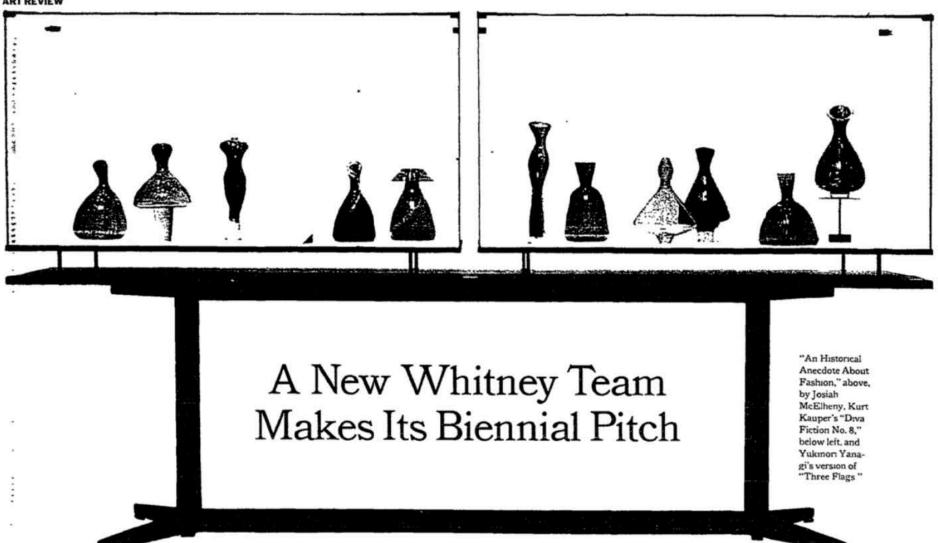
Weekend FINE ARTS LEISURE

The New Hork Times

ART REVIEW



By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

HE 2000 Biennial at the Whitney is not, as you may have been led to believe, amther "Sensation." Relieved? Disappointed? The little pre-game flap over Hans Haacke's "Sanitation" may have created an impression that this Biennial would be akin to that Brooklyn exhibition or maybe to the Biennial in 1993, which was heavy on heavyhanded politics. But Mr. Haacke, it turns out is the only artist among nearly 100 in the show whose work fits that bill. It is the most uncontroversial Biennial in years

This is not good

It is the expedient outcome of an administrative change that partly explains its neutral character When Maxwell L. Anderson arrived as the Whitney director in July of 1998, much of the museum's staff left or was pushed out, so he had to cook up a way to put together a biennial quickly. The solution was a team of outside curators, spread across the country, with different perspectives

They met and compromised, and this is the result - a show without a theme, no strong point of view, not much sex, no dead pigs, no fecal matter or rotting eggs or mannequins with a penis for a nose. Sounds boring, no?

Well, it is. The show goes out of its way to be ecumenical, independent, geographically diverse, repre-sentative of all media, including the Internet, and differ-

Taking chances with emerging film and video artists, Page 33.

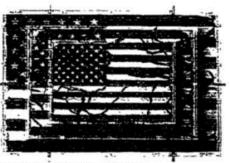
ent from what the New York power brokers would do All this is admirable. A few artists tu jour, like Vanessa Beecroft and John Currin, make the cut, but very few. We get a group from Texas instead. Another from California. Lots of fresh names Honorable veterans like Luis Cam-nitzer and lesser-knowns, like Rina Banerjee, who have shown at places like the Bronx Museum of the Arts or the Queens Museum of Art.

It's truer than previous biennials to what goes on across the country, truer to the character of the American scene, where artists come from other countries, more respectful of different generations and multiple strategies

And flat, which may partly be chalked up to the quality of art at this moment. Like life, art has its lulls. The first three-quarters of the 20th century may have led people to believe that a Picasso ar a Matisse or a de Kooning would always be around but let's face it, the party has been winding down since the early 80's and what's left are a few stalwarts, stragglers and latecomers doing the best they can We all vant to fall in love. But these days you've often got to squart to find someone you'd want to take home

So be it Resist the temptation simply to leave Keep an open mind Check out paintings, for example. The Biennial has plenty, some inexplicable, like Vernon Fish-

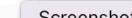




graphy from the Whates 5 Mars uns of American Art

er's scumbled abstractions and Katherine Sherwood's works, which look like poor imitations of Terry Winters's early pictures Lisa Yuskavage's bimbos don't do it for me, either Bu John Currin's do, and so, mildly, do Kurt Kauper's fictive divas, proudly outlandish in their ridiculous outfits, and also Linda Besemer's hard-edge abstractions, which are multicolored stripes on plastic panels draped like towels over aluminum rods.

Salomon Fuerta's deadpan heads and houses, pastel colored and sleek, carry the flag for what seems like a Continued on Page 33



A New Team at the Whitney Makes Its Biennial Pitch

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cool new wave of California painters, with a slender undertone of identity politics added in his case. Joseph Marioni upholds the monochrome tradition stylishly, and Richard Tuttle, as always, is a shaman with translucent daubs of acrylic paint and plywood It's too bad his works hang in one of the show's crowded, mixed-up galleries, eclecticism having led to an occasionally chaotic installation.

That's a range to choose from In the equally broad category that you might call quasi-painting, the Biennial has Vik Muniz's photograph of his copy of Géricault's "Raft of the Medusa" in Bosco chocolate syrup ves. Bosco - which looks less distunctive than it sounds But William De Lottie's "Love Letters Straight From Your Heart, Part 1" is something much better. several rectangular aluminum panels wrapped in bright polka-dot and flower-paiterned cloth, the panels affixed to the ends of long metal poles, which pretrude several feet from a wall. The room is floodlighted so that the parels cast shadows complicating the effect. Where the poles attach to the panels they also skewer photocopied newspaper pictures of Adolf Eictmann and Isaiah Berlin.

Mr. De Lottie is one of the show's oddballs I don't know precisely what he is up to, but his work, which takes off from 60's abstract painting, is wacky enough to be completely urforgettable and it suits the current trend for decorative abstraction while staying very much on its own track.

Joseph Grigely is another example of this individualist spirit and a newly fashionable figure who deserves the attention He makes an irregular colored grid from scraps of paper, Post-Its, foreign bills and claimcheck stubs on which he and his friends have scribbled notes to each other Mr Grigely is deaf This is how he communicates The result twists a kind of anonymous modernism into a personal, almost voyeuristic art.

Likewise, Yukinori Yanagi, who has shown at the Queens Museum, reimagines Jasper Johns's modernist classic "Three Flags" in the form of an ant farm. Anarchic humor piles onto irony The work will deteriorate as the ants dig through it, which, considering the flags, may have pe litical meaning to Mr. Yanagi bit doesn't spoil his joke.

Mr Yanagi's flags aren't paintings or sculptures precisely Sculpture, strictly speaking, is the weakest of the traditional media in the Biesnial, which reflects sculpture's geieral state these days. Two exceptions. Sarah Sze gets the prize for sheer industry with her spiral Tiakertoy of lights, mirrors, potted plants and several thousand other little things, and Josiah McElheny's gorgeous colored glass vases exenplify straightforward, unapologete craftsmanship. A made-up high story by Mr. McElheny goes with the vases, about their being 1950's de-

"2000 Biennial" remains at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, (212) 570-3676, through June 4

signs derived from dresses by Christian Dior, which is a pointless Conceptual conceit except that the curvaceous shapes do convey two of the essential ingredients of haute couture, sex and style. Krzysztof Wodiczko and Cai Guo-

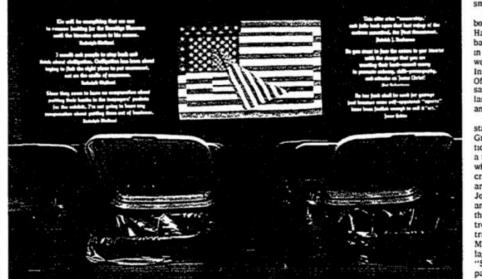
Qiang, in different ways, also fall into a gap between Conceptual Art and sculpture They deserve special mention. Mr Cai, who is one of the most interesting artists around, is selling feng shui lions in a Buddhist grotto beside the museum lobby. (You'll see) And Mr. Wodiczko, whose usual locale is outdoors, survives more or less inside the museum, displaying a bizarre video device with voice-activated pictures. It is worn like a backpack to strike up conversations with strangers on the street The strangers respond either to the person or to the device Suffice it to say that the gizmo, which only sort of works, slyly functions as a metaphor for the comic inadequacy of casual communication.

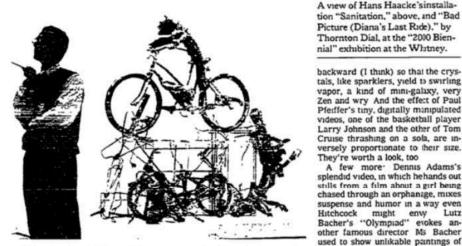
A few things in the show seem merely dutiful or reflexive or dumb Thornton Dial is an overrated folk artist. Chris Verene's photographs of middle-aged men photographing teenage girls are pornography pretending to be social commentary, and they're no excuse for him to have been pulled from virtual obscurity. John Coplans's photographs of himself have become simply unbearable. And someday I may grasp the attraction of Louise Lawler's pictures of art installations, but I'm still waiting.

Dawoud Bey, whose best photographs are in black and white and earlier than the overly romantic ones of young men he shows here, deserves to be in some Biennial, so he's a different matter. So is Robert Gober, who rehashes old territory with several beeswax legs and enamel sinks A few of the legs, along with a reproduction of a piece of wood draped over one of them, are soft and droopy, like overripe brie, recalling, in an interesting way, Dali's famous symbolism for the mortification of the flesh

Having demonstrated modern surreal illusionism to a new generation, Mr Gober also comes to mind at Leandre Erlich's installation in which rain falls, thunder crashes and lightning flashes between windows in a narrow alley Mr Erlich, a newcomer, is one of the show's surprises. along with Michael Joo, whose transparent, headless Buddha and synthetic white dogs with models of human hearts in them extend Matthew Barney's weird bodily transformations in the direction of science fiction

Internet art is a biennial first Much has been made of this fact. Unfortunately, most of the sites I visited didn't amount to much more than scrolling texts, fuzzy pictures, remote video cameras and interactive gimmicks. They were slow to download and visually inert. One of these days the Internet will come up with something good, but Mark Amerika's "Grammatron" (www.grammatron.com) typifies the problem: "a thematic hybrid of cyberspace, cabala mysticism and critical theory," is how the Bienmal catalog describes it. It's worse oceans of jittery photos and discon-nected phrases like "he is him and I





would be her if only she would let me" and "the It transponding my feelings for me "

Ben Benjamin's "Superbad" (www.superbad.com) is better, a funhouse of abstract animation, visual gags and Op teasers, easy to access, graded for different Net skills Like most Net art, it exploits the Web's random, helter-skelter ethos Goldberg's "Ouna 2000" Ken (http://ouija.berkeley.edu) isn't bad, either, a remote Ouija board that's a metaphor for the mystification of the Web and the public's unquestioning faith in it

Netart is the upstart that video art used to be Now video is ubiquitous, and several stick out among the works in the show. The best is Doug Aitken's (which was at the Venice Biennale), a strange, beautiful, completely engrossing spectacle of a man valking and dancing through an empty city at night, on multiple screens in a sequence of spaces that make the work into a sculptural experiesce.

The disappointment is Shirin Neshat's new work. Her subject, the gap between Islamic men and women, was best expressed in a dualscreen video of a male singer and a female singer, also in Venice Ms Neshat has run out of gas here. This video opens with a man and a woman passing in a laidscape, and it fast devolves into melodrama It is implausibly acted and incomprehensible, like a foreign soap opera - or could Ms Neshat intend this as a parody? I doubt it. Either way it misses the mart badly.

More successful is the video installation by Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, who lately proffered glasses of Antarctic water at the Break Museum. In "Le Baiser/The Kiss," he washes the windows of Mies van der Rohe's glass Farnsworth House. Besides illustrating the link between architectural transparency and personal surveillance, the work, which looks as neat and sleek as Mies's building, sweetly honors a flawed monument. Every time Mr Manglano-Ovalle wipes the window with his squeegee. the squeegee makes a sound like a big wet kiss.

Brian Fridge's black and white video "Vault Sequence" is memorable in a different way- seven minutes of steam turning into ice crystals in his kitchen freezer, the video running

Silvia Kolbowski's vidto is also OK Her "Inadequate History of Conceptual Art" is a work of seminostalgic Conceptualism. Artists talk about works of Conceptual Art from the 60's and 70's We see their hands only, out of sync with the voices, and the awkward, disembodied effect is touching, like watching someone else's home movie, in addition to which the intimacy of their descriptions of the art, even when the art is almost impossible to visualize,

A few more Dennis Adams's

might envy

Vargas pinups she had commis-

sioned Here she takes a hand-held

camera through the empty Olympic

stadium in Berlin where Lini Riefen-

stahl's propaganda masterpiece was

Ms Bacher has added gltches and

flare-ups to corrupt her tape, and a

static soundtrack, making the work

as crude as Riefenstahl's "Olympi-

ad" was polished. It's an opaque

saga that runs on but ends up being

more than historic table-turning and

a riff on another female icm (Riefen-

girls), because the camera conveys

the melancholy beauty of the modern

ruin of the stadium and park around

stahl this time instead of

shot

Lutz

Vargas

makes the art world seem like a small, friendly place.

One of the speakers in Ms Kolbowski's video happens to be Hans Haacke Mr. Haacke's "Sanitation" barely deserves mention as art, but in the culture wars, the quality of the work is rarely the governing issue. Inspired by the skirmish over Chris Ofili's "Holy Virgin Mary" in "Sensation," at the Brooklyn Museum last year, Mr Haacke has concocted an installation in a darkened room.

On the back wall he has printed statements by Mayor Rudolph W Guliani and other conservative politicians. They are printed in Fraktur, a typeface the Nazis promoted for a while Three American flags of decreasing size are also on the wall, arranged again, curiously, like Johns's "Three Flags," one on top of another, the smallest flag folded on the diagonal The sound of marching troops comes out of a squadron of trash cans Beside them on the floor Mr Haacke has laid a framed collage of newspaper clippings about "Sensation," onto which he painted a passage from the First Amendment To near about the work is virtually

to have seen it. There's not much to see Isn't it remarkable how much this brouhaha parallels the last one? A big new survey making headlines before it opens A media-fueled escalation. A work that, sight unseen, offends the Anti-Defamation League on behalf of Jews instead of a group of Roman Catholics The artist claiming to be shocked, shocked by the reaction The museum, after public hand-wringing, declaring that it will defend the right to free speech. damn the consequences, knowing perfectly well that this is the kind of art this artist does and that the consequence of all the publicity will be to help the box office.

And you wonder why much of the public is so cynical about contemporary art?

A little credit. Mr. Haacke has been an influential figure for 30 years (he did ant farms early on). and his best work mixes investigative journalism, wordplay and theater. It can be funny and annoying to the conservatives and businesses he aims to annoy. His worst work is platitudinous. "Sanitation" must be the worst thing he has ever done. It demeans the public's intelligence, never mind that the Anti-Defamation League says it demeans the Holocaust Nazi comparisons are almost automatically far-fetched, and while it's a stretch for anyone to assert that using Fraktur and the sounds of jackboots cheapen the memory of people killed by the Nazis, it's hardly more unbelievable than comparing the mayor to Hitler, which passes for political insight in certain art circles these days Too bad Mr Haacke wasn't being ironic, because then his installation might at least have been a good joke about New York cocktail party blather

Instead, the mayor is suddenly made to seem virtuous for doing nothing He should thank Mr Haacke. And if he has not already, he should thank the league for turning an attack on him into a slight of Holocaust victims, still an unthinkable taboo even for a contemporary artist