

S P O T L I G H T

ELEANOR ANTIN

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It's been nearly ten years since Eleanor Antin had a one person show at Ronald Feldman in New York, where she returned this winter to produce a large-scale installation, *Minetta Lane — A Ghost Story*. Antin's intermediary preoccupations, most notably with narrative film have surfaced in this recent work, which includes three films simultaneously projected inside a full-scale set. While Antin has previously involved her audience in performances, *Minetta Lane* marks a new level of collusion on the part of viewers, who play peeping-tom time travelers in a theater-in-the-round. Cast literally as voyeurs, gazing through a neighborhood's rear windows, viewers are compelled to participate in Antin's silent narratives, crime scenes of a sort.

Minetta Lane is titled after a street in Greenwich Village which in the late 40s and 50s, the time frame of the piece, was percolating with Bohemian life. This is not the first historical avantgarde evoked by Antin, but it has an immediacy for the New York art world, still haunted by the ghosts of that "heroic" era. The fringes are still the hip place to be; women still ponder the feasibility of making big, abstract paintings. If there is one weakness in *Minetta Lane*, it is that Antin's avantgarde lacks specificity, or at least, any clear differentiation from now, raising the depressing possibility that nothing ever changes. Such a suspicion has always lingered at the edges of Antin's work, structured as "traditional" narrative, albeit populated with characters whose identities shift between fiction and reality, past and present, as readily as sand.

Entering the installation, the viewer walks along a debris-strewn alleyway, an entry not unlike that of a haunted house in an amusement park. At a turn in the road, three windows appear in the backs of buildings; in them, three separate dramas unfold in films "simulcast" and back-projected in recurring loops. In the first window, of an artist's studio, a woman is painting a big abstraction. Unbeknownst to her, the ghost of a child, Miriam, has appeared behind her, and is mimicking her exhilarated, abstract expressionist gestures. When the artist leaves the room, Miriam paints an X over her work. Discovering the defacement on her return, the artist despairs; the film ends with her rubbing out her evening's work. Meanwhile, next door, a pair of lovers (black man, white woman) are taking a bath together; distant strains of sexy music can be heard. Miriam appears behind the tub and splashes and shoves the pair until each believes the other responsible. Some violent roughhousing ensues, and the woman ends up dressing and storming out. At one point in the middle of the two films, the artist makes a phone call to tell a friend what's happened; that friend is none other than loverboy in the next apartment, raising the possibility of a link between them, perhaps an infidelity on his part. The third film is projected in a window across the way, behind the viewer, and so must be

watched separately. An older man (the press release feels compelled to inform us he's gay) is lovingly tending his birds in a room decorated for Christmas. Miriam pops up to snuff out the lights in his chandelier, in an ominous allusion to loneliness and death (a birdcage is among the debris at the entryway).

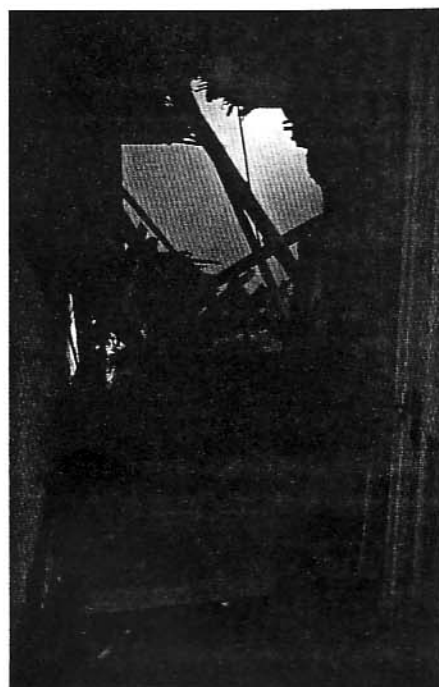
Clearly, Miriam is a troublemaker, with no sentimentality and no respect. But she is also amused by the goings-on, and probably would be as disappointed as anybody were her diversions to vanish. Which they do: the viewer, after leaving *Minetta Lane*, returns to the gallery, where video monitors project, in black and white, a building being destroyed, over and over again, by a wrecking ball. Miriam's interventions seem tame by comparison. The implication is that the world of *Minetta Lane* is a thing of the past, the de-



MINETTA LANE - A GHOST STORY, 1994-95. VIDEO INSTALLATION. "THROUGH THE ARTIST'S WINDOW." (DETAIL). PHOTO BECKY COHEN.

struction of its urban fabric presumably taking Miriam along with everything else. Stepping from the gallery back into the increasingly mall-like atmosphere of Soho, we imagine a moral to *Minetta Lane*: the prevailing image is that of the wrecking ball, or what intervenes when a child's pranks become a realtor's serious play. And Miriam? She is nothing if not an allegory of the characters themselves, of their internal impulses. For the painter, she is a nagging self-doubt that reduces productivity to a shambles. Doppelgänger to the psycho-pop *Child Within*, Miriam indulges destructive actions more effective than impulses to innocent creativity.

In a 1980 essay reprinted as the introduction to Antin's 1994 *Eleanora Antinova Plays* (Los Angeles, *Sun and Moon Press*), Frantisek Deak wrote, "it is... characteristic of allegory that, even though it is made for interpretation, its meaning cannot be exhaust-



MINETTA LANE - A GHOST STORY, 1994. FILMIC INSTALLATION, VIEW OF ENTRANCE. PHOTO DENNIS COWLEY.

ed by interpretation, and parts of it remain signifiers suitable only for contemplation." Benjamin linked allegory with history, to which we stand as spectators even though its impact can be felt on our own bodies at every second. Antin's *Gesamtkunstwerk* is set up as a sensory experience for the viewer, groping along the dark alleyway, the sound of traffic a subtle, constant murmur behind the silent spectacles. Although we disappear into these absorbing narratives, we are bodily implicated as the present feeding on the past, a fact that is even more jarring in the "real" time and space of a gallery, at once archive and setting to Antin's dreamy narratives. Her performances have always been implicated as objects because of their art-world setting, as Deak noted; the gallery ossifies even as it provides the living body for the actual installation, progeny of avantgardes past. *At Ronald Feldman, New York.*