

ARTBEAT

The Politics of Culture

Death in Venus

It's been nearly two years since Colette, who calls herself a "post-conceptual artist," pricked her finger at the Downtown Whitney and declared herself deceased. But this was no ordinary D.O.A. Colette died to be reborn as Justine, a spirit of the age when art has shattered the illusion that it is distinct from industry. As the chief executive of Colette Is Dead, Inc., Justine can do everything her predecessor abjured: she can design a fashion line for Fiorucci, sell environments like the "Beautiful Dreamer bed" in a Sakowitz Christmas catalogue, cut a disco version of "Beautiful Dreamer" with Peter Gordon and the Love of Life Orchestra. "The motivation is survival," she says of her transfiguration. "I know the value of my work will go up when I die. I realize that's the only way to live."

The edge of mock sincerity in everything Justine touches makes it irresistible—as entertainment and critique. Her dresses are almost wearable, her disco single almost danceable, the environments she creates come perilously close to shock—yet it's the peril that validates the art.

She stops a crucial stitch short of bankability, as if to leave us with the awesome illusion that artists really do make the best businessmen, while insisting that they shouldn't. "In my pieces, I'm saying that fashion *isn't* art, that it feeds on art rather than the other way around." Such sentiments make Justine a decisively traditional figure, even—preserve us—a modernist. Although she could expire with the expectation that the value of her work would increase, it hasn't; or so you'd think from hearing her *kvetch* about being ripped off by the art-as-fashion nexus. "The commercial world exploited me," she says. "Now I'm exploiting back."

This week, Justine transforms the Elizabeth Weiner gallery in a Woolworth's of the authentically askew, with a disco record that will never break on WBLS, and accessories that will never make it as New Wave Wear. All this deliberate failure spawns the most traditional art emotion: hope. "I need time," says Justine, in her best Joan Crawford voice. "Maybe I haven't been dead long enough." ■



a.k.a. Colette

JAMES HAMMOND