

phyllis braff

current directions

● My contribution to today's thematic session looks at some of the current directions that art critics now find important to consider. These are points suggested by an assortment of recent exhibitions in the United States. I'll mention perhaps ten in the 20 minutes allotted, and therefore, with 2 minutes each, my presentation itself becomes an exercise in the multi-tasking, multi-layering and even in the compression characteristic of some current art interests.

It was originally the intention to conclude my thoughts with an example of an artist exploring "real-time" imagery. Because sensibilities have changed since this paper was conceived, it seems appropriate to begin with the end and show one segment, or one moment, of the view of lower New York that Wolfgang Staele used for a large, live-feed projection that opened at the Postmasters Gallery on September 6, 2001, to run continuously until October 6, 2001. The lower New York live-feed view forms one part of a huge, 3-screen project that also includes two landmark views in Germany and is intended to compress time and space. His project is also designed to examine the point where symbolic readings converge with actual, immediate conditions. The actual, shown in this single frame from the artist's electronic record, is a smoke filled lower Manhattan 34 hours after the planes hit the World Trade Center buildings. Staele, and a number of other artists working with "real-time" projections, bring in the sense of direct physical engagement, but use the video projections as a platform to shape conceptual readings.



What seems firmly rooted as another direction that art critics will continue to follow involves qualities of destabilization. Fred Tomaselli's "Echo, Wow and Flutter" (2002), a large wood panel with pharmaceutical pills attached to the surface, is not limited to the visual ambiguities that a mid-20th century abstract artist might have been reaching for, but instead the work takes its shifting ambiguities from the multiple meanings of its content.



The recent work of Terry Winters further underscores how the old Modernist opposition between the retinal and the intellectual no longer functions. Concerned with complexity theories and new scientific orientations, Winters combines seemingly random gestures with exacting structures in the ink drawing "Linking Graphics I" (2001). It is an attempt, he has explained,

to map order, chaos, gravity and speed, combining hybrid images and digital approaches mediated by human gestures.

A third direction embraces artists making imaginative, original use of new technologies, like Paul Pfeiffer, whose altered digital moments, using thousands of rearranged and spliced frames, address how conceptions of human beings have been adjusted by new descriptive methods. His intuitively nuanced, hand-worked creations are, in a sense, more human. His alterations eliminate and abstract, and thus tend to trigger memory and broader readings.

Another direction involves artists like John Pilson, who are concerned with developing new strategies for narrative using time-manipulated media. Behavior is content in Pilson's videos, and there is an interest in situations and things that no longer represent their traditional functionality. His multi-channel video "Interregna" (1999-2000) makes off-hours time in a corporate office the setting for sequences of performance-like gestures. The title, "Interregna," means "between the kings," a period between authority, when control is suspended. Pilson further explores this theme in "A la claire fontaine" (2001), a video based on a restless child who has been brought to her father's office and amuses herself by drawing her breath on the window while singing a French song.

An additional area that seems to warrant consideration involves the character of the mark in an age of cyberforms. This point is combined with thoughts about time-based media and narrative in the work of William Kentridge, whose retrospective was seen in a number of cities this year. Kentridge's charcoal drawings, with their constant erasures and changes, apply an autographic method to introspective, autobiographic content that is closely intertwined with social and political issues. The video work seems important in the way it focuses on how a mind works, and seems significant in the way it views the world as a moral terrain, questioning heroes and victims.

Another avenue we seem to be conscious of concerns artists who conceive and construct their pieces around issues of social relevance. Some directly address, and even reach out and implement social needs, like Atelier van Lieshout, the Rotterdam group that exhibited in New

York during the past season. Others, like Marjetica Potrc, whose installation, "Kagiso: Skeleton House" (2000-01) was shown at the Guggenheim Museum, use forms energized by their social meaning. Potrc's piece presented an official South African government-planned housing model (a basic skeletal form inspired by the familiar individually assembled shanty dwelling) along with her sculptural construction which reflected the spirit and character of the traditional found-materials shanty. There are references to the disenfranchised and to buildings as living organisms. A key message is the celebration of individual ingenuity.

The potential for psychic energy in the way Paul McCarthy blends performance, sculpture and body functions seems to present directions for continuing consideration, as was underscored by the response to his retrospective exhibition. His video performance, "The Painter" (1995), uses cartoon like plastic fingers and facial components, along with processed foods, to confront darker aspects of childhood and social conditioning. It is a carefully choreographed social critique incorporating dysfunction, theatrics and repetition to create parallels to society's obsessive attitudes.

Reactions to the Site Santa Fe Biennale, on view during the second half of 2001, generated the next points relating to directions that art critics currently find themselves considering. With his title, "Beau Monde: Toward a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism", the curator Dave Hickey, suggests that beauty is really what we romanticize; it is whatever satisfies each individual artist, and it is shaped by a cultural ambiance. These goals for satisfaction are carried from the periphery to the cosmopolitan center and never lost, according to Hickey, so the cosmopolitan center is formed by a multiplicity of ideas brought in from the periphery. The exhibition also reflects Hickey's ideas about the oneness of all art, high or low. He included, for example, Darryl Montana's Indian Mardi Gras costumes made of sequins, beads, feathers, stones and canvas, and he commissioned the wrapping on the exterior of the building, which created a temporary facade (designed by Jim Isermann) composed of hundreds of white plastic forms.

Within the institution's vast building, a former beer distribution warehouse, Hickey also commissioned the design and shaping

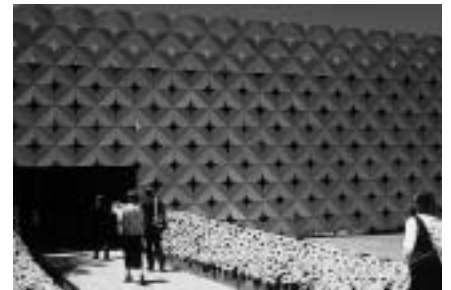
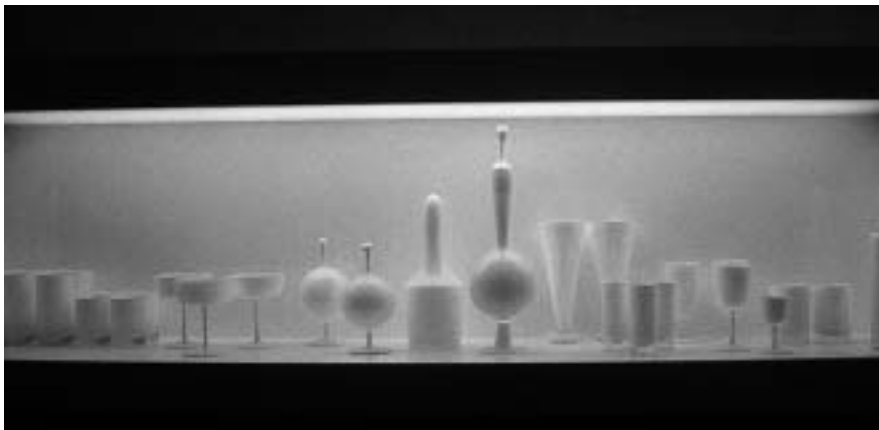
of spaces to suit the art. A rotunda shape was prepared as a setting for Takashi Murakami's helium balloon and mural of animated sunflowers, each with facial features that suggest distinctive personalities.

Hickey gives an important role to the undulating ceramic sculptures of Los Angeles artist Ken Price. These pieces have an organic power, with surfaces that seem to have the possibility of constantly morphing and changing contours — surfaces without boundaries. The sculptures have



been positioned as if they were in dialogue with Ellsworth Kelly's paintings — crisp edged but also dynamic, with no sense of stability.

An effective example of an artist constructing spaces to tie in with the art's content occurs with Josiah McElheny's 27' by 14' room, which is configured as a conceptual piece referring to Adolph Loos's 1908 design for the Karntner Bar in Vienna. Two sections are shown. McElheny, trained in glassblowing, makes probing pieces that involve responses to historical references. These ghost-like shapes also introduce ideas about the presence of absence and the absence of presence.



The idea of making architectural spaces expressive in new ways is underscored by Hickey's inclusion of Jorge Pardo, whose white corian forms articulate floor, wall, and a temporarily inserted glass wall. It reminds us that artists who are rethinking concepts of interior environments are expanding in new ways on a tradition that has always had the potential for special energy.

This brief discussion of some of the things that are now motivating us to stretch our critical sensibilities referred at one point to an interest in making art that has no fixed boundaries, and this, I hope, will metaphorically reinforce the session's message about the need for art critics to meet the newest work with the kind of open mind that functions without boundaries too. ●



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