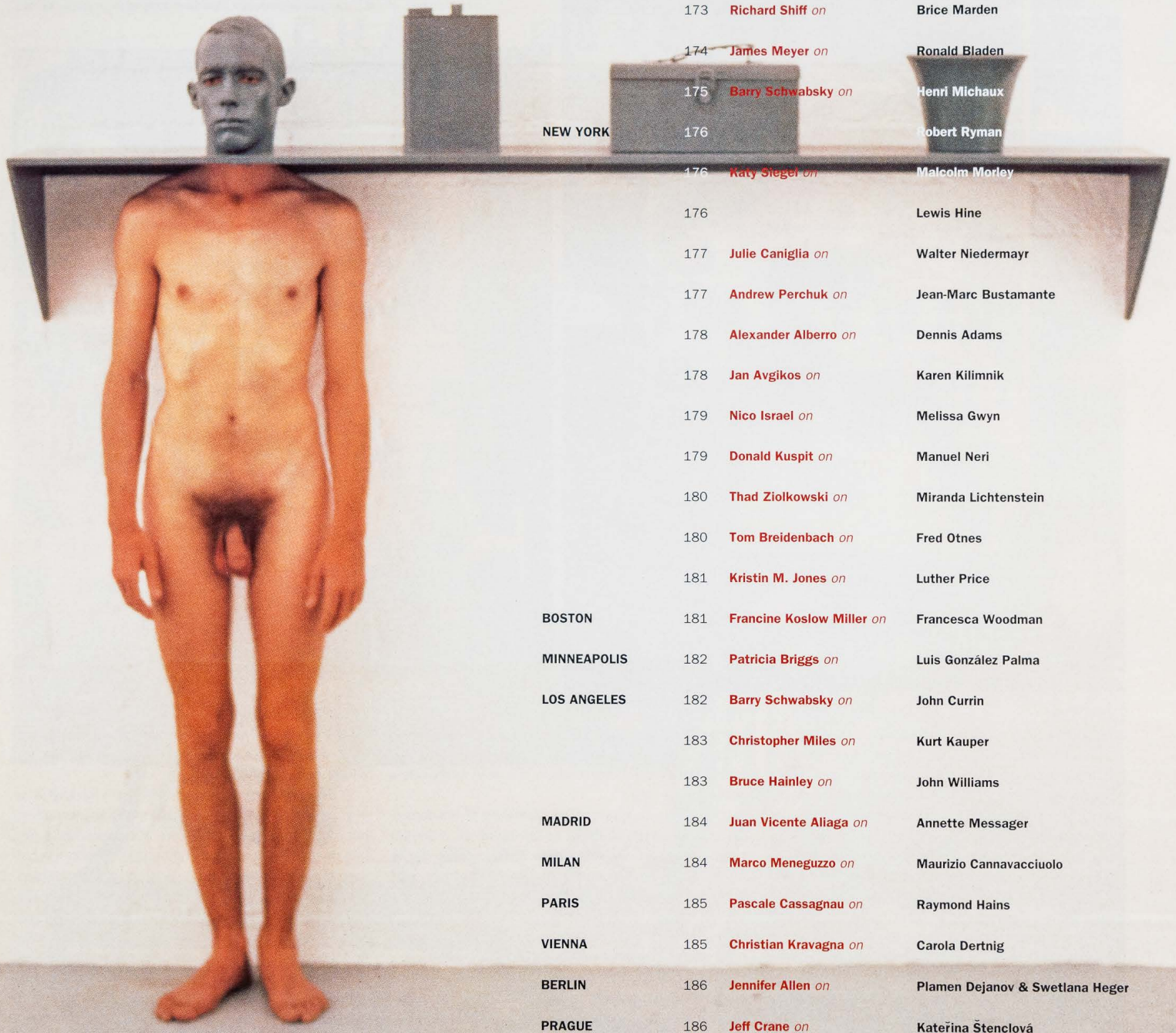
REVIEWS



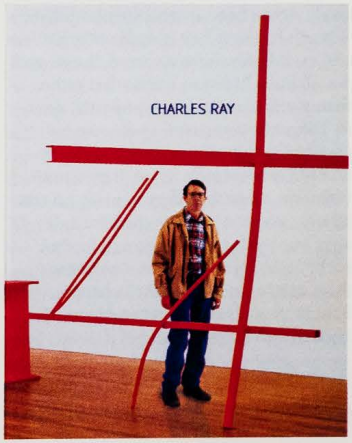
CHARLES RAY

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES

ANNE WAGNER

"What I wish to point out here is that the entire enterprise of art making provides the ground for finding the limits and possibilities of certain kinds of behavior."
—Robert Morris, *Artforum*, 1970

When behaviorism moves into the museum, the result is decisive, or so Robert Morris thought around 1970: The viewer becomes active, the art object passive or passive-aggressive, and the gallery a laboratory where the two collide. Morris went so far as to insist that such activity be more bodily than mental, that the intersection between viewer and object force an encounter that makes "physical and practical" a relation earlier consigned to "empathy and imagination." The quote comes from the catalogue of the 1971 Tate Gallery exhibition where Morris put these ideas to something of a stress test. He found their limits soon enough. For though viewers did have "physical and practical" contact with his work (or better, impractical contact: they dragged logs on rope leashes, labored up ramps, and rolled about inside a concrete culvert), it did not last long. Fears for public safety turned the show into a "proper" retrospective and a de facto declaration of disaffection from Morris's idea of an "art that goes beyond the making, selling, collecting and looking at kind of art" (again the catalogue is speaking) to renovate the artist's public role.



Yet Morris's concerns with behavior weren't so easily closed down. Imagine them migrating along routes established by the more resolutely visual of the sculptural modernisms of the '60s—via Anthony Caro, for one key example—but (to preserve Morris's disestablishmentarianism?) switching signposts along the way. I reckon the exercise eventually leads to the work of Charles Ray: It goes straight to his recent retrospective, right to its core ideas. They had their beginnings at art school in Iowa, under a British-trained teacher enamored of Caro. In homage to their mutual hero, Ray started painting sculpture the same red that Caro had used for his 1962 *Early One Morning*, behind which Ray stands on the cover of the catalogue accompanying his recent retrospective. The image, a montage, hallucinates an encounter between Ray and the art he once saw as most provocatively deceptive—most "hallucinogenic"—in how it figures space and configures anyone nearby. At Iowa Ray could routinely be heard dragging heavy metal around his studio, balancing brute materials to almost high-wire illusionistic effect (it's as if one of Morris's more muscular viewers set out to make himself a Caro for a change). Still a student, Ray showed the resultant metal and concrete pieces as his first exhibition, a 1971 installation called *One-Stop Gallery*. It was re-created, pointedly enough, for the recent LA MOCA retrospective.

WHAT RAY'S ART ENDS UP ARTICULATING IS ITS WISH TO COMMAND THE VIEWER'S RESPONSES, TO FIGURE THEM THROUGH ITS MILDLY COERCIVE PLAY.

One stop, as if the show were the local franchise of some sculptural convenience store, where aficionados of both Morris and Caro could find just the thing. The idea may seem unlikely, especially for viewers used to thinking of Minimalist and modernist sculptors as opposite numbers recordable only in separate columns of the critical ledger. No one told Ray. That's the trouble, or the issue: No one told him that art couldn't both behave and instigate behavior—couldn't both satisfy and produce the viewer as someone self-consciously operating in that role. Instead Ray reckoned that any one artwork could do all these things—and do them simultaneously. The only question was how.

Opposite page: **Charles Ray, *Shelf*, 1981,** the artist's head with gray paint, objects, shelf. This page, left: **Cover of *Charles Ray* catalogue,** published by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Scalo, Zurich, 1998. Right: **Charles Ray, *How a Table Works*, 1986,** mixed media, 44 x 46 x 32".

Satisfy and produce: If these words match up with Ray's practice it is because they speak to its technical fixations and perfectionism, its concern with logic and system, to say nothing of their opposite numbers, illusion, pun, and conundrum. And in their implicit eroticism they further flag the ways his work signals its distrust of the body and of its appearance as an authentic or final category. Granted, as a description of Ray's project, this characterization may seem unconvincing, particularly where bodily authenticity is concerned. For Ray's own bodily performances soon followed those he coaxed from his pieces of metal. One had him trying on clothes for the camera: The sixteen photographs that make up *All My Clothes*, 1973, demonstrate that, no matter which rumpled ensemble Ray models, we can take away nothing very valuable from his amiably geeky presence. We hardly know why he bothered to make the effort, such as it was, if not to erase the sense that an artist's staged offers of body and costume (for which read social identity) could be said to have much interest after all. And forget eroticism. For viewers who might have pored over Eleanor Antin's 1972 *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (to which Ray's piece is a direct reply), there is an unavoidable lesson: The body doesn't change by mere sartorial or cosmetic transformations. His won't even pretend to measure up or satisfy.

If *All My Clothes* left a residue, it coalesced in Ray's credo that artmaking should be systematic and meticulous, wrinkles and all. Negatively meticulous, that is: concerned with the dissuasions and deceptions entailed in even the most apparently coherent image. In all his seamlessly executed objects, Ray fixates on how and why things happen, to say nothing of wondering what really does happen in the field of vision, and how such events might be remade as art. Take a basic question: How do objects sit on a table? Can their interrelations be schematized to represent the physics of support? This is the effort undertaken by *How a Table Works*, 1986. The table itself disappears except as legs and edges; clamps hold up objects, and a literalized mechanics of

support—all screw and strut and bracket—takes over where once were ordinary unquestioned facts. The table enacts an absence: What it lacks is (only) its essence, its surface—its flatness, that is to say.

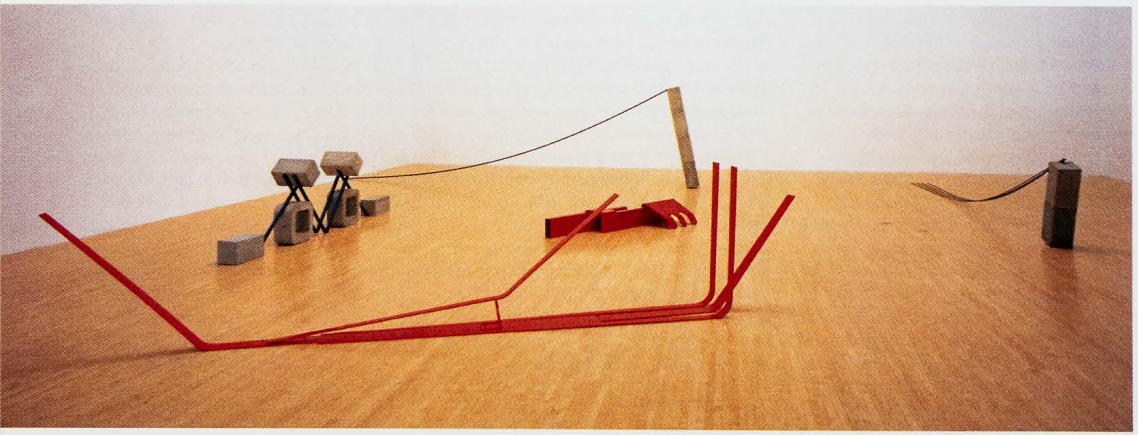
Savor the metaphor: Ray is working transformations in the flat surface of this utterly familiar thing. The formalist allegory is intended: When Ray emends flatness, he literally makes a tabula rasa, the ne plus ultra of erasure. The table itself disappears behind the laborious representation of key principles. Or it is shown to obey a different order completely. This is the case with another table in the exhibition, this one wooden. The table itself sits docilely enough, but the components of the modest still life it supports—metal canister, plastic bowl and tumbler, terracotta pot with artificial geranium—revolve with exquisite slowness, a modern-day orrery dumbed down to a barely perceptible pace. Silent motors do the turning: To grasp their action viewers are reduced to doubtful indecision, and most end up peering beneath the table for clues to what's happening on top.

Investigation is what Ray is after from his viewers. What is this thing, really? It's a question he asks of the cube—for Ray has gone back to the Minimalists' favorite, because "relatively uninteresting," form. Why? Because the cube, to quote Sol LeWitt, is "uncontestably itself." All the better to deploy it—as rephrased by the 1986 *Ink Box*, for example—to pose other questions. What else is this dense volume: Full or empty? False or true? Solid or liquid? Clean or dirty? *Ink Box* makes all these questions tempting and genuinely hard to answer; it feels as brimful of possibilities as the printer's ink it holds. Printer's ink, indeed: Black, viscous, with its own peculiar odor—what better substance to signal that Ray's laborious and utterly material art marvels mean to keep the virtual world at bay?

From his audience Ray wants, at minimum, a double take, followed by speculation and search. These effects are calculatedly clever, but it is the reaction, not the cleverness, that is the point. This is where his work most resembles Morris's: The similarity lies not so much in the exact response solicited but in the no-holds-barred effort to insist that something happen in the gallery—those real-time events are the point.

In a 1995 interview Ray tried to characterize his purposes as a matter of sensation. The task wasn't easy and would-be metaphors proliferated: The body, nature, and violence all scramble aboard. "There was a sensation I was looking for that is located somewhere between the genitals and the head. Like that charge you get from chopping down a big tree, seeing it fall. It's juvenile, but it's also sublime." There's no way to tell when or if Ray brings this nameless sensation out in his viewers, but it is easy to say that doing so depends utterly on his deployment of a theatrics of encounter from which the viewer "gets a charge." Gets it somewhere vital, like the gut or heart. Hence Ray's special fascination with scale: Does he think of his mannequins as big (and little) trees? Such effects aim not to be ersatz, even if fabricated from artificial parts. To call Ray the "Canova of consumerism"—as did Klaus Kertess, speaking of the artist's spectacular uses of department-store mannequins—is only effective if we remember that Canova and Ray, for all their high-gloss coldness, both aim at an intensely provocative art. The former's masturbatory male viewers, worshiping before his marble Venus, are legendary. And while Ray's audiences conduct themselves rather differently—their pleasures are more cognitive than bodily—I nonetheless think that some dream of the viewer's pleasure and unpleasure is on Ray's mind. Nowhere is this more obviously signaled than in *Oh! Charley Charley Charley . . .*, 1992, the group tableau that Kertess called "a docudrama of art's and the artist's auto-erotics." While the phrase speaks to the sculpture's excesses as a self-portrait eight times over, as well as to its ironic literalization of some free-floating notion of "art" as masturbatory self-expression, it says nothing of the work's breathless voice. Who is speaking its title? Is Ray talking to himself? Certainly, but is he not also ventriloquizing an ideal viewer's response: "Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley. . ."? Ray speaks for and as his audience, thereby figuring it as both orgasmic and something of a scold. (And he answers: At MOCA, the gallery next to *Oh! Charley Charley Charley . . .* was empty save for another self-portrait, the 1990 photo called *Yes*.)

A dream audience, yet one who can only exist where Ray's works are. What his art ends up thus articulating is its wish to command the viewer's pleasures and responses, to figure them through its mildly coercive play. The gallery again becomes a laboratory, but it also serves as a sanctum, a haven, where senses grapple with perceptions and the mind begins to think. Art as brain teaser, artist as Mr. Wizard: It is as if Ray is dedicating himself, as did Morris, to an art of "limits and possibilities." He just insists that rather than work your body—for Morris, activity allegorizes activism—you exercise your brain. Ray allegorizes thought. It seems a conservative move, if by conservative we mean the effort to insist on the interest and relevance of the here and now. For while Morris yearned for "an art beyond," Ray wonders if and how there can be art in thought's absence. Behind the games and conundrums, the answer is clear enough. □



Top: **Charles Ray, *All My Clothes*, 1973,** sixteen Kodachrome photographs mounted on board, 9 x 60". Edition of twelve. Bottom: **Charles Ray, *One-Stop Gallery, Iowa City, Iowa*, 1971/98,** cinder blocks and steel, approx. 30 x 30' overall. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998.

Organized by LA MOCA, "Charles Ray" opened in New York at the Whitney Museum of American Art in June 1998. The show is currently on view in Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art through July 4.