



# Surveying New Work: 1987 to Now

APSARA DIQUINZIO

Twenty-three years after its launch, SFMOMA's *New Work* exhibition series continues to be integral to the museum's multifaceted dialogue with innovative and thought-provoking artists. Initiated in 1987 by then-director John R. Lane and its founding patron Collectors Forum, the series set out to promote "recent work by both emerging and established artists that has not been given wide attention in the Bay Area."<sup>1</sup> In instituting the program, SFMOMA formalized its commitment to regularly showcasing new work by living artists, joining institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, the Berkeley Art Museum, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D. C., among others, which developed similar project-based exhibitions devoted to art of the present time.<sup>2</sup> Rather than providing an exhaustive account, this essay offers thematic glimpses of the *New Work* series, which to date has produced fifty-one diverse exhibitions.

Ambitious in his vision for the series, Lane hoped to present half a dozen exhibitions each year. In its first five years the series fell shy of the desired count but nevertheless gave rise to an impressive twenty shows. This defining early momentum was no doubt also a result of John Caldwell's 1989 arrival as curator of painting and sculpture. In Caldwell's mere three-and-a-half-year tenure he organized twelve *New Work* exhibitions, including projects with Georg Herold, Susana Solano, and Christopher Wool. A second vital phase occurred from 1994 through 2000 under the charge of Gary Garrels, who organized important exhibitions with artists Andrea Zittel, Glenn Ligon, and Kara Walker. A four-year lull followed Garrels's departure (he would return in 2008), and Madeleine Grynsztejn revived the series in 2004, this time focusing it on artists at earlier stages of their careers and appointing assistant curators of painting and sculpture to organize the shows. Since its revival the series has encompassed more than fifteen exhibitions, featuring the work of nearly twenty artists.<sup>3</sup>

A characteristic feature of the series prior to 2004 was the display of new bodies of work by established artists such as Richard Hamilton, On Kawara, and Lawrence Weiner. In one significant instance, Garrels introduced new paintings and works on paper by Jasper Johns—an artist renowned for his appropriations of ordinary motifs such as flags, targets, and maps. Johns's 1999 show focused on a group of works referred to as the *Bridge* series.<sup>4</sup>

Notably, in this series Johns introduced the catenary—a freely hanging cord fixed at two points and shaped by the natural pull of gravity. It appeared for the first time in *Bridge* (1997), in which he affixed a simple piece of string from the painting’s lower left vertical edge to its upper right one. Over the last decade Johns has continuously revisited the motif. It is fitting that the *Bridge* series debuted in San Francisco: the catenary curve, a form that denotes connection, is typically associated with suspension bridges, which are defining attributes of the Bay Area landscape. For Johns, an artist who has consistently probed the “relations between things,”<sup>5</sup> the motif has assumed a poignant place in his oeuvre and embodies his ability to build associative relationships into which viewers become enfolded.<sup>6</sup>

In 1991 Caldwell organized two exhibitions that likewise inaugurated important new bodies of work by artists who are now recognized as established but were not necessarily considered so at the time: Sherrie Levine and Martin Kippenberger. Levine had famously reinvigorated the strategy of appropriation (developed by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and later Johns) in the early 1980s with her rephotographed pictures by Walker Evans. Caldwell presented her now signature series of six billiard tables (see pl. 242) as well as three paintings from her *Melt Down*

series (1990), for which the artist took the average color of three specific paintings by three different (male) modernist masters (Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Piet Mondrian, and Claude Monet) and applied the composite hue to individual panels of mahogany. By using other artists’ works as “readymades” that serve as a point of departure for her own art, Caldwell notes, “Levine pays homage to these artists, while at the same time asserting that their work is available for use by other artists in whatever manner they choose.”

Kippenberger’s *New Work* exhibition radiated around a pilot’s ejection seat that continuously circled on a railroad track (pl. 329). Among the dozens of objects configured around the track was a forest of “trees” rendered out of poles and painted in trompe l’oeil to mimic bark. Enormous pills made from wood were scattered around their bases. A dumpster contained fifteen discarded paintings that were (characteristically for Kippenberger) made by someone else—in this case, the artist’s assistant, Merlin Carpenter. Kippenberger deemed the paintings failures and thus piled them up



in the bin, slashing them in the process (see pl. 245). In the background nearly forty watercolors lined one wall, depicting each of his past exhibition catalogues under a magnifying glass, exemplifying Kippenberger's predilection to recycle and survey his past work. As with Levine, appropriation is a key element of his practice; he was known to frequently quote artists like Gerhard Richter, Robert Gober, and Jeff Koons, among many others. The Austrian linguist Martin Prinzhorn characterized this tendency in the following manner: "To be sure this art is parasitical, but I wouldn't interpret it as the dismantling of anybody else's art. . . . More often than not Kippenberger even shows genuine admiration and extols praise. He takes art only as a whole and in its full range of variations, in order to 'replay' it assimilated in his own person."<sup>7</sup>

More than fifteen years later, appropriation has resurfaced as a driving strategy in the work of several younger *New Work* artists, including Lucy McKenzie, Mai-Thu Perret, and Paul Sietsema. Levine's *Knot* paintings, and specifically her frequent use of wood, served as an important inspiration for Perret's sculpture *Sylvania* (2006)—a mannequin formed out of papier-mâché and chicken wire that wears a fine, lace dress designed after Levine's plywood motif. A generation younger than Levine and Kippenberger (and two younger than Johns), McKenzie, Perret, and Sietsema perhaps reflect a synthesizing of the elder artists' work into their own, using appropriated subjects willfully, as connective devices, to reconfigure received tropes and construct layered, associative environments that propel meaning in new directions while generating a complex representational terrain for viewers to decode.

In addition to putting forward new work by established figures, the series has given a number of artists their first one-person museum exhibitions. For example, Caldwell and curator of media arts Robert Riley collaborated in 1991 to present Matthew Barney's first solo museum exhibition. It called attention to some of his earliest explorations in performance, sculpture, and video, featuring a body of work based on his childhood idols, the magician Harry Houdini and Oakland Raider Jim Otto, that would incite critical debate for many years to come. Two ambitious "multi-plex" projects, *Transsexualis* and *REPRESSIA* (both from 1991) were displayed along with their attendant sculptures and videos. *Transsexualis* comprises a large walk-in cooler that preserves a weightlifting bench slathered with petroleum jelly. A related video, *Mile High Threshold: FLIGHT with the ANAL SADISTIC WARRIOR*, follows Barney as he emerges from the cooler and traverses the walls and ceilings of a gallery while wearing only athletic shoes, a swimming cap, and a harness to which are affixed dozens of titanium screws that he uses to support his body as he moves throughout the space. The video ends with Barney's descent, a final leap from the ceiling. Another video, *DELAY OF GAME*, continues where *Mile High Threshold* ends: the artist lands on the mat, transformed into a woman wearing a glamorous white bathing suit, satin white gloves, heels, and a robe (pl. 330). Barney's behavior in both videos throws into question our received notions of gender while also recalling performative



practices initiated in the 1970s. Riley observes that in the videos “Barney’s fluid substances, video as well as materials, transformed through hot and cold, become metaphorical devotions to sex and penetration. Concepts of slippage, surrender, daredevil escape, and internal reflexivity turn obsessive and polymorphous.” Barney’s body necessarily becomes a transgressed object, invaded by both the hardware he uses to climb and the cameras that record a human subject projected into a spectacular realm of physical endurance and transfiguration. The arc of the combined videos entails a body ascending and descending in space—a motif that later became a cornerstone of the artist’s five-part *CREMASTER* cycle (1994–2002).

Gender and transgressed bodies are likewise subjects for Marilyn Minter, another artist whose inclusion in the series marked her first one-person museum exhibition.<sup>8</sup> Her slick, parodic paintings, made after her photographs, zoom in on remote zones of the female body and belie their fetishized state. Minter’s work presents bodies enduring the impositions of cultural industries that prosper from the visual consumption of the idealized female body. Her shiny, enamel surfaces mimic the glistening surfaces of cosmetic enhancements and the glossy magazine pages that reify the feminine stereotypes Minter’s work aims to unhinge. Her 2005 exhibition staged ten photorealist paintings depicting sweaty armpits, overly pierced ears, heavily made-up eyes, lipsticked mouths engorged with pearl necklaces and quail eggs, and soiled feet adorned in designer stilettos (pl. 328). Of the images Minter’s work proffers, Joshua Shirkey, the exhibition’s curator, wrote, “In place of these idealized objects, Minter shows us unruly bodies that cannot fit within our culture’s carefully drawn lines: greedy, excessive bodies that ooze and leak and are marked by too much sweat, too much makeup, too much hair, too much grime.” Minter’s exhibition subsequently became an important milestone in her thirty-year career, generating renewed national interest in her work.

Since *New Work* premiered in 1987, it has featured six Bay Area artists, beginning with Paul Kos. The Kos exhibition presented his monumental video installation *Chartres Bleu* (1986), now on permanent view at the di Rosa Preserve in Napa, California.<sup>9</sup> By then Kos had

been active for nearly twenty years and was known beyond the region for his conceptual, video, and performance-based works. *Chartres Bleu* re-creates the effects of light entering a lancet window on the south facade of Chartres Cathedral over a twenty-four-hour period. Like the gothic window, the media-sculpture conveys the story of Christ's early life in pictures; instead of depicting the subject in stained glass, however, it utilizes twenty-seven, twenty-inch television monitors, each running a twelve-minute video, that Kos turned on their sides and stacked more than fifteen feet high. The artist pointedly replaces the natural luminous source with the glow of the television monitor—a transference that signals the radical shift in mass-communication strategies over the course of seven centuries.

More recently, the series engaged the San Francisco-based sculptor Vincent Fecteau. In a marked departure from preceding *New Work* exhibitions, Fecteau opted to select a range of work from SFMOMA's collection that had rarely, if ever, been viewed before. The exhibition *Not New Work: Vincent Fecteau Selects from the Collection* yielded “new” pieces by Jess, Robert Overby, Dorothy Reid, and Christopher Wilmarth, among others. By focusing on underrepresented works of art, Fecteau endeavored to examine traditional notions of what constitutes a masterpiece and to acknowledge that the life of a museum object extends beyond what is typically seen in the galleries.

In addition to showcasing local artists, the series has exposed Bay Area audiences to the work of international artists rarely exhibited in the United States, a focus consistent with Lane's vision. In 1999 Garrels organized an exhibition with the Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo, whose works are conceived as memorials to those who have suffered from the violence issuing from her country's civil war. In her poetic, meticulously rendered objects, each moored in first-hand research, Salcedo repeatedly questions aspects of human brutality and reminds spectators of its tragic outcome. Three new sculptures from the *Unland* series (see pl. 272), each made from sectioned wood tables, were displayed in the galleries. In turning these familiar structures into delicate, haunting works of art, Salcedo asserts art's potent ability to educate and bolster us while uniting disparate cultures. In the interview in the exhibition's brochure, Salcedo states, “The silent contemplation of each viewer permits the life seen in the work to reappear. Change takes place, as if the experience of the victim were reaching out, beyond, as if making a bridge over the space between one person and another. To make this connection possible is the important thing.”

The British artist Phil Collins, another international figure introduced to San Francisco audiences by the series, also bridges politically riven communities in his work. In 2006 SFMOMA presented the second chapter of his trilogy *the world won't listen*, a moving video project that pivots around a karaoke machine the artist fabricated with musicians in Bogotá and customized to play songs from the 1980s Brit-pop band The Smiths. Each of the three locations in which he produced the work (Colombia, Turkey, and Indonesia) constituted a new chapter of the project.

Collins solicited participants in each locale, inviting “isolated bedroom devotees” to come out and sing while he recorded them. His 2005 video *dünya dinlemiyor* (a Turkish translation of the trilogy’s title) captures young men and women of Istanbul passionately animating The Smiths’ soulful lyrics in front of stock, picturesque landscapes that effectively disassociate the performers from their native surroundings. As the exhibition’s curator Jill Dawsey observes in her brochure essay, “The video serves as a potent counterrepresentation of Western stereotypes and media myths that imagine Turkey as a fundamentally anti-modern nation hindered by tradition and the ghosts of its past.” Through simple and often touching encounters, Collins’s videos complicate our understanding of the subjects and render a layered portrait not only of the individuals he documents but also of a particular demographic in various contested sites.

To date the series has produced solo exhibitions of forty-four artists—the remaining seven exhibitions were group shows. The first, *New Work: A New Generation* (1990), was organized by John Caldwell and included the work of fourteen artists—such as Katharina Fritsch, Robert Gober, and Cady Noland—whose varied practices signaled a shift he identified in modes of artistic production. Many of the pieces in this show were acquired by the museum, including Jeff Koons’s ceramic sculpture *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988; pl. 244) and Christopher Wool’s *Untitled* (1989; pl. 243). Important commissions from Andrea Zittel and Steven Phippen that were featured in solo exhibitions would also subsequently enter the collection. Indeed, the *New Work* series has played a defining role in articulating not only the breadth and character of SFMOMA’s programming but also its collection. Through this direct engagement, via exhibitions and acquisitions, with artists living and working today, SFMOMA continues to cultivate and strengthen its legacy, while presenting vital works of art that link communities and provoke reflection upon many of the most fundamental issues of our time.

## NOTES

- 1 John R. Lane, *New Work: Paul Kos, Chartres Bleu*, exh. brochure (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1987). Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from the specified exhibition’s brochure or catalogue, published by SFMOMA.
- 2 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Wadsworth Athenaeum were among the first museums in the country to organize project series showcasing contemporary art, in 1971 and 1975, respectively. When the Wadsworth’s director James Elliott later moved to the Berkeley Art Museum, he launched the MATRIX series at that institution in 1978. Since then many museums have created similar programs.
- 3 Over the course of the series’ history many exhibitions organized by other venues have been brought to SFMOMA under the *New Work* banner. This essay focuses on exhibitions organized by SFMOMA. Outside organizing venues are indicated in parentheses in the list at right.
- 4 The core of Johns’s *Bridge* series went on view at SFMOMA in the fall of 1999 and subsequently traveled to the Yale University Art Museum, New Haven, Connecticut, and the Dallas Museum of Art.
- 5 Joachim Pissarro, “Jasper Johns Bridge Paintings under Construction,” in *Jasper Johns: New Paintings and Works on Paper*, ed. Gary Garrels (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 40.
- 6 See Richard S. Field, “Chains of Meaning: Jasper John’s Bridge Paintings,” in Garrels, *Jasper Johns*, 18.
- 7 Bice Curiger, interview with Martin Prinzhorn, “Regarding: Martin Kippenberger,” *Parkett* 19 (March 1989): 104.
- 8 Other artists given their first solo museum exhibitions through the series were Dawn Fryling, Don Van Vliet, and Christopher Wool.
- 9 The exhibition was co-organized with Bruce Jenkins, director of film/video at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, who commissioned the work and authored the brochure essay. Other Bay Area artists to have solo exhibitions in the series were Rick Arnitz, Robert Bechtle, Dawn Fryling, and Don Van Vliet.

## Cite as:

APSARA DIQUINZIO, “Surveying *New Work*: 1987 to Now,” in *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: 75 Years of Looking Forward*, ed. Janet Bishop, Corey Keller, and Sarah Roberts (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 368–74. © San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. All rights reserved.