

Projects 3 : Justen Ladda : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 15, 1986-January 6, 1987

Author

Ladda, Justen, 1953-

Date

1986

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

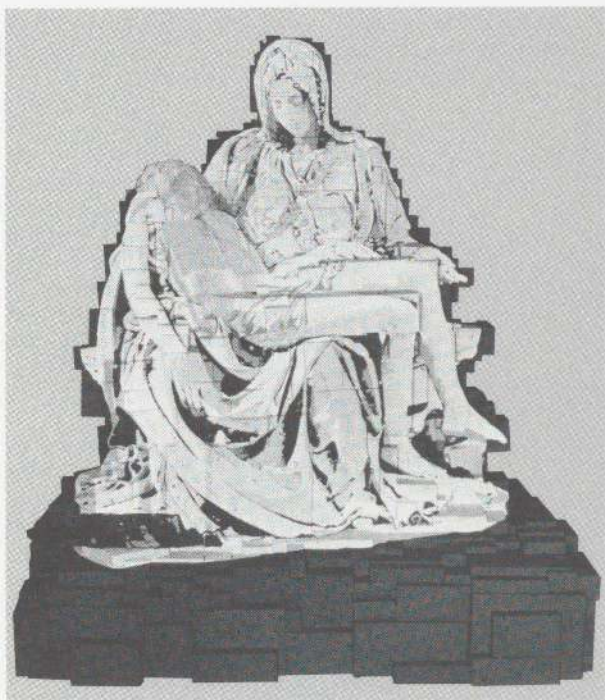
Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2181

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.

The Museum of Modern Art
New York
November 15, 1986–January 6, 1987

3



Sculpture from the installation
art, fashion, and religion. 1986
Vinyl paint over disposable boxes
6 x 6 x 5' (182.9 x 182.9 x 152.4 cm)

projects: justen ladda

Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts. The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Lannan Foundation, and the Wallace Funds, established by the founders of *Reader's Digest*. On behalf of The Museum of Modern Art I would like to express our gratitude for this important support.

Perhaps best known for his startling 1981 rendering in an abandoned Bronx public-school auditorium of the comic-book character *The Thing*, Justen Ladda has been creating on-site pieces in alternative spaces and unconventional settings since he arrived in New York from Germany in 1978. In this installation, *art, fashion, and religion*, the third exhibition in the Museum's new **projects** series, Ladda transforms the neutral setting of the Museum's Garden Hall Gallery into a complex and provocative environment. Although the impermanent, site-specific installation remains an appealing medium for many contemporary artists, this kind of art is particularly challenging to present because of its ephemeral nature and resolutely uncommercial character. It is therefore all the more appropriate for museums to be exhibiting installations like *art, fashion, and religion*.

Ladda's thematic concerns link him to other artists of his generation, but his unique expression of these concerns and the distinctive formal characteristics of his art set him apart as a compelling contemporary voice. The Museum of Modern Art is pleased to present *art, fashion, and religion*, an eloquent summation of Justen Ladda's ongoing artistic investigations.

Linda Shearer, Curator
Department of Painting and Sculpture

Additional support for this exhibition has been provided by the New York State Council on the Arts and First Bank System, Inc., headquarters—Minneapolis.

Clothes by Saint Laurent/Rive Gauche
Mannequins by Pucci, designed by Andrée Putman

justen ladda:
art, fashion, and religion

In his complex installation *art, fashion, and religion*, the German-born artist Justen Ladda blurs the lines between painting, sculpture, and found objects to question the traditional approaches to viewing art. An intriguing synthesis of a constructed sculpture after Michelangelo's *Pietà*, high-fashion mannequins, and geometric patterns painted directly onto floor, walls, and objects, *art, fashion, and religion* reflects the major aspects of Ladda's artistic development, from his earliest wall-paintings of the late seventies to his first free-standing sculpture, of 1985.

Ladda's first wall-paintings were abstract compositions that examined the play between object and shadow in various architectural settings. His decision to use as a surface floor and walls rather than the more conventional stretched canvas seems the natural result of his interest in the interaction of three-dimensional objects with their two-dimensional projections. As Ladda's work has evolved from these primarily painted installations to installations incorporating found objects and, most recently, to constructed sculpture, each stage of his art has been marked by an intricate balance of figurative elements and abstract patterns. Although the figurative elements—often banal, everyday images from contemporary society—are the most conspicuous aspect of his pieces, Ladda's use of abstract pattern has remained an important resource for his visual communication.

In *art, fashion, and religion* there are at least three different abstract patterns: the Greek fret ornament in the entrance frieze, the overall painted crosses, and the wooden pinwheel constructions on the floor of the main room. The architectural design of the installation, which includes a mazelike entrance passageway and a circular, stagelike space, further evidences Ladda's involvement with geometric abstraction. This fascination with abstract forms suggests a formalist approach to art and indicates the lingering influence of the artist's nonobjective schooling in his native Germany. Ladda uses the patterns, however, in a figurative way, evoking ideas and beliefs inherent in these apparent abstractions, much the way he uses the artifacts of contemporary culture.

Another distinctive aspect of Ladda's style is his continued use of a single-point perspective, whereby the viewer is able to perceive an apparent three-dimensional image from only one specific vantage point. From any other angle the composition disintegrates—body parts become distorted and patterns are interrupted—as the individual components emerge. This technique developed out of Ladda's early style in Germany of spray-painting small, abstract sculpture through a stencil, generating a painted image or pattern that was coherent only when viewed from the point at which it was sprayed. In 1982 the use of a projector expanded his possibilities, enabling him to paint a projected image onto an installation's floor, walls, and found objects in a manner that established the desired perspective. This "perfect" perspective at first appears to

reinforce the frontal approach to art that the modern viewer has come to expect. Ultimately, however, the technique challenges these expectations by highlighting the contrast between the one "perfect" frontal view and the infinite number of "imperfect" vantage points from which the image is unrecognizable. Ladda uses the single-point perspective ironically to suggest the many alternative visual approaches.

Insofar as Ladda's work directly involves the position of the viewer it can be linked with the spatial investigations in the on-site work of Barry Le Va, an artist Ladda admires. Although Ladda feels a kinship with artists such as Le Va and Daniel Buren, who use abstract form to create their conceptual environments, he names as his most important artistic influence the jazz innovator Miles Davis, whose music he finds powerfully evocative of contemporary moods. Liking Davis's music to "hot ice" and "cold fire," Ladda has said he is especially drawn to the music because "it is not always logical—there are so many levels and lots of surprises." Ladda's installations incorporate similar juxtapositions and unexpected fusions of form and figure to create a contemporary statement.

Art, fashion, and religion is Ladda's most ambitious work to date. In this dramatic composite of wall-painting, contemporary artifacts, free-standing sculpture, and architectural structures Ladda sets forth the elements of his pictorial language. He uses this symbolic vocabulary to depict what he refers to as "three belief systems," art, fashion, and religion. "I want images that can be read, that are very specific," he explained in a recent interview. "There is a gap between image and language and in my work I am interested in bridging that gap." In creating this visual language Ladda often takes commonplace objects and imbues them with iconic dimension. His interest in the artifacts of contemporary culture derives from the beliefs of a specific segment of society that are reflected in these objects, including the high-fashion clothes of this work and the television sets and comic-book characters of earlier pieces.

The predominant theme of *art, fashion, and religion* is contemporary consumption. The running frieze of grapes in the entrance passageway is the most literal depiction of this theme. The viewer sees consumption in action as he progresses from the first inviting cluster and watches as in subsequent images the stem gradually appears and fewer and fewer pieces of the luscious green fruit remain. Finally only the intricate stem is left, the skeletal remains, a souvenir of the activity of eating. This sequential pattern serves as an approach to the main room of the installation, both thematically and psychologically.

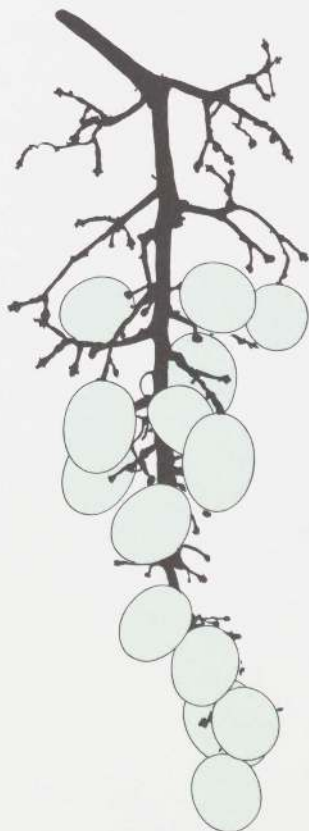
Upon entering, the viewer is confronted with Ladda's symbolic depictions of art, fashion, and religion, each "belief system" presented in equal prominence (the title merely lists them in alphabetical order). In creating this parity Ladda comments on pre-

Original brochure illustrations
based on the installation
art, fashion, and religion. 1986

vailing attitudes in contemporary society. The haute-couture clothes exemplify a level of consumerism that is accepted in fashion, despite its ephemeral nature. Ladda's ironic subtlety emerges, however, as he addresses the issue of the consumption of art and religion. He emphasizes the commercialization of art through his reference to the trivialization of an artistic masterpiece, Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Constructed out of the disposable packaging of ordinary household goods, such as cereal and tissue boxes, Ladda's invocation of the *Pietà* suggests that this sculptural icon has become a ubiquitous consumer item. And, in fact, the *Pietà* can be purchased in a multitude of forms—as a miniature plastic on a chain, postcard-size for the picture frame, or poster-size for the wall. Of course the term "icon" has traditionally referred to an object of religious devotion. In this piece, religion literally floats over the installation in Ladda's patterns of two- and three-dimensional crosses. Obviously the *Pietà* is a further reference to religion, and in the context of this work the image of the dead Christ is open to a number of different interpretations. Ladda equates the consumption of art with the consumption of religion, expressing his concerns that individual spirituality has been replaced by a bombastic, mass approach.

Justen Ladda's challenging installation suggests that the fast-changing trends we have come to accept in fashion—short-term or seasonal styles—are becoming the norm in contemporary society's attitudes toward art and religion. Fashion has become a religion and an art; religion and art a fashion. The "systems" are interchangeable.

Wendy Weitman, Assistant Curator
Department of Prints and Illustrated Books



biography

Born Grevenbroich, West Germany
October 19, 1953

Traveled in South America
March through October 1974
November 1977 through June 1978

Moved to New York 1978

education

The Brooklyn Museum Art School
1978–80

Hochschule für Bildende Künste
Kassel, West Germany. 1974–77

selected individual exhibitions

1985
Willard Gallery, New York
THE TRIUMPH OF LANGUAGE

1984
Philip Nelson Gallery
Villeurbanne, France

1981
P.S. 37, New York
The Thing

1980
ABC No Rio, New York
Time Is Us

selected group exhibitions

1986
The New Museum of Contemporary Art
New York
Damaged Goods

1985
Sogetsu Kaikan, Tokyo
Art in Action

1984
Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, West Germany
A Different Climate

Artists Space, New York
Three Installations

1983
City Gallery, New York
CAPS Sculptors:
1982–83 Fellowship Recipients

1982
Wave Hill, New York
New Perspectives
80 Langton Street, San Francisco
Painted Installations

1980
Times Square, New York
The Times Square Show

selected bibliography

O'Brien, Glenn, ed. *Art in Action*
(catalog). Tokyo: Sogetsu-kai, 1985

Owens, Craig. *New Perspectives*
(catalog). New York: Wave Hill, 1982

Heartney, Eleanor. "Justen Ladda."
Art News (New York), vol. 85, no. 5
(May 1986), pp. 69–70

Robinson, Walter. "The Thing in the
South Bronx." *Art in America* (New York),
vol. 70, no. 3 (March 1982), pp. 135–37