The Museum of Drawers, 1970-77

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In 1969 Swiss artist Herbert Distel came upon a tall, narrow haberdasher's cabinet which held twenty drawers, each containing 25 small compartments. These 500 compartments, each measuring 1 11/16" high, 2 1/4" wide, and 1 7/8" deep, were originally built to house thousands of spoons of brightly colored silk thread. (For an illustration of how it might have looked, see Samuel Buri's contribution in D15er 12.)

The cabinet reminded Distel of an early skyscraper, with storeys and glass windows. He ruminated about how best to use such an intriguing group of spaces. In the fall of 1970 Distel titled the cabinet The Museum of Drawers and, as "museum director," began inviting artists from around the world to donate works to his museum. Unlike most museums, each artist has democratically been offered precisely the same amount of space: every artist was invited to have a "room." This bantam museum was completed in 1977.

The Museum of Drawers takes its place in the mainstream of two interesting traditions: art miniatures and museums by artists. Miniature art collections, popular in the courts of Europe, included those of Elector Max III of Bavaria, Archduke Ferdinand of Tirol, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (painted by David Teniers), and the Baron of Brabeck. Dollhouses of the past sometimes incorporated choice miniature paintings. The Stettheimer doll house with Duchamp's petite version of Nude Descending a Staircase is a noteworthy example. In recent decades we have seen artists' penchant for collecting and cataloguing expressed in quasi-museum formats. First to come to mind are Marcel Duchamp's The Box in a Valise, Marcel Broodthaers' Museum of Eagles, Ben Vautier's Cupboard and Claes Oldenburg's Mouse Museum and Ray Gun Museum (both currently on exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City).

Distel's Museum of Drawers, however, is unique. It reflects the combined creative energies of 510 artists (the 500 drawers which included a few collaborative works, the metal base which Edward Kienholz made for the cabinet and Herbert Distel's continuing entrepreneurial skills). Also, The Museum of Drawers does not merely catalogue replicas of larger works of art reduced to scale. Rather it became itself the occasion for an unprecedented number of original works of art which gave full and serious consideration to how a successful work can be created within the unusual confines of a very small space.

The Museum of Drawers can be explored as a "controlled study" in which the same artistic problem was assigned to over 500 creative persons. This is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this exhibition. As the viewer will see, the solutions vary widely in quality and interest. Many responses are impressive, inventive and intelligent. Some are elegantly simple, others are elaborate. Some are entertaining. And it must be acknowledged that there are those which clearly skimp on imagination and effort. Not visible but of equal importance are those decisions—born of aesthetic, political and other considerations—made by artists who declined Distel's invitation to participate. All together, The Museum of Drawers offers a rare opportunity to study the nature of the creative process in the contemporary visual arts.

The predominant theme explored is, of course, the issue of scale. Hundreds of artists took Distel's invitation to varying degrees of literality. Asked to submit "an original work in limited dimension" many produced a single, straightforward scale reduction of their best known work (e.g. Chuck Arnoldi, Karel Appel, Bernard and François Baschet). The results in some instances are pristine miniaturizations (e.g. Nicholas Kru- shenick, Robert Indiana, Jan Dibbets, Bernhard and Hilla Becher). Others seem awkwardly imprecise
Exhibitions of The Museum of Drawers:
Documenta 5 [230 of 500 compartments completed], Kassel '72; Museum der Stadt, Solothurn, Switzerland '76; International Cultural Center, Antwerp, Belgium '76; Städtisches Museum, Schwäbisch Gmünd, West Germany '77; Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, West Germany '77; Israel Museum, Jerusalem '77; Cooper-Hewitt Museum, NYC '78; Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art '78; Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas '78; Museum of Art, New Orleans '78; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford '78; Institute of Contemporary Art, London '79.

Selected one-man exhibitions:
Gallerie Atelier-Theater, Bern '73; Galerie Kleinthaler, Bern '64; Galerie Toni Brachbühl, Grencchen '66; Galerie Regio, Lürrach '67; Galerie Toni Gerber, Bern '68; Galerie Bischofberger, Zürich '69; Galerie Reckermann, Köln '69 '72; New Smith Gallery, Brussels '69; Galerie Bernard, Solothurn '71.

Selected group exhibitions:
Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland, Weiss auf Weiss '66; Galerie d'Art Moderne, Basel, Switzerland, Unten 40 - Schweizer Maler, Bildhauer und Gestalter '67; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Multiples '68; 9 Biennale Sao Paolo, Brazil '69; Arts Council of Great Britain, 3 ↔ ♦ New Multiple Art '70; New York Cultural Center, NYC, The Swiss Avant-Garde '71; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Multiples, The First Decade '71.

Selected bibliography by Distel:
"Ein Museum für die Museen," Documenta 5 '72, sec. 13, p. 3.

Selected bibliography about Distel:

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