "In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960–1976"

(Museum of Modern Art, New York) Focusing on a group of artists associated with legendary Amsterdam publication and gallery Art & Project, this exhibition, organized by Christophe Cherix, was a refreshingly unorthodox account of Conceptual art. Among the highlights was a substantial selection of works by the Los Angeles triumvirate Bas Jan Ader, Ger van Elk, and Allen Ruppersberg, as well as what is now my favorite five-second-long film: Jan Dibbets's deceptively slight *Louverdrape* (Vertical Blinds), 1971, a 16-mm loop showing a single 360-degree rotation of vertical window blinds that provides the viewer with the most fleeting glimpse of the world outside. □



Ger van Elk, *Paul Klee—Um den Fisch*, 1926 (Paul Klee—Around Fish, 1926) (detail), 1970, eight color slides projected on wooden table with cloth, 27 1/2 x 26 3/4 x 21 1/4". From "In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960–1976," Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009.