

## ON THE ROAD WITH jah

On the occasion of the **June Wayne retrospective** at SUNY at Purchase and the **Sackners'** show at the University of Pennsylvania, a trip to New York City in April seemed quite appropriate. Upon arrival, I was whisked away to the subway, to the ferry to Staten Island, and to a bus to Snug Harbor Cultural Center, which is a historic building in which 150 pieces of abstract painting and some sculpture made since 1970 were hung exquisitely by the sole curator, Lily Wei, who outdid herself, since the show had been reviewed that day in the New York Times, and I was prepared to not only see a new part of Staten Island, but also to see Hale-Bopp clearly and beautifully from both Snug Harbor and from the ferry. It was a soft, warm night, and it was unbelievable to have met Phil Niblock, the great intermedia artist who teaches on Staten Island and also has a home in Gent, on the ferry, enjoying gossip.

In 11 days, I saw a changed New York City, but still a feast for anyone who has the stamina to keep on walking and running and jumping. From that gorgeous warm evening, New York immediately told me she is in command, because Saturday morning it rained. Yes, Umbrella weather, but it was appropriate, since I was going to attend Allen Ginsberg's Memorial at St. Mark's and the skies cried down for the loss we all have. But first to Joe Brainard, one of my favorite artists, who was having a posthumous show (the first since 1975 in New York) at Tibor de Nagy and what a delight it was from flower paintings to Nancy paintings and all the fun in-between. He was an iconoclast and did all the things "right" that everyone else felt was "wrong". Alas, he died in silence and oblivion from AIDS in 1994, but truly did not have very many exhibitions in the 1980s either, except for my favorite one at the Long Beach Museum of Art. He brought sunshine into my life that morning, and made the rush to St. Mark's not as difficult. Luckily, I waited under the arches of the church and although there was a side room where one could hear the celebration, but not see it, I was determined and hoped to get in, if people left. And they did (it was a four-hour memorial celebration) and we (Robert C. Morgan and I) walked in just as Patti Smith was going on, and it was amazing from that moment on. Young children and teenagers, rapt in attention, were there; mothers with infants were there; poets with poems were there; singers with songs were there. Lou Reed, in great shape (he's been working out and looks younger than ever) recited a poem that tore us all apart. Allen's voice was on a tape with poems he had composed just before he died. A description of those last days was recited, so that "we were there" in the details elicited. It was told that when he knew he had liver cancer and had 2 to 5 months to

live, he sent a letter to President Clinton telling him the circumstances and asking him to give him a medal for Poetry. "But perhaps it is not politically correct, and Newt wouldn't like it either, so maybe you shouldn't give me a medal." And the vigil around the bed was intense, including close friends and old lovers, as well as four Buddhist monks chanting and we shared in that. His ashes are now in Newark, New Jersey (his family's plot), at Naropa in Colorado (the Institute where he taught) and at the Buddhist Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He had affected so many of us so early that in many ways, what Duchamp was for art, Ginsberg was for poetry. He showed the way to speak out, to speak your mind, to voice your feelings and still be lucid and rational, albeit sometimes "queer". As we walked out after a rousing 4 hours and 20 minutes, there were those who did not have the chance to speak, but in their hearts they would have some kind of closure. The smell of marijuana, sweet and pervasive, greeted us as we exited the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. It was appropriate, it was a 60s thing, it was all right. Because his voice is on the land and will not be stilled.

**Dikko Faust** of Purgatory Pie Press that weekend was celebrating a birthday and a happy "45" was had by those who brought him 45 rpm records and he had a player to play them on! **Alain Misson**, a performance artist and visual poet, also was a host for a grand soirée with Emily Harvey, the dealer who has a gallery for many of the Fluxus artists, as dinner guest as well.

As for **MOMA**, well, it is a -changing having purchased the Dorset Hotel next door, so things will be looking differently depending upon who is selected as architect. But the artist book collection, purchased from Franklin Furnace, is now cataloged and available for library cataloging and research which makes for a remarkable resource for all those doing research in artist books. MOMA in New York cannot immediately make the collection accessible instantaneously, but there is a way of finding what they have, and you know they have at least 15,000 artist books and other publications by artists.

The **Hannah Höch** show of about 100 collages by the amazing Dadaist who did not flee Nazi Germany is a tribute to her indomitable spirit. Having died at the age of 88 in 1978 after a surge of energetic work after the war, this exhibition was the highlight of my visit to 53rd Street. As was the Bravo photography show with so many photographs I had never seen before, but what a flow of life for this master from Mexico.

Yes, New York is a feast, inside or outside of the galleries. What has changed is SoHo, which has more boutiques per square foot than anywhere I know, and fewer galleries, now that many of them have moved to **Chelsea**. Yes the New York Times for 9 May shows that

SoHo is still around, and the galleries are showing stunning art. Sure, in gentrified neighborhoods where food and clothes are very expensive, and things look expensive even if they are not. Real estate always dictates the venues of galleries in any urban environment, and the shift since the last time I was in New York is amazing. Just imagine the last warehouse area of New York City being invaded by artists, art galleries and a gentrified group of professionals who want loft living at a price. It's a perfect combination, with L.A.-type spaces, large and clean, well-lighted, and sometimes inaccessible for the want of stairs, or a door or a decent elevator access, but it's worth the exploration. The gallerists seem happy to have found spaces conducive to show large works and small, in spaces full of light, with people who think the same way, in other words, other visual people. The only drawback is that the subway is not very close to 10th Avenue, which is a wind tunnel in itself. You have to walk several blocks. Although many of the galleries are already listed in the gallery guide, some have just opened and are neither on the map or in the guide, so it's sheer discovery most of the time. I must say that most of the best art in April was in Chelsea. Food, toilet paper art, large installation pieces, name brands, and those less well known, but quite a treat, and Dia Foundation is at the end of the street. It was so cold and wet the day I went to Chelsea, I was the only one in the Dia on all four floors and in the café, but it was great to be with Hanne Darbhoven, Fred Sandback, Juan Munoz all alone to savor and take my time. Although I had planned to cover all galleries everywhere, it is impossible now to do everything, even in a week. You just have to plan it out, choreograph your itinerary and hope you can see as much as you can. From 20th to 26th Streets, you have a variety of galleries, big names and some quite small, who care about what they are showing and are delighted to have such great spaces to exhibit the work of talented artists. Their schedules used to be Wednesday through Sunday, but some galleries have reverted to Tuesday through Saturdays. Those who stay open on Sundays realize that they can attract big crowds.

One of my favorite shows in New York was the **REMOTA: Airmail Paintings by Eugenio Dittborn**, who created a method of doing conceptual works in Chile at the **New Museum** and then mailing his works disguised as letters back in the early 80s to circumvent a repressive dictatorship. He has it down to a formula so that the envelopes also become part of the exhibition, and the folded paintings are attached to the wall with grommets and they are full of content, so much content that the 7 works in the show took a great deal of time to absorb. He used to do mail art in the 80s as well.

And I even attended a symposium about Magazines at an alternative space called **spot** at 71 Vandam (corner of Hudson) in SoHo. But it was the museum shows that stirred me. The Jewish Museum had Chantal Akerman's *D'Est (From the East)*, her austere and meditative film about Central and Eastern Europe, as well as her video installations, all under the title "Bordering on Fiction". It was moving and emotional for me, watching 70 different scenes depicting the people and the places Akerman encountered during her journey. If it comes to your town, don't miss it.

And I know you'll want my opinion about the **Whitney Biennial**. Well, it was a great deal better than I expected, but I hardly use "expected or expectation" anymore. Mostly installation and photographs, the exhibition has some wonderful pieces by Chris Burden, Ilya Kabakov, Bruce Connor, Tony Oursler, Kara Walker, Louise Bourgeois, Vija Celmins' painting of the night sky, Shahzia Sikander's updated Indian miniatures, but my favorite piece is Glen Seator's recreation, abstraction and displacement of Director David Ross' office. It was a tremendous tour de force.

And of course, along the way I went to pay homage to my favorite designer, Henry Dreyfuss, whose inventions and designs we all are using today—from the telephone design to the round thermostat on your wall. He once worked in California, in Pasadena to be exact, where he started his practice, so we are all blessed that our symbols for keep dry, fragile, etc. were all created by such a facile and ingenious mind. And that was at the National Museum of Design, the **Cooper-Hewitt**, which was abloom with spring flowers.

And at the **Metropolitan**, well, Tiepolo (who used a lot of umbrellas in his art) was amazing, but so was Cartier's jewels (the average age of anyone looking at them was about 60), but the glory that was Byzantium was the mind-blowing show of my stay. Not only was Byzantium shown as I have seen it, but here were treasures from Syria, Bulgaria, Albania, Russia, and Turkey, among others. There was much to learn, and the show was so very, very big! There were so many manuscripts, so many books that showed Christ rescuing Adam and other Biblical figures from the Devil. There were carved ivory icons of the crucifixion and entombment. A grand Man of Sorrow of the 12th century peered at me, a broken man on the cross. Yet the Harbaville Triptych, carved in translucent ivory, was there as well as a 12th-century mosaic icon of Jesus' mountaintop Transfiguration that was executed with grain-like cubes of glistening marble, lapis lazuli, colored glass, and gilded bronze. This middle Byzantine period, from 9th - 13th centuries, is so expressively human, not static and hieratic as the early period. These figures seem so human, so worldly, so recognizable.

The **New York Public Library** Main Building had a remarkable exhibition called "Let There Be Light: William Tyndale and the Making of the English Bible" where I learned how Tyndale, an English priest educated at Oxford and Cambridge, and an admirer of Martin Luther, was the first person to translate Scripture into ordinary English from the original Hebrew and Greek, powerfully influencing the style of the Bible's King James Version. But he was the one who coined phrases such as "fight the good fight", "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" and "eat, drink and be merry" among others. He promoted learning as well as the revolutionary idea that people should have access to information without the mediation of the state. And that cost him his life. Although thousands of his books were smuggled into England, other piles were intercepted and burned by the church authorities, who believed that allowing lay people to read and interpret the Scripture on their own would undermine the social order. Copies not burned were probably deteriorated from overuse, because people literally read them to pieces!

After Tyndale completed the New Testament, he taught himself Hebrew and translated the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, and nine other Old Testament books. But that was it, since he was arrested in Antwerp, had a trial for heresy, and was publicly strangled, his body burned in October 1536. And they had all available copies from all over the world to show us the growth and development of this man's efforts.

But of course, the reason why I was at the New York Public Library was to see the magnificent exhibition of **Richard Tuttle's Books**, reflecting the collecting in depth of the artist's printed works which are full of surprise, innovative, and correspond to the world they bring to view. The catalog contains essays by Robert Rainwater, curator at the New York Public Library's Spencer Collection as well as Chief Library for Art, Prints & Photographs, as well as another by Robert M. Murdock. Includes a selected bibliography, acknowledgments, a poster/catalog with 49 items shown—all designed by the artist. The exhibition opened on 22 February and will remain open until 31 May. This is a must see!

Some interesting points: New York has a new critical journal (which is free) called **Review**, which did a remarkable issue on the Whitney Biennial and has writers such as Robert C. Morgan, J. Bowyer Bell, Karen S. Chambers, Steve Mumford, Jennifer Dalton, Dore Ashton, John Perreault and many more. Even Hilton Kramer, April Kingsley, Jane Harris, Amei Wallach and others write for this "Review", so pick it up at your favorite gallery or museum. It works for New York! And there is a series of tours by dealers, called "Dealer as Educator" where people like Holly Solomon or Bill Bartman take anyone who wants to come (it's free) on a Saturday at

noon at the dealer's gallery and gets a tour of their "favorite" shows. It's an education!

The Guggenheim, uptown and downtown, had remarkable shows, but my favorite was at Guggenheim SoHo, *Art/Fashion*, a dynamic exhibition examining the exchange between visual art and fashion design, including work by Giacomo Balla, Christo, Sonia Delauney, Lucio Fontana, Elsa Schiaparelli, Andy Warhol, as well as 8 contemporary artists including Jan Fabre, Oliver Herring, Beverly Semmes, and Judith Shea. There are Russian Constructivists as well as Jean Cocteau and Salvador Dali, Lucio Fontana and Getulio Alviani. This exhibition was part of a group of exhibitions designed by Issey Miyake at the 1996 Biennale di Firenze. It is a stunning show, one that is aesthetically exciting. It can be seen **through 8 June**.

And not to be outdone by any other show I saw, it was Oleg Kulik, a 36-year-old Russian performance artist, who was living his life as a dog in a cagelike room at the Deitch Projects Gallery in SoHo that really got to me. He was quite unfriendly to me, when I looked into the barred room to see him lying nude on the ground just like a dog. I walked around the barred room to see a video camera beaming on him from the back of the gallery. He barked at me through the bars, giving the feeling I was really in the presence of a pit bull, and not a performance artist. He has water and food bowls which satisfy I guess a hunger, and then he curls up on his pallet, while wearing nothing but a thick studded collar.

Kulik became a dog ever since he passed through customs at Kennedy Airport, entered a van and stripped off his clothes, putting on a dog coat, collar, leash and muzzle and began communicating in dog-talk. He stayed in character until he returned to the airport on 26 April. When he barked at me twice, I got the idea. And frankly, I started thinking what is real and what is not. He was really "authentic" as far as frightening. The name of the show was "I Bite America and America Bites Me", much like Joseph Beuys' performance piece at the René Block Gallery in SoHo in 1974. In that work, titled "I Like America and America Likes Me," Beuys arrived at the gallery from the airport in an ambulance, spent three weeks in a room-size cage with a coyote, and returned immediately to the airport, again by ambulance.

People were allowed into his cage if they put on the quilted overalls and arm-guards which hung near the chained and barred door to his cage. I guess he acted coy and lovable if you rubbed him behind the ears or gave him a small snack. Otherwise, I just don't know. First a sculptor, then a performance artist, he impersonated a bird, ran for President of Russia as a bull, wearing horns, as well as clothing while campaigning. (Roberta Smith in the New York Times and jah).