

# REPORT FROM NEW YORK

## Generational Saga

*In what has now become a ritual of art-world self-examination, the Whitney has mounted its 1991 biennial survey—this time, with a thesis that is implicitly oedipal.*

BY KEN JOHNSON

Will we ever see the day when no one can think of anything bad to say about the much-maligned but indispensable Whitney Biennial? Probably not, but the curators keep trying, and this year they've come up with some promising new ideas. The 1991 model is bigger, having expanded to occupy the entire museum, and it has had the curatorial input of a committee of non-New York advisers.<sup>1</sup> The latter innovation seems to have been a good idea, as some of the pleasantest surprises of the show are from such distant lands as Chicago and California. But the exhibition is still heavily New York dominated, and one wonders what an even more geographically diversified selection might have looked like.

This year, the show's format decisively affects the viewer's experience, since the exhibition is divided by generations into three parts. The more than 170 works included were made in the past two years, but the 70 artists are grouped according to the periods when they first became well-known. On the second floor are 15 artists who came of age during the 1950s and '60s, including Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Alex Katz, Joan Mitchell, Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella. The third floor offers 26 who emerged in the 1970s and '80s, some of the best known of whom are Vito Acconci, Jennifer Bartlett, Eric Fischl, David Salle and Cindy Sherman. And on the top floor are 29 new arrivals, none of whom were included in previous Biennials, and most of whom began exhibiting in the late 1980s. Among the more recently celebrated are Nayland Blake, Kiki Smith, Jessica Diamond, Jessica Stockholder and Lorna Simpson.<sup>2</sup>

Leaving aside for now the question of whether or not such a segregation by generation is a good idea, it is interesting to observe the distinctly different character of each floor: on the top floor, the ambiance is assertively youthful—playful, rebellious, capricious and charming; on the middle floor, although some of the antic impudence of the top floor is still felt, the atmosphere is more serious, mature, hardworking and responsible; and on the second floor, you have a museum-quality atmosphere, as most of the artists are living legends of art history. What you've got, you might say in short, are children, parents and grandparents.

Walking through the top floor of younger artists, we find many examples of lightheartedly inventive and/or perversely rebellious works and very few things made in traditional genres (the three painters, Carlos Alfonzo, Rebecca Purdum



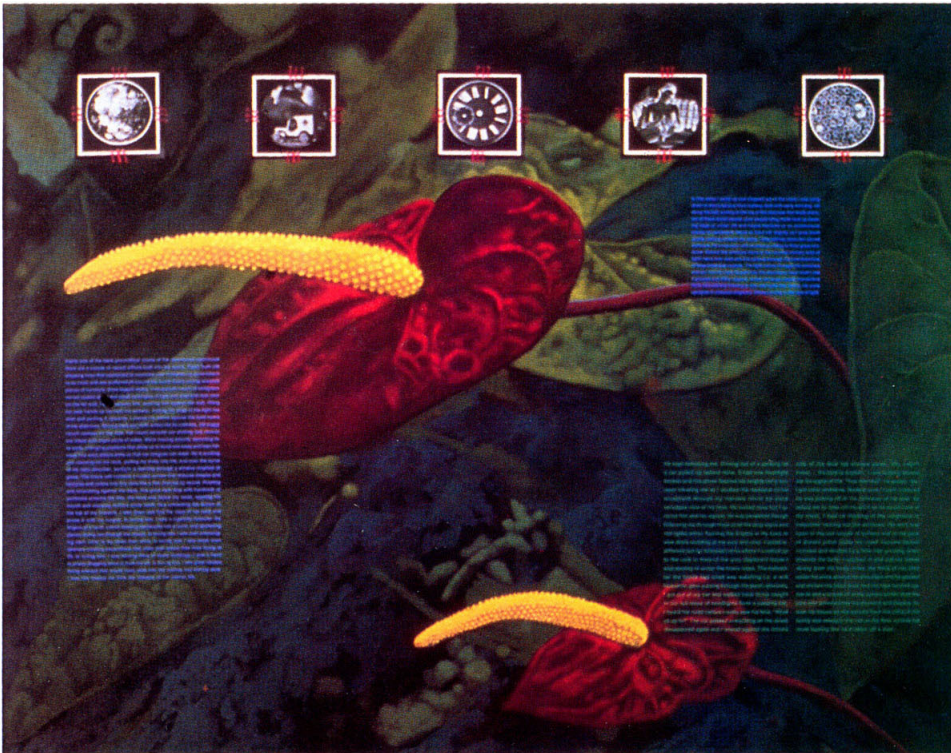
David Salle: *E.A.J.A.*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 102 by 123 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Israel Lapciuc.

and Philip Smith, looked quite conservative, not to say traditional, in the context). Rona Pondick's rope-bound, baby-bottle-studded mattress with its slightly repellent appeal to the viewer's primordial memories (mother, milk) is, appropriately, the first thing you encounter on this floor. John Miller's fecal sculpture, a floor-bound townscape slathered with his signature ordurous brown paint and a pair of mannequins sporting brown fashions, similarly refers to Freudian beginnings. Other artists present amusing toys: Californian Alan Rath's<sup>3</sup> delightful *Hound* is a wheeled wooden crate from which extend two small video picture tubes, both of which depict twitching human noses. Wendy Jacobs of Chicago creates false walls that are invisible as art works until you notice they're ballooning slowly in and out (with a considerable "whoosh" sound) as though breathing. The stainless steel and glass

bondage and torture devices by Nayland Blake (San Francisco) are not for children, but they are fantasy toys for adults. Suggesting the child's tendency to make a big mess and perhaps mocking the macho muscularity of someone like Mark di Suvero, there's Jessica Stockholder's gigantic assemblage of massive wooden beams and panels and urban detritus. There are also works actually fabricated by kids—the collages of Tim Rollins + K.O.S.

To observe the prevalence of juvenile tendencies on the top floor, however, should not obscure the genuinely compelling qualities of certain artists. While Miller's sculpture or Chicagoan Jeanne Dunning's photographs of the backs of women's heads or Christian Marclay's accumulation of cast hydrostone telephone receivers called *Bone Yard* are clever but thin, Kiki





Above, David Wojnarowicz: *He Kept Following Me*, 1990, acrylic on board with photographs, 48 by 60 inches. Private collection, courtesy P.P.O.W.  
 Below, Carrie Mae Weems: *Untitled*, 1990, silver print, 28¼ inches square. Courtesy P.P.O.W.



**The idea that the artist must break in at an early age with some spectacular new idea is the unexamined myth that underlies the division of this Biennial into age groups—and the same notion animates the art world at large.**

Smith's pair of life-size nude people made of wax (one male and one female), bloodstained and hung by steel rods imbedded in their backs, are painfully resonant: the lumpy, abused, pathetic bodies call to mind a dizzying wealth of associations—modern torture, ancient myth (Adam and Eve), realist figurative sculpture from Michelangelo to Duane Hanson—and they convey a feeling for the dumb, inert materiality of flesh with appalling poignancy.

Cady Noland's installation hits some deep notes, too, but in a more specifically sociological way. Her sprawling, room-filling installation of stacked Budweiser cans and industrial aluminum ware (ladders, scaffolds, railings, crates), blown-up pictures of Lee Harvey Oswald (full of holes) and Patty Hearst, and a cheap plastic motel sign that says "Fuck Hut Motor Lodge" evokes a certain bleak spirit of tawdry, low-rent Americana that rings a bell of recognition the way the stories of Raymond Carver do.

Jim Shaw (Los Angeles) gets at a particularly American essence, too, with his amazing fictional biography of a boy named Billy in 107 pictures. Skillfully mimicking an incredible range of pictorial kitsch, from *Mad* magazine comics to acid rock posters to bad fantasy oil paintings of sexy women to pencil renderings of yearbook pages, Shaw produces an encyclopedic inventory of the consciousness of an All-American teenager. It is a tour-de-force simulation of a kind of whacked-out anthropology.

One of the few artists on this floor who works in a traditional way is photographer Sally Mann. Her work fits, however, in that she makes pictures of children—luminously beautiful black-and-white images of mysteriously elfin children around Mann's rural home in Lexington, Virginia. These are riveting, enigmatic narrative images; for example, a picture of two little girls playing with makeup next to a pickup truck as a singularly grotesque dog looks threateningly on. Mann's art looks like a photographic version of Carolyn Chute's novel *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*.

There is also work on this floor that deals with serious social issues, such as Lorna Simpson's elliptical photo-text meditations on racism or Felix Gonzalez-Torres's stack of big pages (viewers could take one free) enthrallingly printed with names, pictures and stories of people killed by guns. There's also Group Material's *AIDS Timeline*, a busy installation in the first floor lobby gallery made of art works by various art-



ists, several video programs and lots of text and media material. The issues at stake here, needless to say, are profoundly urgent. But overtly asserted ideology is not the Biennial's strong suit. Rather, at best, the political and sociological are addressed metaphorically, through oblique symbols and a kind of surrealism that reflects the essence of modern experience (i.e., absurdity and paranoia) more deeply and with more convincing urgency than does the didacticism of the Group Material project.

**D**espite the presence of artists such as Mike Kelley (Los Angeles) or McDermott & McGough who have more in common with the kids upstairs, the environment of the middle generation is comparatively subdued. The fourth floor is the fun floor—the most diverse, unruly, disobedient, outrageous, entertaining and fatiguing part of the show; on the third floor you find former bad boys like Fischl, Salle and Schnabel grown-up and hard at work making things that no longer depend on the shock of the contrary but on traditional esthetic qualities. The fact that there's a lot more painting on this floor is significant. Jennifer Bartlett, Carroll Dunham, Peter Halley, Elizabeth Murray, Ellen Phelan, Joseph Santore, Philip Taaffe, Mark Tansey: in various ways and for better or worse, these painters have all forgone the quick hit of the novel invention and are involved in the patient, long-haul commitment of making or trying to make better paintings. Sculptors are similarly hardworking: Donald Lipski's humongous ball of arm-thick rope (on display downstairs in the outdoor courtyard) is funny but also an impressive piece of industry. Luis Jimenez's (New Mex-



*Installation view of second floor showing works by Pat Steir (foreground) and Joan Mitchell (background). Photo Geoffrey Clements.*

ico) colossal, luridly hued figures made of fiberglass, one a heroic WPA-style steelworker, the other a man laboriously carrying a woman on his shoulders, are monuments to adult toil, both as objects and as images.

There can be a downside to the maturation of an artist who began as a brash youngster. Fischl's paintings of India may be richer and more self-assured as paintings than his earlier pictures of suburban sexual angst, but they are less gripping psychologically. Salle's layered paintings are visually gratifying—even quite lush—but you miss the unpredictably crazy obnoxiousness of his earlier work. Cindy Sherman's big photographic parodies of old-master paintings extend the range of her quirky imagination but seem calculated and overproduced compared to her early black-and-white film stills or her first, disquieting self-images in color. On the other hand, some artists look stuck in a prolonged adolescence: Thomas Lanigan Schmidt's tinfoil-and-rhinestone-glitter-based art retains little capacity to provoke, but it hasn't matured much either.

Robert Gober, however, gets better and better at combining magical craft and idiosyncratic ideas. Here he shows two weirdly realistic/surrealistic waxworks. One is the lower half of a man front down and naked but for shoes and socks—with sheet music printed on his bare buttocks. The other piece is a flesh-colored object like a bag of cement, but formed in front like an androgyne's chest—female breast on one side; flat, hairy expanse on the other. Viscerally repellent/attractive and loaded with psychological meaning, yet resistant to interpretation, the

Gobers are among the most haunting things in the show.

Allen Ruppersberg is another wild card on this floor. Appropriating the presentational format that Chuck Close developed for his recent curatorship at the Museum of Modern Art, Ruppersberg filled a large wall with framed signs and pictures crammed together on narrow shelves. Intertitles from old silent movies, skillfully made drawings of books, portraits in hackneyed illustrator styles, facsimiles of old letters and other sorts of unclassifiable materials all go together to form a huge poetic collage that is perhaps, something like Shaw's, an autobiographical inventory of American-style consciousness.

The middle-generation selection offers little explicitly political art. Louise Lawler is an exception. She is not restricted to the third floor, however. Rather, her clusters of deconstructive photographs of art installations are distributed throughout the museum in a subversive effort to activate awareness of the institutional and ideological background of contemporary art. The effect of being confronted by her works in so many different places, however, is to make you feel she's getting more play here than her narrow, obliquely preachy conceptualism deserves.

**T**he second floor hosts the senior artists, and the selection is interesting because it's not entirely predictable. Curious variations from the standardized, blue-chip roster are Texan Joseph Glasco with his bright patchwork quiltlike abstractions and Californian Ed Moses with his somberly updated Abstract Expressionism. These

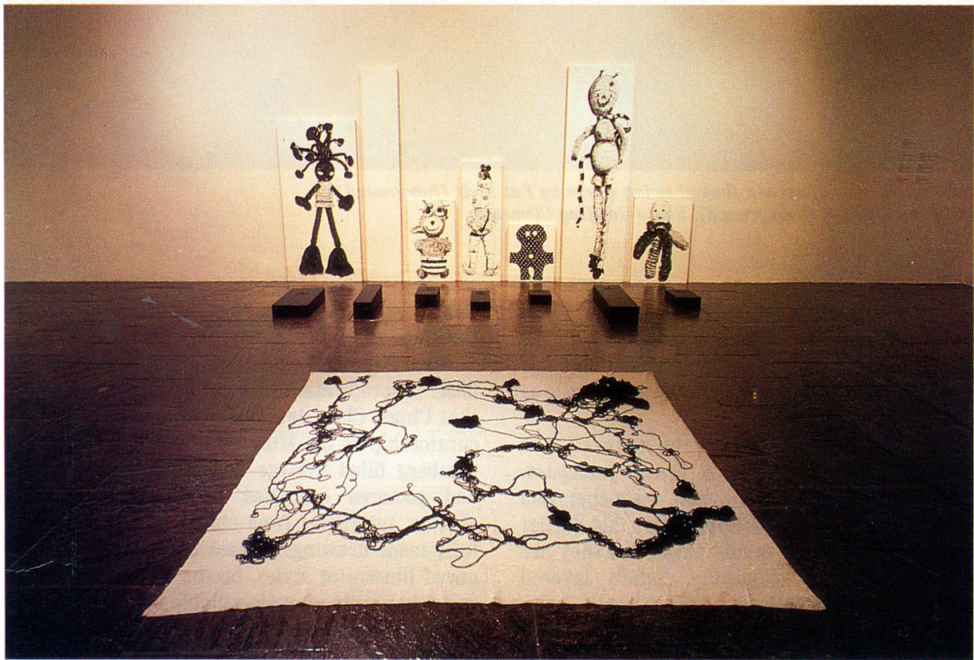


*Alex Katz: Black Brook 10, 1990, oil on canvas, 126 by 96 inches. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery.*



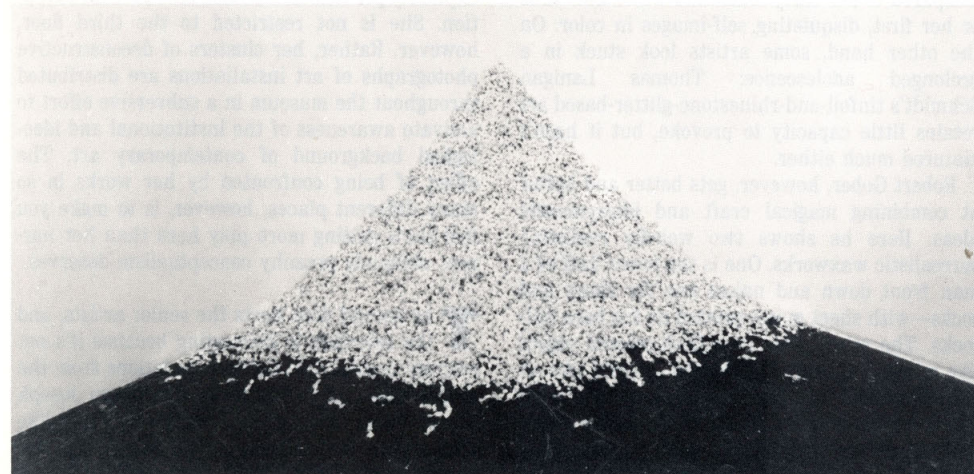


Installation view of fourth floor showing Rona Pondick's *Double Bed*, 1989 (center), and work by Jessica Diamond on partition at left.



Above, view of Mike Kelley installation on third floor with *Untitled*, 1990, in foreground. Courtesy Galerie Jablonka, Cologne. Photos this page Geoffrey Clements.

Below, Felix Gonzalez-Torres: *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, 1991, 255 pounds of wrapped candies and painted wall, variable dimensions. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.



John Miller: *Echo and Narcissus*, 1990, acrylic paint and clothing on life-size mannequins. Courtesy Metro Pictures.

artists do not, however, challenge the modernist orthodoxy that prevails here. On this floor, there is something gratifying about the absence of contemporary conceptual or stylistic fashion. Katz's big, dark, meditative waterscapes, Joan Mitchell's airy swarms of spontaneous painterly gestures, Rauschenberg's haikulike arrangements of a few pieces of junk metal, Johns's recent art-historical puzzles, Close's buzzing, lushly painterly face mosaics—with each of these and others you feel quite above the contemporary style wars. It seems that each artist has followed his or her own path to a solitary place. The most spectacular instance of this is Roy Lichtenstein, who showed two immense, eye-popping paintings of generic living room interiors. Rendered in black lines on snowy fields, they monumentally epitomize the intercourse of high classicism and low vernacular that has preoccupied Lichtenstein ever since he was born as a Pop artist 30 years ago.

Remarkably divergent from his signature style of painting, however, were Cy Twombly's graceful bronze sculptures. A stack of weathered boards topped by a brick, *Winter's Passage (Luxor)*; an untitled, extremely sensitive representation of a tall, slender potted plant mounted on a high pedestal: these works emanated an Asian quality of grace, simplicity and elegance.

To be sure, the "Establishment" floor is not completely placid: there is something unnervingly psychotic about Bruce Nauman's video installation focusing on the head of a man (the artist himself) who keeps spinning in circles and humming; and Stella's enormous, aggressive aluminum assemblage looks like an airplane crash. But what prevails is something that you might say John Coplans's huge photographs of his own



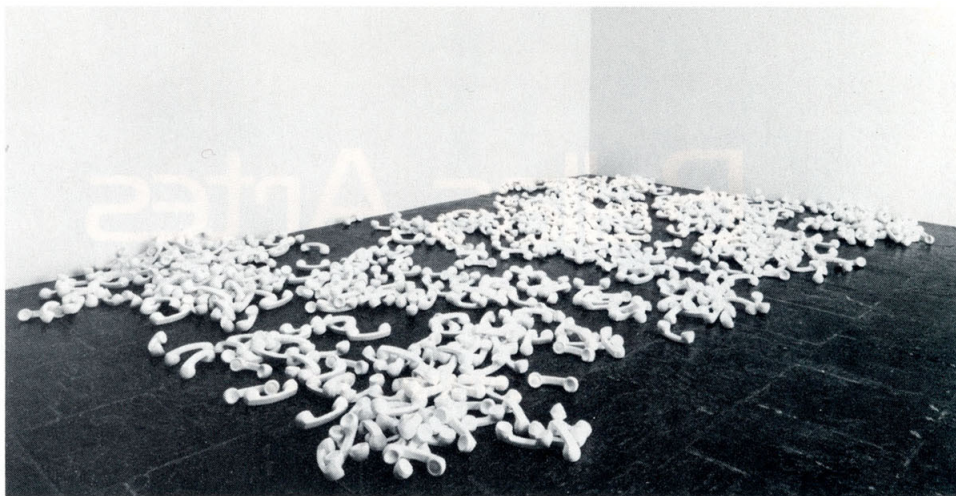
**What the Whitney's curators tacitly seem to be saying is that the most crucial developments in today's art come out of youthful, anti-adult consciousness, and their selection of older artists seems meant to affirm this.**

naked, aged body emblemize: a hard-won sense of identity and self-acceptance.

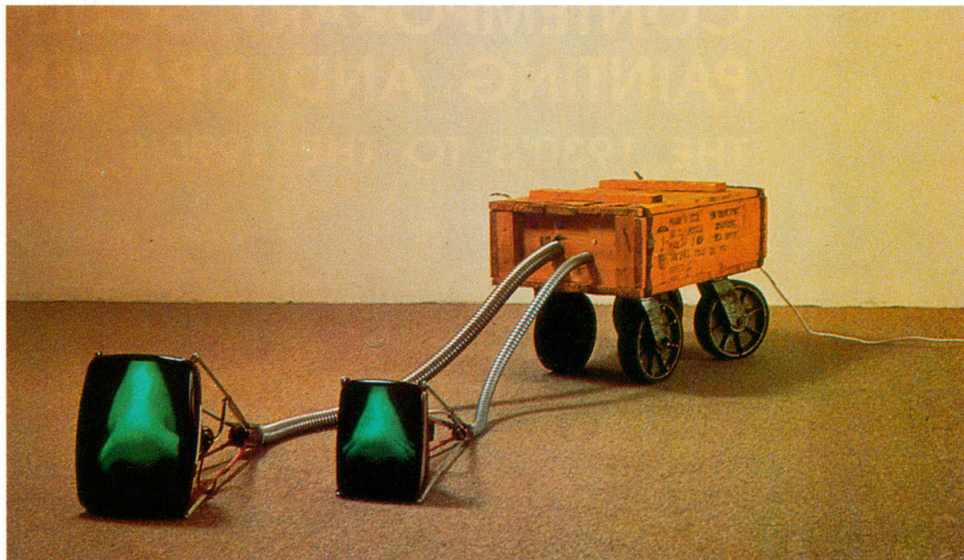
**T**he most obvious objection to the generational format is that it ghettoizes artists into age groups and could be perceived as making the older ones look subordinate (if not obsolete), as though they were brought in to provide art-historical background and credibility for the what's-happening younger group. Also, by giving the floor devoted to the cutting edge almost entirely to artists involved more in the pursuit of novelty than the expansion of tradition, the Whitney curators seem implicitly to be saying that the most important developments in today's art come out of youthful, anti-adult consciousness. The selection of older and middle-generation artists actually affirms this as well, since most of them are identified with the anti-status-quo achievements of their own youth. The idea that the artist must break in at an early age with some spectacular, revolutionary new idea is the unexamined myth that animates this exhibition as well as contemporary art in general. Pat Steir, who appears among the older generation although she would be equally at home in the middle group, is a notable exception in that she doesn't have to live up to any unforgettable signature early work and, with her recent waterfall series, is doing what many consider the best work of her career.

Of course, the Whitney is not alone in its enthrallment with the cult of youth. Our whole culture shares the fascination. And it may indeed be true that the best art we have is produced under the aegis of the spirit of the rebellious child. There is much art to support this view, going back to the earliest stirrings of modernism. The assumption, by now a very long-standing one, has been that innovation in art must keep up with change in society at large if it wants to say anything pertinent about its time. Looking at the Biennial's top floor, one has to admit that some of the latest multi-media assemblages express perceptions that may be impossible to convey by traditional means. A room by Dawn Fryling (San Francisco), in which empty black picture frames are hung all around the walls, with a pair of huge, blindingly bright spotlights in the middle of the floor, expresses the emptiness of contemporary spectacle with a power that painting would be hard-pressed to match.

But the notion that art must always embrace radical reinvention is something that ought to



*Christian Marclay: Bone Yard, 1990, 750 cast hydrostone telephone receivers, variable dimensions. Courtesy Galerie Isabella Kacprzak, Cologne, and Tom Cugliani Gallery, New York.*



*Above, Alan Rath: Hound, 1990, mixed mediums and video. Courtesy Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica.*

*Below, installation view of Jessica Stockholder's Recording Forever Pickled Too, 1991. Courtesy American Fine Arts.*





inspire some ambivalence, too, no matter how much one may enjoy each season's revelations. Tradition, after all, is a backbone of collective consciousness that we dispense with at our peril. What is lost, one wonders, when our smartest and most adventurous younger artists refuse to learn or develop traditional modes of visual expression such as figurative painting, for instance? Does the collective imagination of our culture suffer when potentially fruitful means of visualization die off because of the overwhelming imperative to discover the next unforeseen thing? Is an ingenious but fleetingly amusing pun like Christian Marclay's *Tape Fall*—a tape recorder installed in a stairwell that plays the sound of trickling water as its tape spills down to a pile below—worth the loss of visionary metaphors that might be realized in abstract or representational painting or sculpture? This year's Biennial does not specifically address such questions, but they are hard to avoid, given the structure and content of the exhibition. And although it is an entertaining show, it is regrettable that its underlying criteria, biases and mythic beliefs were not explicitly scrutinized or acknowledged in any substantial way.<sup>4</sup> It is hard to avoid concluding that this Biennial has unconsciously embraced rather than deeply pondered the juvenilization of contemporary culture. □

1. The Whitney curators are Richard Armstrong, Richard Marshall, Lisa Phillips and film and video curator John G. Hanhardt. The seven-member advisory committee included: Cheryl Chisholm, director, Atlanta Third World Film Festival; Dana Friis-Hansen, former curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Mass.; Susanne Ghez, director, Renaissance Society, University of Chicago; Kellie Jones, former visual arts director, Jamaica Arts Center, Jamaica, New York, and U.S. commissioner to the 20th São Paulo Biennial (1989); Lawrence Rinder, MATRIX curator, University Art Museum, Berkeley; Cesar Trasobares, former executive director, Metro-Dade Art in Public Places, Miami; and Marilyn Zeitlin, director, Washington (D.C.) Project for the Arts and former curator, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

2. Not discussed here are the Biennial's 34 video or film artists [this section of the show will be covered in a forthcoming issue]. Their works, according to curator John G. Hanhardt's catalogue essay, "illustrate the reflections of contemporary artists on a number of important issues in our society, ranging from feminism to the representation of cultures."

3. Unless otherwise noted, artists mentioned live and work in New York.

4. The only catalogue essay besides Hanhardt's that is not just perfunctory is Lisa Phillips's, which, rather than discussing the art work in the show, gives a tiresome account of the various funding and censorship controversies of the past couple of years. Phillips's essay is less history or thoughtful analysis than them-against-us polemic.

*The Biennial opened in stages but was officially inaugurated as a whole on Apr. 18; the last day to see it in its entirety will be June 16, although certain sections will be on view until June 30.*

Author: Ken Johnson is a free-lance critic and an art historian.



*Above, Rebecca Purdum: Footnote and Fumbling, 1990, oil on canvas, 108 inches square. Courtesy Jack Tilton Gallery.*

*Below, installation view of Rona Pondick's Seat (left) and Chairman (right), both 1990, with three works by Glenn Ligon, all 1990, on wall behind. Photo Geoffrey Clements.*

