

# The New York Times

## José Antonio Hernández-Diez

New Museum of Contemporary Art  
583 Broadway, near Houston Street  
SoHo

Through Sept. 21

José Antonio Hernández-Diez, born in Venezuela in 1964, is one of several urbane Latin American artists — Cildo Meireles and Gabriel Orozco are others — whose work might be described as a kind of vernacular conceptualism. Each makes a physically reductive, idea-rich art from scraps of a consumer culture that for most of us constitutes everyday life.

Mr. Hernández-Diez's solo show at the New Museum incorporates a mélange of several such scraps — skateboards, household furniture, a stuffed pet dog, fake fingernails, baseball bats, photographs of designer sneakers — put to unexpected uses. A china cabinet with sliding doors, for example, holds dishes, though its primary function is as a screen for a projected video in which the artist is seen slowly emptying and filling the same cabinet with personal items, as if he were in a perpetual process of changing homes.

Skateboards are integral to an installation titled "La Hermandad (The Brotherhood)," a version of which appeared at the Sandra Gering Gallery in New York in 1994. But they aren't real skateboards; they are strips of deep-fried pork equipped with wheels, literally consumer items. In a video we see stray dogs devouring some of the boards in the street.

Other objects created by this artist look comparably absurd and mysterious. Big white plastic fingernails lie like shields or overturned turtles on a sheet of sandpaper. The taxidermic dog is encased like a saint's relic in a vitrine. Four baseball bats lie on a countertop that is covered with sheets of dented metal: slam a bat on one of the sheets, and the impact will activate a radio, giving you a moment of music or talk show chat.

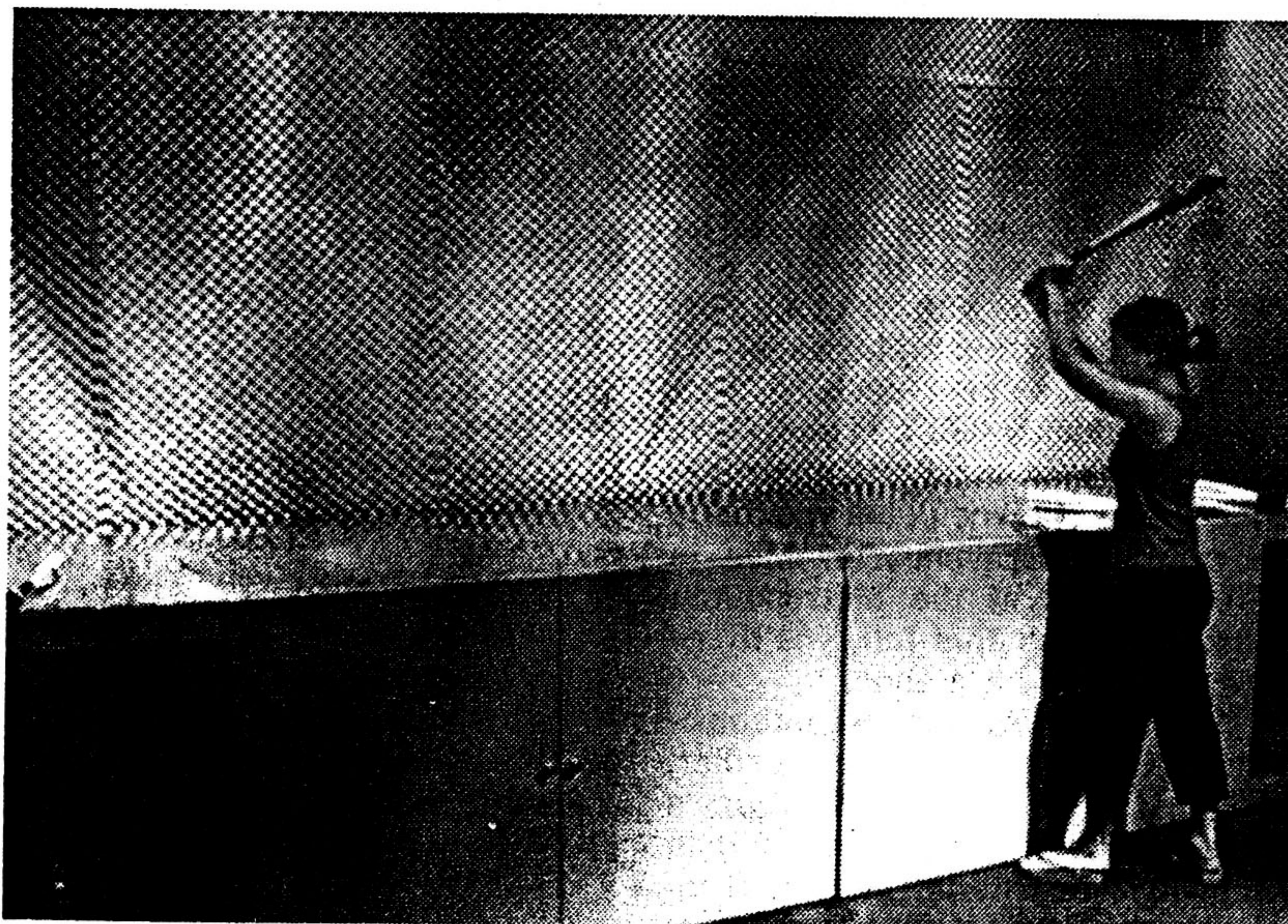
Any of these works can support readings involving local culture. Fried pork rinds are a cheap street snack in parts of Latin America; baseball is a hugely popular sport there; beauty salons are big business even in the region's poorest neighborhoods. But Mr. Hernández-Diez has little interest in producing a "Latin American" art to fit existing prototypes. Just the opposite.

Like many artists now, he focuses not on specific identity but on common sensations and states of mind — restlessness, appetite, belief and delusion, incipient violence — and the collective unconscious of globalized culture. In the series of sneaker photographs, each shoe, whether a pricey designer original or a shoddy

knockoff, comes emblazoned with a single, logolike letter on its side, and he has arranged the shoes in stacks to spell out names: Jung, Kafka, Marx and so on.

The sneaker photos are the most immediately accessible pieces in a modestly scaled show organized by Dan Cameron, senior curator at the New Museum, and Gerardo Mosquera, adjunct curator. Nothing else has the same visual punch, but the work slowly gathers density as Mr. Hernández-Diez's methods and meanings reveal themselves. You start out puzzled, then you begin to get the jokes, then the antic strangeness — a little mocking, a little melancholic — that is this artist's dominant mode kicks in.

HOLLAND COTTER



New Museum of Contemporary Art

An installation view of José Antonio Hernández-Diez's show at the New Museum, where hitting a counter with a baseball bat turns on a radio.