

Art

MONTHLY

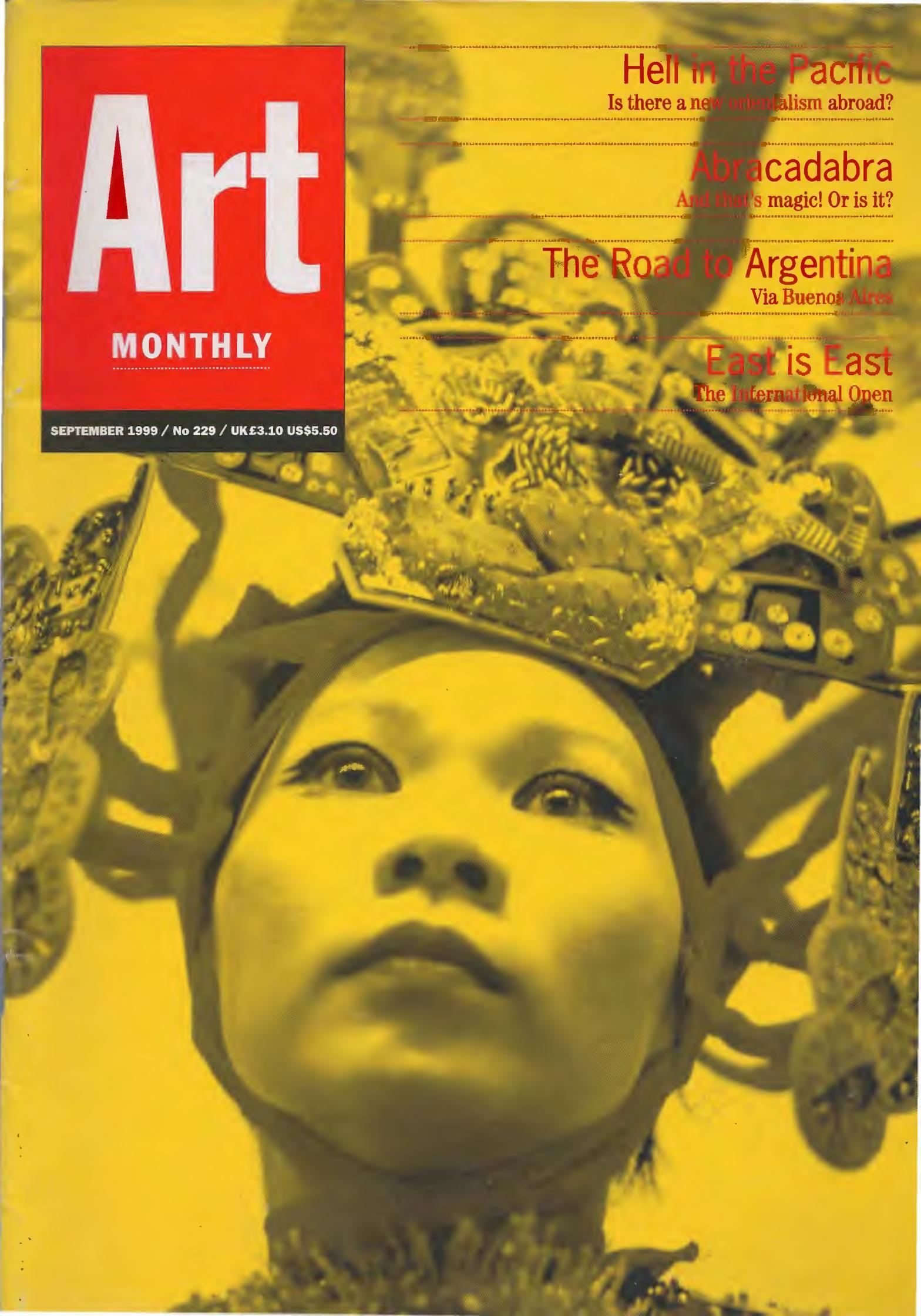
SEPTEMBER 1999 / No 229 / UK £3.10 US \$5.50

Hell in the Pacific
Is there a new orientalism abroad?

Abracadabra
And that's magic! Or is it?

The Road to Argentina
Via Buenos Aires

East is East
The International Open





Mark Harris
Sixty-eight, Sixty-nine
 1999

by dribbles of crimson ink. The tools and techniques of the painter are thus compared to the characteristics and capabilities of the human body. Fine, except that the whole construction looks, despite the crudity of its individual elements, so designed that its appearance fails to keep pace with its intellectual and emotional ambition. There are different ways of writing in blood, and this comes closest to amateur calligraphy.

Kathe Burkhart and Mark Harris also make reference to the body, and do so with a similar heavy-handedness. Burkhart's 1992 acrylic *Slit*, from her series of Liz Taylor portraits, shows the star in profile and swathed in bandages, with ugly black stitches running around her heavily made-up eyes and mouth. Are we witnessing the results of cosmetic surgery or an assault? The answer is uncertain, but the issue at hand is never in any doubt. Harris' cut paper net of vein-like painterly trickle is finished off with a row of exaggerated droplet shapes, just in case we didn't get the connection.

Henry Rogers' *197 reasons why* shows a great mass of red balloons floating across the sky. A small, square photograph intelligently placed in an alcove and near the window, it looks the most modest of images until one realises what it depicts. The graininess of the enlargement contributes to a deliberate confusion of scale, and the resultant ambiguity allows the particles of colour to be read as cells or brushmarks. The connection is not a rigid one, but this flexibility works in the artist's favour. *197 reasons why* is easily the most coolly abstracted work in the exhibition, but Rogers' quiet aesthetic holds its own amidst the schlock. ■

Michael Wilson is an artist.

■ Mark Harris / Carmel Buckley

The Economist Building London July 23 to September 12

■ Carmel Buckley

Shillam + Smith 3 London July 30 to September 10

The Economist building has come to be synonymous with a Modernism deemed to eschew the decorative in favour of geometry and function. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with these latter attributes, but the contemporary tendency is to celebrate those instances where the modernist ethos of 'form follows function' is seen to be contaminated by the decorative.¹ However, the current exhibition at the Economist building, consisting of selected collaborative pieces and individual works by husband and wife artists Mark Harris and Carmel Buckley unsettles the false dichotomies that underpin such celebrations.

Initially, it is tempting to say that Mark Harris' installation, *Sixty-eight, Sixty-nine*, 1999, which decorates three corner windows of the Economist building, boldly subverts the building's uniformity. Its large-scale, two-ply, painted paper cutouts in the shape of drips resembling but also disassembling, abstract expressionist gestures, contrast sharply with the grid-like structure and industrial materials of the building itself. Excess meets economy. The fact that the layer of drips facing the interior is overlaid with equally cut-into inkjet prints of Ungaro fashion from a 1960s magazine adds to the persuasive quality of this view. However, the way *Sixty-eight, Sixty-nine* combines retro and craft elements with the traditions of modernist painting is quite literal and all

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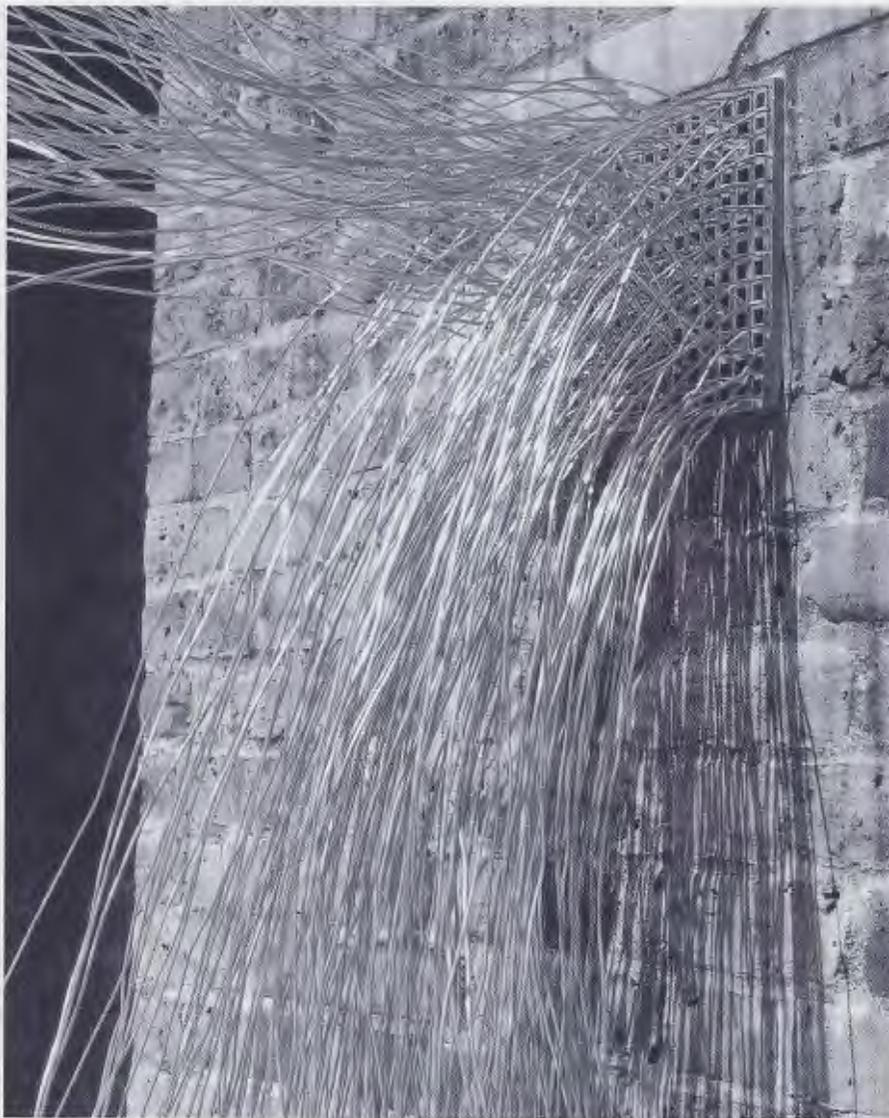
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Carmel Buckley
Untitled 1999 detail

too easily assimilable into the aesthetic that celebrates the decorative as subversive. What makes the piece more interesting is how its concerns re-emphasise the fact that Modernism itself is characterised by the combination of contradictory elements. In this sense, *Sixty-eight, Sixty-nine* makes us remember that for the architects of the Economist building, Alison and Peter Smithson, Modernism was as much bound up with fluid, open structures as it was with truth to materials and classical geometry.

Carmel Buckley's untitled aluminium wire installation on the north wall of the Economist Plaza continues this dialogue with fluidity. Hand-polished wires are woven into and protrude from three air vents, thereby creating a dynamic structure that cascades down the wall but, at the same time, the wiry strands seem to be sucked back into the ventilating shafts. This effect of continual motion overrides the bulbous arrest of the scramble of wires at ground level. In drawing attention to the kinds of details (vents) that were thought to upset

ideal form in classical architectural models, the piece disturbs the symmetrical relation of a building's interior to its exterior. The building is leaking, its internal wiring visibly gone awry.

Controlled flux is also the theme of one of the collaborative pieces, *Splash*, 1998, a three-dimensional rendition of a splash-like form the result of a complex process referred to as 'rapid prototype using laser sintering of nylon powder'. *Splash* looks like a three-dimensional translation of an architect's or designer's drawing using CAD to analyse a natural form. However, the resulting object, while registering the precision and self-effacement of technological process, has a cartoon-like quality. Sitting in a glass case facing the lift (the positioning is crucial), it appears charged to hit like a bullet at some unsuspecting target. Its frosted fronds jut out forcefully, but are dramatically suspended in well-rounded droplets that echo the biomorphic drips of *Sixty-eight, Sixty-nine* and also seem to refer to

MY EYE HURTS

The Green Room 54 - 56 Whitworth Street West Manchester Saturday 4th Sept 2pm to 2am
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Buckley's cascade. *Splash* is the one collaborative piece in the show which condenses references both to the site and to the two individual works.

In all three collaborative pieces on show, individual artistic trademarks have been subsumed by the technologies and readymade objects used. This is most obvious in *Splash*, but also *Driving into Clarksdale*, 1997, and *Colonial Stock Book*, 1998. In *Colonial Stock Book*, an album displaying two pages of West Indian stamps sits in a display cabinet. The rest of the album is hollowed out and hides a mini-CD player. The viewer can select from a variety of calypso songs while gazing at the rural idylls of happy plantation workers depicted in the stamps. In the leaflet accompanying the show, we learn that the piece stems from Harris' personal concerns. The collaboration here would seem to be in the re-presentation of the work – on one page of the album are the actual stamps, on the opposite page the same stamps are presented digitally altered to omit the monarch's head and enlarge the captions, eg 'Picking Limes'. As well as highlighting the incongruity between the calypso lyrics of strikes, misery, insurrection and the picturesque idylls of contented workers, *Colonial Stock Book* also draws attention to the use made of commercial forms of representation such as stamps for official propaganda. Such seemingly innocuous displays of officialdom are well summed up by Don DeLillo in *The Names* as seeming 'intended to register in people's minds the hopeful truth that colonialism was a tourist ornament now, utterly safe to display in public'.

Music also features in *Driving into Clarksdale*. Here the ostensible starting point for the work was the couple's shared experience of finding themselves on a rainy evening in the deep south of America in a small town blues museum. The resulting piece comprises a portable period cassette player propped open in two halves like a stage set on a blue plexiglass shelf. Behind the plinth of this makeshift theatre hangs an enlarged snapshot taken from behind the windshield while driving in the rain. Again, the viewer can select what music to listen to from a series of five compilation tapes of Delta Blues based on the museum's collection of old blues LPs. The combination of wailing harmonica and rhythmic blues beat, along with the striations of blurry neon in the photograph, evokes scenes from our own film image repertoires of American road movies – the motels, bars and pool halls, the heat and heartache. Unlike watching a film where the soundtrack simply adds to the atmosphere, here the dominance of the lyrics conjures up other sequences of images in our heads.

At Shillam + Smith 3, in an exhibition called 'Sleight', Carmel Buckley is showing a series of 14 drawings of concentric orange circles on rice paper, as well as two sculptures. The drawings, presented in two rows of seven, can be read as singular markers of time or as a narrative temporal sequence. Process is paramount here, the rows of dots and lines that make up the concentric circles being the result of loading a brush with ink and ending each row when the ink on the brush has been used up.

Therefore, in the top sequence of drawings, the bands of dotted rows fade entropically towards the centre. In the bottom sequence, the same thing happens with the rows of lines that comprise the circles. In every second drawing in the series a circular band of dots fades towards a central void, but this voided centre is never static as the next image of decreasing concentric circles seems to continue the motion, at once active and meditative.

The untitled wire constructions each take a domestic, once functional object – one a tea strainer, the other an egg slicer – as an internal frame that acts as a gravitational force for the intricate scramble of wires that seem to escape from and contract into them. The gallery walls act as external supports for these coherently tangled bodies that precariously extend from them. One can see similarities with the piece at the Economist building, except that there the way the wiry structure implied other hidden parts of the building made the work more forceful and mysterious rather than merely beautiful. While a thing of beauty may be a joy forever, a thing whose beauty is always threatening to unravel has a modern sense to it. ■

1. I'm thinking of Mike Kelley's 'Foul Perfection' in *Artforum*, no 27, January, 1989.

Maria Walsh is a writer and teaches at Chelsea College of Art & Design.

■ Adam Chodzko

Ikon Gallery Birmingham, June 23 to August 30

The projection has the blue tint and heavy pixellation of an image-intensifier. This means that what we're witnessing is happening at night, lending a clandestine edge to whatever it is that's going on. What can we see? We are in a wood. Four people dressed in heavy waterproofs are working intently on various pieces of equipment – tripods, maybe. A muffled soundtrack of voices plays alongside the video – calm and thoughtful voices littered with technical jargon. 'I'd put a 20 or 10K behind a huge frame with graduated gels; just strips of gels across, creating all your graduated colours and they'll bleed into each other and create a rainbow effect.' Lights, then; they're talking about lights. Perhaps the equipment they're setting up is some kind of lighting rig. 'A way that I see Heaven being lit is with one of the old Brute lamps.' Gradually, we understand that these people are lighting technicians, setting up a rig to illuminate an area in the way that they imagine Heaven would be lit. After 15 minutes of this – requiring patience and perseverance from the viewer – all goes quiet. Something's about to happen. The huge clang and deep thrum of a large power switch being thrown kills the projection while another on the opposite wall flashes blindingly into life. So here it is then, at last. Heaven.

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