

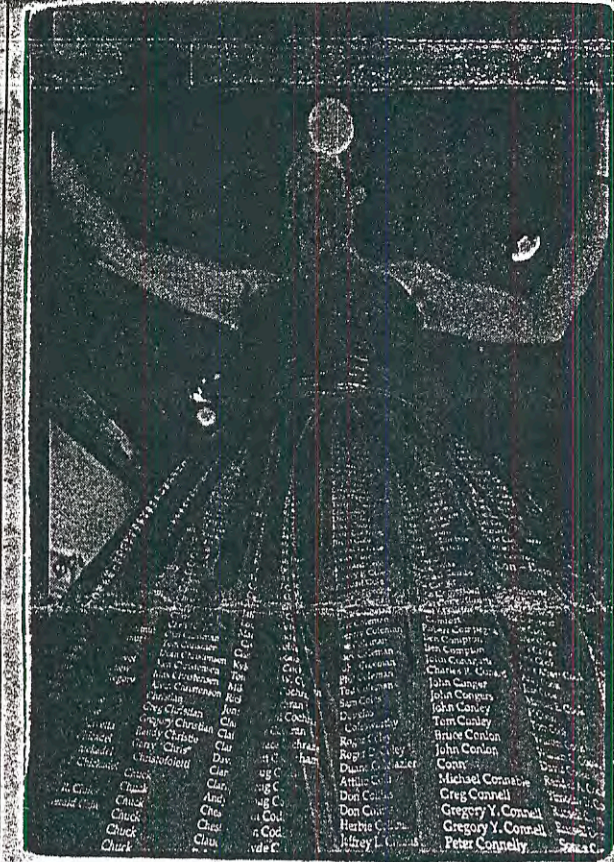
By Robert Atkins

When the not-to-be-trifled-with users at the Stonewall Inn resisted police harassment 25 years ago, here wasn't much overtly gay or lesbian art being made. The art world had only just begun to realize the giddy promise of '60s liberation, as the exuberantly varied '1969: A Year Revisited' howl at NYU's Grey Art Gallery 33 Washington Place, 998-6780) demonstrates. That year marked the exhibition debuts of Conceptual Art and Process Art, along with the birth of the alternative space movement and Judy Chicago's Feminist Art Program, two vents that would bear directly on queer art of the future. But if the ascent pluralism of the era allowed many things being out and away in your art wasn't one of them.

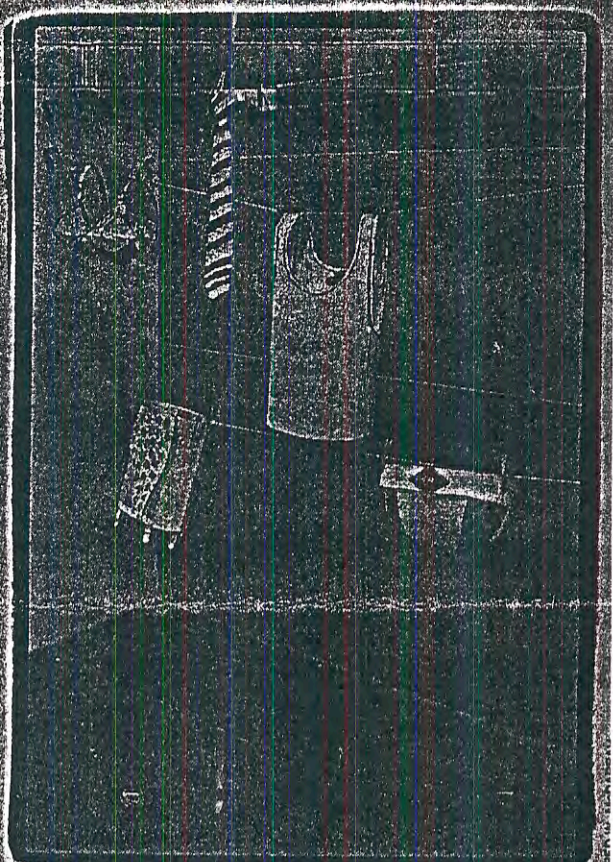
Civil rights and later liberation ruggles are a reminder that no one gives us permission to be free to take it. Not many career-minded gay and lesbian artists came out during the '70s; it wasn't until the mid '80s that AIDS finally emptied art-world closets. Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt was an exception. His "1969" environment, *the Summer Palace of Czarina Attalina*, invokes the East Village installation cum apartment he inhabited during the time he participated in the Stonewall riots. Dressed in drag as collector Ethel Hull, complete with Frank Stella earrings fashioned from the pages of *Artforum*, Lanigan-Schmidt led visitors through his brilliantly colored maze of gauzy hangings and lux liturgical objects wittily conveyed from foil and paste jewels.

Lanigan-Schmidt's drag-queen exoticism seems familiar because he operates within a tradition he's helped raise from the underground. His late, lamented contemporaries in this enterprise are the filmmaker Jack Smith and the theatrical diva Ethyl Eicherberger, three of whose gown-creations—one with foam-rubber breasts—are currently visible in their own closet at the Leslie-Lohan Gay Art Foundation. Lanigan-Schmidt also paved the way for the current crop of East Village-bred drag queen artists, such as Rupert Goldsworthy and Paul Ehlers, who are featured in **Stonewall 25: Imaginings of the Gay Past—Imagining the Future** at White Columns 54 Christopher Street, 924-2121. Their faux-naif sensibility, only one of the many approaches curator Bill Arning presents, "Imaginings" mainly showcases work by thirtysomething neo-Conceptualists with an almost uniformly deft and deceptively light touch. For Arning, pop culture found objects are in; theoretically oriented painting is out. "Imaginings" is, incidentally, the best queer group show I've seen in New York.

Why? It's sexy. And because it is 1994, it means dykes are even hotter than fags. Witness Patricia Cronin's gorgeously Turresque watercolors of faceless women-in-close-up eating pussy and playing with dildoes, or Elizabeth Stephens's huge photos of a photographer shooting Annie Prinkie and getting, shall we say, involved with her subject/object. It provides powerful inspiration for men, too. Andy Fabo's *Mandaling Matisse Suite* is a virtuoso installation of sometimes pae-dic, always erotic images etched onto small black chalkboards, while Eric Rhein's shockingly re-



Hunter Reynolds: *Patina du Prey's Memorial Dress (1994)*



Phranci Installation (1994) at White Columns

Queer for You

finer silver-, brass-, and gold-wire penis portraits slyly avoid a thousand potential pitfalls.

"Imaginings" demonstrates not only that the personal is political, but *how*. It's crammed with queer cultural history that functioned for many of the artists (and the rest of us) as an adolescent escape route from the closet. In word and image, exhibition visitors meet James Baldwin, Radclyffe Hall, John-Boy Walton, Pier Paolo Pasolini, André Gide, and Walt Whitman, among many others. Found photos become the screens onto which many of the exhibitors project their personal—and our collective—histories. Cary Leibowitz appended the closet-busting title *Celebratin' the Day After Stonewall* to a black-and-white publicity still of Rex Reed, Bobby Short, and Tallulah Bankhead (who oddly wears a sash that reads "Bette Davis"). For *Natural Nature*, Steven Evans couples a stylized, foliate motif from Beardsley and an early-20th-century photo blowup of a tattooed hunk with his arm on his androgynous-looking buddy's shoulder. The (against) nature theme is even mirrored in the greenhouse studio backdrop and the hunk's forestry company T-shirt, helping to make this one of the most resonant and allusive works in the show.

Happily, "Imaginings" is no sugarcoated, apolitical vision of queerness. Cindy Smith's moving *After the Well* installation, devoted to Radclyffe Hall's landmark lesbo-novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, includes a reference to a 1928 letter from a young woman who asked Hall if tolerance of the "third sex" would ever come. "I could not help visualizing the many stoney miles that her feet must tread," Hall noted. In his exhibition essay, Arning writes with similar ruefulness about the

uncertainty in dealing with AIDS in the celebratory exhibition context he devised. Keith Mayerson's stirring artist book, *A Patriarchy's Nightmare*, and Stuart Netsky's bittersweet tableau of a swish sickroom/boudoir, with three medicine cabinets and a chaise for watching *Dark Victory*, should have allayed Arning's concerns.

Nineteen ninety-four marks the 13th year of the AIDS epidemic and, not surprisingly, the ongoing crisis holds center stage in a number of shows. "Absence, Activism & the Body Politic," at the Fischbach Gallery (24 West 57th Street, 759-2345), is an effective and elegiac tone poem of an exhibition that might simply have been called "Absence." From Mary Patten's whited-out address book at the gallery door, to a wall of spectral and poetic presences by Bill Jacobson, Daniel Goldstein, and Ross Bleckner, curator Joseph Wolin sustains his fugue.

Other noteworthy AIDS-related shows are the Organization of Lesbian and Gay Architects and Designers' "Design Legacies" (Gallery 91, 91 Grand Street, 966-3722) and *Patina du Prey's Memorial Dress*. The former is a model tribute to 23 spectrum-spanning designers that include Perry Ellis and William Oliver Johnston Jr., who was part of the Silence = Death Project. The latter is Hunter Reynolds's performance sculpture, sponsored at 45 Greene Street (966-2929) by Creative Time and the Contemporary Art Institute of New York. A site of mourning, the dress bears the names of 25,000 AIDS-deceased. In a ritual of healing, Reynolds/du Prey publicly dresses and, silently, addresses "her" audiences. Coincidentally, both shows provide vehicles for inscribing the names of those who have been lost. As Millie Wilson poignantly observed

about gay men's lives in her textwork for "Absence, Activism & the Body Politic": "The more they vanished, the more they were represented."

If there's a single, standout exhibition-event among the very mixed bag of 40 or so Stonewall-season shows, it's "Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall" at the New York Public Library (Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, 221-7676). Composed of hundreds of historical artifacts supplemented with photographs and the occasional painting or etching, this gargantuan and intelligent endeavor examines a century of queer activity and identity in New York. Curators Mimi Bowling, Molly McGarry, and Fred Wasserman wrest fascinating tales of social, amorous, and political attachments from placards and posters, political buttons and pop-cultural icons (Gay Bob is packaged in his own doll-closet). The first major American exhibition of

lesbian and gay history—there have been organized over the last decade in Europe—"Becoming Visible" is an especially meaningful embrace coming from our premier institutional symbol of equity and access.

Unfortunately, some of the exhibition's contextual meaning is sidestepped in the (current) lack of funding for a catalogue, the National Endowment for the Humanities' rebuff of the library's application for a planning grant for the show and the near total indifference of local art institutions to lesbian and gay men this month. (The Caribbean Cultural Center's "Transcending Silence: The Life and Poetic Legacy of Audre Lorde" [408 West 58th Street, 307-7420] is a notable exception. I'm willing to write off the elite-than-God Metropolitan Museum this year, but what happened at the New Museum, the Alternative Museum, the Studio Museum, Museo del Barrio, the Jewish Museum, or any of the dozen other spaces whose programming derives almost exclusively from identity politics? Denying the complexity of identity (and eschewing coalitions) signals irrelevance whether you're in Soho or Sarajevo.)



John Lindell: *Dickheads and Assholes* at White Columns