Cottingham, Laura. "The Pleasure Principled." *Frieze* 10 (May 1993): 10–15.

The reception of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, the so-called 'politically correct' or 'multicultural' biennial has been characterised by a consistent and familiar refrain. Although sung in different keys, around sometimes divergent stanzas, the negative chorus goes something like this:
'There's no beauty!', 'There's no pleasure!', 'Where's the painting?'

the pleasure principled

Laura Cottingham

'THERE'S NO BEAUTY!'

By the early 20th century, the question 'what is beauty?', although employed as the criterion for judgement at the first Miss America Pageant in 1920, had otherwise been dislodged from its place at the centre of Western aesthetics, and replaced by the question 'what is art?' But if 'beauty' and its cousin 'pleasure' are the forsaken ancestors we're to exhume from antiquity to seat at the table of 20th century art, then let them judge the work of Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp first. If Plato, Burke and Ruskin are the critics of the day, they should begin their dialogue on Duchamp's urinal and leave the present to those of us who are already here.

'WHERE'S THE PAINTING?'

But one might just forget about attempting to distinguish beauty from pleasure, or what is meant by either, because when these words are bandied about by art critics in *fin de siècle* America, what they usually mean is p-a-i-n-t-i-n-g. Because a painting is an object, it is somewhat easier to define than beauty or pleasure: it refers to pigment, preferably oil-based, on a surface, usually stretched canvas. Since the 60s, painting is always on a deathbed somewhere and invariably accompanied by anxious attendants crying out against the persistent death rattle. Painting's friends seem forever rehearsing the tragedy of his demise: it is as if painting is never healthy enough, can never be healthy enough, as if painting must be made God, immortal, never to leave this life. So that eight painters in the 67th Whitney Biennial – Ida Applebroog, Peter Cain, Byron Kim, Suzanne McClelland, Lari Pittman, Nancy Spero, Sue Williams and Kevin Wolf – are not enough evidence of the medium's robust health. Most reviews of the show have concurred with the claim put forth in *The New York Times*, that the Biennial 'neglects painting.' [2]

Is it possible that those of us who remain cold to painting's supposed peril live under the assumption that we have something to gain from his demise? What could it be that we think we stand to inherit?

'WHERE'S THE PLEASURE?'

The search for 'pleasure' seems related, if not identical to the search for 'beauty', although pleasure embodies 20th century, post-structural allusions, especially to Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, that 'beauty' doesn't. So when *The New York Times* observes that 'clearly *pleasure* is not what the '93 Biennial had uppermost in mind', they are referring to a kind of French-informed *jouissance.*[1] Barthes is perhaps more relevant here than one might at first assume: it was he who, in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) delicately trounced the aesthetic theory put forth by Sartre, who had called for *écriture engagé*, that is, socially engaged writing. Since Barthes, other cries for *jouissance* from France have been imported into the United States as steadily as Chanel and Hermes, and to serve the same customers. This has very much inhibited the recent struggle of American artists for *l'art engagé*, a political art. This concern for *pleasure* assumes that an art experience should be judged according to its ability to produce a sensation similar to that of fresh raspberries on the tongue, fields of flowers for the eyes, or a lover's touch. Even as the current Matisse retrospective makes the rounds of world class museums, waving the flag for an art that, in Matisse's own words, 'provides comfort to the weary businessman at the end of his day', there is another tradition, as old as that of Matisse, that situates art away from the easy chair, the quotidian details of comfort, and the political and visual gaze of the businessman.

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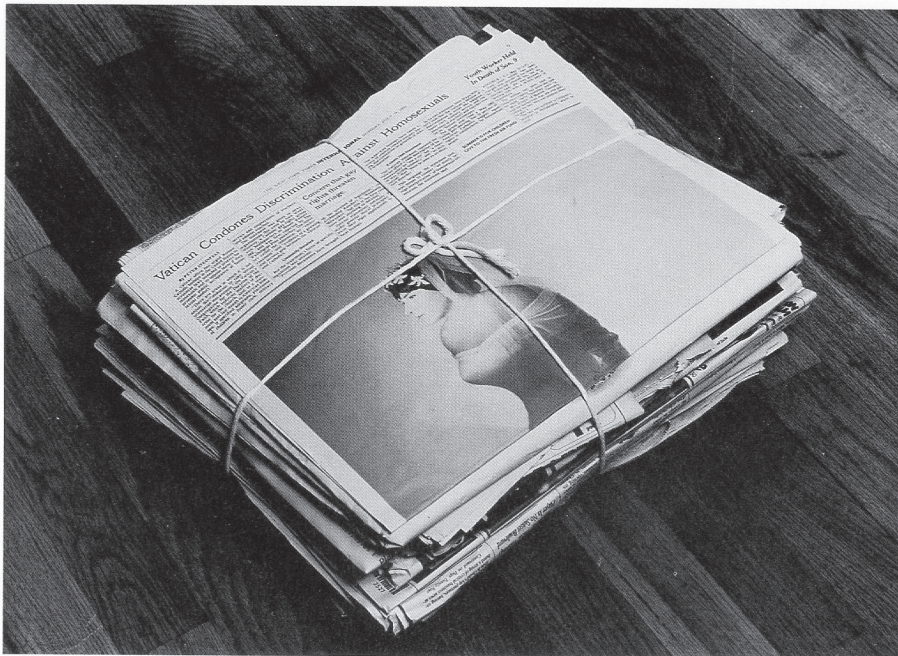

Robert Gober Newspaper 1992
Edition of 10, photo-litho on paper and twine

WHAT'S THERE ANYWAY?

Perhaps the most significant and potentially influential decision made by the curators of this Biennial was to move media works to the physical and aesthetic centre of the exhibition. For the first time, two video galleries, on the third and fourth floors, have been added to extend the viewing possibilities beyond those of the Whitney's permanent film gallery on the second floor. Unfortunately, the exhibition schedule is limited to specific days and times; one would have to visit the museum approximately 20, precisely-chosen, times to have access to all 35 of the media works. It would be preferable if viewers could pick and choose from the selections instead of being restricted to the institution's timetable. Maybe the Whitney should consider setting up a video lending library; even in New York City, only a handful of video stores offer any independent tapes.

It's certainly time that contemporary art museums began to situate themselves according to the cultural parameters of the present, instead of those of the 19th century - although it's still unclear if the system of galleries, collectors and museums could ever become capable of financially sustaining independent film and video work in any way similar to the way they currently support 'fine art'. Certainly the growth of independent film and video requires an economic apparatus other than the overly-determined commercial sites of Hollywood and advertising. But can Soho and 57th Street do for the filmmaker what they have the potential to do for the painter? The obstacle is obvious: 'Film and video are products of mass production. Galleries and museums are exclusive and place a premium on originality. Their economies demand high prices and few sales. Film and video are the opposite of that.' [3]

The video and film selections in this exhibition are generally exceptional, including Mark Rappaport's *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (1992), a hilarious deconstruction of the (gay) actor's hetero-sexual role-playing across 30 years of Hollywood film; Julie Dash's lyrical narrative of an African-American family history, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991); Sadie Benning's wry and ridiculous lesbian 'romance', *It Wasn't Love* (1992), and Robbie McCauley's *Mississippi Freedom* (1992); an oral history and dramatic account of Black civil rights activities. A number of works will premiere for the first time during the run of the Biennial, including *Double Blind* by Sophie Calle and Greg Shephard, *The Potluck and the Passion* by Cheryl Dunye; *March/April/May* by Ernie Gehr; and Lourdes Portillo's *Columbus on Trial.*

Like the other works on view, the film and video selections were drawn from work completed or shown during the last two years, by American artists, with a curatorial emphasis on works that 'confront such dominant current issues as class, race, gender, sexuality and the family.' [4] Most of the New York attacks on this exhibition take issue with this premise – although usually the critic is sophisticated and dishonest enough to couch his disdain within a humanistic concern for art and to claim that 'bad art', not 'good politics' is his enemy. As usual, there has been a kind of hyperbolic condemnation indicating that the critic has chosen not to view the art, but to condemn all the selected works in one angry fell swoop. According to *The New Yorker* for instance, the Biennial 'combines the excitement of a seminar at The New School with the charm of re-education camp'; if you read *New York Magazine*, it's 'one extended exhibitionist frenzy of victimisation and self-pity'. [5]

Among the works assembled in the galleries there is, as there is with every Whitney Biennial, a range of efforts that come off with varying degrees of success. Because the six curators chose to emphasise young work, the kind of solidity, confidence and (yes) production quality one can expect from mid-career artists is not consistently evident. [6] Still, in terms of documenting both the kinds of aesthetic investigations and types of formal and technical concerns current in contemporary American art, the selection is thoughtful, if not consistently inspired. The most serious curatorial mistake seems to lie in precisely which mid-career artists *are* included. Given that a commitment to social engagement is the active parameter at play, it seems that artists such as Adrian Piper, Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Jenny Holzer, Louise Lawler, Sue Coe and Martha Rosler might have served as better anchors for this premise than Chris Burden, Mike Kelley and Cindy Sherman.

Because of the three film and video galleries, and because so many of artists have constructed installations, a tour of the Biennial is an excursion through a maze of different lighting, sounds and settings. Gary Hill's *Tall Ships* (1992), shown at Documenta IX, is perhaps the most technically sophisticated work in the show. In a narrow room devoid of light, visitors meet portrait-sized images of people whose dimensions and clarity fluctuate in response to the movements of the audience. In New York City the piece has a dimension of fear and anxiety that wasn't present in its Kassel incarnation: New Yorkers mistrust darkness. But after the initial trepidation, and the time it takes for the eyes to adjust to the faint elusive light, one's fright is transformed to contemplation of this cosy if high-tech rendition of a hall of mirrors, Plato's cave, or an ancestral family portrait gallery. One of the most common comments from viewers as they exit *Tall Ships* has been; 'It's like the Haunted House at Disneyland!' [7]

How Plato becomes Pop culture is the visual and political history of the United States; and this Biennial illustrates just how disjunctively and incompletely the present exists in both its mythical and material relationship to the past. For instance, in *Re: Claiming Egypt* (1993), Fred Wilson presents a mini-museum of Egyptology, self-consciously and humourously annotated to reveal some of the impulses behind colonialism, traditional museology, and the historical and psychic connections between contemporary African Americans and ancient Egypt. Busts of Nefertiti with varying skin hues line one wall, while across another, various pedestals present Egyptian sculptural reproductions posed on stacks of scholarly books. These Middle Kingdom period

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Pepón Osorio The Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?) 1993

repros are draped with popular contemporary T-shirts and necklaces of Afrocentric slogans and symbols. In one museum display case, an assortment of small, similar but not immediately recognisable artifacts are meticulously displayed for viewing. Each attached label carries but one word of descriptive ethno-historical information: 'Mine'. This confusingly clever designation suggests that a claim of ownership by either the colonised or the coloniser is specious: the coloniser can't claim to own what he steals but neither can the colonised claim to possess that which has been stolen. In one small claret-coloured room furnished like a 19th century British study, including decorative objects that Sotheby's might describe as fine examples of the Egyptian influence, the walls speak in British English, extolling, 'I want what you have', 'I want to define it', 'I want to get inside it', 'I want to overpower it.' Nearby, a video monitor plays a continuous loop of contemporary popularised Egyptology, including a grey-bearded white male academic recounting a PBS-style history, a children's cartoon set in the land of the Pyramids, and Michael Jackson's recent music video enacted in Egyptian style dress and dance movements. Jackson, whose supposed plastic surgery and skin colour lightening are almost as much a part of his public personae as his Superstar status, sings *Do You Remember the Time...?*; across the video terminal Wilson has draped a T-shirt that says: 'Just Call me Cleopatra, Queen of Denial.'

Other multi-media installations include Renée Green's hip-hop investigation, *Import/Export Funk Office*, (1992-93); Pepón Osario's video-invaded Latino household, *The Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)* (1993); Daniel Martinez's confusing *(Terms of Engagement)* (1993); Bruce Yonemoto, Norman Yonemoto, and Timothy Martin's meditation on Easter Island, *Land of Projection*, (1993); and Maureen Connor's two curtain-enclosed sites for examining femaleness and femininity, *Ensemble for Three Female Voices*, (1990-91) and *The Sixth Sense*, (1992). All of these artists combine audio-video technology with non-technological media. In that sense they are formal indications of the unsettled sense of a hybrid state that sounds throughout the show, of a historical moment confusingly caught between the over-determination of the past and the possible potential of the future. Similarly, the 'frame', one of the central conceits of Eurocentric aesthetics and the conceptual/physical demarcation of life from art is both in hyper-abundance (in the film and video) and conspicuous absence (in the installations and wall paintings).

In Green's one-room installation, the centre of the room is dominated by free-standing industrial shelves holding books from, amongst others, forerunners in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 60s and contemporary academic leaders in Afro-American studies. How ideas originate, develop, obfuscate and circulate is suggested both in Green's juxtaposition of the work of a 60s Black Panther leader next to that of a 90s Black Harvard University professor, and her related presentation, in private cubicles, of the complicated journey of hip-hop slang into and out of Germany and German-language translations. Green's work, like most of the work in this Biennial, can't be comprehended in a single, however contemplative, gaze. It requires viewer collaboration and time.

Very few selections in this exhibition are constructed according to the conventional aesthetic dictum, derived from that of Modernist painting, that art should present the viewer with a unified, full frontal, visual-centred experience. Even works produced in traditional, single, low- or no-tech media, such as Sue Williams' paintings and sculptures, Karen Kilimnick's drawings and Glenn Ligon's photographs, refuse the purist's demands for an exclusively visual experience: all are text heavy.

Ligon, whose first and previous Biennial participation was with painting, presents a wall of Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* photographs annotated by comments from sources as diverse as the conservative U.S. Senator Jesse Helms, the Black cultural critic bell hooks, and the bartender at a gay bar. *Notes in the Margin of the Black Book* (1991-93), is one of a few works that attempt to confront the complexity of identities shaped under dual systems of oppression (for instance, Black and Gay). Hung in the museum where the same images appeared, larger, as part of Mapplethorpe's retrospective a few years ago, Ligon's project asks the viewer to consider how racism comes into play in Mapplethorpe's celebratory homoerotic portraits of naked Black men.

Williams' wordy, provocative paintings on male violence, female masochism and feminist resistance, such as *Are You Pro-Porn or Anti-Porn?* (1992), and *It's a New Age* (1992), are scrawled with skewed, sometimes contradictory insights, including political critique, personal dejection and even the artist's ambivalence about whether she chose the right colour of paint. When she ironically scribbles 'this is (art) not social commentary' in the margin of the canvas, she is reminding herself as much as anyone else that assumptions need perpetual challenging.

Janine Antoni, like Williams, is concerned with the devaluation of women in society and art. Her three part installation echoes the self-confessional and body-incorporating performance work of the 70s Feminist Art Movement as well as recasting the aims of Minimalism. It charts, in process and product, a relationship between women's eating disorders and female self-image. *Gnaw* (1992), includes two large sculptural blocks, one chocolate, one lard, that the artist has previously nibbled away at. The third part of the piece is a mirrored mall-like display of tiers of red lipsticks and chocolate hearts manufactured from the artist's nibblings.

Another feminist comment comes from a Nancy Spero painting, where the messy marks of two bloody hands drawn down toward the floor is imprinted on a wall. *Homage to Ana Mendieta* (1991-93), joins a group of works by different New York women artists, all inspired by the artist's death and the possible culpability of her husband, Carl Andre, who was acquitted of murdering Mendieta in 1988. That art's production and reception is circum-

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Lari Pittman Untitled No. 1, (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence & Resignation) 1992
Acrylic and enamel on 4 mahogany panels

Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery Photo: Michael O'Brien

Matthew Barney Drawing Restraint 7 1993

scribed by the social reality that both creates and interprets it is an insight suggested not only by this Biennial, but in the run of art of this century.

An active and immediate utilisation of art as an appropriate vehicle for social commentary is called forth in Donald Moffet's series *Gays in the Military* (1991), where the artist has wryly annotated drawings of celebrated military men from former centuries to suggest what the U.S. Pentagon refuses to admit in their insistence on 'gay ban': that homosexual men already serve in the armed forces, and have throughout history. And all the critical rants to the contrary, this Biennial is not without its ephemeral gestures to private emotions, including Kiki Smith's shower of glass tear drops strewn before two transparent feet and lovingly titled *Mother* (1992-3); Jack Pierson's *Diamond Life* (1990), a sensitive *hommage,* with desk cigarette butts and Joni Mitchell albums, to the slower moments of an emotional life in the 70s; Lari Pittman's intricately patterned paintings; Lorna Simpson's wonderful wall of trumpet mouthpieces that form part of her installation *Hypothetical?* (1992); and Nan Goldin's colourful and almost devotional photographic series of her friends.

But the most 'political' piece included in this politically-informed show is George Holliday's *Videotape of the Rodney King Beating*, the ten minutes of spontaneous, 'amateur', camcorded footage taken by a bystander on March 3, 1991. The videotape has dominated the national media, popular consciousness, and also the subsequent trials, some still pending, of the white Los Angeles policemen who adminis-tered repeated blows to Mr. King after pulling him over on the highway for a traffic violation. Why has the Whitney chosen to exhibit a work whose production and previous distribution are completely outside of 'art' parameters? Last year, in a similar curatorial expression, Nancy Spero included the drawings of a young female rape victim, whose accusers were then on trial in New Jersey, alongside the works of a hundred women artists exhibited at the Richard Anderson Gallery. Although the victim's drawings had already appeared in the New York newspapers, a number of gallery viewers felt the drawings didn't 'belong' in an art context, just as many critics have taken exception to the inclusion of George Holliday's video in the

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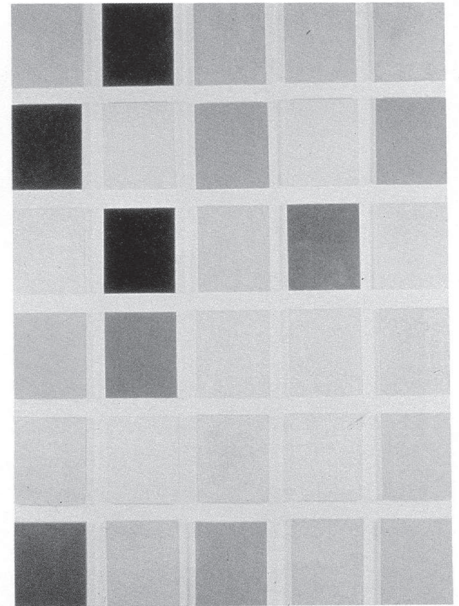
Nan Goldin Installation view



Byron Kim Synechdoche (detail) 1992
Oil and wax on 204 panels

Charles Ray Fire Truck 1993

Biennial – even though it has already been broadcast on every television in America.

These real life documents, although executed in the same media used by artists, are not meant to be offered as 'art'. Rather, they are meant to suggest that the social realities of racism and sexism not only define art and cultural production, but are in turn defined by it, that our representations – even 'beauty', 'pleasure' and 'painting' – participate in the construction of lived experience.

1. Roberta Smith, 'At the Whitney, a Biennial with a Social Conscience', *The New York Times,* March 5, 1993, Section C, p.1. Despite her criticisms, Smith concedes that: 'Nonetheless, this Biennial is a watershed. In some ways it is actually a better show than usual, simply because it sticks its neck out.' Other mainstream critics have been both less generous and less insightful in their accounts of the exhibition.
2. Ibid, Smith.
3. Dan Walworth, from his remarks at the 'Sites of Criticism' symposium, at the Drawing Center, New York, March 3, 1992, sponsored by and reprinted in *ACME Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1992, pp 24-26. Walworth, a filmmaker, discusses the specific production and distribution problems faced by independents in the United States today.
4. Elizabeth Sussman, the central curator of the 1993 Biennial, as quoted in one of the press releases issued from the Whitney Museum of American Art, dated December 11, 1992.
5. Adam Gopnick, *The New Yorker*, March 22, 1993, pp 100-101; John Taylor, 'Mope Art', *New York Magazine,* March 22, 1993, pp 16-17. In the same issue of *New York,* Kay Larsen gives a more favourable review of the show. In general, the press has shown a gender breakdown in responses, with women critics tending toward favourable, while men have been negative or damning. Along with those already cited, this includes Elizabeth Hess in the *Village Voice,* as opposed to the rants of Robert Hughes in *Time* and Hilton Kramer in *The New York Observer,* for instance. All of these critics, like the overwhelming majority of art writers in the U.S., are white.
6. Although the Whitney has chosen to announce that a 'single curatorial vision guides [the] exhibition organisation' (press release, December 11, 1992), the curator, Elizabeth Sussman, worked with a team that included Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, and Lisa Phillips, all members of the Whitney curatorial staff, and a seven-member advisory committee drawn from outside the museum.
7. According to a friend, who said just that to the guard, who in turn informed her of the frequency of the comment.

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