


Art in America



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GERMANY

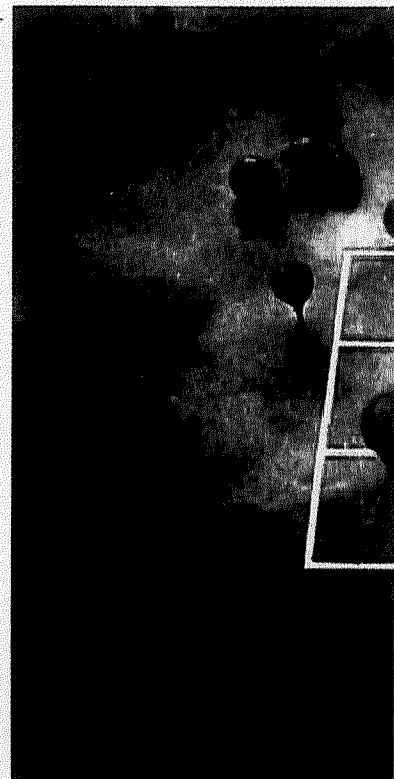
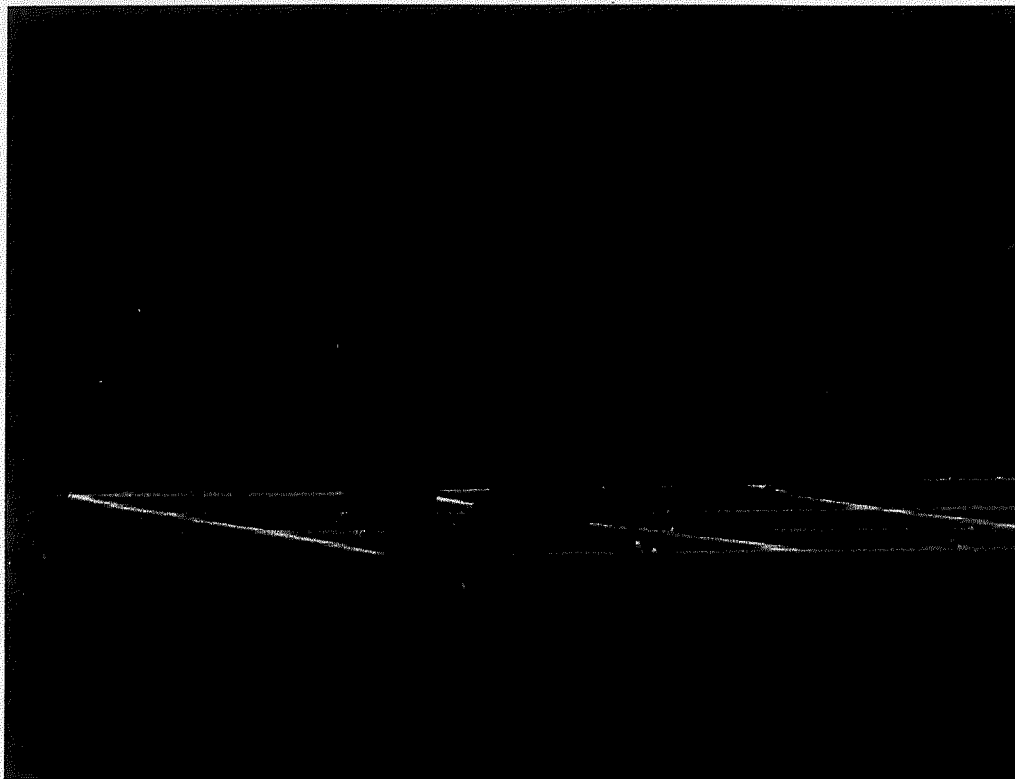
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A Serious Game

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

As Miguel Angel Rios's recent three-channel video installation *A Morir ('til Death)* gets under way, there are a few seconds of tranquility before the trio of projected images bursts into frenetic activity. One moment the viewer is looking at three shots of an indeterminate charcoal-gray space with a small square white grid in its center, then suddenly a bulbous black form with a headlike knob on top hurtles in from above and begins to spin rapidly on its tapered base. It is joined, almost immediately, by other spinning black forms of various sizes that swoop into the scene with a noise that sounds like a squadron of dive bombers.

Converging on the white grid, these buzzing, spinning forms, which eventually number around 30, crowd together and repeatedly bump into one another, making little clicking sounds as they do so. Some of these close encounters are cordial, as two whirling bulbs merely bounce off each other, staying upright on their now slightly altered courses. But many others are catastrophic, with one or both of the black forms knocked over or sent careening out of the frame. Soon, the grid is littered with fallen spinners, and suddenly another protagonist appears: an elongated wooden rake, much like the device a croupier uses to sweep away poker chips, that thrusts in from above to snatch away the stilled forms. The rake moves so rapidly that as well as taking away toppled spinners it also knocks over and ruthlessly removes a number of upright forms.

Although the forms are equally black and bulbous and all of them spin on metal tips, their contours vary subtly. Some are relatively squat and onion-like, while others bulk out near their tops, then rapidly turn svelte, like a bodybuilder with the legs of a ballet dancer. To an art-historical eye, they might recall some of Oskar Schlemmer's streamlined figures, or even Morandi's still-life objects. The structure of the installation highlights these

variations by showing three different, synchronized views, on three adjacent walls, of the same sequence of spinning and falling forms. The central image is the largest, at 9 by 14 feet, with the lefthand version (shot by a camera positioned to the left of the grid) much smaller at 4 by 6 feet, and the righthand projection (from a camera looking at the grid from the right) somewhere between the other two in terms of size. The viewer is thus enveloped by the moving images and invited to follow the action from three different perspectives. At the conclusion of the video, only one of the black, anthropomorphic spinners remains upright, until it, too, surrenders to gravity in a whirling, slow-motion fall.

What are these forms? What exactly is going on in this video? Lengths of string flashing into the frame as each new form zooms in help the viewer identify the objects as spinning tops. To create this video, Rios, an Argentinean-born artist who divides his time between Mexico City and New York, went to the Mexican town of Tepotzlan, where the game of *trompos* is a popular, highly competitive pastime. Making his own oversize spinning tops (they measure between 4 and 8 inches in height) out of wood and enlisting the help of some 30 skilled local *trompos* players, age 14 to 50, he then began to experiment, filming the tops from various angles and in a variety of groupings. The final result is a five-minute, single-take DVD that can be appreciated for its formal qualities even as it exudes the ruthless mayhem of a demolition derby.

Part of what makes *A Morir* such a successful work is the way it combines control and chance. Although Rios designed and made the tops, decided on the backdrop and camera set-up, directed the invisible players and