

Making choices : fourth floor

Date

2000

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/178

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MAKING|CHOICES

Fourth Floor

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Making Choices is a cycle of exhibitions that focuses on the years between 1920 and 1960, a period of great social and political turmoil and spirited artistic debate. As the original visions of modern art matured, they simultaneously provoked dissenting reactions and spawned parallel experiments in a wide range of mediums. No general survey could encompass the art of this period without diminishing its essential variety. *Making Choices* instead presents twenty-four distinct exhibitions, all of them drawn entirely from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. Some concentrate on one artist's achievement or a single aspect of it; others explore broad artistic movements, themes, or traditions. Some are devoted to a particular moment or medium; others span the entire century and incorporate works in a wide range of mediums.

At any given moment artists confront divergent opportunities and challenges defined by the art that has come before and by the changing world around them. Each artist responds differently; competing programs and imperatives sharpen those differences; and independent traditions in particular mediums further nourish variety. Even the art that in retrospect seems the most innovative is deeply rooted in the constellation of uncertain choices from which it arose. Modern art is justly celebrated for its spirit of ceaseless invention; these exhibitions aim as well to stress its vital multiplicity.

Making Choices



COVER AND ABOVE: Marcel Duchamp. *Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics)*. 1925. Motor-driven construction: painted wood demisphere on black velvet disk, copper collar with plexi-glass dome, motor, pulley, and metal stand, 58 1/2 x 25 1/4 x 24" (148.6 x 64.2 x 60.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. William Sisler and Edward James Fund.
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The Marriage of Reason and Squalor

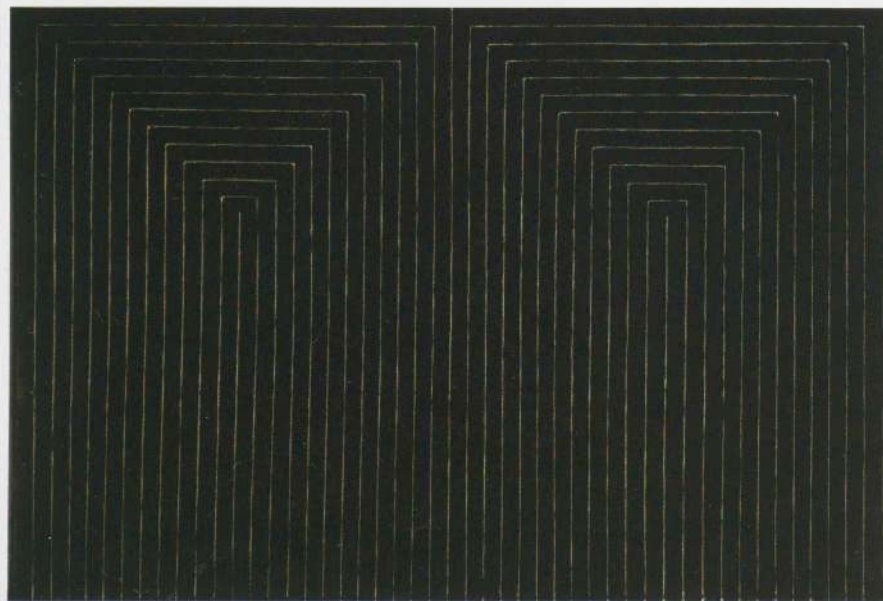
THIS EXHIBITION IS NAMED after Frank Stella's 1959 work *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II* from his *Black Paintings* series. Carl Andre titled that work for Stella by conflating the poem "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" by William Blake and the story *To Esmé—with Love and Squalor* by J. D. Salinger. The truth of the contraries is an old theme in religion, philosophy, literature, and art. Much like Blake's "memorable relations," this exhibition invites visitors to perceive the symbolic interaction of unpredictable oppositions.

In his manuscript *Our Navigator Compass in Life*, Joaquín Torres-García proclaims reason as the key to life. The grid of his *Composition* articulates symbols for the equilibrium of knowledge, emotion, and sensation, just as his utopian "Universal Man" harmonizes reason, soul, and body. Dante Alighieri, whose *Inferno* was revisited as a contemporary journey by Robert Rauschenberg in a serial work, defined the layers of human nature: rational, appetitive, and vegetative.

Although Stella had a highly defined plan for *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, when he executed this scheme the

process of painting incorporated chance and the unpredictable into the work. The white interstices of this Minimalist work, actually just raw canvas between the painted black bands, were interpreted by William Rubin as organic space, where the painting breathes. In the same way, the lines carved in Lygia Pape's grainy woodblock prints relate to Lygia Clark's concept of "organic line" that was fundamental to Neoconcretismo, a historical parallel to Minimalism based in Rio de Janeiro. Louise Bourgeois, in a similar graphic construction, asks: "Has the day invaded the night, or has the night invaded the day?" This exact duality is visualized in *The Empire of Light, II* by René Magritte. The black monochrome painting *White #19* by Glenn Ligon reorients the discussion from formal concerns to an agenda of social distress.

The harmony of contrasts of materials, forms, and meaning connects four generations of sculptors. Constantin Brancusi's *Socrates* is rhythm and stability, organic and geometric forms, reason and sensuality. Bourgeois, for whom geometry means stability, reshaped wooden boards of an old water tower by cutting curves in their corners, bringing *Quarantania, III* to her own



Frank Stella. *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II*. 1959. Enamel on canvas, 7' 6 1/4" x 11' 1/4" (230.5 x 337.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund. © 2000 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

height. Refined African and Scandinavian craft traditions meet in the intriguing *Greed's Trophy* by Martin Puryear. Doris Salcedo creates melancholic monuments against oblivion and fights violence by filling furniture with cement, objects, and human remnants.

The fate of geometry unites Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysics, the visceral sphere of Georges Vantongerloo, the "formless" of Jean Dubuffet, the "sensible geometry" of Gego, and César's volume of crushed cars. Kurt Schwitters misleads our vision by equating Christmas and censorship in two similar *Merz* collages. Cildo Meireles's *Fontes*, folding rulers whose numbers are wrong, and *Zero Dollar* measure uncertainty. His *Zero Cruzeiro* simulates Brazilian money illustrated with an image of a Native American to denounce the genocide of those people in that country.

Art confronts eschatology/scatology and asepsis, the sublime and the violent. Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Shit No. 014* invokes the Freudian connotations between money and feces to discuss the formation of value through the artistic act. Jenny Holzer's *Truisms*, written on golf balls, restate Dante's condemnation of acquisitiveness. Jac Leirner's delicate

Lung, constructed with the cellophane of cigarette packages, points to certain contradictions between pleasure and health. Marisol's *Love*, with a head impaled by a Coca-Cola bottle, presents a horrifying eroticism. An eyeball on a spring and a pair of eyeglasses whose lenses have words on them by Joseph Cornell and Rirkrit Tiravanija, respectively, portray the constraints of the gaze. Marcel Duchamp intricates language, economy, and desire.

As in Leirner's *Lung*, elegant forms and specific facts create tension within the silent harmony of the cones of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*" (*Supreme Majority*), which addresses political polls and the conservative majority in the Supreme Court. The apparently innocent game of Öyvind Fahlström's *Plan for World Trade Monopoly* simulates post-colonial exploitation on a global scale. Mike Kelley envisions a sci-fi, comic, helter-skelter, and Dantesque landscape.

Failure to deal with difference leads to historical antagonisms. Militarism is alluded to by Antonio Berni and by Claude Viallat, who uses an army tent as a painterly support. With acid magazine inserts, John Heartfield fiercely attacked Nazism. For Lasar Segall, Jews

and Africans are races in diaspora. His moral landscapes comprise immigrant ships, plantations, and *favelas*, the Latin American slums. Melvin Edwards's *Lynch Fragment* series and the silhouette narratives by Kara Walker refuse to erase the painful memory of cruel social pathologies of racism. The disturbing question asked by Michel Foucault resounds: when does the "soul"—ideology—become the prison for the body?

In a century of contradictory choices, philosophy has come to define oppression as the uttermost morally debased form of irrationality. Jacob Lawrence identifies the manipulation of social space in *The Migration Series*: "Industries attempted to board their labor in quarters that were oftentimes very unhealthy." The perversion of architecture and housing are squalid sides of society discussed by Lawrence, Segall, Francis Bacon, and by Gordon Matta-Clark with *Bronx Floors*. In the tradition of Poesia Concreta, Hélio Oiticica interweaves names of marginal urban sites to reaffirm that creativity survives social exclusion. Oiticica proclaims an "aesthetics of adversity."

Paulo Herkenhoff, Adjunct Curator,
Department of Painting and Sculpture



Louise Bourgeois. *Quarantania, III*. 1949–50.
Unpainted wood, 59 1/4 x 11 1/4 x 2" (151.3 x 29.8 x 5 cm).
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Cuthbert Daniel. Reproduction courtesy Cheim
and Read, New York

The Raw and the Cooked

"MY KID COULD DRAW better than that." Such is the proverbial protest of the "average" viewer upon first encountering the deliberate crudeness characteristic of so much modern art. Whether anyone really believes that his or her child could or would draw in the manner of the artist in question—only better—is doubtful. The essence of this challenge is its unspoken refusal to believe that the trained artist responsible for the monstrosity before them couldn't have done it better had *the artist* really tried. And along with this assumption comes another: that the awkwardness of the artist's effort is somehow inauthentic, a sham performance of graphic inarticulateness simply intended to get the public's goat.

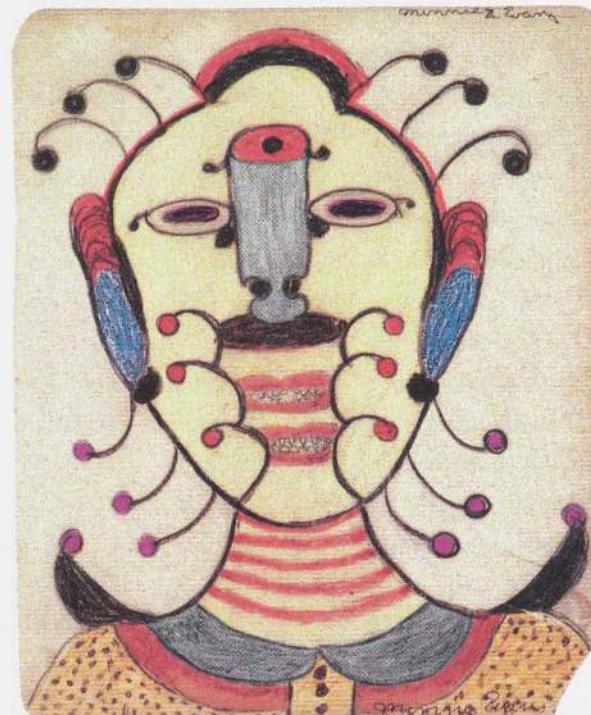
The probable truth of the matter lies somewhere between these two possibilities. Certainly if the artist is a master draftsman like Paul Klee or Pablo Picasso, the distortions of the image are deliberate since both could draw impeccably in a naturalistic or academic mode. Moreover, if the artist is Jean Dubuffet, author of a manifesto titled *Anticultural Positions*, then there is an undeniable element of defiance or effrontery involved. However, the interest in and

mimicry of "primitive" forms of expression is a constant of modern art that goes well beyond stylistic affectations or aggression against conventional good taste. Thus Picasso's close friendship with the customs official turned Sunday painter Henri Rousseau, Klee's interest in the art of the insane which he, along with others like the Surrealist Max Ernst, researched in the famous collection of Dr. Hans Prinzhorn, and Dubuffet's advocacy of "Art

Brut" all reflect the same desire to return to art's primal imaginative sources and tap into instincts unfettered by aesthetic or social taboos. From Picasso, Klee, and Dubuffet down to contemporary artists like Louise Bourgeois and Carroll Dunham, art has often had the look of something formally or psychologically atavistic.

There is a paradox in all of this, though, since neither "naïf" art, "outsider" art, nor

children's art is necessarily crude in execution nor simple-minded in conception. On the contrary, in many cases these efforts are meticulous and highly complex. Thus the fantastic but painstakingly rendered canvases of Rousseau belie the notion that he was merely, albeit charmingly, inept. Likewise the intricately decorative works of Morris Hirshfield or the sober icons of John Kane, who were both essentially autodidacts, possess an orderliness and



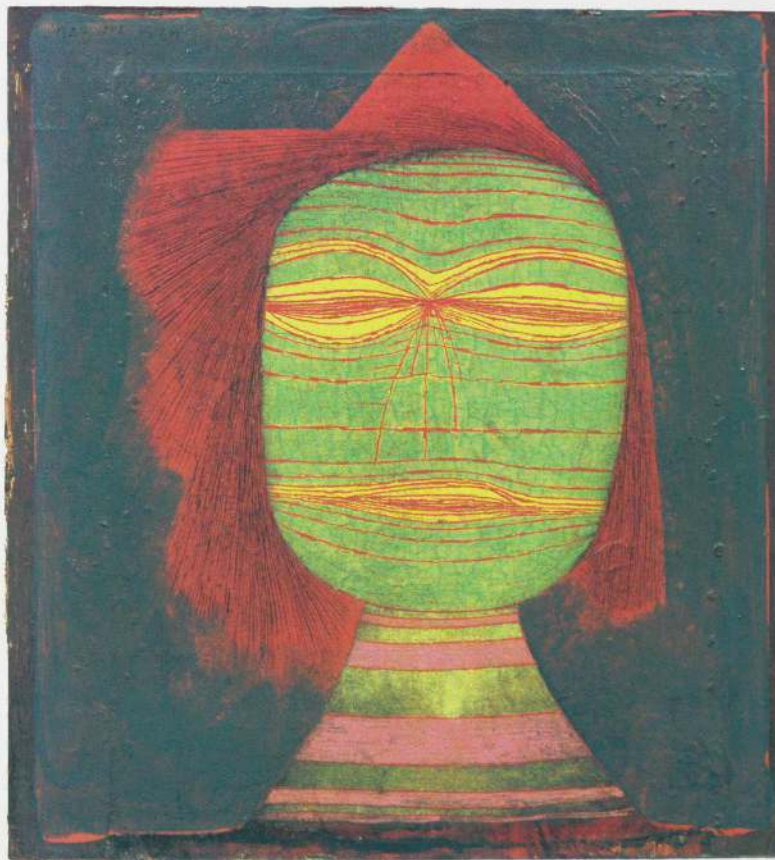
Minnie Evans. Untitled (*Clown Creature*). c. 1944. Colored crayons and pencil on buff paper, 11 1/8 x 9 1/4" (29.1 x 24.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Nina Howell Starr

refinement that is the antithesis of Dubuffet's ideas about artists in the grip of madness showing the way toward creative loss of control. The fact, then, that many untrained artists make work that eschews realism does not mean that they are solely reliant on unmediated talent or feeling, although some such as Louis Soutter *do* seem possessed by demons. Instead, the emotional pitch of Bill Traylor's whimsical portrayal of a man drinking is that of an artist who is a close observer of human behavior able to capture the vertiginous essence of drunkenness from the inside as well as the outside. Without his being aware of Traylor, or Traylor being aware of him, Marc Chagall, referencing Russian folk art, seized upon acrobatic exhilaration in very similar terms.

As these examples indicate, sharp verbal distinctions between unsophisticated and sophisticated—raw and cooked—are difficult, often impossible to make when confronted by actual works. And they are distracting as well, given the visual richness of the art that treads this always fluctuating line. Finally it should be noted that when art by trained artists does resemble that of a child, we may well be looking at a

hard-won formal achievement rather than a relapse or failure. For as the precociously facile draftsman Picasso once said when touring an exhibition of children's drawings, "When I was their age I could draw like Raphael, but it took me a lifetime to learn to draw like them."

*Robert Storr, Senior Curator,
Department of Painting and Sculpture*



Paul Klee. *Actor's Mask*. 1924. Oil on canvas mounted on board, 14 1/4 x 13 3/8" (36.7 x 33.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. © 2000 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Useless Science

THIS EXHIBITION explores the notion of pseudoscience from the first experiments in "precision" optics by Marcel Duchamp to recent inquiries into endurance and libido by Matthew Barney. Since World War I, when technological advances made possible a heretofore unimaginable level of carnage, artists have mimicked the methods of scientific

research in order to reveal the irrationality inherent in this most rational of disciplines. It was after World War II, however, that interest in the absurd as a philosophical, liter-

ary, and artistic concept dovetailed with the dawn of the atomic age, the birth of the space program, and many popular cultural manifestations of science fiction to create a critical mass of work that used the language and imagery of science and technology to speculate on the implications of scientific advancement.

Whereas Dadaists like Duchamp and Max Ernst toyed with the biological and the mechanical, the postwar development of nuclear physics and astrophysics as well as quantum mechanics inspired in many artists in the late forties and fifties an interest, however skeptical, in

a more theoretical model of scientific inquiry. A case in point is the

College of 'Pataphysics, a pseudo-academic institution founded in Paris in 1948 by various artists, writers, and intellectuals. It included in its membership such well known artists as Jean Dubuffet and Duchamp, and the playwright Eugène Ionesco, among others. A term devised by the French author Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), 'Pataphysics was neither a scientific nor artistic theory, neither a school of thought nor a political position, but rather the investigation of exceptions as opposed to the generalities of traditional science. The College of

'Pataphysics was formed to study this "science of imaginary solutions," and over the past fifty years has hosted numerous banquets, symposia, and conferences, and published a series of periodicals and pamphlets featuring an abundance of research on Jarry and other previously underappreciated artistic and literary figures.

Parodies of both pure (research for its own sake) and applied (research toward a particular end) science were rampant among so-called neo-Dadaists in the fifties and sixties, some of whom, under the influence of the composer John Cage, adopted chance—the opposite of rationality—applying it as rigorously as a scientific principle or procedure. Others, like Jean Tinguely, constructed automata whose functions ranged from oil painting to self-destruction. With the belief that a combination of science and imagination could overcome the limitations of his materials, the Belgian artist Panamarenko designed rocket ships, bombs, and cars from balsa wood, paper, and rubber that he claimed could really function.

Still other artists, most notably those who experimented with kinetics, emulated scientific manners of inquiry,



Panamarenko. *Flying Object (Rocket)*. 1969. Balsa wood, cardboard, plastic, fabric, aluminum, steel, and synthetic polymer paint, 8' 11" x 11' 4" x 8' 2" (271.7 x 345.5 x 249 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Agnes Gund. © 1969 Panamarenko

privileging the process of experimentation over the results. In Paris, artists like Victor Vasarely, a painter, studied works on relativity, wave mechanics, and even astrophysics and cofounded an artists' association—the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) dedicated to the scientific study of kinetics but without the promise of discernible results that could be measured by quantitative means. In the U.S. in the sixties, a group of artists, musicians, and engineers called Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) collaborated on a series of ambitious multimedia performances and environments. The emphasis of E.A.T. was on a successful interdisciplinary partnership, rather than on any concrete scientific research. "The experimentation—the process—was what interested E.A.T., far more than any conceivable result," said Billy Klüver, an engineer who founded the organization along with a number of artists including Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Breer. "All the art projects I have worked on have at least one thing in common; from an engineer's point of view, they are all ridiculous."

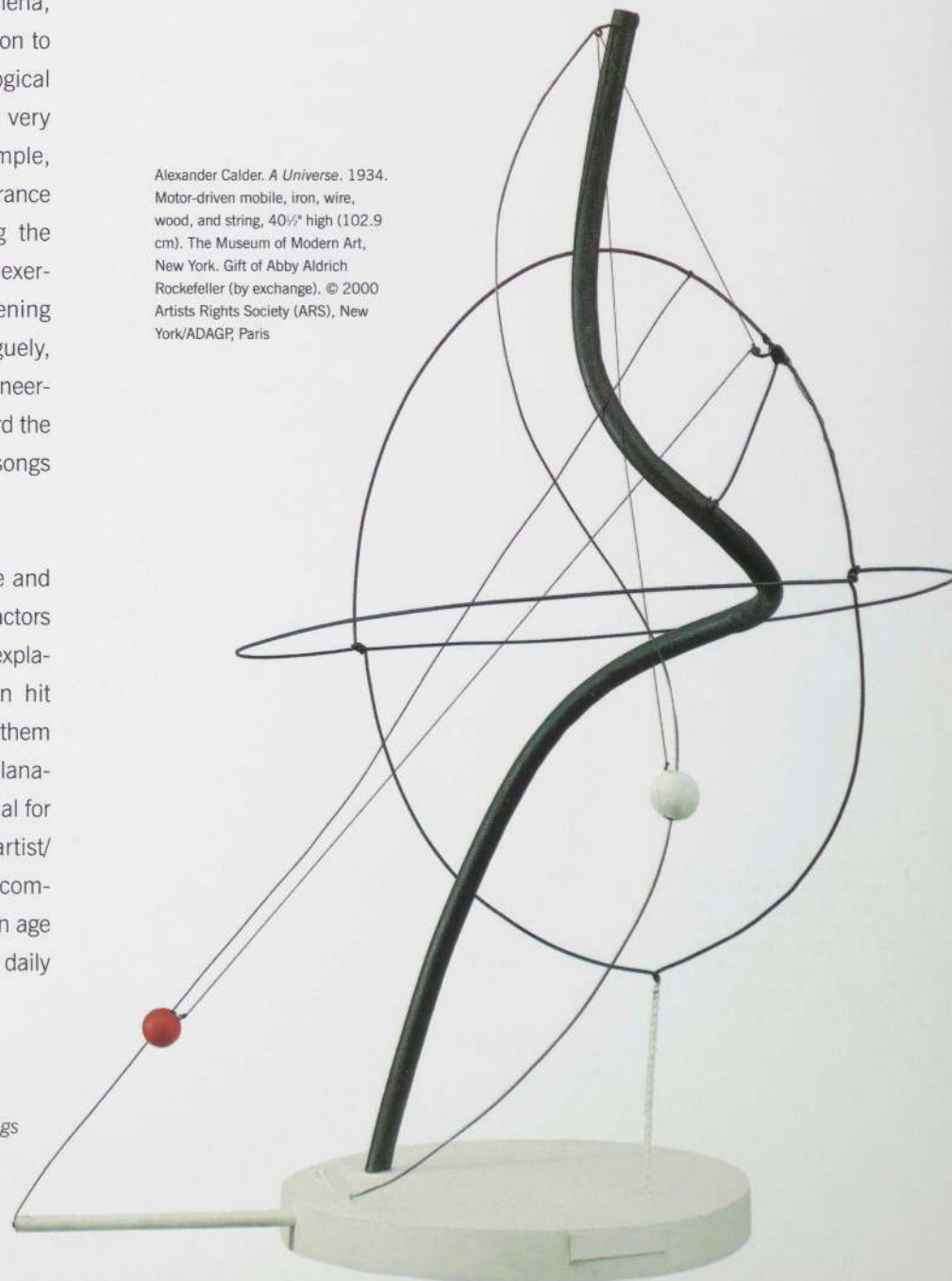
More recently, many artists who have come of age in the nineties have adopted the rigorous discipline of sci-

tific observation to record phenomena, not for the sake of finding a solution to a particular biological or technological question but rather to test the very methods of inquiry. So, for example, Barney measures the level of endurance of a human subject by charting the build-up of muscle mass during exercise, while Steven Pippin, hearkening back to works by Duchamp, Tinguely, and other masters of useless engineering, constructs machines that record the ambient sounds found between songs on old records.

The rapid development of science and technology is one of the defining factors of the past century. Every rational explanation offered and every solution hit upon, however, have brought with them an endless number of counter explanations and questions, all raw material for the critical imagination of the artist/pseudoscientist. As Tinguely commented in 1966, "We're living in an age when the wildest fantasies become daily truths. Anything is possible."

Laura Hoptman
Assistant Curator, Department of Drawings
Michael Carter
Senior Library Assistant, Library

Alexander Calder. *A Universe*. 1934. Motor-driven mobile, iron, wire, wood, and string, 40 1/2" high (102.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (by exchange). © 2000 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris



PUBLIC PROGRAMS

For information about *Brown Bag Lunch Lectures*, *Conversations with Contemporary Artists*, Adult Courses, and other special programs being held in conjunction with the exhibition *Making Choices*, please refer to the Museum Web site at www.moma.org or you may visit The Edward John Noble Education Center. For further information about Public Programs, please call the Department of Education at 212-708-9781.

PUBLICATIONS

Making Choices: 1929, 1939, 1948, 1955. By Peter Galassi, Robert Storr, and Anne Umland. 348 pages. 9½ x 12". 306 illustrations, including 162 in color and 144 in duotone. \$55.00 cloth; \$35.00 paper.

Walker Evans & Company. By Peter Galassi. 272 pages. 9¾ x 11¼". 399 illustrations, including 67 in color and 332 in duotone. \$55.00 cloth; \$35.00 paper.

Modern Art despite Modernism. By Robert Storr. 248 pages. 9 x 12". 198 illustrations, including 172 in color and 26 in black and white. \$55.00 cloth; \$35.00 paper.

Making Choices is part of *MoMA2000*, which is made possible by The Starr Foundation.

Generous support is provided by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro in memory of Louise Reinhardt Smith.

The Museum gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Contemporary Exhibition Fund of The Museum of Modern Art, established with gifts from Lily Auchincloss, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder.

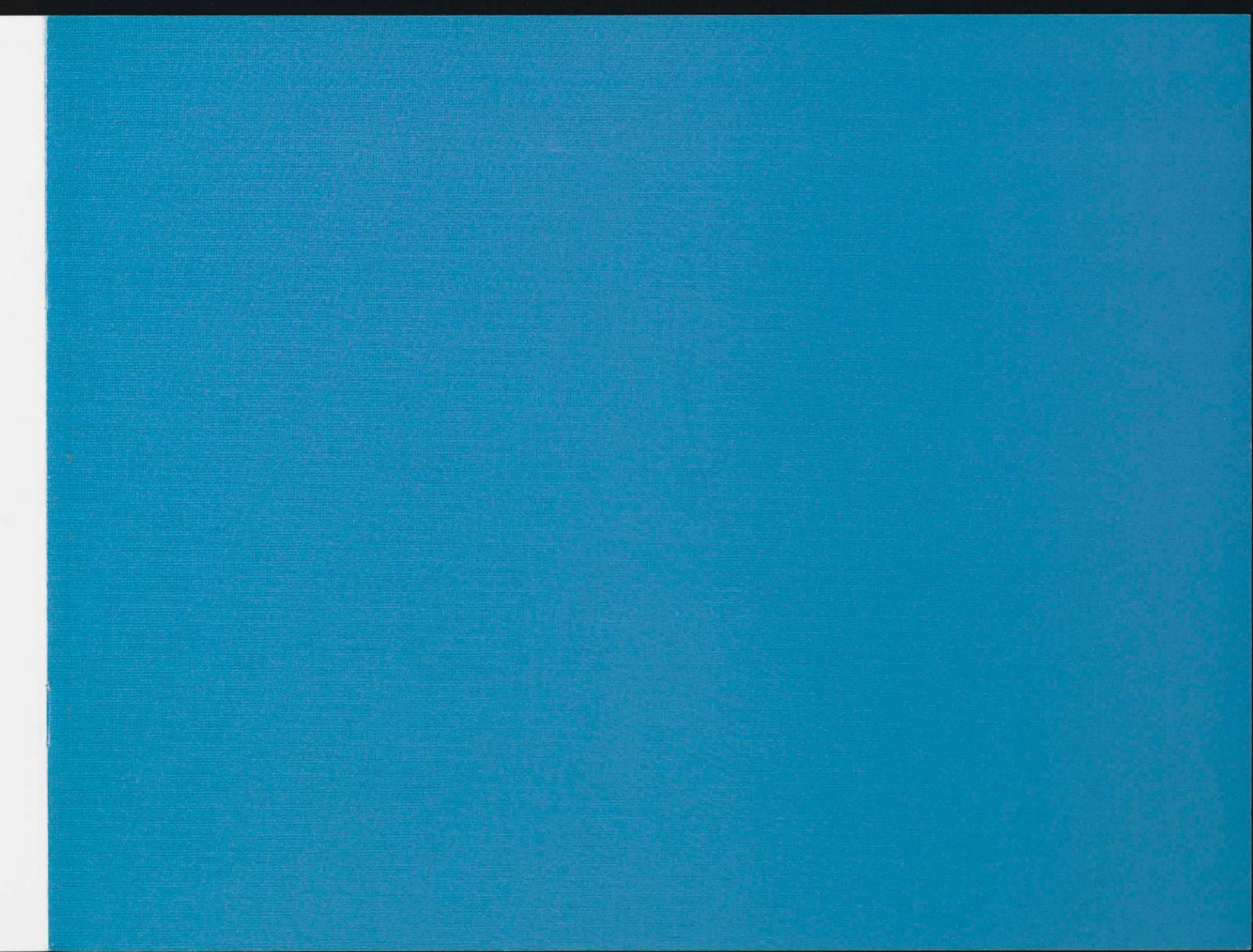
Additional funding is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley, Mrs. Melville Wakeman Hall, and by The Contemporary Arts Council and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.

Education programs accompanying *MoMA2000* are made possible by Paribas.

The publication *Making Choices: 1929, 1939, 1948, 1955* is made possible by The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

The interactive environment of *Making Choices* is supported by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

Web/kiosk content management software is provided by SohoNet.



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