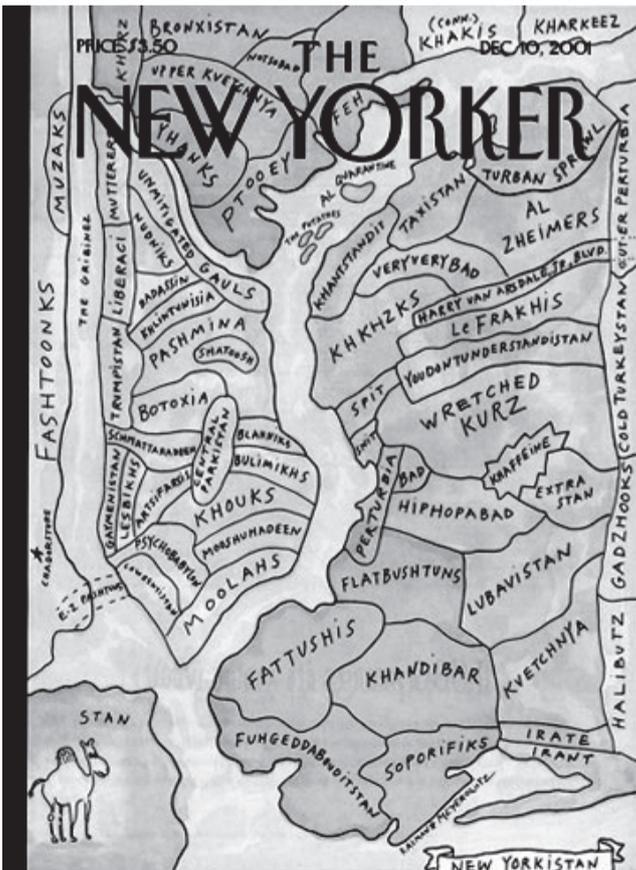


# Limits of Triviality

For the first major museum survey of her work, Maira Kalman has transformed one of the rooms in the Institute for Contemporary Art into a unique cabinet de *curiosité*. Various works on paper, embroideries and quotations create a visual tapestry on the walls surrounding a heteroclitic assortment of chairs, ladders, suitcases, buckets, shoes, paint rags, display cases and tables teaming with lists, bobby pins, balls of string, children's books and assorted paraphernalia. Unlike the intriguing oddities of 19th-century collections, which often ranged from natural history to geology, ethnography and archeology, Kalman's collection is a testament to our culture, to the everyday existence of the contemporary world.



If the first glance at this heteroclitic assortment of objects were not enough to call into question the category "fine art," the motley activities of the artist herself would surely succeed in dismantling the hierarchies that continue to plague the art world. For even the most avant-garde attempts to overcome the divide between high and low art very often slip into a performative contradiction precisely because they rely on 'noble' aesthetic practices (video, performance, etc.) to call into question the very distinction between 'noble' and 'ignoble' arts. Kalman not only avoids this contradiction, she seemingly disregards the hierarchies of aesthetic practices by moving fluidly between painting, illustration, embroidery, installation, citation, design, etc. She also seamlessly navigates between a clear preoccupation with art history (Matisse, Magritte, Cartier-Bresson), and a playful engagement with contemporary culture (keenly illustrated by the "Newyorkistan" cover for the New Yorker three months after September 11, 2001).



This exhibit confronts us with what authors such as Danto and Rancière have theorized as the contradiction of the commonplace: if art succeeds

in abolishing its structural hierarchies by becoming identical with the commonplace, it ultimately destroys its identity *qua* art. Therefore, it is worth asking whether or not the art of the commonplace is destined to failure: either it remains on the side of art and is never commonplace enough, or it finally succeeds in becoming commonplace but at the price of destroying its identity as art.

This conundrum extends well beyond Kalman's exhibit, and two of the three citations that preside over it recall the heritage that she is keenly aware of. Let us take the poignant example of the quote from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: "as if the fullness of the soul did not sometimes overflow in the emptiest metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of his needs, nor of his conceptions, nor of his sorrows; and since human speech is like a cracked tin kettle, on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance when we long to move the stars." The new context that Kalman invents for this quote seems to suggest a partial response to the contradiction highlighted above: human passion is always funneled through the triteness of the quotidian, and all we have are the cracked kettles that we have accumulated through our personal travels. In other words, art is nothing more than the commonplace act of sculpting an existence out of the everyday things we have inherited.

And yet, it is Maira Kalman's doodling that makes it into a museum, and Flaubert's writings that have been canonized. Taken independently, some of Kalman's work is distinctly unremarkable (especially when contrasted with pieces like *C.L.U.E.* by A.L. Steiner + robbinschilds in the contemporaneous exhibit, "Dance with Camera").



Indeed, Kalman's *cabinet de curiosité* is light and airy, and is much less captivating than slightly amusing. The question that remains after a relatively un-engaging visit to the show is: what—if any—are the limits of triviality? And why does this assortment of trivialities merit the spotlight of a museum whereas others do not? Since the message of the exhibit seems to be that there is art in the trivialities of our everyday lives, the transition between the entrance and exit of the museum is as smooth as it is voluntary.

- Theodore Tucker