

it with bags of pigment. In a theatrical setting, often involving an audience, she would shoot a gun at the work. She explained that she was trying to make the painting bleed. Spattered in a beautiful and violent spray of colored paint, the objects, like the roller skate and vacuum cleaner exhibited here, become fragments of the performance.

The ephemeral spirit of Nouveau Réalisme is perhaps most clearly epitomized in Yves Klein's *Le Saut dans le vide* (*The Leap into the Void*). In October of 1960 at Rue Gentil-Bernard in Fontenay-aux-Roses, he hurled himself, arms spread, from a Parisian rooftop. Obsessed with the possibility of human flight, he was seeking the spiritual transcendence of levitation, the ultimate escape from the reality of the material world. The photographs by Harry Shunk and John Kender that capture this moment are shrouded in secrecy. Provocatively leading to questions about their technical manufacture, the authenticity of Klein's demonstration of flight, and the circumstances that may have transpired to protect the artist from the potentially disastrous fate of gravity, the photographs remain compelling documents that scholar Thomas McEvilley has described as "unbearably poignant image[s] of impatient longing for paradise."²

To further commemorate the now iconic leap, on November 27, 1960, Klein created a mock edition of the Sunday newspaper, *France-Soir* for the "Festival of Avant-Garde Art." Using the photograph of the leap on the cover and text that proclaimed, "A Man in Space! The Painter of Space Throws Himself into the Void," he printed a few thousand of the four-paged papers and covertly inserted them into newsstands throughout Paris.

After Klein's death in 1962, the group of artists slowly disintegrated. In 1970, a festival was held in Milan to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of Nouveau Réalisme. As seen in the archival documents on display, Tinguely and de Saint Phalle paid homage to the short-lived movement with a fleeting monument called *La Vittoria*, a golden phallus built in front of the Milan Cathedral. Self-destructing in flames, it disappeared only moments after its spectacular construction.

Michelle White, Associate Curator

NOTES

1. Arman, quoted by Pierre Restany, in "Arman: A Radical Portrait of Modernity," *Arman 1955-1991: A Retrospective* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1991) p, 41
2. Thomas McEvilley, "Conquistador of the Void," *Yves Klein, 1928-1962: A Retrospective* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982), p. 65.

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The exhibition is curated by Michelle White, Associate Curator.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

FotoFest Talk
"Harry Shunk's *Leap into the Void*"
Michelle White

Saturday, March 20, 3:00 p.m.

Exhibition curator Michelle White discusses photographer Harry Shunk's iconic 1960 image of artist Yves Klein hurling himself from a Parisian rooftop. In conjunction with FotoFest.

Outdoor Film Screenings

***Yves Klein, la révolution bleue* (2006)**

Sunday, March 21, 7:30 p.m.

This 2006 film examines the meteoric and brief artistic career of Yves Klein (1928–1962) who, in only eight years, managed to shake the foundations of modern art. Co-sponsored by the Consulate General of France in Houston and the Texan-French Alliance for the Arts.

From the Menil Film Archive

Andrea Grover

Friday, April 9, 8:00 p.m.

Adrian Grover, founder of Aurora Picture Show, assembles largely unseen films and videos on Yves Klein, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Jean Tinguely, among others, that resonate with "Leaps into the Void." Co-presented with Aurora Picture Show.

Cover: Harry Shunk, *Saut dans le vide* (*Leap into the Void*), Oct. 23, 1960. Silver gelatin print, 10³/₄ x 13⁷/₈ inches. The Menil Collection. Photo: Shunk-Kender © Roy Lichtenstein Foundation

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Leaps into the Void:

**Documents of Nouveau Realist
Performance**

THE MENIL COLLECTION

March 19–August 8, 2010

Protechnics, exploding bags of pigment, blowtorched surfaces, lacerated paper, wrapped objects, and collected garbage all characterize the radical materials and gestures of the avant-garde art movement Nouveau Réalisme. Founded in Paris by art critic Pierre Restany, the group first exhibited together at Galleria Apollinaire in Milan in May of 1960 and formalized their association with a ceremonious signing of a manifesto in Klein's apartment that fall. Nouveau Réalisme engaged American conceptual movements such as Fluxus, Happenings, and Pop Art, as well as other French intellectual trends responding to the “new” reality of the 1960s, such as New Wave cinema and Nouveau Roman literature. “Leaps into the Void: Documents of Nouveau Realist Performance” draws upon the Menil's holdings to present documentation of the brief but influential movement's ephemeral and performance-based work.

Artists associated with the movement include Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, Martial Raysse, Christo, Mimmo Rotella, and Arman.



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Reims*, 1962. Spray paint, plaster, and wire on plywood with fabric, plastic toys, masks, and horns, 74½ x 48 x 117/8 inches. The Menil Collection. Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston © 2009 Niki Charitable Art Foundation

Paradoxically deconstructing and accumulating found objects through performative actions, they believed their use of discarded materials was an honest and soulful antidote to the banality of a changing industrial world. As proclaimed in the *First Manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme* (1960), “if one succeeds at reintegrating oneself with the real, one achieves transcendence, which is emotion, sentiment, and finally, poetry.”

The early twentieth century anti-art philosophy of artist Marcel Duchamp and Dada was a central point of inspiration and departure for the Nouveau Realists. Arman, for instance, shattered the singularity of the Duchampian readymade by gathering repetitious quantities of everyday manufactured objects, such as the ball bearings and cogwheels used in the works on view. He also deconstructed and reassembled found objects. In *Heroic Suffragist*, 1963, he sliced a cast metal statuette of a shrouded female figure to create multiple silhouetted forms. For “*La Plein (Full Up)*,” his 1960 gallery exhibition in Paris, Arman filled the space with an assortment of rubbish he collected from the street. Oyster shells, broken radios, birdcages, light bulbs, hula hoops, and five cubic yards of old plastic bags were packed into the gallery. For the artist, the urgent and nostalgic act of hoarding mass-produced remnants was a comment on a consumer culture increasingly filled with things. He stated that he wanted his accumulations to express “the anxieties that come from the reductions in spaces and surfaces and from the invasiveness of our industrial secretions.”¹

Similarly turning to artifacts found on the street, Italian born artist Mimmo Rotella used film posters to create his work. He made his early *décollages* by tearing away images, as opposed to using a collage technique (pasting paper together). After stripping the posters from public walls in Rome, he would reassemble the lacerated fragments with goopy paste on board or canvas. Sometime tearing the layers even further to make abstract compositions, Rotella's aim was to transcend the monotonous language of advertising by literally scrapping into its surface.

As with Arman's insistent installation of trash and Rotella's theatrical tearing down of posters, the Nouveau Realists were interested in activating the body in ephemeral environments. Frequently created in real time and space, many of the existing works are documents of a performance or a temporary construction. In 1962, with collaborator Jeanne-Claude, Christo filled the Rue Visconti, the narrowest street in Paris, with 240 colorful oil barrels that blocked traffic and pedestrian passage for eight hours. Navigating what the artists called an iron curtain, viewers had to



Jean Tinguely/Niki de Saint Phalle, *M.O.N.S.T.R.E.*, 1964. Motorized assemblage: cast steel and iron, painted newsprint and fabric over wire; electric motor, plastic, rubber and plastic toys, fabric, and twine, 927/8 x 603/4 x 40 inches with base. The Menil Collection. Photo: Janet Woodard, Houston © 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

react to the environmental assault, an unexpected spectacle made from a quotidian urban object. Christo's drawing of his unrealized plan to build a towering mastaba out of 4,584 oil drums references this temporary event.

Niki de Saint Phalle also used found objects in a performative context. She often worked with her husband, Jean Tinguely, on works like the motorized assemblage *M.O.N.S.T.R.E.*, 1964, and together they would write letters and make drawings, elaborately building off of each other's notes and lines with rubber stamps and pasted bits of paper. A founding member of the group, Tinguely constructed kinetic sculptures with junkyard scraps. In *Le Patin No. 5*, 1960, a rusty roller skate, attached to a slowly turning tricycle wheel, humorously flops over the edge of a metal platform.

The Nouveau Realists invited de Saint Phalle to become a member after seeing her *Tirs* (1961–1963), paintings made with a shotgun. Assembling objects together with chicken wire and plaster, she would embed containers of paint in the surface of the tableau and surround