

"Lapiz International Art Magazine"
No 80 (October 1991)

Having a Ball, Wish You Were Here

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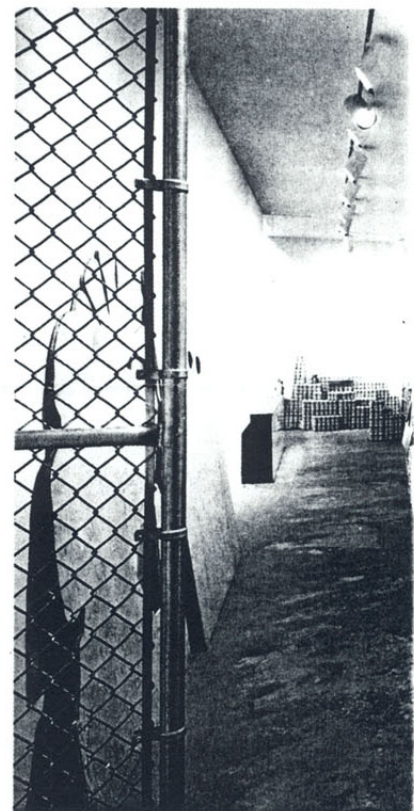
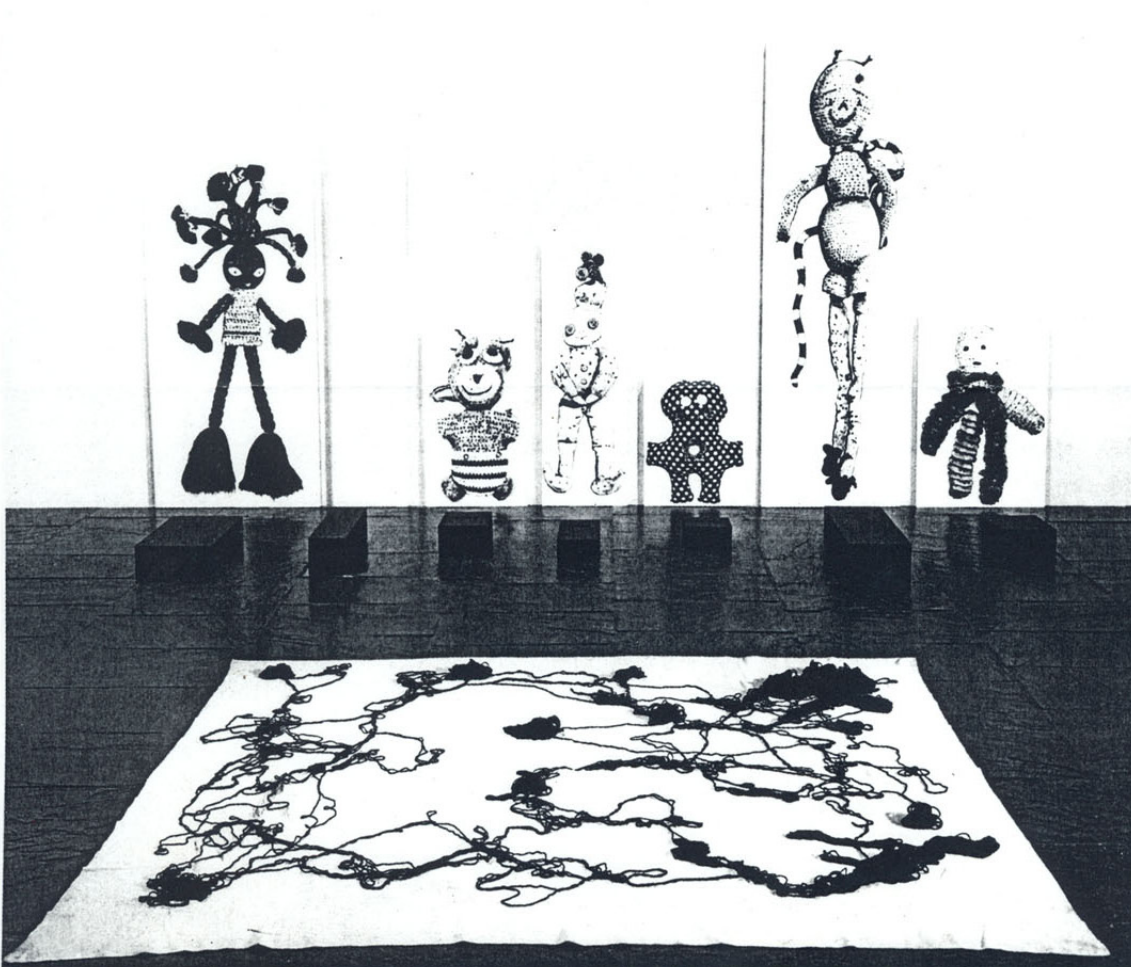
Without question, the best artwork in the 1991 Whitney Biennial is Jennie Livingston's 1990 film *Paris Is Burning*. While most of the visual art world only murmurs (or panics) about the reactionary acts of exclusion which typically stifle creative expressions of sexual difference and multiculturalism, Livingston has gone out and actually done something about the problem, making a film that looks hard at the transvestite subculture-within-a-subculture that is alive and well in Harlem. Usually such outside scrutiny leads to manipulation not unlike

that found in strategies for corporate raiding—the artist reinvigorates his or her own practice by stealing energy from other cultural practitioners who have no power to speak for themselves and take the credit. Livingston, however, has created a true masterpiece that empowers her subjects as much as it empowers the film-maker, all of which now find themselves to be at the center of a significant and well-deserved amount of attention. The remainder of the Biennial finds itself in the long shadow of this fantastic piece of work.

What else of value is in this Biennial? Is it a «provocative and

useful overview of American art today», as Director David Ross puts it in his foreword to the catalogue? Probably, although the exhibition still suffers from its all-too-obvious pandering to particular New York galleries, despite the fact that there was a concerted effort to extend the exhibition beyond New York (by way of a national advisory committee whose purpose was to bring unknown work to the attention of curators Richard Armstrong, John G. Hanhardt, Richard Marshall, and Lisa Phillips). There is a substantial amount of good work in all sections of the Biennial, which has been divided by generation for the Painting,

Sculpture, and Photography category. Second Floor: artists who gained recognition in the 1950s and 1960s, Third Floor: the 1970s and 1980s, and Fourth Floor: artists who had their first shows in the late '80s and have never before been in a Whitney Biennial exhibition. The idea to show work from artists at different stages in their careers is a good one; however, the exhibition would have made better use of such diversity by mixing all of the artists together instead of separating them according to the dates of their births. For example, imagine a room containing Jasper Johns's recent paintings of disembodied facial fea-



Left: Mike Kelley, «Untitled», 1990, mixed media. Above, Cady Noland, «This piece has no title yet», 1989.

tures in juxtaposition with Robert Gober's cast wax hybrid body fragments and Lorna Simpson's photographs of African-American identity restrained by societal pressures, and you immediately sense that the exhibition has missed its opportunity to be substantially more interesting. What we are left with instead is a Biennial that seems to willingly expose the arbitrary nature of its selections, making the situation worse by being so didactic about them.

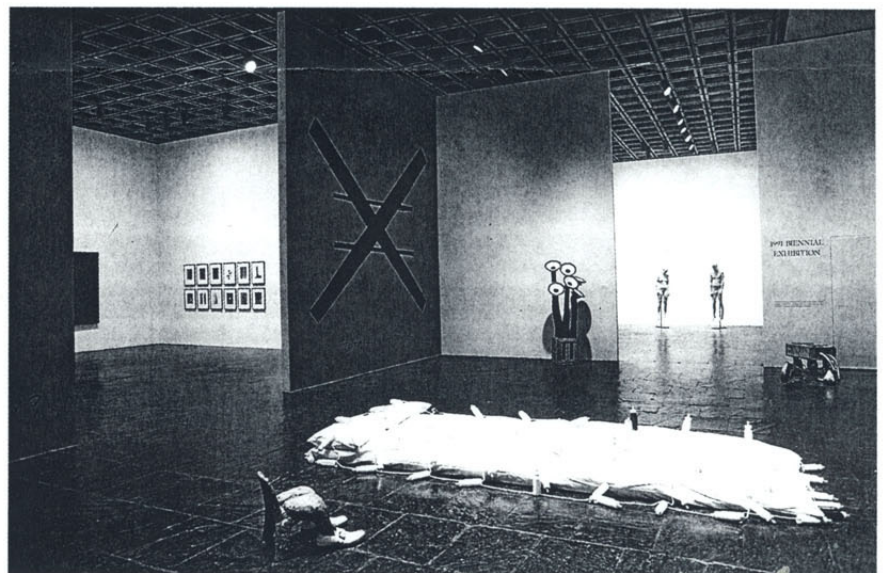
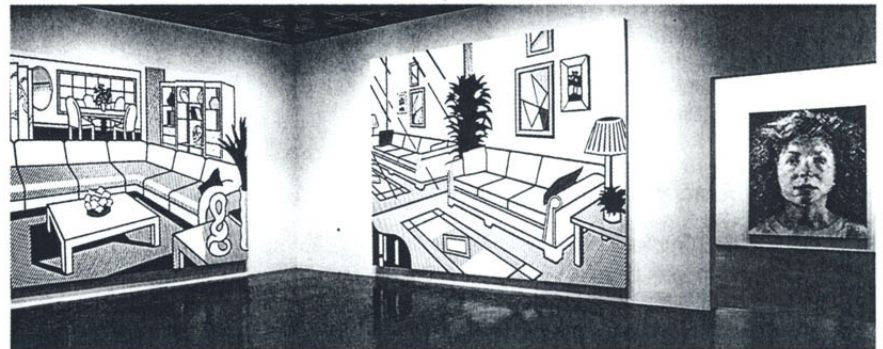
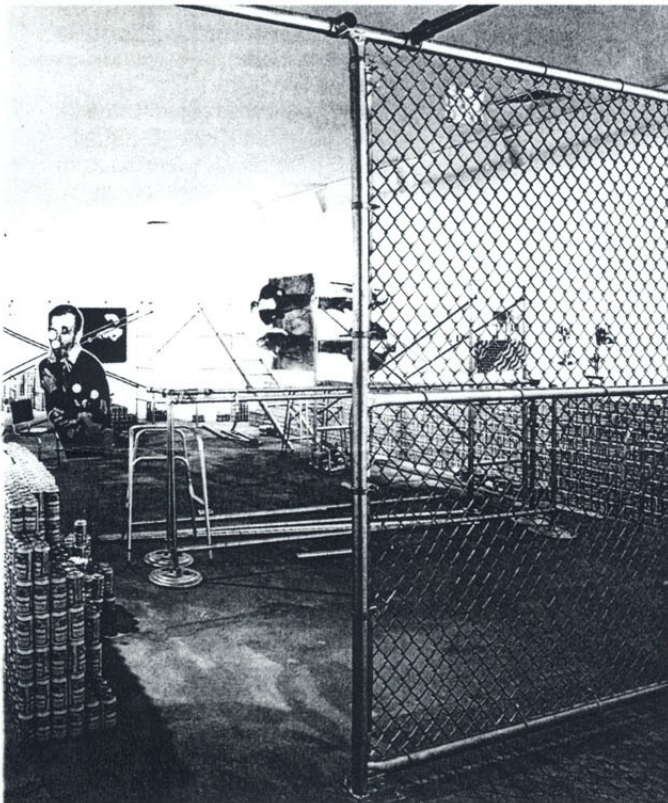
The second floor of the Biennial attempts to present the old favorites of American art as «masters»: Chuck Close, John Coplans, Joseph Glasco, Jasper Johns, Alex

Katz, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Joan Mitchell, Ed Moses, Bruce Nauman, Philip Pearlstein, Robert Rauschenberg, Pat Steir, Frank Stella, and Cy Twombly. You have no problem believing that you're in a museum on this floor—most everything is big, and if not it is given a lot of space to make it look important. Roy Lichtenstein's large canvases of home interiors are the best paintings in the Biennial—fresh, clear and smart—but such a claim does not say much because most of the painting in the exhibition is dismal, almost as if the curators truly believe that if they ignore good painting (especially abstract painting), it will

disappear (they seem to have been particularly misrepresentational with their choices for the young artist category). Bruce Nauman's video installation *Raw Material-«MMMM»* (1990), which depicts the artist's head spinning as he hums to himself, eyes closed to the eyesores around him, symbolizes the entire show. Robert Rauschenberg is represented by unusually poor assemblages, and Pat Steir by typically poor paintings. Finally, along with Nauman's video, John Coplan's fractured photographs of his body literally prefigure what's to come in the remainder of the exhibition, as issues of the body in an increasingly

threatened culture become more self-evident as the artists get younger.

Those artists who could be considered «mid-career» are on the third floor: Vito Acconci, Jennifer Bartlett, Carroll Dunham, Eric Fischl, Bill Fontana, Robert Gober, Peter Halley, Keith Haring, Roni Horn, Luis Jiménez, Mike Kelley, Louise Lawler, Donald Lipski, David McDermott & Peter McGough, Richard Misrach, Elizabeth Murray, Ellen Phelan, Allen Ruppersberg, David Salle, Joseph Santore, Thomas Lanigan Schmidt, Julian Schnabel, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Philip Taaffe, and



Above Right: Roy Lichtenstein and Chuck Close, 1991.
Right: a view of works by J. Diamond, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., R. Pondick, A. Rath and Kiki Smith.

Mark Tansey. This floor reads like part museum, part gallery: conservative installations of frequently provocative works, much of it very good. This floor also sports the best room and the worst room. The best: Carroll Dunham's candy-colored paintings of bulbous, wonderfully stupid forms; Mike Kelley's series *Empathy Displacement: Humanoid Morphology* (2nd and 3rd Remove), 1990, of dolls in little black caskets with paintings of their perverse bodies leaning against the wall, and his *Untitled* (1990) drawing using black yarn on a white blanket; and Cindy Sherman's wicked and art historically-aware photographs. The worst, by far, contains two of Keith Haring's weakest paintings (once again, this seems deliberate considering this Biennial's fear of the medium), Luis Jiménez's tacky, outsized, politically suspect fiberglass sculptures, and Thomas Schmidt's disco lounge glittering collages—one really wonders if the curators were trying to be funny and cruel. Peter Halley's paintings are the best ones on the floor, and Robert Gober's body sculptures (along with Mike Kelley) extend the discussion of the body begun by Coplans and Nauman, a dialogue that turns cacophonous on the top floor.

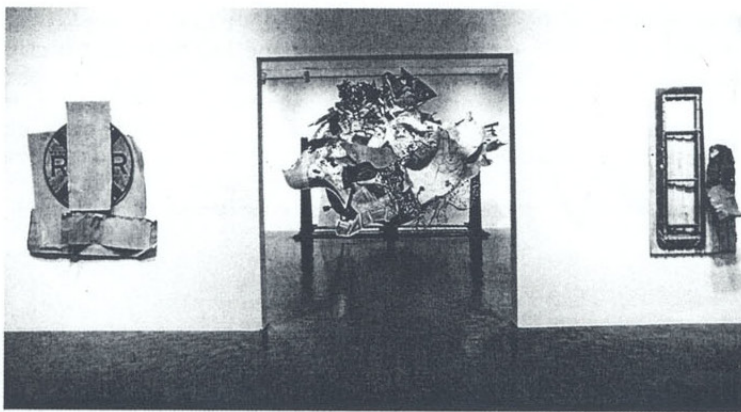
The «kids» take over the fourth floor: Carlos Alfonzo, Nayland Blake, Jessica Diamond, Jeanne Dunning, Dawn Fryling, Adam Fuss, Félix González-Torres, Gary Hill, Wendy Jacob, Larry Johnson, Mary Kelly, Glenn Ligon, Sally Mann, Christian Marclay, John Miller, Celia Álvarez Muñoz, Cady Noland, Rona Pondick, Rebecca Purdum, Alan Rath, Tim Rollins + K.O.S., Jim Shaw, Lorna Simpson, Kiki Smith, Philip Smith, Jessica Stockholder, Alex Webb, Carrie Mae Weems, and David Wojnarowicz. This floor looks very little like a museum, installed more like a playground often made to be politically-correct. Much of the work is installation-oriented: Cady Noland's stacks of beer cans and various types of metal hardware as

well as Dawn Fryling's blinding halide lights and empty frames are each given their own rooms because of the adolescent nature of the work—if you are obnoxious enough, you're given a lot of space. Félix González Torres's and Rona Pondick's installations are more elegant and thought-provoking in their dif-

ferent approaches to the minimalist legacy, both of which reinvest the movement's formal conventions with socially powerful content, while Jessica Stockholder's enormous stage-like construction is just plain formal, no matter how theatrical it tries to be. Larry Johnson's photographs of cartoon landscapes effec-

tively redirect appropriation and text-based visual practices into issues of sexual difference and orchestrated sincerity, as well as into issues of painting, which is blatantly maligned on this floor—Rebecca Purdum's canvases, for example, are not indicative of the best American abstract painting being made by members of this emerging generation. By now, the body (as a politicized entity) has forcefully re-entered the exhibition, not only in Pondick's work, but also in Nayland Blake's objects and Kiki Smith's sculptures, and most impressively in the photographs of children-playing-grown-ups by Sally Mann, who is the major discovery of the exhibition, even though her name has been in the news because of recent attempts to censor her work.

Installed in the lobby gallery of the museum, Group Material's (Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Félix González-Torres, Karen Ramspacher) *AIDS Timeline* effectively brings the entire Biennial back to some of the most important concerns of today. Like *Paris Is Burning*, this installation makes its point without losing its necessarily visual impact. Ultimately, this Whitney Biennial should be remembered not for the bad work, or for its all-too-obvious playing of art world politics, but instead for its presentation of a significant amount of work which is successful in its mixture of visual form with specific political content, creating situations which themselves are not didactic but empowering. ■



Top, an installation by R. Rauschenberg and Frank Stella. Below, «AIDS Timeline», by Group Material, 1991.