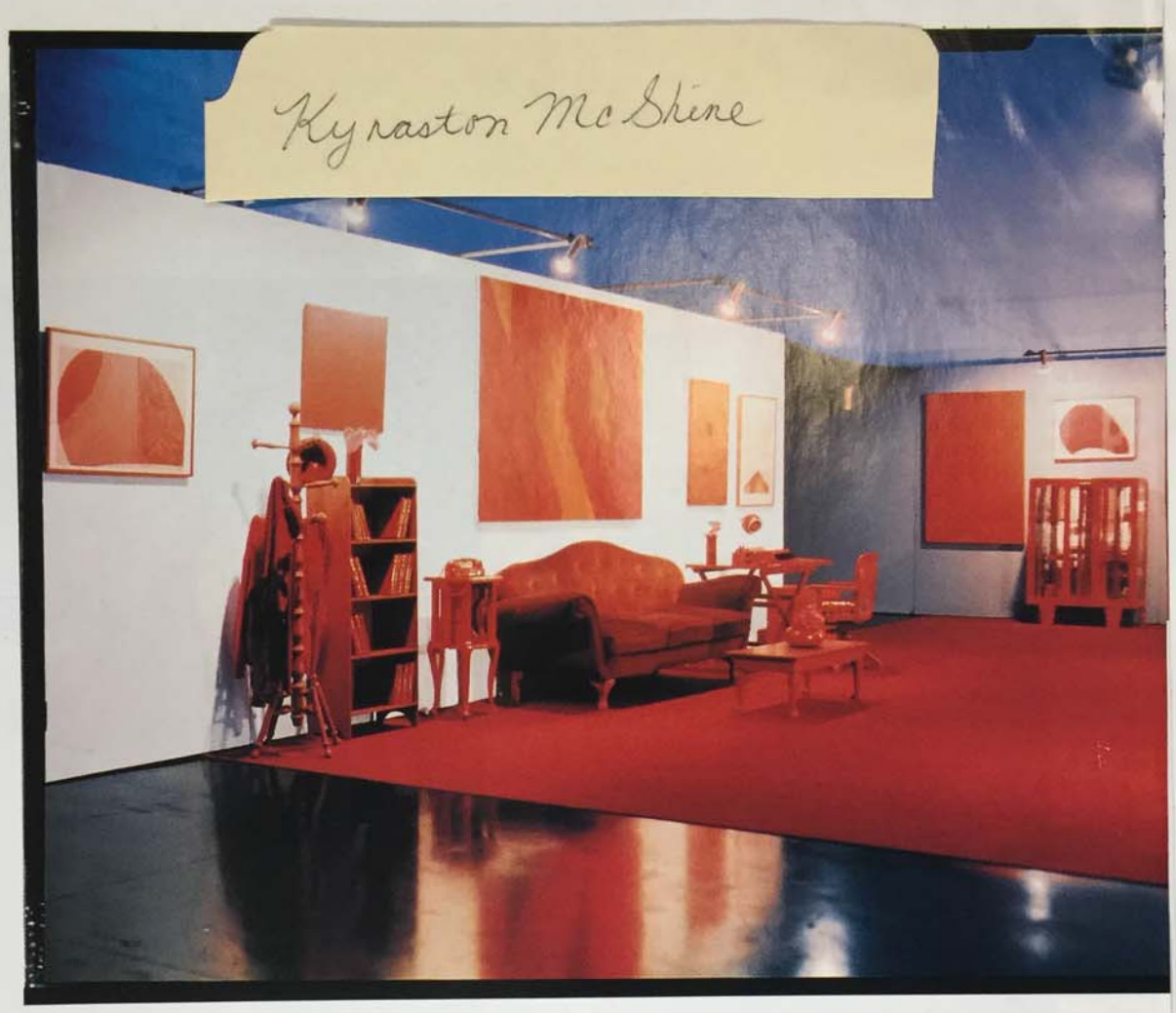
Kynaston McShine



Unspoken Stories

A traveling exhibition of Cildo Meireles's installations and objects reveals them to be metaphoric reckonings of Brazil's postcolonial history.

BY EDWARD LEFFINGWELL

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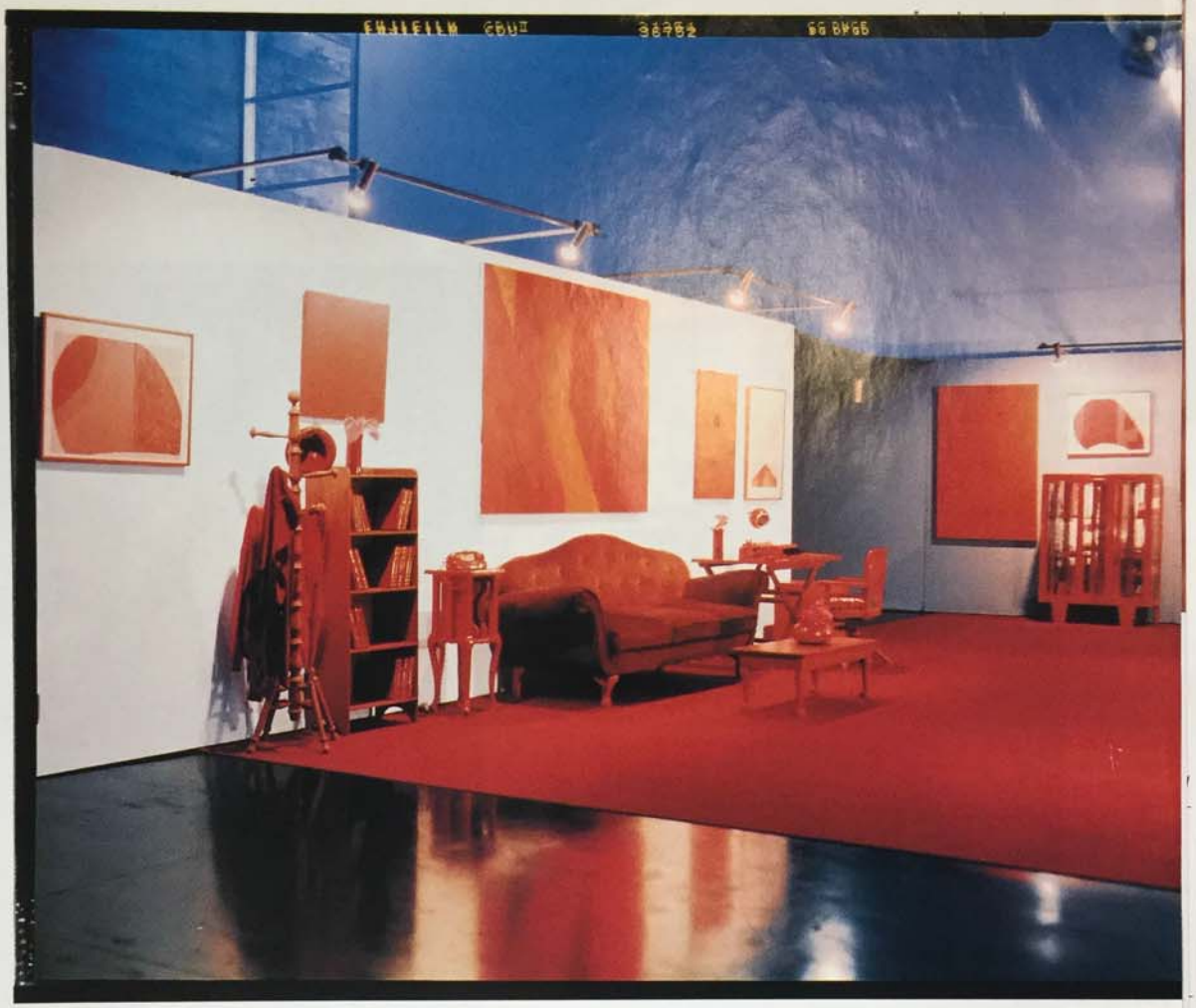
At the same time that he wrote this text, Meireles, then 21 years old, made a sculpture emblematic of his country and his idea, also called *Cruzeiro do Sul* (1969-70). It is a tiny cube, 9mm on a side, one half of pine, the other of oak—the soft and the hard, materials from which the



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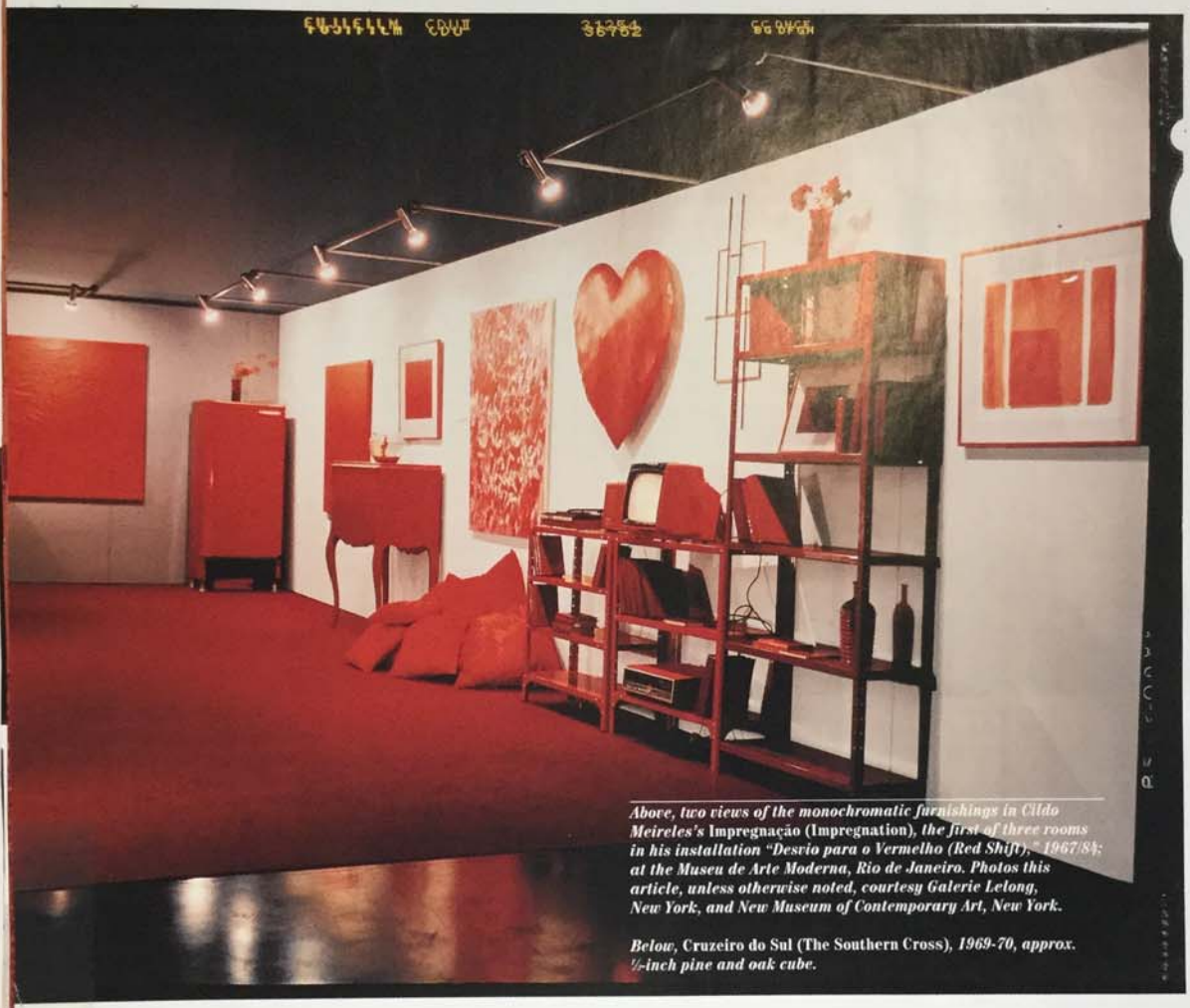


Above, two views of the monochromatic furnishings in Cildo Meireles's **Impregnação (Impregnation)**, *the first of three rooms in his installation "Desvio para o Vermelho (Red Shift)," 1967/84; at the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York, and New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.*

Below, **Cruzeiro do Sul (The Southern Cross)**, *1969-70, approx. ½-inch pine and oak cube.*

indigenous people of Brazil make fire. He intended that this minuscule sculpture, monumental in its implications, be installed as the sole object in a large museum. This proposal has yet to be realized. Such allegorical manifestations are a constant in Meireles's work.

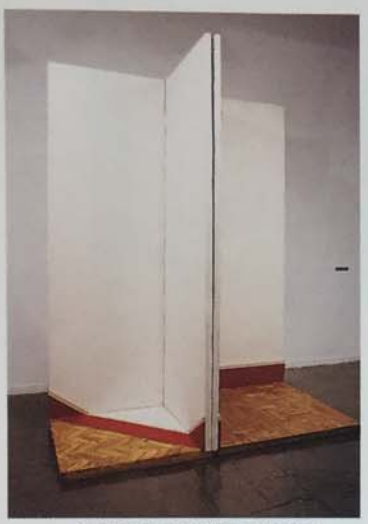
Social Use & Moral Valences

In a retrospective organized by New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art and currently traveling, Meireles's conceptually oriented, measured, tactile, sometimes labyrinthine installations, environments and objects resonate with such evocative stories. Meireles is attentive to the physical experience of making and seeing art, and also to its social use and moral valence. His works reveal broad powers of metaphor exercised in the reckoning of a postcolonial history; he addresses periods of military oppression and persecution, the effects of Brazil's struggle for cultural identity, its history of being subjected to foreign intervention and the pervasive economic and cultural influence of the United States.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1948 to a family actively concerned with the rights of the indigenous, Meireles spent his formative years in the country's interior, during the time of the creation of Brasilia. Constructivist art held special meaning for many artists in this country deeply influenced by European modernism. The esthetics of the abstract, formalist Concrete movement, generally associated with São Paulo, were countered by the sensory, less intellectual interests of the neo-Concrete artists based in Rio de Janeiro. In Rio, by the mid-1960s, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, Franz Weissmann and Amilcar de Castro had produced constructions that redefined the objective experience of space while intimately involving the viewer as engaged participant. Clark, Oiticica and Pape formulated a culturally responsive variation of what would come to be known as Conceptual art, adopting esthetic strategies in opposition to a government that compromised free expression, a position that Meireles adopted as well.[2]

Informed by the intersecting spatial reliefs of Oiticica and the mov-

In his "mobile graffiti," Meireles used existing systems of circulation by applying political messages to paper currency and Coke bottles.



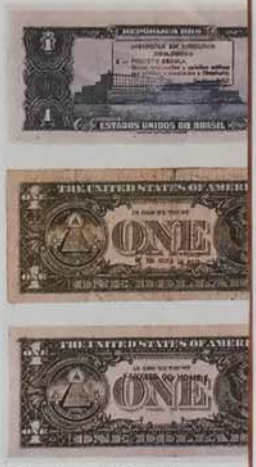
Espaços Virtuais: Cantos (Virtual Space: Corners), *1967-68, wood, canvas, paint, woodblock flooring, 10 by 3¼ by 3¼ feet; at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo D. James Dee.*

able, articulated metal *bichos* of Clark, Meireles produced a number of related abstractions.[3] One of the two examples on view in this survey, *Espaços Virtuais: Cantos* (Virtual Spaces: Corners), 1967-68, is a structure that looks like the corner of an ordinary, familiar room. Around a segment of worn herringbone parquet floor are baseboards rich with red enamel edged with pink, from which rise walls of matte and dusty pink that are clearly fabricated from stretched and stapled canvas and exhibit a cracking in the gesso beneath the painted surface not unlike a plaster wall. Meireles shatters this architectural banality with a wedge of space that disrupts the right angle of the corner and seems to shift the line of the baseboard toward a new intersection of walls. It is an unexpected, irrational space, as if it were the threshold of another dimension where people might well disappear.

In 1970, during the military dictatorship, Meireles produced "Inserções em Circuitos Ideologicos" (Insertions into Ideological Circuits), a group of works which were represented in "Information" and appropriately featured in the New Museum's Public Access Gallery. These projects, which the artist has described as "mobile graffiti," took advantage of existing systems of circulation: the recycling of empty bottles and the exchange of currency. In the *Coca-Cola Project*, Meireles placed messages, including "Yankee Go Home," in white transfer decals on the body of the familiar bottle, itself an emblem second to none for the cultural and economic presence of the United States abroad. When the bottle was empty, the messages could easily escape notice. When it was filled, the text became legible. With the *Cédula Project*, cruzeiro banknotes and American dollars were rubber-stamped with messages and returned to circulation. One of these messages, "Who Killed Herzog?," refers to a journalist who had been detained for two days of questioning by the Brazilian army, then pronounced a suicide by hanging.

Responding to overt political pressure, including the cancellation of exhibitions, Meireles, like Oiticica, left Brazil and moved to New York City, where he lived from 1971 to 1973. In the years to follow, his work became closely associated with that of a number of his conceptually oriented contemporaries, fellow Brazilian artists working in a hybrid of sculpture, installation and process, among them Antonio Dias, José Resende, Waltercio Caldas and Tunga [see *A.i.A.*, June '98].

Meireles also produced an edition of "counterfeit" bank notes and coins, *Zero Cruzeiro/Zero Centavo* (1974-78), *Zero Dollar* (1979-84) and *Zero Cent* (1984). Although bordering on caricature, the notes have the look of official currency. The worthless dollar is clearly marked "zero" with the artist's signature as secretary of the treasury and an "Uncle Sam wants you" cartouche in place of George Washington. The counterfeit cruzeiro substitutes a photo-derived image of a Brazilian Indian on one side, and on the reverse an image understood to represent a psychiatric patient, symbolic of the marginalized and oppressed.



Cédula Project *(detail), from the series "Insertions into Ideological Circuits," 1970, rubber-stamped banknotes. New Museum of Contemporary Art.*

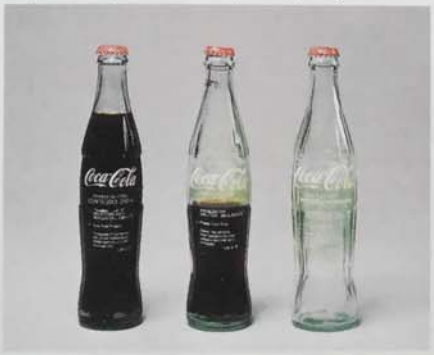
Adding Energy to the Circuit

At the New Museum, Meireles opened the show with his 1992 installation *Fontes* (Fountains/sources), which served to introduce audiences to the complex nature of his work. Now in the collection of the artist and Ghent's Stedelijk Museum, and originally conceived for Documenta IX, *Fontes* is a double spiral forest of 6,000 folding carpenter's measuring sticks suspended within a 6-by-6-meter freestanding enclosure. The jointed wooden rules are metrically misnumbered in black on dark yellow. On the extended sticks, 30 may be followed by 0 and then by 60, which adds to the calculated disturbance as the sticks clatter and sway to the viewer's passage. Meireles has related this penetrable field ("a formal metaphor for the universe") to his experience in viewing van Gogh's *Wheat Field under Threatening Skies with Crows* (1890).[4]

On the interior walls of the installation cubicle, arranged in diagonals from floor to ceiling, 1,000 clocks ticked away through eccentric quarter hours, the numbers on their faces erratically and sparsely positioned in random order. All these elements referenced the arbitrariness of measurements of time or space, as in the standard stoppages of Duchamp, while engulfing the viewer in the artist's perception of how the world is made—of many things—and how it is understood through the telling of stories. Meireles scattered 500,000 plastic numbers on the floor as though they had fallen from the clock faces. Many of them were tracked randomly through gallery after gallery of the museum, up the stairs, even out the door and onto the street, scattered like rice after a wedding, ants from a broken hill or visitors from an exhibition.

It is difficult to recall this or any other Meireles exhibition without the sensation of having somehow participated in the process of its making and unmaking. The artist conscripts his audience into the circulation of his work. In this way, bits of information or energy are added to a circuit,

Coca-Cola Project *(detail), from "Insertions into Ideological Circuits," Coca-Cola bottles, soda, transferred text, 7 inches high. New Museum of Contemporary Art.*



This page, installation detail of Fontes (Fountains/sources), *1992, 6,000 carpenter's rulers, 1,000 yellow clocks, black numeral labels, approx. 19½ by 9½ by 9½ feet; at Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany. Photo Dirk Pauwels. Courtesy Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo. Inset, installation entryway at the New Museum. Photo D. James Dee.*

This page, **Volátil (Volatile),** *1980/94, wood, ash, candle, natural gas, 9¼ by 13¼ by 49½ feet; at Galerie Lelong. Photo Wit McKay.*

One part of "Red Shift" is a porcelain sink mounted at a disturbing tilt. Its continuous red pour suggests that the spilling of blood is unending.

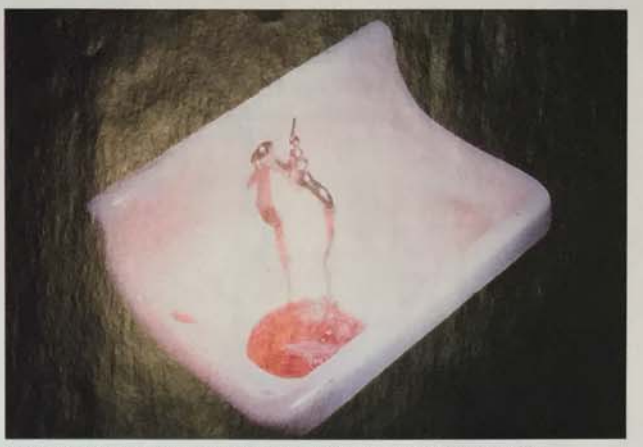
which is exactly what Meireles, who is not averse to the uses and pleasures of humor, had in mind in the first place: going beyond the stasis of the readymade.

For Meireles, the process of accumulating tangible materials, and their alteration, numbering and use, are critically important. He demonstrates propositions of observable fact and makes them meaningful. The works are an iteration, a repeated expression of intention (he means what he is doing) and emphasis (he means it this much), rather than an accounting of measure or size. The materials are evocative of an idea or condition. They add up. Single things ordinary in their original context, like chalk, talc, rulers, bones or coins, are improbably accumulated in the hundreds and thousands. Taken together, they quantify and broaden the implications of a specific thought. There is little actual emphasis on the act of counting. The somewhat broadly conceived measurements of his works suffer in translation from the original metric. For this reason, that system has been retained throughout this article.

Above, exterior view of Cinza (Ash/Gray), *1984-86, canvas, acrylic, chalk, charcoal, metal supports, dimensions variable. Below, details of chalk on interior walls and floor; at the New Museum. Photos D. James Dee.*

One of Meireles's most celebrated works, the 1967-84 "Desvio para o Vermelho" (Red Shift), is a powerful reflection on the unknown numbers of those who die in political protest. As the story goes, Meireles as a boy accompanied his father to the place where a journalist had been assassinated. With his blood, friends had inscribed "Here died a journalist defending the freedom of expression," a slogan restored in paint when the blood was obliterated. In Meireles fashion, this work is big, and, like most complex installations, it is greater than the sum of its many parts. It is conceived as a rambling sequence of three rooms.

The first, *Impregnação* (Impregnation), 1967, is a white-walled room carpeted in red and crammed with red things: bird cage, shelves, sofa, desk, chairs, paintings. Also fans, telephones, a tourist's voodoo doll, bound books on the subjects of health, politics and social order, a folding mirrored screen, garments on a clothes rack. There is a red refrigerator and inside it, red apples, tomatoes and peppers. There are fading red chrysanthemums in a vase, a red fish swimming in a bowl, a video monitor with a continuous loop of these many red things and more. In the background is the sound of running water.



Desvio (Shift), *detail from the third room of "Desvio para o Vermelho (Red Shift)," 1967/84, darkened room, tilted porcelain sink, continuously flowing red liquid, approx. 10 by 32⅞ by 16½ feet overall. Photo courtesy Galeria Luisa Strina.*

The end wall of the room gradually shades to black as the visitor enters the second stage of the installation, *Entorno* (Spill/Environment). Conceived in 1980, it consists of a small bottle resting on the floor picked out by a spotlight, its red contents seeming to spill out as a long, undulating path of red vinyl extending into an impenetrable darkness beyond another spotlight. The sound of running water returns as the visitor discovers a third space around a corner. *Desvio* (Shift), also conceived in 1980, consists only of a relatively small found porcelain utility sink, mounted at a disturbing tilt, with a red liquid pouring in an endless stream from the faucet to the drain below, objectifying the sound of running water that permeates the work and suggesting that the spilling of blood is unending. The title "Red Shift" derives from the scientific phenomenon of the same name, the tendency of light waves to shift toward the color with the longest wavelength, which is red.

In the Realm of the Senses

Meireles is interested in multisensory means. In "Red Shift" sound contributes to the visual effect, and the New Museum survey also included installations that involved touch, smell and taste. *Entrevendo* (Glimpsing), 1970-94, and *Volátil* (Volatile), 1980-94, were first conceived a number of years before they were constructed in 1994 for an exhibition at Capp Street Project in San Francisco, where they occupied spaces large enough to allow for a play of mass and volume. In both these works, Meireles coaxes the viewer away from dependence on the purely visual. The slatted-wood wind tunnel of *Entrevendo* tapers at the far end, which houses an enormous fan. Placing sweetened and salted spiral-shaped ice cubes on the tongue, the visitor walks into the tunnel and toward the fan as the ice dissolves. Meireles intends that the visitor associate the tactile experience of the spiraling currents of warm air with the taste of the melting ice.

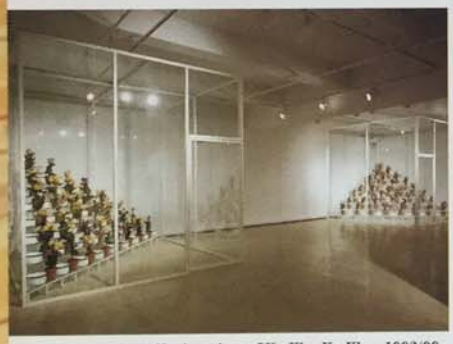
In *Volátil* the viewer enters an antechamber, removes shoes and socks, dons a particle filter mask and proceeds to a darkened room. The floor is covered with ash that rises to the calves. The barefoot sensation is a

Meireles is interested in multisensory means. He often coaxes viewers away from dependence on the purely visual with tastes, smells, feels and sounds.

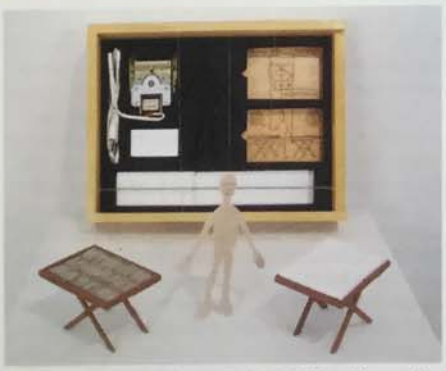
pleasant one. The visitor rounds a corner. A single candle burns in the fog-like atmosphere, while an odor of gas introduced by the artist subtly insinuates the risk implied by the work's title. (Meireles associates the piece with an earlier installation of more than 100,000 matchboxes stacked on a floor of black sandpaper; it created the ominous impression that the entire work could be ignited by the scraping of the visitor's feet.[5])

Cinza (Ash/Gray), 1984-86, consists of two enclosures made of grommeted canvas lashed onto fitted pipes, one suspended over a floor made of densely packed, upright pieces of chalk, the other over a floor of rough-hewn charcoal. The canvas walls and ceiling of the chalk chamber have been coated with black acrylic paint and then systematically marked with white chalk strokes; in the center of each panel is a black shape like an upright stick of chalk. The charcoal-floored room is the reverse: random charcoal marks over white paint, centering on a white shape like a piece of charcoal. Not incidentally, Meireles has employed tools fundamental to the art of drawing.

The regular patterning of the standing sticks of chalk forms a relatively firm, if fragile, mosaic floor. The shifting, irregular chunks of charcoal are somewhat more precarious underfoot. Both materials crunch as they are walked on, and slowly break down. As the visitor moves between the rooms, one substance or the other is tracked along, with the notion that at some point an ashy blending will occur. Although Meireles has associated the chalk chamber with the classroom, and the charcoal with the street, the work may hazard a critical reference to the view of miscegenation as a source of strength fostered by the social historian Gilberto Freyre.[6]



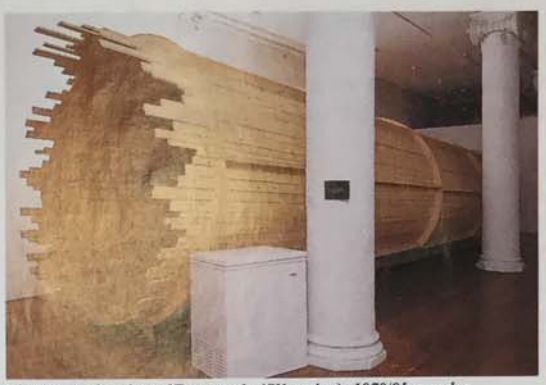
Installation view of **Ku Kka Ka Kka**, *1992/99, aluminum, steel, glass, artificial and real excrement, flowers, porcelain and terra-cotta pots, two structures: each 10 feet cubed; at Galerie Lelong. Photo Wit McKay.*



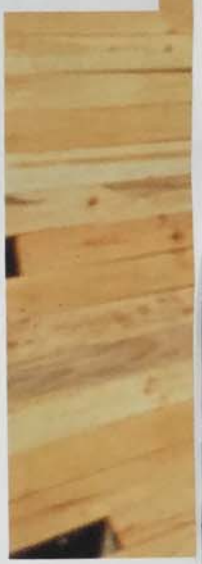
Camelô (Street Vendor), *1998, rubber marionette, motor, plastic shirt stays; box: 11½ by 15¼ by 3 inches.*

Do Not Enter

The New Museum show also included sculptures that can be entered only in the viewer's imagination. A work representing Meireles's interest in metaphor, density and the ambiguous nature of materials, *Fio* (Thread), 1990/1995, is a modest stack of baled hay making a 2-meter cube. Tied with cord and laced with a gold needle and 100 meters or so of gold thread, the work challenges the viewer to find the proverbial needle in the haystack. Meireles also invokes the needle that mends things torn—the heart included—and recalls the dross of hay that the miller's daughter must spin into gold in the tale of Rumpelstilskin. He calculates the quality, physical weight and density of the gold itself: in fact, the needle is 18-carat, and the total weight of gold, including the thread, amounts to 335 grams. He considers this piece related to his ongoing series of works exploring the relationship of volume and density, shown together under the title *Eureka/Blindhotland* (1970-75), otherwise not specifically represented in this exhibition.[7]



Above, exterior view of **Entrevendo (Glimpsing)**, *1970/94, wooden tube, fan, heating unit and ice, 27 feet long; at the New Museum. Photo D. James Dee. Opposite, viewer inside* **Entrevendo (Glimpsing)**. *Photo Ben Blackwell.*

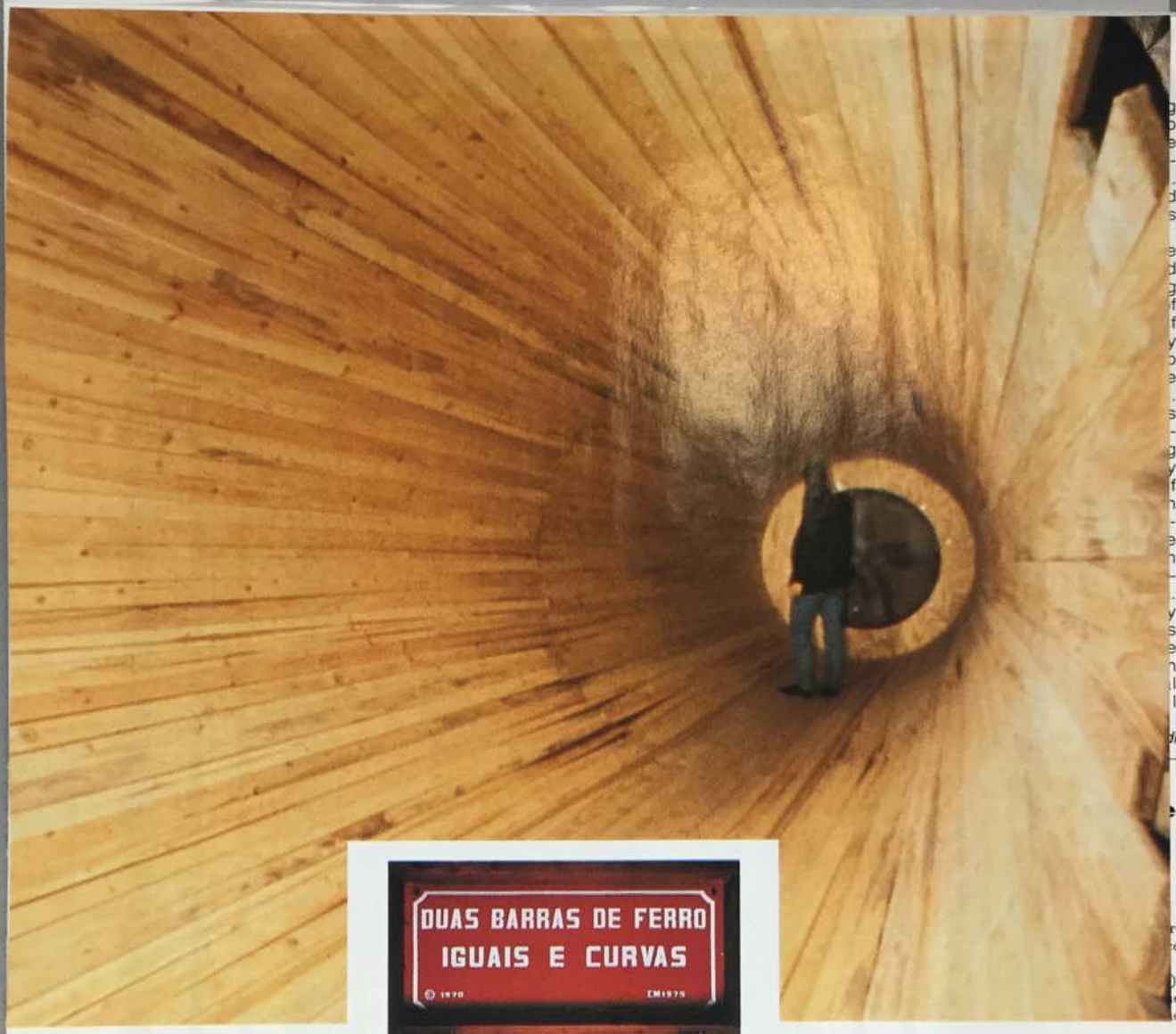


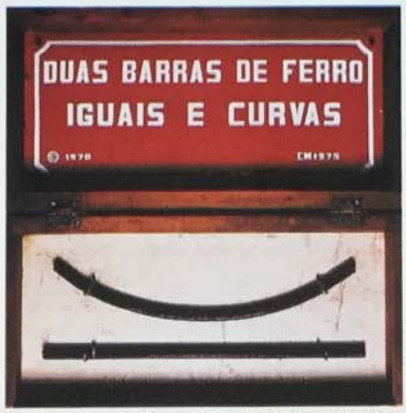
Another work shown was *Para ser Curvada Com os Olhos* (To be Curved by the Eyes), first realized in 1970 and later produced in a small edition, an object that Meireles includes in all his shows. It has the look of a portable reliquary for art in time of war, and consists of a hinged wooden box with an enameled plaque inside the lid identifying the contents as two iron bars that are equal and curved, although one is straight. The artist elicits the participation of viewers, commanding them to curve the second bar by the force of sheer will, through the accumulative force of their attention. It is what he expects from his audience, in exchange for a dare.

Stories from Life

In a contemporaneous exhibition at Galerie Lelong, Meireles installed a work inspired by the childhood memory of a joke having to do with human gullibility and the frailty of expectations. The story, true or not, is that Meireles's father was traveling in the interior of Brazil when he encountered a shack with a long line of people at the door. A sign on the wall read, "Discover the truth! Price 1 cruzeiro." The visitor received a jar with a lid of silk paper, and was invited to make a hole in the lid with a finger. The jar was full of shit.

Ku Kka Ka Kka was commissioned and previously shown by the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, in 1999. The installation consisted of two sleek glass-walled chambers, much like greenhouses, 3





Para ser Curvada Com os Olhos (To Be Curved by the Eyes), *1970, wooden box, 2 iron bars, graph paper, enamel plaque, 20 by 19¼ by 2 inches. Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro.*

meters on a side, with a glass door affording access in each. The rooms were split on the diagonal, with half the floor space occupied by tiers of steel shelves that rose like a pyramid into a corner, on which terra-cotta pots alternated with typical Brazilian chamber pots (white with green rims). In one enclosure, the pots contained real cut roses and plastic imitation excrement, respectively. The fragrance of roses dominated that room. In the opposite chamber the roses were artificial and the odor of real excrement suffused the space. Meireles again set up a place of opposing experiences to be reconciled by the viewer.

The Lelong exhibition also included a small stagelike arrangement of Meireles's recent edition *Camelô* (Street Vendor), 1998, a work, again, drawn from childhood memories of peddlers who sell simple notions and games to passersby. Some merchants offer suspended paper marionettes that in skilled hands can be made to dance and gyrate from the end of a string. Meireles's marionette is stamped from thin rubber and was suspended from a rotating rod at the ceiling. It danced with the aid of an electric motor. Next to the figure, tiny campaign tables displayed rows of wares: 1,000 white collar stays and 1,000 straight pins with the artist's initials inscribed on the head of each.

For two evenings in December, *Camelô* was performed, with stage drapes and a spotlight, in the window of the New Museum before the

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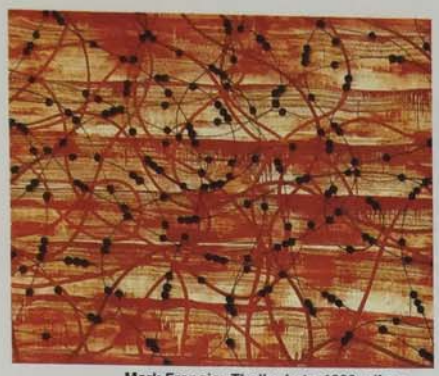

Mark Francis: *Thallophyte*, 1999, oil on canvas, 84 by 108 inches; at MK G.

space, which doubles as the gallery office, Woods left the ceiling and walls as they were, papering only the floor with a floral print. Alone on one wall was a 4-by-5-foot "painting"—an empty picture frame that Woods had stamped all over with the same wood-grain pattern that pervaded the show. This piece effectively condensed the experience of the main space above.

Instead of ink, Woods made all the prints with two fat layers of near-primary-colored gloss enamel paint, an idiosyncratic printing process that contributed to the show's impact. The materiality of the paint and the sticky pull and release of the printing process showed a rough and ready formalism at work. By limiting each wall, floor and ceiling plane to a single repeated pattern, Woods was able to give order to the vivid material and graphic qualities of the installation and still allow himself (and viewers) a sense of play. With all the surfaces looking at once actual and unreal, stepping into the gallery was like walking into a cartoon.

—James Hyde

MILTON KEYNES, U.K.

Mark Francis at MK G

Painter Mark Francis is an alumnus of the "Sensation" show, but a quiet one, no scandal-seeker. His exhibition at MK G (Milton Keynes Gallery), a new public art space just outside London, raised such questions as: does his use of saturated hues make his art decorative, and are the images representations of microscopic entities or are they abstract?

The show consisted of three rooms, each containing distinct work. The first displayed nine oils painted between 1994 and 1999, most measuring 84 by 72 inches. Another contained four new, large canvases (either 120 by 96 inches or 108 by 84 inches). Between these a third room housed an installation of Francis's extensive collection of antiquarian prints and models, which are largely medical (skin diseases and viruses) or mycological (mushrooms and other fungi). This display reflected Francis's home, which is chock-full of these objects side by side, floor to ceiling. By showing this collection, Francis bravely revealed his visual influences and clarified how thoroughly he has abstracted, absorbed and personalized the references used in his art.

Francis's paintings consist of glossy, opulent, monochromatic color fields on which small, dark nodules are bunched or strung out along rhythmically wavering black ribbons. The matte dots have often been blurred by dragging the wet paint into the background with a blending brush, suggesting motion through a similarity to cartoon "speed lines." These dot-strings can evoke an abacus or, yes, even viruses. Earlier works also featured ovumlike forms or bent strands resembling chromosomes.

In the newest paintings, the nodule-cords dominate, enriched by two dissimilar, underlying layers. *Thallophyte*, a glory of the show, bears a series of broad bands of horizontally scraped golden orange. A web of reddish-brown, nervelike tendrils is brushed over them. Topmost, the artist delineates a looping version of his dots-on-lines. Francis's captivating surface competes marvelously with a surprising sense of deep space—a new strength in his orchestrations of disconcerting opposition. Seductive color-formed space vies with vaguely disturbing forms—"pure" vs. "impure" abstraction. The pieces allusively amplify the unsettled feeling one has when viewing his source images. Attraction and aversion merge in a compelling visual metaphor with existential implications.

—Mark Staff Brandl

Meireles

continued from page 87

holiday shoppers bustling up and down Broadway. Besides Meireles's sympathy for the plight of his subject—peddlers in New York or the men and women who have recently risen in protest of their abuse on the streets of Brazil—the work has another, more immediate implication: the *camelô* is Meireles himself, with his many wares and their staggering inventory of parts, dancing to his own tune, as he brings his stories from the gallery to the street, where they came from. □

Meireles's works convey repeated expressions of intent (he means what he is doing) and emphasis (he means it this much)—not accountings of number or size.

1. As a condition of the Portuguese-Spanish Treaty of Tordesillas, signed in 1494, the western, Andean sector of South America, with its valuable resources and rich indigenous population, was awarded to Spain. Portugal received the coastal territory 50 degrees west longitude, 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. Meireles's account of the division of Latin America, and other stories cited in this article, are related by the artist and various critics in *Cildo Meireles*, London, Phaidon Press Ltd, 1999, pp. 39-42 and 106, and *Cildo Meireles*, Valencia, IVAM Centre del Carme, 1995, pp. 175-76. These books are among the principal sources for detailed accounts of Meireles's production and its historical context.

2. For a more comprehensive overview, see Aracy Amaral's account in "Abstract Constructivist Trends in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia," published in *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, by Waldo Rasmussen et al., New York, Harry Abrams, Inc. and the Museum of Modern Art, 1993, p. 92 ff. In the same volume, Mari Carmen Ramirez addresses related issues in "Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America," p. 156 ff, and Guy Brett addresses some of the work in "Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica," p. 100 ff. See also Guy Brett's articles in *Art in America* on Oiticica (Nov. '89) and Clark (July '94).

3. Clark's articulated metal sculptures of 1960-63, called *bichos* (animals), are intended to be held and manipulated by the viewer. Their polished shapes recall the geometric forms of Concretism.

4. Meireles's regard for *Fontes* as a metaphor for the universe seems a hyperbolic characterization of the work's material and numerical complexity. However, the plans for its installation also reveal the order of the double spiral, a reference to the Milky Way. The van Gogh allusion has to do with what Meireles calls its "chromatic atmosphere." While he often cites specific experiences or recounts anecdotes that seem crucial to understanding the background of a given work, he sometimes alters these stories in the service of metaphor. See Phaidon's *Cildo Meireles*, pp. 118-27.

5. *Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* (The Sermon on the Mount: Let There Be Light), 1973/79, consisting of 126,000 Fiat Lux brand matchboxes, included the text of the Beatitudes and a handful of actors impersonating armed plainclothes security men who guarded the installation for 24 hours.

6. Freyre, in *The Masters and the Slaves. A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, xxxiii ff, puts forth the idea that slavery had been a relatively mild practice in Brazil and that there was historically little racial prejudice among the Portuguese. He argued that centuries of miscegenation and the cultural mixing that accompanied it should not be regarded as a national shame but a source of Brazil's strength, and that this synthesis contributed to the ability of the Portuguese to establish a civilization in the tropics.

7. The two parts of *Eureka/Blindhotland*, consisting of weighing scales, a wood cross resting on its axis like the symbol for multiplication, and 200 black rubber balls of similar size but varying density, were first exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro in 1975. The work was included in P.S. 1's "Brazil Projects" exhibition of 1988. See Phaidon's *Cildo Meireles*, pp. 118-27.

"Cildo Meireles" appeared at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York [Nov. 19, 1999-Mar. 5, 2000]. It was organized by the museum's senior curator, Dan Cameron, and adjunct curator Gerardo Mosquera. The show opens this month at the Museu Moderna Arte de São Paulo [July 13-Aug. 20] and will travel to the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro [Oct. 5-Dec. 2]. It is accompanied by a multiauthor catalogue published by Phaidon.

Author: *Edward Leffingwell, a freelance critic based in New York, is* Art in America*'s corresponding editor for Brazil.*

N E W S

NEW YORK

Museum as Muse

The Museum of Modern Art is currently showing "Museum as Muse," an exhibition organized by Kynaston McShine that examines artists' responses to museum practices. Included are Marcel Duchamp's mustachioed *Mona Lisa*, Joseph Cornell's boxed collections, Mark Dion's cabinets of curiosities, and anarcissistic period room by Barbara Bloom. Perhaps inevitably, the exhibition absorbs the politics of institutional critique: the volatile punches of Hans Haacke, Fred Wilson, and Andrea Fraser seem oddly muted in MoMA's white walled galleries.

To keep your eyes on the edge venture to MoMA's bookstore. Among the postcards reproducing highlights of the museum's permanent collection, you'll find stacks featuring art by Ryan McGinness, a young conceptual artist who had the bright idea of reproducing his art on a postcard designed to mimic MoMA's own that he serruptitiously stocks between the Matisses and Nolands. To complete the artwork, a collector need only purchase a card and send to McGinness along with the receipt and bag. The artist will sign all three. As McGinness explains in his instructions to collectors, "I'd like to make these cards the MoMA bookstore's hottest selling postcards of reproductions of pieces that are not actually in their collection." To possess a memento of "Museum as Muse," pocket 60 cents and head to MoMA's bookstore, but hurry: the cards keep selling out.
(Grady T. Turner)

ED RUSCHA, The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire, 1965-8. Oil on canvas. 135.9x339.1cm.

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LOS ANGELES TIMES
LOS ANGELES, CA
SUNDAY 1,391,076
OCT 10 1999

When the Museum Is the Message

9475

A traveling exhibition examines how artists are inspired by the institutions themselves.

By LEAH OLLMAN

SAN DIEGO—A pithy, biting little fact heads curator Kynaston McShine's essay for the catalog of "The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect." The museum as we know it, he writes, came into being at the same time as the guillotine.

Both, you might say, represent advancements over previous methods of getting a job done. But is that as far as the coincidence goes? McShine laughs a deep, rumbling, evasive laugh over the telephone from his office at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and refuses to explicate further. No, he finally concedes, there's nothing lethal about museums. They're not places where art goes to die.

"If they were, I wouldn't be here," says the 40-year museum veteran. "I wouldn't be an undertaker. There are other things I would do with my life."

Museum walls have, in fact, circumscribed the entirety of McShine's working life. Fresh out of graduate school, he began coordinating circulating exhibitions at MOMA, then took a curatorial position at the Jewish Museum. After serving as acting director there from 1965 to 1968, he returned to MOMA, settling into the department of painting and sculpture, where he's been senior curator since 1980.

Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden

M. Hessel Collection

Ed Ruscha's "The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire" (1965-68), above, is in "The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect" in San Diego. Thomas Struth's "Musee Du Louvre IV, Paris" (1989), left, looks at museum-goers.

It would seem natural, after charting such a path, to conclude that museums have been McShine's muse, but he laughs that one away too, not wanting a complex, multidimensional relationship reduced to an easy phrase. Elusive and provocative, McShine curates in his own image. "The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect," which opened recently at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, takes a broad look at the ways artists have used museums—their stature, physical structure, history and organizing principles—as subject matter for their art.

Kaleidoscopic rather than telescopic, the show is rich in complementary, sometimes even conflicting points of view. Günther Forg's photographs render the Pinakothek München a cathedral suffused with divine light, while Vic Muniz takes a nothing's-sacred approach, gently mocking the navel-gazing practices of art professionals. With wry, inside humor, he photographs small

[illegible] as metaphor, images, text and luxuriously framed window onto human behavior. Thomas Struth records in magnificent scale and color how viewers choreograph themselves in front of postcard-familiar paintings in the great museums-cum-tourist-sites. Sophie Calle photographs the spaces left empty by works stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, pairing the voids with verbal descriptions of the works by employees of the museum—an exercise in equivalence that attests to the primacy and potency of the actual art object.

If there is an appropriate distance to be maintained between artists and museums, artists, at least, have regularly tested it. When Chris Burden tore through the Geffen Contemporary's floor for an installation in 1986, he set a precedent for physical violation of the museum space that no longer feels extreme. Hans Haacke's work questioning the ethics of museum trustees and the motivations of exhibition sponsors—two examples of which are in the show—might

"THE MUSEUM AS MUSE: ARTISTS REFLECT," Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 700 Prospect St., La Jolla. **Phone:** (619) 454-3541.

Dates: Through Jan. 9, 2000.

sections of the Museum of Modern Art's gray-and-white-streaked marble floor, and titles the works "Equivalents," after the legendary series of sky-and-cloud pictures that Alfred Stieglitz intended as emotional self-portraits.

Since their formalization in the late 18th century, museums have changed radically, becoming so fixated in recent years on democratic access and appeal that they've entered what one scholar calls "an age of populist deference." Art has changed just as dramatically over those 200 years, becoming, among other things, increasingly self-reflexive, critical of its own structures and the systems of its presentation and dissemination. Defining a relationship between two such fluid entities, as McShine attempts in "The Museum as Muse," seems an exercise in frustration, but one destined to generate a good deal of intellectual friction along the way.

When the show opened at MOMA in March, Roberta Smith, writing for the New York Times, called it remarkable, "stronger in big ideas than in profound visual experiences" but "unusually coherent [and] well-orchestrated."

"Part of its power," Smith wrote, "lies in the simple fact that, to paraphrase Frank Stella, what you see is where you see it. Its contents and its context are one."

In the catalog and the New York version of the show, McShine, as he puts it, "pulled the living and the dead together," stretching back to the early 19th century to illustrate how artists have long perceived museums as not just repositories, but also concrete manifestations of societal values, be they colonialist, commercial or otherwise. In an instructive painting of 1822, artist Charles Willson Peale shows himself pulling aside a curtain to reveal a vast hall holding his own collection of art and artifacts. That exhibition gallery evolved into the first American museum.

For the San Diego venue, the show has been trimmed of its historical precedents. It picks up in the 1940s with two Joseph Cornell boxes—reliquary-like portraits that function as intimate museums in themselves—and reaches to the present, with works like Mark Dion's 1998 "The Great Chain of Being," a massive tableau mimicking the taxonomic practices of natural history museums.

Along the way, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Marcel Duchamp, Larry Fink, Komar and Melamid, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Ed Ruscha, Hiroshi Sugimoto and others weigh in with their interpretations of the museum as metaphor, morgue, ruin and luxuriously framed window onto human behavior. Thomas Struth records in magnificent scale and color how viewers choreograph themselves in front of postcard-familiar paintings in the great museums-cum-tourist-sites. Sophie Calle photographs the spaces left empty by works stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, pairing the voids with verbal descriptions of the works by employees of the museum—an exercise in equivalence that attests to the primacy and potency of the actual art object.

One of the most controversial works in the show, by L.A. conceptualist Michael Asher, is not traveling *(please see story Page 73)*. Commissioned by McShine to create a work specifically for the show, Asher came up with a document, a slim brochure between red covers, that lists all of the paintings and sculptures de-accessioned from the Museum of Modern Art's collection during its 70-year history.

Though the sale and exchange of works from a collection to purchase other works is a normal museum procedure, it is rarely publicized the way a savvy acquisition is, and the list from MOMA, loaded with such familiar names as Picasso and Cézanne, ends up feeling startling and questionable.

A similar reversal of expectations occurs with another work commissioned for the show (also not traveling), Canadian Janet Cardiff's audio tour, which trades the academic, authoritative tone of most such taped guides for a more personal, poetic ramble through the galleries.

Patronage of artists goes back centuries, if not longer, but this kind of invitation, to use a museum as raw material for work that will be displayed within it, is a more recent phenomenon, one that signals the contemporary museum's role as both archive—a place for collection and preservation—and laboratory.

"I think there's a place for both," McShine says, "and a place where both should happen at the same time. Our basic nature, as people involved in art and culture, is to have both things—we want experimentation and we want the library."

In the show, that sense of experimentation and play often takes as its object the museum's own authority—how it's established, challenged, used and abused. While respect for the institution is assumed in the very concept of the show, irreverence courses through it like a riptide, and a love-hate, push-pull dynamic plays itself out visibly in much of the work. "Artists," McShine writes in the catalog, "are often, ultimately, wrestling with the issue of their dependence on the museum to endorse their place in art history."

If there is an appropriate distance to be maintained between artists and museums, artists, at least, have regularly tested it. When Chris Burden tore through the Geffen Contemporary's floor for an installation in 1986, he set a precedent for physical violation of the museum space that no longer feels extreme. Hans Haacke's work questioning the ethics of museum trustees and the motivations of exhibition sponsors—two examples of which are in the show—might

NATIONAL NEWS

NEWS BRIEFS

■ The Museum of Modern Art in New York has named Kynaston McShine, a senior curator at the museum, as its acting chief curator of painting and sculpture, the position left vacant in December by the resignation of Kirk Varnedoe. The museum is conducting a search for a permanent replacement.

THE ART NEWSPAPER, No. 135, APRIL 2003

MoMA curatorial swaps

NEW YORK. John Elderfield, 59, chief curator at large of the Museum of Modern Art, has been appointed chief curator of the department of painting and sculpture, the museum's most senior position. Kynaston McShine, acting chief curator of painting and sculpture, has been appointed chief curator at large.

The Nation.

July 19/26, 2004

ART

Body and Soul

ARTHUR C. DANTO

AMEDEO MODIGLIANI

In the 1960s, the New York Jewish Museum became the unlikely leading venue for contemporary avant-garde art in America. It was there, in the former Warburg mansion on upper Fifth Avenue, that enthusiasts for innovative art were able to study, in some depth, the second generation of the New York School, as well as those artists who had already gone well beyond it—Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, George Segal, Philip Guston, Ad Reinhardt and others. In 1963 Alan Solomon put together the exhibition "Toward a New Abstraction," with work by, among others, Ellsworth Kelly and Leon Polk Smith, marked by the hard-edged clarity of its forms and colors, and the use of canvases shaped in nontraditional ways. The following year the museum gave most New Yorkers their first understanding of Minimalist painting and sculpture when Kynaston McShine organized the epochal exhibition "Primary Structures." It would have been difficult to tell from what was on view in the other museums in the city that New York was the most exciting center of artistic innovation in the world, and there can be little question that the extraordinary popularity and prestige of the Jewish Museum's shows put pressure on its peers to rethink their responsibilities to contemporary art.

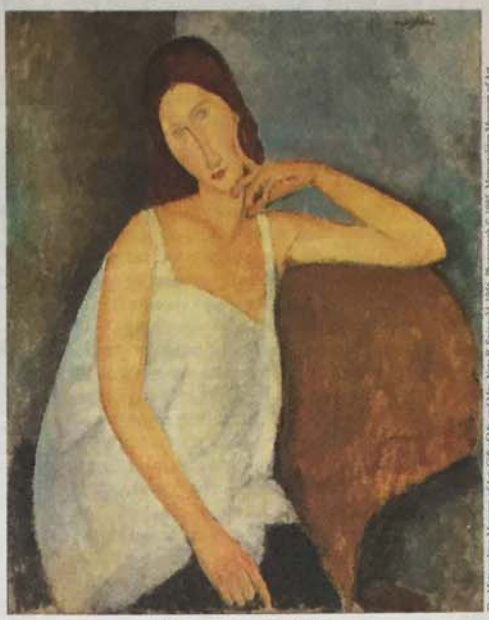
At the same time, however, the success of those shows created considerable tensions between the museum and its parent institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, not to mention the more conservative elements in New York's Jewish community. The museum was originally intended to house and study ritual and ceremonial objects the seminary had acquired. It had never been intended as a hot spot for non-Jewish artists to display their work for a cosmopolitan audience. My own view was that nothing could be more Jewish than supporting advanced art, and that a European tradition of Jewish patronage, disrupted by fascism, had been taken up by American collectors like Vera List, who had become powers on the museum's board of directors. In the end, conservatism triumphed, and the Jewish Museum disappeared from the "What's Going on in New York" pages of magazines. Unless you had a passion for Jewish artifacts and their historical significance, there was no reason to set foot in what for a decade had been the improbable site of radical artistic exploration.

In recent years the Jewish Museum has been pursuing a program that again appeals to a wider and more urbane audience, while remaining faithful to the mission of promoting an awareness of Jewish culture. It has mounted shows of Jewish artists whose work is of compelling interest to anyone concerned with art, whether or not they take a further interest in the ethnic or religious identity of those who made it. As one part of this agenda, if has paid particular attention to Jewish artists drawn to Paris in the first decades of the twentieth century, when it was the beacon for those with advanced artistic ambitions—Marc Chagall, Jacques Lipchitz, Sonia Delaunay, Chaim Soutine and now Amedeo Modigliani, figures that any museum anywhere would take pride in presenting. As a Jewish venue, however, the museum feels bound by responsibilities other museums need not share. It cannot rest satisfied with letting the work stand on its artistic merits alone. It must make an effort to explain in what special ways the Jewishness of the artists contributes to the significance of the art. It is thus under the kind of obligation that museums with dedicated constituencies generally feel bound by—to explain, for example, how a peculiarly feminine sensibility inflects the art in a museum devoted to work made by women, or how the blackness of the artists in museums restricted to black artists contributes to the interest and importance of their art.

There are many sound reasons—political, moral, educational and psychological—for the existence of what we might call identity art museums: museums whose visitors are, in a sense, split between those whose identity is an important reason for going to see an exhibit, and those who go primarily for the art irrespective of the

artists' race, nationality or gender. As a rule the artists don't need such museums. It is, rather, the other way around. There is currently on view at New York's Metropolitan Museum a superb painting of chess players by Sofonisba Anguissola, in a show of artists from Lombardy. Anguissola was one of the wonders of her age: Vasari visited Cremona to see her work, and Michelangelo held her in highest esteem. *The Chess Players*, almost certainly her masterpiece, is difficult for most of us to see, since it is located in Poznan, Poland. I went down to Washington especially to write about the wonderful show of her work a few years ago, which, for reasons of museum politics, was shown in the National Museum of Women in the Arts. But it would have been no less at home in the National Gallery or, for that matter, the Metropolitan Museum. The Jewish Museum had an incentive to put together the superb and very moving show of Modigliani—a Sephardic Jew born in Livorno in 1884—now on view in its second-floor galleries (until September 19, after which it travels to the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Phillips Collection in Washington). But because of Modigliani's stature, and his nearly unparalleled popularity, lines at least as long as those at the Jewish Museum would form wherever such a show were held today.

As a Sephardic Jew myself, I might, if I were given to such allegiances, take satisfaction that one of our own had achieved such eminence as an artist. But I find it extremely difficult to see how Modigliani's Sephardic identity has any bearing on his art. As a person and an artist, Modigliani personified the values and aesthetics of the School of Paris in the years before World War I. He immediately grasped that a new era had opened in art, and that to achieve the artistic greatness to which he aspired, he had to find his way as a Modernist. He very quickly began appropriating non-European stylistic devices that had become marks of Modernism—from Africa, Oceania and elsewhere. He saw Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the artist's studio in 1907, and soon began carving heads with elongated faces, long thin noses, slitty eyes and tiny mouths. Modigliani's style had certain affinities to German Expressionist art, not as a matter of direct influence but of an interest in non-European forms shared by advanced artists throughout Europe. The impact on Modigliani of the aesthetic strategies of *l'art negre* defined his entire generation. He would almost certainly never have become the Modernist he was had he remained in Italy. So it is difficult to swallow the argument of the show's curator that "far from being rooted in aesthetics and the history of art, his art and portraiture originate elsewhere"—namely in the political and religious reality of a Jew in Modigliani's Italy, and especially "his Sephardic understanding of the indelibility of his Jewishness, regardless of acculturation."



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Nate B. Spingold, 1956. Photograph © 1985 Metropolitan Museum of Art

Jeanne Hébuterne (1919)

How does that "understanding" show up in his art? "Mirroring his own experience of racial anonymity, Modigliani's abstracting pictorial terms confer on his sitters an enigmatic quality." At best, this would explain the "enigmatic quality" of Modigliani's sitters. In fact, the portraits are so transparent that if one of them had an enigmatic quality, it would be because he or she was an enigmatic person. The curator goes on: "What are we to make of an artist whose scrutiny of the individual gradually becomes so stylized as to effect a succession of seemingly indifferent faces echoed in the impassive expression of his stone caryatids?" My response to this is: What are we to make of a curator who sees Modigliani's portraits as "a succession of seemingly indifferent faces"?

The mystery of Modigliani is that each of his portraits embodies his own unmistakable style while at the same time showing a face with an expression of its own and a personality one is certain is precisely that of the sitter before him. The early sculptured heads admittedly have a kind of hieratic sameness, but it may have been this that caused him to give up sculpture in 1915—not merely because of his exceedingly fragile health, as is sometimes argued, or because the stone he needed was difficult to come by during the war, but because he realized that sculpture was the wrong medium for an artist whose true gifts coincided with his profound interest in the individual soul that each human face reveals. The paintings that captivate the throngs waiting outside to see them were all done in the last five years of his tragically short life, when portraying those who meant the most to him—artists, lovers, patrons—must have had an urgency that accounts for their poignant intensity.

What calls for explanation is that Modigliani's signature work is almost entirely restricted to portraits—even the spectacularly erotic and profoundly moving suite of nudes he painted late in his life are individuated portraits of women looked at through longing eyes. If one did not know they were models, hired by one of his patrons so that Modigliani might paint something salable—his show of nudes at the Berthe Weill Gallery in December 1917 was his only one-person exhibition in a commercial gallery—one would suppose they must be of women with whom he had made love. They are among the most erotic nudes in history, the heat and softness of their bodies made magically visual. Each is an incarnation in visual terms of tenderness and desire, and each, at the same time, is an individual woman, passionately aware. Matisse's *Blue Nude*, even his *Pink Nude*, is an exercise in expressive abstraction. We are conscious of them as paintings, and only secondarily as women. Only rarely with Picasso, as in some of his portraits of Marie Therèse Walther, does the sexed being of a woman become palpable. But Modigliani loses himself in the women he paints, accenting their nipples and pubic hair. Small wonder the police closed the show down!

It is often observed that Modigliani remained independent of the two powerful styles that defined the Paris art world before World War I—Cubism and Fauvism. That is because he had no interest in reducing objects to geometrical elements, with Picasso and Braque, or in submerging visual reality to arbitrary colors in the interest of abstract

design, as with Matisse and Dérain. His subject was the human being, body *and* soul. The drive to put that meaning onto canvas entailed that the only format available to him as an artist was the intimate portrait. The freedom with which Cubism and Fauvism broke up the human form gave him a lexicon of notations with which to render features in a way that borders on caricature. It made it possible for him to reinvent the face before him, depicting expressively, through curves and angles, the way the subject felt to him. That made him a modern artist, but free of Modernist dogmas. Characteristically, an oval head is tilted on a long neck, with the body quickly brushed in. He did a few landscapes, and no still lifes that I know of. What interest could he have had in mere things and places?

Like Tosca, Modigliani lived for art and for love—*Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore*. He had a knack for living likenesses, but an interest only in people for whom he had a bond of feeling. This guaranteed a life of poverty, for he could hardly charge fees when his subjects were primarily chums and sweethearts, themselves as poor as he was. So he lived on handouts, petty loans, small charities. A man that impractical was hardly likely to live a prudent life. He formed terrible habits and became a legendary drunk and pothead. His friends called him "Modi," which sounds close enough to *maudit*—"cursed"—to summon up the image of the outcast poet portrayed in Baudelaire's *Fleurs de Mal*, were it not for the affection with which it must have been pronounced. As he was blazingly handsome, there was always someone happy to take care of him. Luckily for us, he was too driven by a belief in his ultimate greatness to settle for the passive life of a spoiled beauty.

Modigliani not only underwent a true academic training in Florence, Venice, Rome and Livorno but continued to believe in the virtues of traditional painting. Unlike his compatriots the Futurists, he was in no hurry to jettison the past. It was for the same reason he held himself apart from the Cubists and the Fauvists. He meant to be a Modernist, but he wanted at the same time to achieve work that had the weight, the clarity, even the beauty of traditional Italian art. Though indisputably modern, particularly in their use of African forms, the great portraits of the last five years of Modigliani's life have the transparency of a Renaissance portrait. But this is to look at him too much from an art-historical perspective. I would not want someone to take away the idea that what made him an important artist was a sort of fusion of Siena and the Congo.

EVENTS

NATIONAL

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What made Modigliani important altogether transcends the question of influence, though I am unsure that I am able to explain it. I found it extremely moving to walk past those paintings of slender, luminous beings with their blank eyes and pursed lips, an experience I can only compare to looking at old photographs of people I don't know but whom somebody once knew, who had a real existence—a life—in a certain place and time. There is that extraordinary patina of their having been some particular person. Which is not to say that the images are in any sense photographic. We see them through the medium of Modigliani's consciousness, which is dense with effects entirely his own. The image is the intersection of two consciousnesses—the artist's and the subject's—and some of the feelings of both are transmitted in ways it is impossible to explain, but that make us feel we are in the presence not primarily of a painting but of a person. I think of them as having the power of icons, in which the subjects—traditionally Jesus or Mary or one of the saints—made themselves mystically present. It was not necessary for the icon to resemble its subject. What mattered was that the subject was somehow present, and could be engaged with. I was overwhelmed by the reality of these presences—of Moise Kisling, or Max Jacob, or Jean Cocteau. And I could not think of another artist who achieved such an illusion, unless Vermeer or perhaps Egon Schiele, although by very different means.

I think Modigliani addresses each of his viewers in these terms. The most important thing about him is what also explains his popularity. What those who line up to see a show of his work know is really all that needs to be known, the rest being art history and gossip. What they know is that they have fallen in love with a tawny nude, or a beautiful long-necked woman with eyes like blue almonds and a mouth that looks as if it were kissed onto the canvas. They don't come because they have studied Modigliani in art history courses, since he is no longer part of the great canonical narrative of Modernism. His absence from the art history textbooks must have something to do with the fact that there has not been a show of his work here for more than fifty years. But I imagine that reproductions of his paintings continue to sell very well. So in the end I am grateful that Modigliani's Sephardism gave the Jewish Museum a pretext to give us this wonderful show. Don't let the crowds keep you away! And if you come up with a better account of his power, I'd like to know about it. I am sure it has to do with light, love and beauty. But my analytical powers carry me only so far. ■