



Colette as Ragdoll, 1975



Colette as Countess Reichenbach from the mid-1980s



Colette as Countess Reichenbach unveiled, from the mid-1980s



Colette as Mata Hari from the mid-1980s

## COLETTE IN TRANSIT

### by Alexandra Anderson-Spivy

"Colette: The ApARTment," Apr. 4-May 12, 2007, at HPGRP Gallery, 32-36 Little West 12th Street, New York, N.Y. 10014.

It's no secret that Colette has made life itself into performance art.

She is a nomadic impresario of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, always seeking a fusion of art and life. What other contemporary artist has staged her own death? And then speedily followed it by assuming a different identity, as Colette was reborn as Justine?

When Colette "died" in 1978 at the Whitney Museum Downtown, in an installation and performance she called *The Last Stitch*, she sought to illustrate the difficulties of being a living artist and the superior market advantages of being a dead one. The reincarnated Justine became Colette's executor. As the director of the "Colette is Dead" Company, this alter ego became a conceptual entrepreneur, establishing a commercial enterprise and a consumer marketing strategy. Justine/Colette subsequently developed a line of "Beautiful Dreamer" products, including recordings, fashion designs and a punk rock band.

In April, the Tunisia-born iconoclast has staged her signature brand of period room in the second-floor HPGRP Gallery on Little West 12th Street. Under her direction, the gallery has become a full-scale still life done in a palette of pastels that recreates the artist's own satin-swathed boudoir from the Maison Lumière, her home in New York's financial district. It's an elaborate and dreamy assemblage consisting of hundreds of objects -- many of them artifacts from Colette's previous incarnations, installations and performances in Munich, Tokyo, Berlin and New York. I was smitten by the fairytale effect of the installation. It immediately enfolds you within the embrace of a seductive storehouse of an imagination that elides external and internal worlds.

Since her arrival from France at the end of the 1960s, when she executed her first photographically documented "Street Works" around New York City, Colette has made herself into an art world brand name. Using her own enigmatically shifting appearance, she constantly enlarged the reach of art into the arenas not only of performance and installation, fashion and set design, but also video and collage, music and photography. The influence of her "Living Tableaux" resonates in the works of artists as diverse as Cindy Sherman (who restricts her fantasy personas to the two-dimensionality of her photographs) and Mathew Barney (whose use of mythology, notably his satyr impersonations, take costume play to similar levels of flamboyance). The elaborately staged performances of the Japanese

artist, Mariko Mori, also seem to channel Colette in their appropriations of cultural and mythological icons.

Colette's essentially blithe esthetic has celebrated aspects of the feminine during the rise of an era when academic feminism declared suspect everything conventionally associated with enjoying being a girl. That includes high heels, fashion and make-up, not to mention good manners, elegance and romance. Her pieces also have hypothesized an ambivalent relationship with domesticity and fashion, posing questions about the nature of female roles in art and life without ever rejecting femininity. Through the manipulation and dramatization of her female archetypes Colette constantly alters stereotypes into something fresh, provocative and glamorous.

Her characters are allegorical, using a highly theatrical symbolism to investigate social history and challenge gender clichés. Her work also constantly mines her own personal history and her associations with art and art history. During the past three decades Colette has enacted many recreations of legendary women, among them Delacroix's figure of liberty, Marianne; Mata Hari (in 1984 the artist turned her Berlin apartment into the boudoir of the alluring spy); and the Countess Reichenbach (1986), a fictitious aristocrat from the era of the extravagant King Ludwig.

Returning from Germany to New York in the 1990s, Colette converted herself into Manet's Olympia, constructing a parallel environment and strict code of behavior she named "The House of Olympia." Its rules included "Colettesizing the 18th Century." French culture and history has played a big part her work since the 1970s, when she appeared as Madame Recamier (1974), as Joan of Arc in the windows of the Victoria Falls boutique in SoHo (1978), and as Marie Antoinette as part of the 1977 Paris Biennale. Her recent visual vocabulary owes much to the Court of Versailles and to Fragonard's idylls, Watteau's *fêtes galantes* and François Boucher's domesticated hedonism. The versatile Boucher was noted for his intimate interiors and his pastoral and mythological scenes. Besides his paintings, this favored court painter created everything from decorative boudoir panels, tapestry designs and theater sets to book illustrations and prototypes for the Royal Porcelain Works.

Colette shares Boucher's creative versatility as well as his conviction that an evolved society requires beauty and civility. To that end, she has always sought to reach the broadest possible audience. To find it, this pioneer of performance art took her work beyond conventional venues and media. Her satin and silk-swathed installations transform plain rooms and white box galleries into fantasy palaces and salons. Her serial invented personas were early to adapt historical subject matter to contemporary art through her evocative tableaux vivants cocooned in ethereal fabrics. Her installations and performances have appeared in alternative spaces such as P.S.1 and also at the Mudd Club, Danceteria and a department store in Tokyo. She has stealthily inserted herself into museum settings -- her mannequin sculpture appeared in the Guggenheim's 1997 fashion art exhibition.

The current gallery installation in Manhattan's Meatpacking District has something for every art



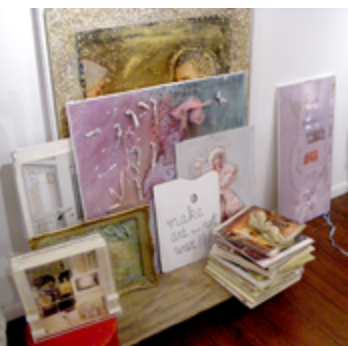
Maison Lumière Mannequin from the early 2000s



"Colette: The ApARTment" at HPGRP Gallery, 2007



Colette's costumes and gowns in "Colette: The ApARTment" at HPGRP Gallery, 2007



"Colette: The ApARTment" at HPGRP Gallery, installation view, with Colette's albums, paintings and altered photographs, 2007



Colette's Self-portrait as Frida Kahlo, 1991



Colette as Justine from the Fiorucci window, 1978



"Colette: The ApARTment" at HPGRP Gallery, 2007, installation view

lover who might long to possess a fragment of Colette's self-created world and artistic autobiography. Here are her Colette dolls, her glitter-spangled "record" album covers, her photographs and portraits, her accessories such as the pastel hatboxes that form part of her current Maison Lumière incarnation and the delicate vintage dresses she used in her House of Olympia performances and the Bavarian Adventure -- documents of her multiple personas and environments.

At the gallery you'll also find racks of clothes culled from her extraordinary closet as well as hats, signature platform shoes, paintings, painted china and furniture, including her sumptuous satin-covered bed, and several of the intricate, glowing floor lamps made from the costumed mannequins that serve as her surrogates. There are even uniforms from Colette's episode as Justine, and items from her 1974 "Fashion as Fantasy" installation in the 59th Street windows of Fiorucci, a work that inspired Madonna to change her look and wardrobe.

Now Colette wants to sell everything, from furniture and artifacts to clothes and artworks. The outfits start at \$150, while smaller collectibles are in the \$100-\$175 range. The LP record-cover-sized spangled collage photos from Colette's "Story of My Life" series are \$1,650 each. Framed "I am a work of art" T-shirt dresses are \$12,000, while the mannequin sculpture carries a price tag of \$125,000.

The exhibition dramatizes the challenges of impermanence and change. This subject has occupied Colette ever since 9/11, after which she invented the Maison Lumière. She redesigned her loft (located only blocks from Ground Zero) making it into an elegant salon intended to counter the gloomy aftermath of the World Trade Center attack. Her exploration of the impact of displacement has new relevance since, after surviving 9/11, the ferocious demolition and redevelopment happening on her block threatens the five-story early-19th-century brick building where she lives. In its wake, Colette and her fellow tenants have endured temporary eviction, no heat and the fear that parts of their building might crumble. Last October, giant cracks appeared on its north wall.

Most poignant in the "ApARTment" show is the Lumière mannequin sculpture, a stand-in heroine dressed in a long antique dress of white organza, who gazes from the gallery window towards the future. Behind her is a procession of pure white suitcases that suggests she is on the move to somewhere as yet unknown. This piece, which confronts the anxieties and possibilities evoked by impermanence, is called *Be Favorable to Bold Beginnings*.

Once again donning her long white gloves, Colette tirelessly and with resilient style continues courageously to convert daily life and personal circumstance into metaphor and enchantment. As she once told the late critic Gianfranco Mantegna, "Magic exists all around us. We just have to notice it."



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"Colette: The ApARTment" at HPGRP Gallery, 2007, installation view



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