

AN ARCHITECTURE OF

P A I N T

The medium of modern art is thought. That so few artists realize this is evident from the fact that the great majority are one-idea artists. Each new work is yet another variation on the same "idea" which is more often than not either a gimmick or an arbitrary craft "innovation." Vapid newness and egocentric virtuosity are confused with importance. If an artist's one idea is sufficiently impressive and does not require anyone to think beyond the initial low hurdle of "getting it" in the first place, a product identity is established and the buyers and sellers of commodities are smugly self-satisfied. It is paramount that the product be easily recognizable and that it be cool and innocuous in a typical materialistic and unevolved middle-class interior. It absolutely must not challenge the viewer or rock the art-as-status-interior-decoration boat. Hence, one-idea art is the enforced rule and good luck getting a show or making a living if you don't toe the line.

► **Big Ideas installation at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, 1984.**

Douglas M. Parker

That is why Richard Jackson hasn't sold so much as a drawing in Los Angeles in the last six years. He is incorrigible and shows no signs of developing his own product identity. Like his work he is difficult and has too many ideas for his aesthetic investigations to ever conform to a predictable result. Nor can he be coerced into producing one-idea art because he maintains a deliberate independence from the entire commercial art structure by supporting himself with small contracting jobs. He's thin, but not hungry. He could use the money but won't prostitute himself. He's got the talent but you might as well save your breath because he'd only laugh in your face. The guy, obviously, is a thug.

RICHARD JACKSON'S INSTALLATIONS



BY JEFFREY BROWNING

► **Detail, *Big Ideas*, acrylic on canvas, 1984.**

Grant Mudford



▶ **Richard Jackson
and *1000 Pictures*,
a work that simul-
taneously denies
and reinforces
conventional notions
of modern art.**

Grant Mudford



A probable first reaction to a Richard Jackson installation is shock, amazement, and, very likely, incomprehension. Painting, sculpture, and the environmental scale of architecture are all fused into a very powerful and enveloping totality. You thought you'd hit a few galleries but in this case the gallery has hit you. As you try to piece together what you may or may not know about painting, sculpture, architecture, conceptual art, process art, and environmental installations, Richard thought he would help you along by subverting virtually every accepted belief associated with those disciplines. In lieu of training wheels for the mind, two oblique clues will have to suffice: "painting is a mental thing" (Leonardo), and "architecture is a pure creation of the mind" (Le Corbusier).

Conventional media such as paint on canvas are for those who do not think and can only endlessly repeat with inconsequential variations what has already been done. Such an artist suffers from tunnel vision. Painting has not been the premier medium of contemporary art since at least the 1960s, nor will it ever be again. In the late 20th century there are so many media with which to express ideas that any individual medium is secondary. It is the concept that is primary. The dominance of painting over all other art media has passed into history. This is true even if you love painting, and Richard Jackson does love painting. A bury-the-head, wishful thinking, crawl-into-the-past nostalgia is not going to restore painting to its former glory. Painting (on canvas) isn't dead, it's merely secondary.

An idiomatic expression such as "a picture

is worth a 1000 words" applied to an idiomatic medium such as paint on canvas exposes the little horns on Richard Jackson's head. Why not *1000 Pictures*? And don't let 'em see the pictures either! Of course, Richard's "pictures" aren't pictures at all—they're not even paintings. If, as Warhol said, in the era of mass production "thirty are better than one," a thousand is that much better. The value of a painting, however, has always been predicated upon the virtue of its uniqueness. A wall constructed of 1000 identical 19" x 35" x 1 1/4" canvases stacked floor to ceiling with only their edges visible energetically returns that archaic idea whence it came—the distant past. Like all of Richard Jackson's installations, *1000 Pictures* is site-specific. The dimensions of the individual canvases echo the shape of the room (20' wide x 30' long x 16' high), which is an integral part of the work.

The stacking of modular units is not only a primitive activity which preceded the dawn of civilization, but it is also intrinsic to modern art and architecture, and especially to systemic and conceptual art. In *1000 Pictures* Jackson uses the modular stretched and gessoed canvases ironically as bricks or blocks to construct a wall 16' high x 20' 8" long x 19" wide. The use of paint as mortar trowelled on as thickly as cake icing and spilling over the edges of the canvases like a gloriously sloppy peanut butter and jelly sandwich is no less ironic. Given the cost of 6000 feet of lumber, 550 yards of canvas, more than 100 gallons of acrylic paint custom-made to Jackson's specifications, and the month it took him to stretch and gesso each canvas and to construct his installation in the gallery, as well as

▶ **Big Ideas will be
recreated for the
Menil Collection,
Houston.**

Grant Mudford

the remoteness of the possibility of ever selling such a work, it helps to have a sense of humor.

Adding to the taut density and nonchalance of *1000 Pictures* is the frank evidence of process indicated by the paint-splattered floor and ceiling and the wooden wedges along the top row of canvases which stabilize the wall. Most remarkable of all is the fact that every consideration of material, process, and conceptual rigor is emphatically subordinated by the miraculous resolution and overwhelming presence of the completed work. The power of *1000 Pictures* is such that, like the monolith which initiated consciousness in the apes of Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, perhaps even a few retrogressive, one-idea, single-medium, tunnel-vision paint-daubers might be shocked into the realization that the medium of modern art is thought.

Richard Jackson's most recent installation,

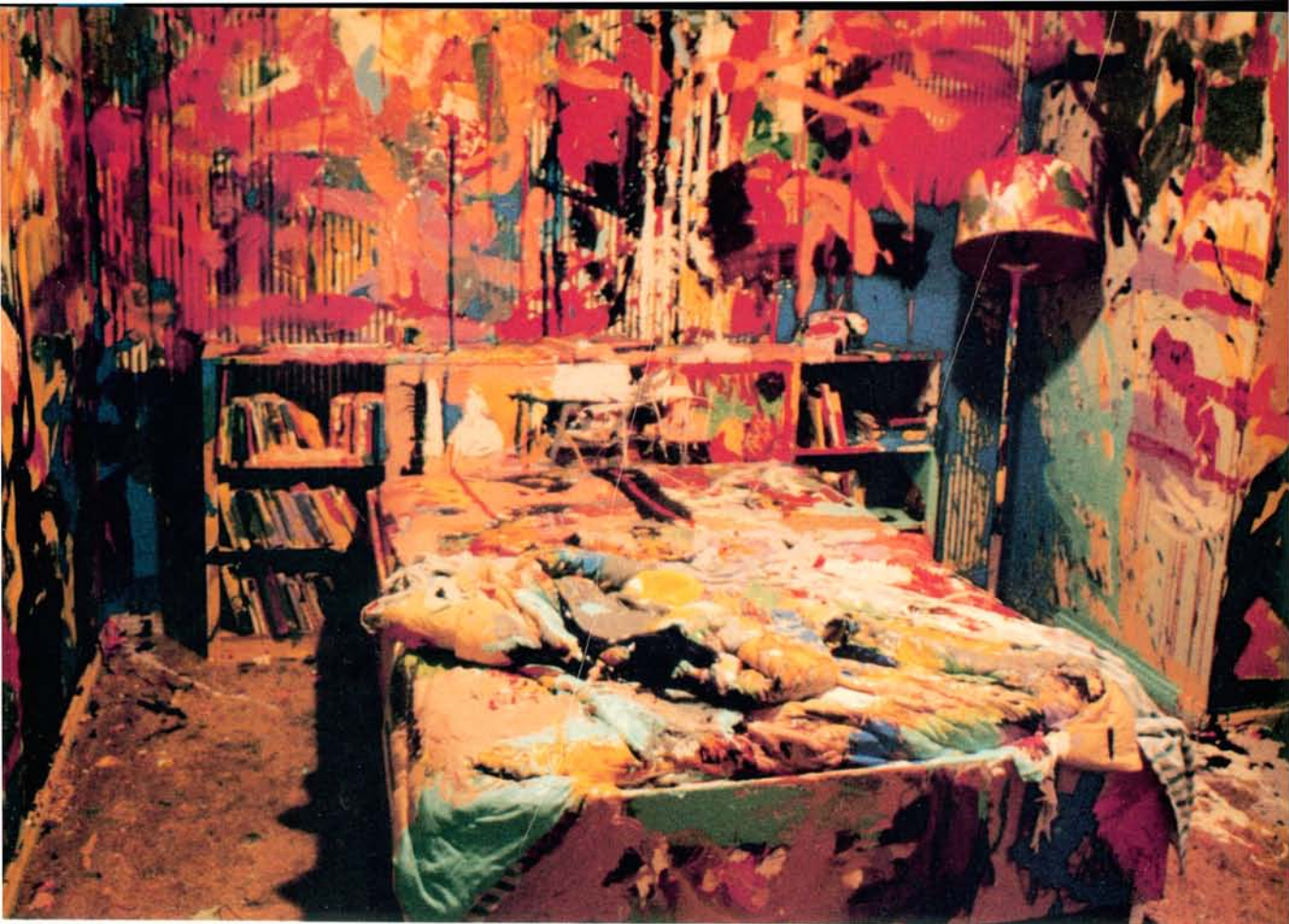
Big Ideals, incorporates many of the same materials and aesthetic qualities as *1000 Pictures* but yields an entirely different result. The tendency with *1000 Pictures* was to perceive the wall of canvases as a monumental object constructed in the center of the otherwise unchanged space of the gallery. The wall, however, was designed specifically for and requires a room with exactly the same dimensions as the Rosamund Felsen gallery space. *1000 Pictures* is therefore an environment and not an object. Although the necessity of the total space may not have been consciously realized by some viewers, the environmental force of the work was unmistakable.

Big Ideals resolves such ambiguities because it can only be perceived as an environment. Whereas in *1000 Pictures* one's attention was directed inward and upward as one moved around the central wall, in *Big Ideals* the viewer is now free to move in the central space

with one's attention directed upward and outward to the painted walls, ceiling, and two four-pointed stars suspended overhead. Jackson has constructed a 19' square room, 16' high with 36 modular canvases which completely cover the four walls of the gallery. The ceiling is also entirely painted except for two long narrow skylights which, with the open doorway, are the only sources of light.

Lending credence to Richard Jackson's criticism of conventional painting is the undeniable fact that many of the individual painted canvases look very strong—and Jackson had not painted a painting for 15 years and spent less than a day on each of the 36 canvases. In order to deliberately provoke painters, the modular canvases were nailed to the wall through the front of the painting. Whereas even abstract painters tend to think in terms of an image, Jackson's work is not reducible to an image. Jackson thinks of his installations





▲ **The energy found in *Bedroom* transcends its conceptual genesis and strongly ties the work to abstract expressionism.**

Richard Jackson

as events which are, above all, experiences.

In spite of Jackson's less-than-reverent attitude toward the principal deities of abstract expressionism, there are very definite parallels in his work to the more environmental painters of that school: specifically DeKooning, Pollock, Rothko, and Newman. None of the four artists painted images per se; color, space, and process were the means to a much higher goal. Richard Jackson's palette is very hot, like DeKooning's, and he shares with both Pollock and DeKooning their tremendous energy. The spatial, environmental, and spiritual concerns of Pollock, Rothko, and Newman are also analogous to similar qualities in Jackson's installations. Both Rothko and Newman were led to view individual paintings as modular elements in a total spiritual environment. Viewing the vanguard trends of the 60s and 70s as research and extension, it is easy to observe Richard Jackson's continuity with these major abstract expressionists. Virtually all of the minimalists and conceptualists were cool and cerebral, relatively uninterested in process but highly systemic. Jackson, however, is hot and expressionistic in spite of the minimal forms of his systemic installations, and with an emphasis upon process. The dramatic

mood and energy of the final work transcends its conceptual genesis and is actually closer in feeling to abstract expressionism than to minimalism or conceptualism. Jackson has watched minimalism pass into history and has seen a lot of conceptual art become overly intellectual, academic and, ultimately, boring. But, given the example of *Big Ideas*, that's not his problem.

Bedroom is a no longer extant work which Jackson worked on sporadically over a period of six years from 1976—1982. (He worked on a variety of other projects in the United States and Europe during this time.) Jackson actually constructed the walls and made all the furniture. Any activity which is not mental Jackson deprecates as busywork. He is not prolific because he rigorously requires even his drawings to be about ideas. Hence, much of his activity he calls busywork, which amounts to self-deprecation because he is very interested in process. Jackson now feels that he may have been overly precious in making all of the furniture by hand and does not like even the suggestion of too strong an emphasis upon craft. In Jackson's view many artists are craftsmen because they cannot think.



Another view of *Bedroom*. The pockets of the clothes in the closet are filled with paint.

Richard Jackson

The source of *Bedroom* was the idea that artists who have to teach to make a living are often too tired from teaching to do their own work. Jackson's solution is to just stay in bed and paint everything within reach! A 1978 exhibition catalogue of Jackson's drawings published by Ed and Nancy Kienholz extends this idea throughout the *Bedroom*. The first drawing sets the tone for the catalogue and depicts a paint can tenuously balanced on the top edge of a partially opened door. The first person through the door, if it's not Jackson himself, will soon be cursing vehemently as the open can falls to the floor. Other elements in the room include a parodistic tableau which involves an easel with canvas and paint brushes set up in front of an actual still life of a small table with bottle, fruit, skull, etc. Here, again, subtlety is not the issue and everything gets drenched with paint. A small couch is painted in the same manner as the bed. A floor lamp with a conical shade is used as a paintbrush. Window curtains are painted and swept upward along the wall in an arc from the curtain rod. A chest of drawers gets it, too, including the insides of the drawers and their contents. The television situated at the foot of the bed is lovingly attended to, and an electric fan, turned on, becomes an abstract expressionist sprinkler. One of my favorite aspects of *Bedroom* is the clothes closet. A complete wardrobe with storage shelf for

shoes and things is painted inside and out, with each of the pockets carefully filled with paint. Richard Jackson is certainly a colorful guy.

Bedroom had to be carted off to the dump and no more than a dozen people ever saw it. More than a month of work and \$10,000 in materials went into *Big Ideas* and, with no place to store it, Jackson thought it, too, would have to go to the dump. Walter Hopps had a better idea. Now the director of the Menil Collection in Houston which will house the most important private collection of modern art in the United States, he has asked Richard to recreate *Bedroom* for permanent installation, along with *1000 Pictures* and *Big Ideas*.

From Duchamp to the present much of the best of contemporary art has been ironic. Art was an intellectual game for Duchamp (who preferred chess). Conceptual art is his legacy. Richard Jackson transcends the cool intellectuality of the ironic posture regardless of his motivation. Minimal form, a conceptual approach, humor and irony become mere means to the final work. At their best his installations are profoundly moving and spiritually cathartic. The truth is out—Richard Jackson is a passion artist.

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