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Jaime Davidovich papers: Clippings, circa 1970-1986

Extracted on Apr-17-2024 09:42:12

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O SoHo Mio
By James Wolcott

[[image]]
James Hamilton
Robert Kushner's fashion show is one segment of "Soho Television."

Aesthetes Say the Darnedest Things

SoHo Television, broadcast Mondays on cable Channel 10, offers the creamiest names in avant-garde entertainment - John Cage, Gregory Battcock, Richard Foreman, and the ubiquitous Nam June Paik. The 13-week series is produced by Artists' Television Network, Inc., which is in turn funded by the National Endowment; it's official lofty stuff, the sort of postmodernist endeavor that keeps Calvin Tompkin's typewriter humming. Given the deafening idiocy of most commercial television, the ATN project is a small welcome counterthrust; but on its own terms the show hasn't been a revelation. SoHo Television is to lower-Manhattan bohemians what The 700 Club is to born-again Christians: a place where faith is coddled rather than challenged.

A recent segment, One Size Fits All, is a fashion show starring Robert Kushner. At the beginning, he tells the viewer, "I think of [my designs] as moving sculpture, and I'd like you to look at them that way." My eyes obediently widened. The camera scans the floor where the soft sculpture rests in neat piles and Kushner undresses, standing before us as naked as an undraped Donatello. Then, to the accompaniment of lush Muzak, he models his spring and summer line. The outfits have amusing names- "TV Sun Suit," "Homage to Sonja Heine," "Dude Ranch"- and Kushner wears each one regally, parading against a white backdrop like a drag-ballet soloist acknowledging ovations. (But with a difference: Kushner has a beard an unappealing hairy body, so when he flashes a come-hither look he has the creepy-creepy lewdness of a freak-show hermaphrodite.)

Some of the clothed have an airy iridescence, particularly his Persian line, which looks like exotic whorehouse lingerie. Other pieces, like his shimmering violet diapers, are resplendently ugly - good for a few tawdry laughs. However, as a performer Kushner is numbingly narcissistic. Even when the gear is hilarious - for example, "Cocktail Pot Lids," a hat described as "the ultimate in solar-shielding, with a ruby-red vinyl visor"- his delivery's so deadpan that the words drop like a rabbit pellers. One Size Fits All doesn't have the energy of a great comic performance; it's droopy kitsch.

Two upcoming SoHo shows are also failed comedies. Out Reach is a put-on talk show hosted by critic Gregory Battcock on "The Changing Role of the Art Museum." His guests are art-world somebodies Marcia Tucker, Dr. Judith Van Baron, and Charles Howland, who chatter like caged parrots as soon as wine-filled glasses are set before them. The program consists of three limp jokes: Howland's face is hidden by a flower display (he keeps peeking around green stalks); Battcock is more concerned about the Burgundy than the discussion ("Don't shake the sediment into the wine," he says with princely scorn); and the guests would rather chat about gift-shop merchandise than sculpture or paintings. As a comic actor, Battcock is confident and dapper-corrupt-an Artform Martin Mull- but the menagerie he presides over isn't worth even his modest talent. They're as dull as the panelists on Match Game PM (though more loquacious); and all of them Battcock included- are self-infatuated snobs. They may think they're parodying art-snob elitism but their own elitism cracks through, especially when they make museum patrons sound like snorting cattle.

Another forthcoming program sounds like the title of a Donald Barthelme



story: "Mr. Peanut Runs for Mayor." In 1975, artist Vincent Trasov donned a Mr.Peanut costume and announced his desire to serve as mayor of Vancouver. Supported by the city's art community, endorsed by William Burroughs, Trasov won 4 per cent of the vote. In this documentary, we see the candidate hitting the campaign trail in his black stovepipe hat, white gloves spats, and saucer-sized monocle. Mr. Peanut poses for pictures. Mr.Peanut hands out leaflets. Mr. Peanut tap dances on the sidewalk. There are even shots of Mr.Peanut fondling a nude woman, which look like panels from a Tijuana funny. Unfortunately, the show doesn't have the elegant simplicity of a Barthelme fable. The colors are mushy, like crushed crayons, and the editing seems to have been done by a speed freak with a bayonet. Worse, the jokes - mostly variations on the peanut theme (getting roasted, coming out of a shell, etc.) - are unworthy of a Catskills comic, and they aren't any funnier mouthed by conceptual artists. What's implicit in the other shows is explicit here: many avant-gardists are no longer interested in exploring (in Hart Crane's phrase) "new thresholds, new anatomies," but instead fashion themselves as aesthetic pranksters - licensed Fools.

Richard Foreman's two-part Out-of-theBody Travel (May 15 and 22) uses slapstick ritualistically. In this piece - created for the American Dance Festival in 1976 - girls are slapped with pillows, splashed with water. Except for an involuntary wince, they are an aesthetic rite. Pillows, faces, and books, especially books, are Foreman's favorite objects here - books are opened, stacked, used as pillows. The camera doesn't move: The TV screen becomes a cluttered picture frame, with bodies used abstractly, drained of personality, tension, eroticism. The narration consists of simple sentences that (pre-dictably) form Wittgensteinian knots. One sentence- "How did the contest go today?"- is repeated solemnly, as if it were an apple hanging from the bough of proust. Punctuating the narration are loud buzzes, sharp raps (like rimshots), the metronomic squeaks of a rocking chair; and after the tick-tock tick-tock of a clock, a voice says, "I want to replace my body into the world where it came from." Pillows. Faces. Books. Boredom. ... But I confess Foreman's boringness makes one more attentive to the nuances of Boredom. It's like watching a Fassbinder movie - The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, say- and waiting to see what new wig Margit Carstensen will emerge under. Since so little happens in Out-of-the-Body-Travel, one notices the curve of an arm, the hint of a smile. And Foreman provides one unforgettably lovely image: a dozen or so opened books on a tablecloth, the pages flipping idly in the breeze, a soft sculpture of light and shadow.

Which brings us full circle. As unaccomplished as individual programs are- I haven't even mentioned Julia Heyward's Conscious Knocks Unconscious, a doodling collage of Daliesque imagery and Patti Smith rhetoric (sort of a Video Ethiopia) - the project itself is worth supporting. Jaime Davidovich, SoHo TV's executive director, told me the series might showcase jazz and rock bands, and I suggested the B-52s, a group from Georgia whose Eno-meets-Hullabaloo! music is far more arty-adventurous than Gregory Battcock's peevishness. If SoHo Television can provide a forum for the B-52s- or Richard Hell, or the Communists- it will be doing something far more innovative than letting art-scene luminaries preen for the camera. Without some prodding, SoHo TV is in danger of becoming pure pap for now people.

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