

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
October 1995

ANNETTE MESSEGER

October 12, 1995 - January 16, 1996

The first retrospective in the United States of the work of French artist Annette Messager (b. 1943), one of the most provocative and important contemporary artists working in Europe, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on October 12, 1995. Alternating between a quiet conceptualism and a raucous expressionism, the work in **ANNETTE MESSEGER** includes books that inquire into the nature of women's roles, photographs transformed by paint into fairytale monsters, ensembles comprising hundreds of photographs of body parts, and multimedia installations that explore the multiple meanings of objects and images placed in new contexts.

On view through January 16, 1996, the exhibition is jointly organized by Sheryl Conkelton, Associate Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, and Carol S. Eliel, Associate Curator, Twentieth-Century Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It is installed with the artist's participation.

Messager uses fragmented images and language, incorporating a wide range of media to explore the issue of identity, both collective and individual. The tension between social and personal definitions of the individual persists as a theme in the exhibition's approximately twenty-five works created from 1971 to the present. The exhibition opens with the artist's early album collections in which, through the act of collecting, she seeks to define and codify her identity in relationship to images of women she encountered in newspapers, magazines, and instructional texts. In *Voluntary Tortures* (1972), photographs of women

- more -

submitting to beauty treatments illustrate the sacrifice of individual identity to a socially defined standard. In *The Horrifying Adventures of Annette Messenger, Trickster* (1975), the artist, by redrawing pornographic images in her own hand and then photographing them, seems to present pulp fantasies as her own experience, subverting their original meaning.

Multiple sources inform Messenger's work, including Symbolism and Surrealism, how-to books, magazine and newspaper articles, advertisements, astrology, religious art, *art brut*, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. The influence of Surrealist photography, with its fragmentation of the human body and voyeuristic aspect, is evident in *My Vows* (1988-91), where numerous photographs of body parts hang from strings, overlapping and partially obscuring one another. In *My Trophies* (1986-88), Messenger calls upon the less-regarded arts of tattooing, palmistry, children's books, and medieval manuscripts to create the symbols and marks that she draws over photographs of body parts.

In recent work, she has turned to large-scale installations. In *The Pikes* (1991-93), Messenger presents maps of contemporary political entities, scribbled drawings of people in despair, and stuffed fabric figures impaled on tall rods to convey a sense of violently interrupted stories. A completely different sensibility is evoked in the installation *Penetration* (1993-94), in which gaily colored organs of stuffed fabric hang in clusters from soft angora yarns. This piece recalls the stuffed toys used in earlier works and resembles an imaginative three-dimensional anatomical model. In her most recent work, *Parade* (1994-95), Messenger assembles a playful procession of stuffed toys, taxidermized animals, and images as she revisits themes of childhood and the invention of personal identity.

Annette Messenger was born in 1943 in Berck, a seaside town in northern France. In the early 1960s she enrolled in the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

The 1968 student revolution had a profound effect on Messenger and her generation, provoking skepticism and an interest in the conceptual aspects of art. Regarded in Europe today as one of the key artists of her generation, Messenger has exhibited regularly there for twenty-two years, but remains largely unknown in the United States. She currently lives and works in Malakoff, outside Paris.

The exhibition and its accompanying publication are sponsored in part by generous grants from the AFAA (Association Française d'Action Artistique-Ministère des Affaires Etrangères) and the National Endowment for the Arts. Transportation assistance was provided in part by Air France. Additional funding for the New York showing was provided by the Contemporary Exhibition Fund of The Museum of Modern Art, established with gifts from Lily Auchincloss, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and Mr. and Mrs. Ronald S. Lauder.

ANNETTE MESSENGER opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in June 1995. After its New York showing, the exhibition travels to the Art Institute of Chicago (February 17 - May 5, 1996).

* * *

PUBLICATION

Annette Messenger, with essays by Sheryl Conkelton and Carol S. Eliel. 96 pages. 65 illustrations; 34 in color. Published jointly by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Paperbound; \$24.95; distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams. Inc., New York; available in The MoMA Book Store.

No. 47

For further information or photographic materials, contact Mary-Anne Smith, the Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 212/708-9750.