

## Arts & Liesure

### Complacency Butts Up Against Game Changers

By HOLLAND COTTER

THERE was a lot of painting on view in Zuccotti Park this fall, in the form of Occupy Wall Street protest posters, free for the taking. And there was a lot of painting on the walls of New York art galleries, most of it post-M.F.A. eye candy with hefty price tags. The physical distance between Lower Manhattan and the Chelsea art zone is short, but the mental and moral gap felt immeasurable. The park was about light-on-its-feet, change-the-game politics. Chelsea — leaden and inbred — was about cash and caution.

True, art-worldlings did at least adopt one thing from the Occupy Wall Street movement: a new identifying label for the source of particularly noxious vibes emanating from art fairs, V.I.P. galas and museum boardrooms: namely the 1 percent. But why, you'll ask, dis the ultrarich? Haven't they historically been the primary bankrollers of great art?

Sure, except we're not getting great art. By and large we're getting high-polish mediocrity. You had really, truly, desperately need to believe in the perpetual wondrous newness value of contemporary work to conclude that the New York gallery season just past was anything more than a long flat line, with month after month of young artists rehashing yesteryear's trends and veterans cannibalizing their own careers.

Did anyone really believe, for example, that a gallery full of heavy-metal souvenirs from yet another A-list-audience-only Matthew Barney performance constituted an

important event? Or that the latest line of paintings by the design-savvy Mark Grotjahn represented some kind of Ab-Ex second coming? Or that the deeply networked Larry Gagosian roundup of more half-baked, big-bucks Picassos for exhibition on West 21st Street marked the vanguard of an art-for-all revolution?

This isn't to say that galleries didn't deliver good things. Solos by the likes of David Hammons, Andrea Bowers, Bjarne Melgaard, Chris Kraus, Christian Marclay and Nicolas Guagnini, Elisabeth Subrin, Simon Leung, Ben Kinmont and Rona Yefman were among shows that demonstrated otherwise, as did small surveys of the careers of Christopher D'Arcangelo (1955-79) and Mark Morrisroe (1959-89) at Artists Space, and Jean Crotti (1878-1958) at Francis M. Naumann. But considering that New York has hundreds of galleries, and hundreds upon hundreds of new shows in a year, the level of stimulation was low.

As for museums there were a few new ones. In Denver the American painter Clyfford Still (1904-80) was finally awarded the one-man shrine he insisted he deserved, while in Arkansas the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art materialized on a foundation of Wal-Mart money. And New York got the equivalent of an enlarged-and-improved museum of Islamic art with the November debut of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's luminous New Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia

(which should add Sub-Saharan Africa and Indonesia to its title, along, of course, with art from both, to its title).

Overall the Met had a good run, certainly — and to its own surprise — at the box office, with its intensely theatrical Alexander McQueen retrospective, which kept admission lines long, doors open late and ideas about the line between art and fashion in a healthy state of disarray.

The Museum of Modern Art offered two classics. "De Kooning: A Retrospective" (through Jan. 9) surprised no one and thrilled everyone: we knew it would be great; it turned out to be better than that. Earlier in the season the 70 small pieces in "Picasso: Guitars 1912-1914" were not only comparably exhilarating but utterly pioneering historically.

It's not too much to say that, in Picasso's crazily delicate 3-D cut-and-paste ensembles the seeds of Conceptual Art's long history were decisively sowed. And that's a history that MoMA has in the past few years set its sights on investigating and documenting. The group exhibitions like "On Line: Drawing Through the 20th Century" found the museum probing and testing various approaches to it. The Sanja Ivekovic retrospective that opens at the museum on Sunday will surely advance this exploratory trend.

Timing can mean everything with how art is received. "Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art," at

Japan Society last spring, looked, on paper, like just another Takashi Murakami spinoff. It wasn't. It was a seriously thought through meditation on various social and metaphysical fissures spreading through 21st-century Japanese art and culture. And opening exactly a week after the earthquake and tsunami had hit northern Japan, this strong show took on the encompassing emotional pull of a psychic emergency.

“Ostalgia” at the New Museum

had the same immersive effect. Filling the museum's entire Bowery building, it was a survey of contemporary art made in Western and Eastern Europe, and in the former Soviet republics, before and after the collapse of the Communist bloc. The work by some 50 artists was passionately political to the core, but in astonishingly diverse ways. In form it ranged from painting to film to performance art; in tone from bitter hilarity to memory-haunted yearning.

The technical means used were, as often as not, modest, make do, even crude. In most cases no market rewards for the results were or could have been envisioned. This was art trying, in ways not so different from Occupy Wall Street, to come to resistant grips with the ethically embattled world around it and, by doing so, to shape history and push it in new directions. It was, in short, precisely what nearly everything in New York galleries this season was not.

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### Substance and Spectacle

By ROBERTA SMITH

YOU can complain all you want about the art-world money-go-round and the celebrity circus spinning in its widening gyre. Prices are up; so are mentions of Art Basel Miami on Page Six. Artworks seem only to get bigger and shinier, and spectacle — participatory or not — is becoming the new normal at museum exhibitions of contemporary art. Note the record crowds lining up to gawk at Maurizio Cattelan's career immolation at the Guggenheim or whiz down Carsten Höller's tubular slide at the New Museum.

The year was full of dismaying sights, as the art world kept jumping the shark. Who can forget Francesco Vezzoli's dreadfully slick, churchlike installation at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea in February? Who can remember? There's been so much sludge under the bridge since then. Art and life imitated each other in countless, sometimes hair-raising ways. Not least: At this year's Venice Biennale the oligarchic yachts moored outside the Giardini were answered from within by a huge upturned military tank. It was the most ostentatious element in the extremely expensive, and thus institutionally dependent, institutional critique offered by Allora & Calzadilla at the American pavilion.

And yet there were also close encounters with artworks past and present in all mediums for which to be deeply grateful. I was mostly in New York, which — despite the booming success of the Hong Kong art fair, a wealth of interesting-

sounding exhibitions in Europe (especially London) this fall and the multifaceted curatorial triumph of "Pacific Standard Time" in and around Los Angeles — remains the art capital where the greatest number of people participate in the largest, most random multi-tiered scene. There is certainly more art in New York's museums, galleries, alternative spaces and outlying artist-run showplaces than any one person can see, much less digest.

Hats off to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the extraordinary cultural revelation of its new and expanded Arab Lands galleries and to the Museum of Modern Art for its once-in-a-lifetime de Kooning retrospective, memorializing an artist who never stopped trying in a show that never lets us down. The Modern also deserves our thanks for continuing to aerate its permanent collection with artists previously absent from its overly compact version of art history.

In addition there was the Whitney's retrospective of Glenn Ligon's serene but barbed art; the New Museum's summation of Lynda Benglis's subversive sculptural tendencies, as well as "Ostalgia," its examination of recent art from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. At MoMA PS1 antic videos by Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch, screened among their equally antic assemblages of Ikea furniture, felt alive and of the moment.

Around the time of Occupy Wall Street, Creative Time convened "Living as Form" at the Essex Street

Market, showing how artists are stretching their work into the social realm. Not everything in it qualified as art, but that wasn't the point. Society needs all the creative thinking it can get, and artists are a prime resource. My favorite display documented Park Fiction, an artist-led effort in Hamburg, Germany, that managed to have riverside property slated for development rezoned as a park by, in essence, "performing" picnics and other recreational activities on its turf. Elsewhere Performa 11 delivered two knockouts: Liz Magic Laser's "I Feel Your Pain" and Ragnar Kjartansson's "Bliss."

Then there were the small for-profit institutions, also known as commercial galleries, presenting new work by artists of all ages, filling in art-historical gaps and fomenting imaginative group shows.

The notable historical efforts included Picasso's Marie-Thérèse Walter years at Gagosian; the revelatory survey of Picasso's truly most significant other, Georges Braque, at Acquavella Galleries; Romare Bearden's historic collages at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery; Jack Smith's films and photographs at Gladstone Gallery; and the Pace Gallery's homage to de Kooning's figurative impulses. You can still catch the extraordinary selection of medieval panel paintings that the London dealer Sam Fogg has brought to Richard L. Feigen & Company on the Upper East Side (through Jan. 27).

Outstanding gallery group shows included "La Carte d'Après Nature," Thomas Demand's meditation on

art about nature at Matthew Marks. At Luxembourg & Dayan “Unpainted Paintings” assembled works by 32 artists who declined to rest on that medium’s laurels. Exceptional was “After Shelley Duvall ’72 (Frogs on the High Line),” organized by Bjarne Melgaard at Maccarone as a bookend to “Baton Sinister,” his obstreperous exhibition, with his students, at the Venice Biennale. At Maccarone, Mr. Melgaard’s collaborations continued, most impressively with Omar Harvey and Sverre Bjertnes, while several outsider artists were added to the mix. This furious, scenery-chewing conflagration of the political, the sexual and the formal pushed the curatorial envelope in all directions.

In the galleries artists at midcareer or beyond presented

stellar work, starting with Christian Marclay’s prodigious, time-telling splice-fest, “The Clock,” which enthralled audiences at the Paula Cooper Gallery (and later at the Venice Biennale). There was also David Hammons’s aggressive articulation of painting’s pictorial effects into real space at L&M Arts; Ellsworth Kelly’s continuing refinement, in subtly bulked-up reliefs, of black and white at Matthew Marks; Kara Walker’s big, bold new drawings at Sikkema Jenkins; and David Salle’s latest paintings at Mary Boone, which reprised earlier motifs and strategies with such verve and conviction that they felt new. Metro Pictures provided a nearly 40-year retrospective of the local hero B. Wurtz, whose delicate assemblies of ephemeral materials just say no, with wonderful poetry, to the costly

materiality and outsize scale of so much contemporary art.

Several impressive debuts include David Adamo’s sculpturally astute installation at Untitled; Jason Polan’s impromptu drawings at Nicholas Robinson; Anna Betbeze’s shaggy-rug paintings at Kate Werble; and the entrancing landscape drawings of the British artist Tom Fairs (1925-2007) at KS Art.

After all is said and done, I can only say: We get to live through this, a time when people continue to make art that isn’t missed until it arrives, an unbidden and suddenly essential gift.