

NAIVE NOUVEAU AND ITS MALCONTENTENTS

by Carrie Rickey

There's a fine line between simplicity and simplemindedness, and drawing it is a tough assignment. Apropos movies, the distinction is easy: Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* is simple, while *The American Gigolo*, by Bresson's American epigone Paul Schrader is simple-minded, because it embodies the pared-down form of Bressonian simplicity while lacking the pungency and concentration of Bresson's content. In pop music, The Ramones — whose musical vocabulary consists of about three chords — are simple; they use economic form to stress the wicked humor of their lyrics. The Flying Lizards, on the other hand, however amusing, are simpleminded: they impose a tired ironic attitude on old pop material — the content is cynicism. (As Oscar Wilde said, the cynic knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.) Georges Simenon is a writer whose simplicity is staggering. He crams a world of information into a six-word sentence. But the prose of Penelope Gilliatt's simple sentences, unlike Simenon's, relates little information and, consequently, often seems simpleminded. Simplicity is a condensed account of a complicated concept. Simplemindedness a condensation of something vacuous.

I prize simplicity, believing that to be simple is

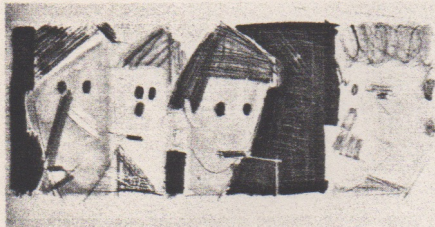
quite a difficult task. Yet it's impossible to ignore the significant number of artists taking up the corollary aesthetic of simple-mindedness. In the visual arts, this aesthetic seems particularly modern, paralleling, as it does, the development (one might call it regression) in the music of Punk, New Wave and No Wave persuasions. The parallel is significant, for although modern art and music have a lot in common, most recently their shared territory has been Minimalism — a reduction of means (as opposed to a simplification) that has resulted in a reduction of audience as well. That vanguard efforts in art (specifics later) aspire to popular culture, no less youth culture, marks the difference in attitude among artists, recalling the ambitions of certain abstract expressionists to make pictures having the personal, improvisational qualities of black jazz.

A characterological profile of the artist extolling the aesthetic of the simple-minded would take into account youth, interest in domains outside the history of art (namely music and pop culture), and — most crucial — the emphasis on *attitude*. (I feel like a buzzard, circling the general territory, before setting my sights on specifics; they will come.) While partisans of simplicity treasure the *issues* simplicity enables them better to expose, adherents of simple-mindedness reckon a posture toward an issue is more impor-

tant than the issue itself. An issue is something one formulates an attitude toward. Issue-orientation is primarily interested in content. Attitude-orientation is preoccupied with form and protocol. Attitude is the essence of the simpleminded aesthetic, a sensibility I call Naïf Nouveau.

Other traits of the Naïf Nouveau: the sense the artist knows more than he or she is telling, the making of paintings or sculpture (or music or fashion) that's childlike in presentation but sophisticated in execution. Disingenuousness reigns. The reason? I suspect it's because freed from the burden of art history and art seriousness, the artist can unpretentiously go about his or her business and make art — instead of Making Art. This work is about deschooling oneself of Modernism and starting from scratch. But starting from scratch can only be a token gesture. Think of Nudist colonists who want to be in their original uncivilized natural states. Or think of Marie Antoinette and her ladies-in-waiting who glorified the bucolic life of milkmaids as sideshows to the most cynical, urbane court in the history of France. Likewise, Naïf Nouveau artists affect simple-mindedness in simplicity's clothing at a stunningly complex moment in culture.

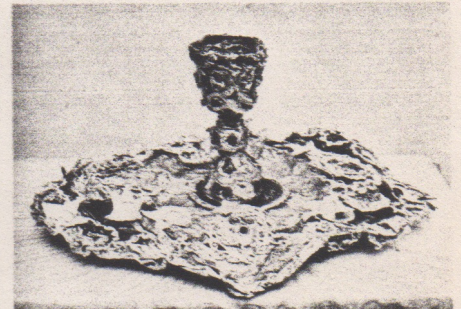
Despite a preference for simplicity over simple-mindedness, for issues over attitudes, the work of Naïf Nouveau artists provokes equal measures of attraction and repulsion in me. On the attraction side, I like the idea of lightweight art after so much heavy-handed Modernism; I like NN's lack of pretension; I like the obviation of Modernist art "problems" like the resolution of figure and ground (NN's view of the canvas is a vast ground, anything depicted becomes figure). Irony (meaning *meaning*) is the aspect of



Michael Hurson, *Treister Family*, 1979-80. Courtesy Paula Cooper, New York.



Nicholas Africano, *The Shadow*, 1979. Courtesy Holly Solomon.



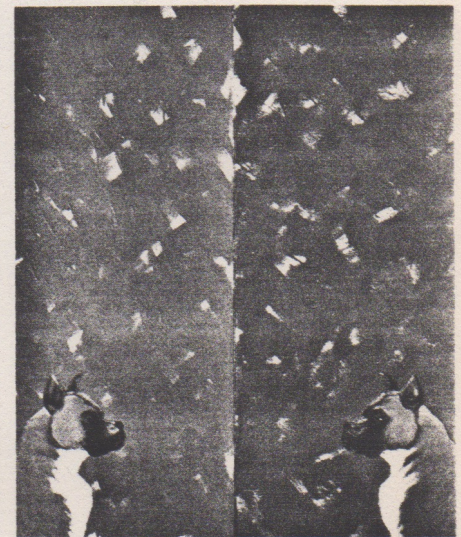
Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, *Chalice + Paten*, 1973. Courtesy Holly Solomon.



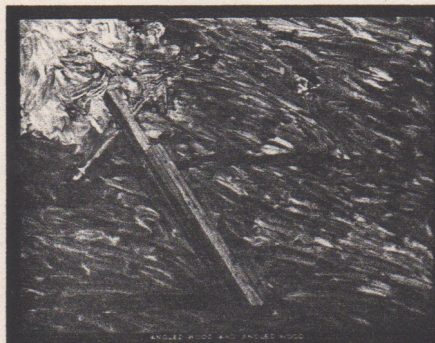
Roberto Longo, *Untitled*, 1980.



David Salle, *I, Garner Kudos*. Courtesy Mary Boone.



Thomas Lawson, *The Great Divide*, 1979.



Neil Jenney, *Angles wood and angles wood*, 1969-70. Courtesy Blum/Helman, New York.