A CONSPIRACY OF BACHELORS

BARBARA FLYNN

Harald Szeemann, the former director of the Kunsthalle in Bern and head of the last Documenta, has organized an exhibition called "The Bachelors' Machines," which is presently on tour in Europe. The title is taken from Duchamp's designation for the bottom half of his *Large Glass*, in which nine cylindrical, machinelike "bachelors" work with other forms to build a closed system for the production, conveyance, and release of sexual energy (sperm) into the top part of the work, the "bride's domain."

Bachelors' machines are statements on the relationship between the sexes and on the male's aspiration for something beyond himself; masturbation and artistic creation are shown to be activities that work like machines. The machines Szeemann has collected for his exhibition symbolize the futility, lack of function, and incomprehensibility alluded to by Duchamp's ensemble.

The present exhibition aims at visualizing a theory put forth by Michel Carrouges in *Les Machines Celibitaires* (Paris, 1954). In keeping with Carrouges' scheme, the exhibition places special emphasis on the fantastic bachelors' machines that appeared in literature roughly between 1850 and 1925. Material is presented in ten "rooms"—rough spatial divisions, each of which is devoted to the analysis of a subtheme. These include transcendence, horror, anthropomorphism of the machine, irony, autism, and speculation. Examples to illustrate these themes have been culled from such wide-ranging sources as Greek mythology, the work of Leonardo da Vinci, pataphysical texts, and almanacs on sexual perversion. Investigations of the theme have been taken up in books, paintings, charts, machines, computers, magazine pages, advertisements and film. The bicycle, the electric chair, and the chocolate grinder are a few of its recurring metaphors.

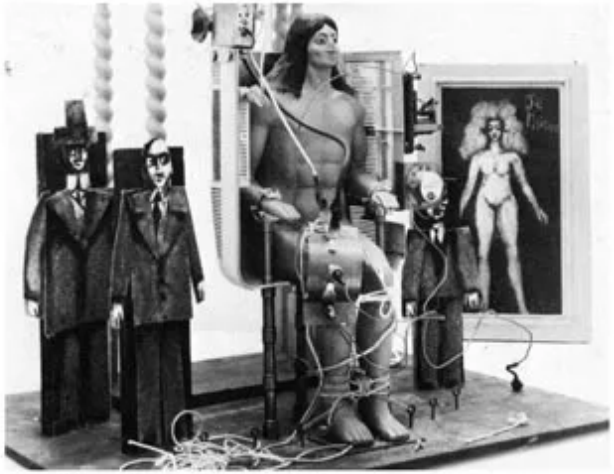
The form the exhibition takes is as important as its various parts, for it is itself a bachelor's machine—closed, complete in itself, reflexive, independent of its surroundings, with its own order (a "recommended" way in which objects should be viewed), and its own completeness (a catalogue that begins where the exhibition leaves off); in short, a system so efficient that no help is needed (from host museum or local press) to get the message across.

Although the exhibition travels from museum to museum, for example, Szeemann retains control of its form by using V-shaped partitions that subdivide and reorganize spaces. These partitions safeguard the viewer's esthetic experience by separating literary from visual material, and create pockets of space that emphasize the theatrical quality of the machines, created in imposing scale especially for the exhibition after plans delineated in books by Jarry, Roussel and Kafka.

Szeemann compares his exhibition to a museum in a valise; in packing up his traveling show he ended up—as Duchamp did when he made small-scale reproductions of some of his works for the *Valise* of 1941—with a finished product that opens out (wherever he decides to unpack it) into an arrangement of curiosities for view. You force a context on the components of the exhibition packed together in this way, hitting hard on single aspects or meanings of individual objects, sometimes to the exclusion of others. Or in trying to provide for every eventuality in the initial packing, the exhibition-maker risks overexplanation and overdocumentation. Objects are too seldom allowed to speak for themselves, and the facts and ideas conveyed by the texts posted in the exhibition rooms hardly ever go unillustrated. The procedure here is a radical one—an individual operates outside of the existing market structure to produce a more workable structure of his own, a "museum" in which he holds all the posts, and any object is art, or no object is art.

What is the structure for exhibiting and analyzing contemporary art in Western Europe? A system of art museums with permanent collections, of exhibition houses for changing exhibitions of contemporary art, biennales, and Documenta every four years. Local and federal funding assists in realizing the exhibition schedule and responds to the visitor count. Determining the main exposure of art through

Left: Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913; center: Robert Müller, *Tête à Tête*, 1958; right: Robert Müller, *The Runner's Widow*, 1957.



Jacques Carelman, *Machine to Inspire Love*, 1975 (after Alfred Jarry's *Le Surmâle*, 1902).

exhibitions and exhibition catalogues, the museum official gains a considerable power."

As director of the Kunsthalle in Bern from 1961 to 1969, Szeemann learned how to maneuver within this structure. He pushed hard and far, and with the exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" in 1969, became the man offering an alternative to the established exhibition norm, which artists at the time were seeking. (Student demonstrations against the Biennale in Venice, and Documenta 4, in 1968, had made artists uneasy about their relationship to the established structure.)

"When Attitudes Become Form," furthermore, was a watershed exhibition in Europe that established a new exhibition type in which idea became more important than art object. The Bern Kunsthalle was transformed into a repository for ideas rather than objects, a center for organization, an address to which artists could send their specifications for works to be exhibited. The only things holding the exhibition together were the ideas behind works of art, many of which couldn't be realized in time for the exhibition anyway.

Szeemann's approach to exhibition-making was well received by other theorists and exhibition-makers—and by artists—because it offered them a way into the structure that didn't look like one: they could ease their consciences by participating in an exhibition that looked revolutionary, without having to abandon their connections to the established structure. They believed in the power of this system to transform a proposal into a work of art.

Why, then, did Szeemann find it necessary to leave the structure when he had obviously learned how to manipulate it for his own purposes? Part of the reason lay with city officials, who had become increasingly reluctant to okay exhibitions that might overtax the staff or physical capacities of Kunst-museums or Kunsthalles. By the time Szeemann's "Happening and Fluxus" exhibition took place in 1971, for instance, many exhibition houses had shown themselves to be closed completely to exhibitions of ideas or processes rather than of finished objects.[1] The general psychic situation for art had been overtaxed too, in part because every exhibition had claimed to be the great breakthrough. As far as Szeemann was concerned, artists were also at fault, because they had lost the knack of cooperating reasonably with institutions and exhibition-makers, to the point where joint efforts were no longer possible.

Since 1970, Szeemann has worked as a free-lance exhibition-maker, and developed a new "subversive" alternative—the thematic exhibition, Documenta 5 and "The Bachelors' Machines" being primary examples.[2] In a thematic exhibition, works of art are shown to illustrate a theme or concept along with many non-works of art; Documenta 5, for instance, brought in examples from the world of advertising, and Szeemann's "The Bachelors' Machines," from manuals on sexual perversion. The broad range of exhibition materials invites members of the viewing public to see connections with ordinary life at every point, and yet, having gone so far, to remain open to the works of art also on display.

In the current exhibition, Szeemann gives the impression of the driven anarchist, working outside of and against a system which hampers his—and artists'—freedom. The character and success of his efforts until now make him believable in this latest endeavor. In Bern, for example, he worked with artists to help them give form to their concepts and plans, and when that was impossible, to document them (during the "Attitudes" exhibition). In "The Bachelors' Machines," he claims he performs a similar function by providing a forum for artists connected with pataphysics, the philosophical system created by the absurdist French writer Alfred Jarry at the beginning of the century. Here, though, no clear mandate or need motivates his activities, and thus they lack the timeliness of his Bern endeavors. He writes "rough notes" rather than a hard-hitting finished essay in the exhibition catalogue, and comes off as a spokesman for an esoteric and elite philosophical society rather than a marshal for the demonstration.

Is Szeemann an advance man or himself an artist? Even in Bern his activities as organizer of "When Attitudes Become Form" came close to the art-making that went on during the exhibition; making the switch from exhibition- to art-maker is perhaps one he has long dallied with. In the catalogue to the present exhibition, Szeemann confirms that he sees what he's long been involved with as a form of art-making: he calls the exhibition a work of art and the preparation that went into it bachelor's work.

As artist he resembles Duchamp, approaching his work with irony, putting in hours of labor to bring the show into perfect form while delighting in what might disturb it: heated criticism at the opening press conference, or failure to obtain the desired Picabia painting.

Szeemann the artist has a split personality: on the one side, flexible and ironic, on the other, rigidly arbitrary. In making an exhibition which he calls a work of art, he is pledging brotherhood with other artists while establishing himself as their judge; he is offering an opportunity to exhibit, but artists whose works don't fit his theme are left out, and those who do participate have to make works that fit the theme. (This is a danger inherent in all thematic exhibitions, not only Szeemann's. There is talk here, for example, that Documenta 6 might have to break from its tradition of presenting the best contemporary artists, if the work of too many falls outside its strict categories.) If artists could live without the exhibition structure, they wouldn't have to listen. As it is, Szeemann is free to call all the shots, because he still offers a needed way in. Our anarchist has given birth to a dictatorship. And will no one say a word in protest?■

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Machine from Kafka's 1914 story "The Penal Colony," reconstruction by Ateliers des Grands Magazins Loeb SA, Bern.

Models constructed after plans by Leonardo da Vinci.

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