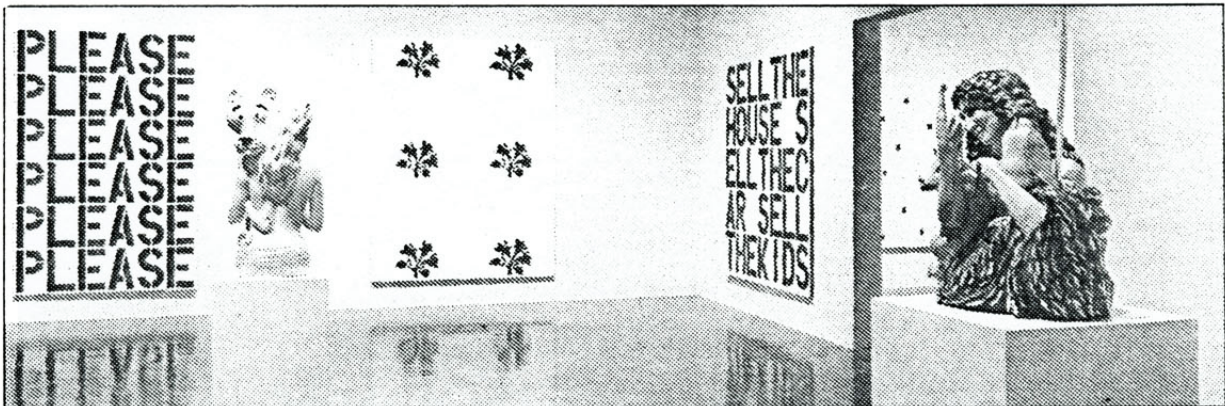


The New York Times

Arts & Leisure

A Remembrance of Whitney Biennials Past



Geoffrey Clements/Whitney Museum of American Art

Paintings by Christopher Wool, sculptures by Jeff Koons at the 1989 biennial—A dip in reputation.

BY ROBERTA SMITH

IT MAY BE THE EXHIBITION THAT NEW YORK loves to hate, but the world would be a duller place without the Whitney Biennial to kick around every two years. This informative, if hardly infallible, barometer of contemporary art has been part of the scene since 1932; its latest incarnation, which will include 80 artists, will arrive on Thursday.

Over the years, the biennial has undergone major and minor adjustments. For the first decade, the artists invited selected their own works for the show, until it was noticed that instead of choosing their best efforts they sometimes sent pieces that were for sale. Beginning in 1937, the museum held two annuals a year — painting in the fall, and sculpture and other media in the spring. Not surprisingly, the exhibition became a regular event for

many American artists: Georgia O'Keeffe was in 22, Charles Sheeler in 29 and Raphael Soyer, maybe the record-holder, was in 38.

In 1959, the museum slowed its pace a bit, alternating between painting and sculpture each year. Then, in 1973, the shows were consolidated into a single every-other-year exhibition, and the Whitney Biennial as we know it began to take shape.

Not that that shape has been constant. In a perpetual process of self-correction and revision, the show continues to be re-formed, re-thought and re-focused. In the 1970's it was fairly low-key, an exhibition by which the art world took stock of itself. But with the thriving art market and dueling megatrends of the 1980's, it became increasingly ambitious and, thanks to the growth of installation art, physically elaborate, if not overbearing. Needless to say, it also metamorphosed into a major media event,

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ART VIEW

Biennials Past: From Blue Chip to Subversive

1977: Welcome to the 70's

The response to this biennial, which focuses on "artists who had their first decisive influence in the 1970's," is less unanimously negative. In *The New York Times*, Hilton Kramer's review carries the headline: "This Whitney Biennial Is as Boring as Ever." But in *New York* magazine, Thomas B. Hess calls it "the best of its kind . . . at least since 1946." (That was the year Jackson Pollock made his Whitney debut.) The show shrinks to 2 floors, 40 artists and 17 video artists. It is again a youngish show: 40 of the 57 artists are under 40.

In the catalogue, the curators proffer essays justifying their selections, while the show itself attempts a loose and partial map of burgeoning reputations and trends of the 70's. From the Minimal-Conceptual-Installation Art nexus, there is Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, Mel Bochner, Dorothea Rockburne, Vito Acconci and Barry Le Va. In opposition is the more accessible, touchy-feely strains of semi-representation that will culminate in the museum's "New Image Painting" show in 1979 — exemplified by Nicholas Africano, Joe Zucker, Elizabeth Murray, Jennifer Bartlett, Ree Morton and Joel Shapiro. Photo Realism gets a nod (Richard Estes, Chuck Close), as does photography (Duane Michals, Lewis Baltz).

Correcting the sins of the 1975 biennial, the few artists from outside New York, among them John Baldessari, Vija Celmins, Chris Burden, Jim Nutt and Joan Brown, have sizable reputations. Lawrence Alloway complains that the majority of artists are represented by a handful of New York galleries.

1979: The 70's, Only More So

The biennial gets big again, or at least bigger, expanding to 88 artists. It recapitulates many of the trends of the previous biennial, only with more and somewhat different names. The representation of women, 33 percent, is unusually high as biennials go. New Image is now a force, as is Pattern painting, represented here by Kim MacConnel, Rodney Ripps and Joyce Kozloff. Martin Puryear and Susan Rothenberg are newcomers. Nobody ventures explanatory essays in the catalogue this time.

The 67-year-old painter Philip Guston, whose new figurative style is exerting a growing influence on younger artists, makes his first appearance since 1966. Also present are established artists like Lucas Samaras, Alex Katz, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein and Philip Pearlstein. In some ways this show establishes a mixture of hip and blue chip that will inform many subsequent biennials.

The collectors Donald and Mira Rubell, dismayed that the museum tends to serve hot dogs and bad wine at biennial openings, hold the first of their post-opening parties in their Upper East Side brownstone.

1981: This Time They Really Mean It

Yet again the biennial reprises the basic styles of the 70's, using the entire museum to showcase 115 artists. The show emphasizes painting and, consequently, has an unusually spacious look. In an innovation that will never be repeated, outdoor installations

garnering admiration, indifference and outrage — especially outrage. Here is a rundown of the highlights of the last 20 years.

1973: Together Again

The Whitney puts it all together, combining painting and sculpture annuals into one big ur-biennial that fills all five floors of its seven-year-old Marcel Breuer building on Madison Avenue at 75th Street. With 221 painters and sculptors, of which nearly 70 are biennial first-timers, the show is two to three times the size of future biennials.

A number of critics make a point of mentioning the show's pluralism, as if 221 artists could be anything but diverse. It is neither hated nor loved, although Lawrence Alloway observes in *The Nation* that "the mixture seems more than twice as bad as when the two media were shown apart." The selection ranges through several generations, embracing older, established artists like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Nevelson, Joan Mitchell, Milton Resnick and Robert Motherwell, but also relative youngsters like Elizabeth Murray, Harriet Korman, Louise Fishman, Peter Campus, Terry Allen and Barbara Kruger (who at this point in her career practices a form of early Pattern painting).

A sign of the future is an installation piece that seems to lay siege to the museum. Rafael Ferrer's "Fuegian House With Harpy Eagle," which is mentioned in nearly every review, consists of a teepee, piles of leaves and, when it's cold enough, cakes of ice. It commandeers the pedestrian bridge at the museum's front door. A sign of the past is the modest catalogue, which offers no essay, reproduces work by only 61 of the artists, and lists each artist's address for the convenience of collectors.

1975: Are You Experienced?

In an attempt to make the show more independent of the New York art scene and market, the Whitney curators try something completely different: this biennial includes only artists who have never been in a Whitney biennial (or annual) or who have not had a solo show in New York in the past decade. In the kindest review, in *Art in America*, Amy Goldin dubs it "The Virgins' Show," but it is otherwise widely disliked.

Again the whole museum is filled, this time with the work of 147 artists, many from out of town. It includes 18 working in video, also a biennial first. The artists' average age is just under 30. The artists' addresses disappear from the catalogue, ending a 40-year tradition, but they all get photographs. Critic after critic points out that while the artists are unfamiliar, their work is not: much of it consists of weak imitations of more famous colleagues. (There are lots of Brice Marden look-alikes, for example.)

Among the adjectives critics used to describe the show: "indulgent," "well-meaning," "muddle-headed," "frustrating," "uninspired," "disappointing," "dull." Emily Genauer's review in *Newsday* appeared under the scolding headline "Boring, Childish, Awful." Many "virgins" are never heard from again; others become quite experienced, including Robin Winters, Ross Bleckner, Kim MacConnel, Scott Burton, Andrew Spence, Earle Staley, Charles Simonds, Alexis Smith, Judy Rifka, Allan McCollum, David Reed and Judy Pfaff.

by nine sculptors are shown on a slide projector, leading one critic to wonder if the entire exhibition might not be presented in slide form.

Hilton Kramer finds the show "extremely boring" and "occasionally repulsive." In *New York* magazine, Kay Larson calls it "safely gold-plated." In fact, it is the first biennial to have a corporate sponsor, the American Can Company.

Although artists like Joel Shapiro, Jennifer Bartlett, Elizabeth Murray and Richard Serra are by now old biennial hands, some first-timers, like Julian Schnabel, Jedd Garet, Robert Mapplethorpe and Robert Wilson, hint of things to come.

1983: O.K., the 70's Are Over

Basically, this is the end-of-pluralism, beginning-of-Neo-Expressionism biennial, the one that introduces the new, often figurative painting of the 80's. It is also the first seriously multimedia biennial: its 36 painters, sculptors and photographers are balanced by 35 artists in film, video and installation. And it is unusually well liked, with Kay Larson calling it "the best I've ever seen."

It's a youthful show, with more than half the artists in their 20's or 30's and represented for the first time. Among them are many soon-to-be-big names of the 80's: Jean Michel Basquiat, Eric Fischl, David Salle, Robert Longo, Keith Haring, Jenny Holzer, Mark Tansey and Cindy Sherman. Barbara Kruger is back, this time as a photographer. As a sign of the shift toward figurative images and politics, the painter Leon Golub is in his first biennial since 1955.

1985: Where the Wild Things Are

The most widely disliked biennial since 1975, this show legitimizes the East Village art scene and is consistently regarded as a childish free-for-all, characterized by garish installations. That's not the whole story, but the only eminences in sight are Jasper Johns, Donald Judd and Bruce Nauman.

The show anoints Pictures Art, photo-fluent and socially critical, with Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger being joined by Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, James Casebere, Sarah Charlesworth and Laurie Simmons.

Other artists making their biennial debuts are East Village denizens like David Wojnarowicz, Kenny Scharf (whose relentlessly attacked installation turns the second-floor telephone booths and restrooms into a fluorescent jungle), Tom Otterness (whose frieze of small copulating figures also elicits wide comment), Todt and Rodney Alan Greenblat (who also contribute elaborate set pieces).

In *Time* magazine, Robert Hughes calls the show "the worst in living memory," while Kim Levin in *The Village Voice* labels it "a compendium of the safe, the predictable, the already seen."

**1987:
Pop Goes the Simulacrum**

This biennial anoints Neo-Geo, with Jeff Koons, Peter Halley, Philip Taaffe, Annette Lemieux and Nancy Dwyer among the artists making their debuts. In so doing, it recognizes the new penchant for operating in the gap between Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual Art. Perhaps in honor of the interest in appropriation, the catalogue has an imitation plywood-print cover; it also has color reproductions for the first time. The show has the dubious distinction of putting the Sarn Twins on the map and the images of the fashion photographer Bruce Weber on the wall.

Many critics take retroactive potshots at the 1985 biennial and especially at poor Kenny Scharf, but they tend to like the show. "The 1987 Whitney Biennial has learned a little discretion," writes Kay Larson, while Robert Hughes says that "the 1987 version is in some ways among the best." The Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous watchdog group of art-world women, take exception to the fact that only 24 percent of the show's artists are women. Their retort is "The Guerrilla Girls Review the Whitney," a show at a downtown alternative space called the Clocktower, that features big charts and graphs tracing the percentages of nonwhite artists and women in biennials since 1973.

**1989:
Almost Like a Virgin**

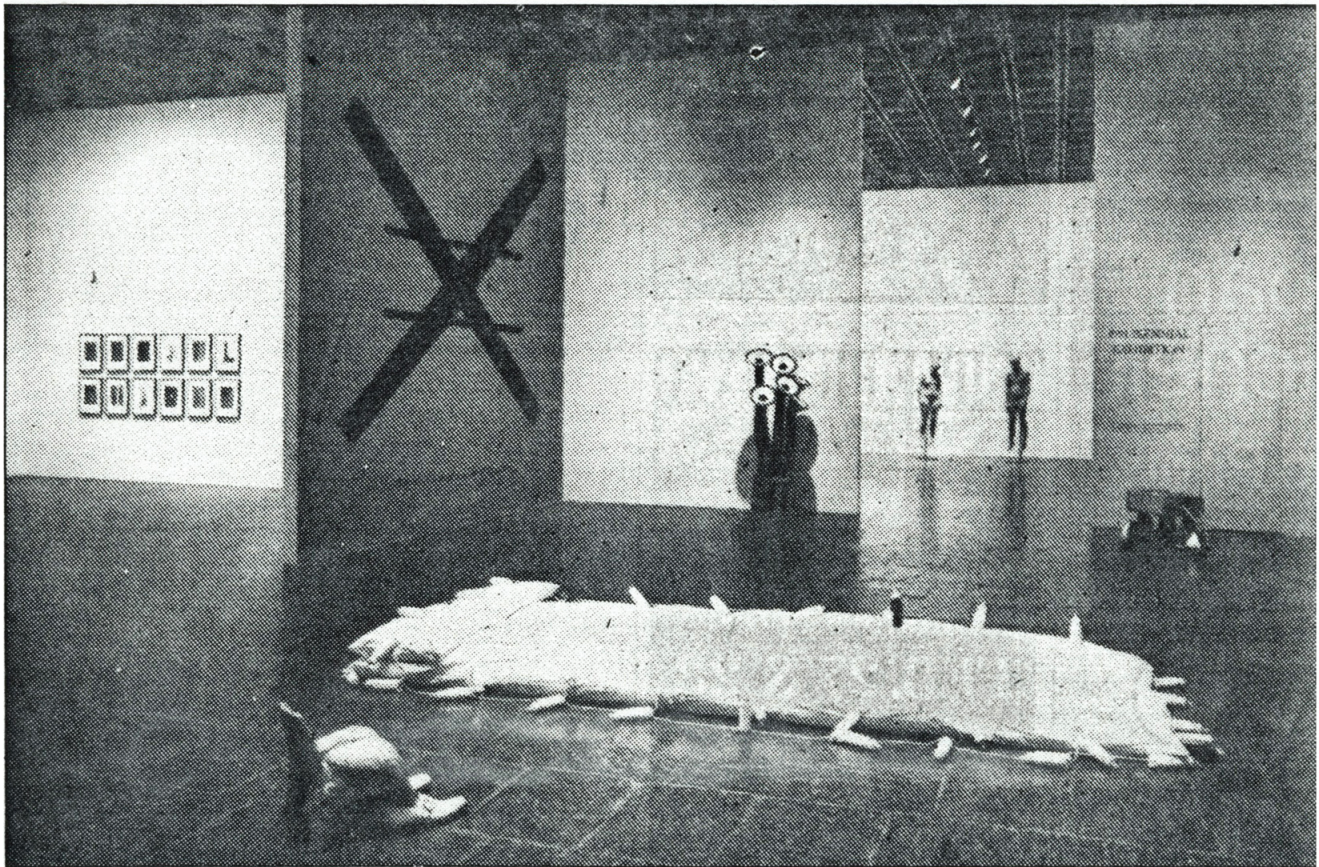
The biennial's reputation takes another dip with this quiet show, in which the museum tries to stake out new territory and make up for past oversights. Nearly 40 percent of the 76 artists are women and approximately two-thirds are new to the biennial, including Donald Baechler, Martha Diamond, Meg Webster, Matt Mullican, Mark Innerst and Ashley Bickerton. But the show's chief distinction is to introduce the work of Robert Gober, Mike Kelley and Liz Larner, whose efforts eschew the hard machine-made look of much Neo-Geo and frequently evoke the body.

For the first time, the catalogue cover is designed by an artist, Christopher Wool, who specializes in stenciled lettering. Its stark black-on-white design signals an undernourished presentation, riddled with colorless art. "The patient is dangerously pale and thin," writes Kay Larson, while an unsigned review in *The New Yorker* states that "not since the early 1970's has contemporary American art looked so pale."

**1991:
Sobering Up for the 90's**

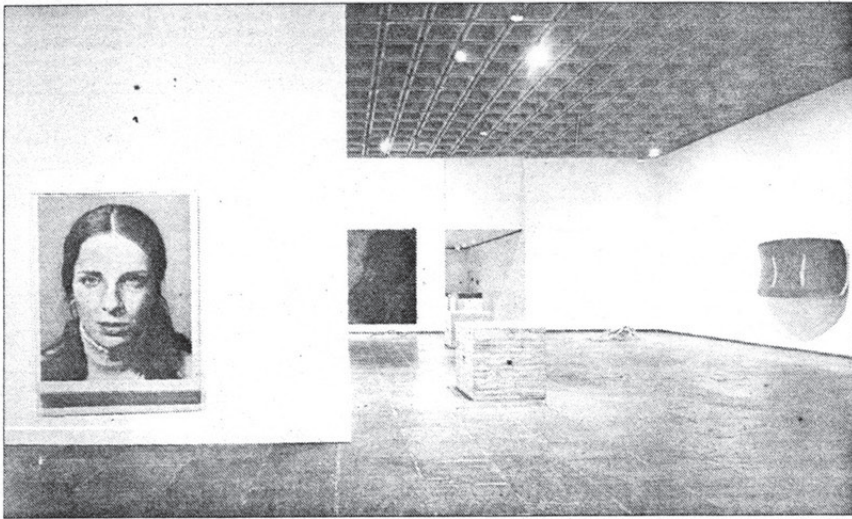
At the start of the "we're sorry" decade, the Whitney returns to the size and breadth of biennials past, giving older artists their due while also embracing more completely the new political and esthetic subversiveness among younger ones. The exhibition swells once again to more than 100 artists and fills the entire museum. All generations are welcomed. Back once more are old hands like Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein and Philip Pearlstein, who haven't seen the inside of a biennial in 10 years or more. Not only that, each generation — old hands, youngish hands and new hands — has a separate floor, a tactic that is not universally appreciated. The catalogue, with 392 pages and weighing three pounds, is the biggest ever.

As if to distance itself from 1989, 1991 has the lowest rate of repeaters: only Mike Kelley and Robert Gober are asked back from the preceding biennial, and they function as presiding influences for the "kids' floor." Here the first-timers include Kiki Smith, Jessica Diamond, Rona Pondick, Cady Noland, Glenn Ligon and Nayland Blake. References to race, sexuality, AIDS and the body are prevalent; dispersed installation pieces known as scatter art are acknowledged; and the anti-esthetic of ugly art and pure thoughts begins. □



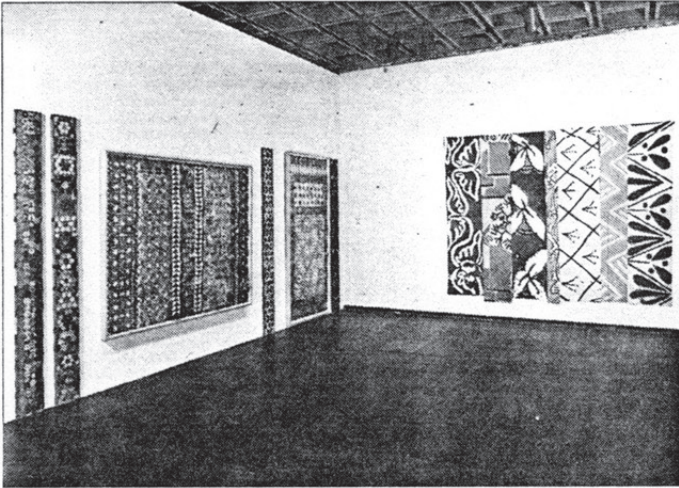
Geoffrey Clements/Whitney Museum of American Art

1991 A Jessica Diamond wall drawing and two Rona Pondick sculptures, foreground—Segregation by age.



Eeva-Inkeri

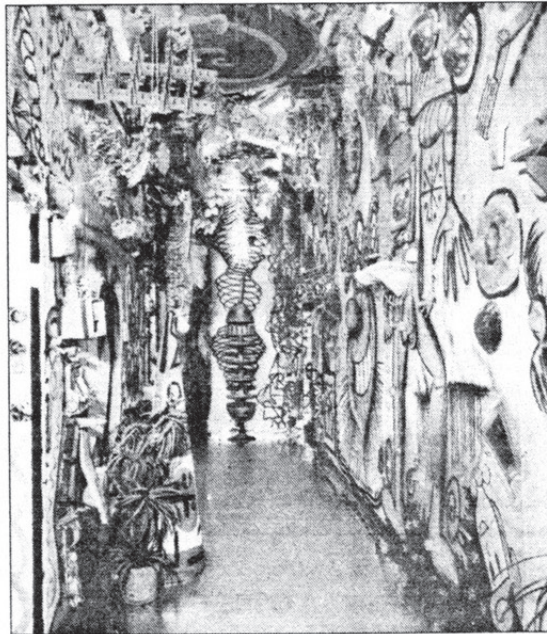
1977 Paintings by Chuck Close, left, and Ron Gorchov, right—The best in 30 years or as boring as ever?



Roy M. Eikind

1979 *New Image* is now a force, as is *Pattern painting*, exemplified in the work of Joyce Kozloff, on left wall, and Kim MacConnel.

1985 Kenny Scharf's relentlessly attacked installation turns the second-floor telephone booths and restrooms into a fluorescent jungle.



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