Edward Kienholz
MATRIX/BERKELEY 21

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The Back Seat Dodge '38, 1964

When Edward Kienholz' The Back Seat Dodge '38 was first exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1966, it was labeled "revolting, pornographic and blasephemous" by a number of Los Angeles County Supervisors who publicly requested the closing of the exhibition (L.A. Times, March 24, 1966). While Kienholz is internationally recognized as one of the most important sculptors of his generation, American audiences have consistently found his work confounding and disturbing. This is not surprising since Kienholz' passion for addressing difficult social issues through his art has taken the form of uncomprimising critiques of American society. It is perhaps for this reason that since the late 60's Kienholz' works have seldom been presented in the United States, although he has exhibited regularly in Europe. Indeed, all but three of his major environmental works are housed in European collections.

An anarchist of sorts, to whom no material, method or subject matter is taboo, it is difficult to pinpoint the genesus of Kienholz' approach to art. A consistent element in Kienholz' work since the late 50's has been the juxtaposition and manipulation of various found materials. His earliest works took the form of wooden relief paintings in which wood fragments were nailed and glued to a supporting panel and aggressively painted with a broom. In the catalog Edward Kienholz (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1966), Maurice Tuchman describes Kienholz' attitude at the time: "Kienholz conceived of the 'broom paintings' as exercises in a non-artistic territory, a region of 'ugliness.' He proceeded on the premise that if he 'could make something ugly' it would help him 'understand beauty.'" His aggressive application of paint in these works was comparable to that of the Abstract Expressionist painters concurrently working on the East Coast, while his use of cast-off materials was paralleled in the work of numerous sculptors also active at that time; notably Jean Tinguely and Arman, with whom Kienholz spent some time scavenging the streets of Los Angeles for materials, having been introduced to them by his Los Angeles dealer Virginia Dwan.

In the late 50's Kienholz' works became increasingly three-dimensional and figurative, taking the form of oblique interpretations of topical social issues. God-Tracking Station #1, 1959, consisted of a variety of found objects such as an oil lantern, camera, training chair and plastic animal. The work represented Kienholz' sardonic response to the anxiety created by the "space race" between Russia and the United States. The work epitomized the ultimate space technology in the form of a device designed to photograph God. Increasingly, the assemblages moved out from the wall to become free-standing sculpture, as in the work John Doe, 1959, constructed of a male department store dummy sarcastically manipulated to form a representation of the modern American male.

In the early 60's, as his subjects moved towards isolating specific aspects of American urban life, Kienholz' works were seen as an extension of the Pop Art movement of that period, represented by Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and George Segal, among others. Kienholz' work differs significantly from that of the Pop artists, however, in that he makes no attempt to transform his materials into elegant, formal compositions. Kienholz never imposes the artifice of formal composition upon his subjects. His manipulation of materials and space is directly determened by the social and psychological subject matter of the work. As such, Kienholz' work is more appropriately related to that of the "beat poets" of the Bay Area, such as Wallace Berman, Jess Colins, Wally Hedrich and Bruce Conner, and their macambre, surrealistic "proto-pop" imagery.

In the mid 60's Kienholz began grouping the free-standing sculptures together to form dramatic environments which the artist termed "tableaux." The inspirational source for the tableaux format may be traced to the Nativity scenes and other makeshift sculptural narratives the artist witnessed in church performances and grange meetings as a child growing up in rural Washington state. The Back Seat Dodge '38, created in 1964, is one of Kienholz' most memorable and controversial tableaux. The work represents the experience of millions of adolescents whose introduction to sex took place in the back seat of an automobile. Kienholz constructs the scene in a straight forward and uncompromising manner. Caught in an intoxicated and seemingly primeval state--beer bottles and underwear are strewn in and around the car--the teenage figures do their best to copulate in the tiny private environment of an automobile. While no specific moral statement is offered, the work clearly underscores that frustrating period of adolescence when a teenager's naturally expanding sexual appetite is confronted by a society which demands Victorian behavior.

In many cases, Kienholz' tableaux are highly personal, autobiographical statements, and the artist takes great care in adding objective details to the works in order to capture the nuances of a remembered moment. A majority of the tableaux, for example, are set in specific time settings. The Back Seat Dodge '38 evokes the lifestyle of an adolescent generation in the 40's (Kienholz' youth), incorporating brand name beer bottles, cigarette wrappers, clothing styles and a modified 1938 Dodge automobile complete with raccoon tail on the aerial. Kienholz deliberately flashes the viewer back to the immediacy of the present by incorporating an operating radio which blares contemporary music. We ask ourselves, have our morals changed that much? As Maurice Tuchman noted, "Kienholz involves the viewer, forces him into confrontation with the present by thrusting the past at him." (LACMA '66).

An astute critical observer of modern life, Kienholz is ultimately a realist of uncompromising order. His talents lie not in a facility for tromp l'oiel illusionism, but in his ability to create a powerful sign language from the remnants that society has little use for. Kienholz has stated, "I really begin to understand any society by going through its junk stores and flee markets. It is a form of education and historical orientation for me. I can see the results of ideas in what is thrown away by a culture." (Edward Kienholz:

Volksempfängers, Berlin: Nationalgalerie, 1977.) Kienholz' realism is that of a common unconsious--experiences from our childhood, adolescence and adult life that we often choose to suppress. His tableaux are direct and unambiguous. They stand as some of the most incisive interpretations of American society created by any artist.

Edward Kienholz was born in Fairfield, Washington in 1927. He attended Eastern Washington College of Education. In 1953 he moved to Los Angeles, subsequently opening the Now Gallery, Syndell Studios and, with Walter Hopps, the Ferus Gallery. Kienholz currently spends half the year in Berlin and half the year in Hope, Idaho where he has opened The Faith and Charity in Hope Gallery.

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Works in MATRIX:

The Back Seat Dodge '38, 1964, mixed media. 5' 6" x 20' x 12'. Lent by Lyn Kienholz, Los Angeles.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
Syndell Studios, LA '65; Ferus Gallery, LA '59 & '60; Pasadena Art Museum, CA '61; Ferus Gallery, LA '63; Iolas Gallery, NYC '63; Dwan Gallery, LA '63 & '64; Dwan Gallery, NY '65; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston '66; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA '66; Dwan Gallery, NY '65; Boise Art Museum, Idaho '68; Art Museum Atheneum, Helsinki '69; Moderna Museet, Stockholm (toured Amsterdam, Dusseldorf, Paris, Zurich, London) '70; Omnasch Galerie, Cologne '73; Stadtische Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf '73; Galeria Bocchi, Milan '74; Centre George Pompidou, Paris '77; Nationalgalerie, Berlin '77.

Selected group exhibitions:
Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Art of Assemblage '61; Dwan Gallery, LA '64; Art Institute, Chicago '66; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA, Sculpture of the Sixties '67; Dwan Gallery, NY '67; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage '68; Kassel, Germany, Documenta 4 '68; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, The Machine '68; Kassel, Germany, Documenta 5 '72.

Selected bibliography about Kienholz:

Seitz, William. The Art of Assemblage (New York: Museum of Modern Art '61).

Coplans, J. "Assemblage: The Savage Eye of Edward Kienholz," Studio, vol. 170 (Sept. '65) pp. 112-115.

Tuchman, Maurice. Edward Kienholz (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art '66).

Russell, John and Suzi Gablick. Pop Art Redefined (London: Oxford University Press '69).

Hulten, K. G. P. Edward Kienholz: 11 Tableaux (Stockholm: Moderna Museet '70).

Merkert, Jorn. Edward Kienholz: Volksempfängers (Berlin: Nationalgalerie '77).

Silk, G. D. "Ed Kienholz' Back Seat Dodge '38," Arts vol. 52 (Jan. '78) pp. 112-118.

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