

The recent nineteen ninety five Whitney Biennial is an interesting show, but for the most part not for the right reasons. Somewhat literally, it is the brain child of its curator Klaus Kertess.

When we enter the Whitney we immediately see two things: the catalogue for the exhibit, and a sculpture by Gabriel Orozco which is a large empty elevator placed near the lobbies real elevators.

Kertess has a plan, it is to show that all the categories of art are *relative*, and that artists place themselves into the genre they participate in because it has *unused* potential, that it is a niche. His justification and inspiration is in the work of Gerald Edelman, a nobel prize winning neural physiologist. Edelman's many dense and wonderful books pioneer theories of how the brain functions, and how the mind has evolved over the span of mankinds development.

They demonstrate the theory he calls Neural Darwinism. In broad strokes, Neural Darwinism proposes that perception is based on memory, which has been discovered to a large extent when vision is concerned, to operate by analogously mapped patterns on the brains surfaces which correspond to any visual input which addresses them. Also, that the smallest circuits of the brain are in perpetual competition with each other, in the same way animal species compete with each other in an ecosystem; or in how the varieties of genetic information (the origin of memory, according to Edelman) gets passed on through chromosomes to offspring, both mutate, and evolve new forms through a process of selections of selections, rather than through a process of mechanised plans.

Basically, Kertess latches on to one or two of Edelman's ideas and attempts to demonstrate them with the art he deems worthy. He tries two techniques to do this, but first the show:

The first room on the second floor is one of the best rooms in the show. As you enter, straight ahead is a nice large ~~WHITE~~ Robert Ryman painting, it is intended to be in *contrast* to the "figurative" sculpture located to its right - a new Charles Ray sculpture. The Ray piece is a fabricated self-portrait of the artist highly crafted into a steriotypical rum bottle in the miniature tradition of ship modelmaking. This one stands vertical unlike most, and the figure inside the bottle is the artist pensively looking through the wavy glass. He's decked out in jeans and workshirt which are carved of wood, polychromed and segmented into the ~~twenty one~~ <sup>PARTS</sup> which made it possible to fit through the bottles ~~tiny~~ neck. This piece is *intentionally* ironic and tiny in contrast to the gargantuan bright red toy fire truck he fabricated for the Biennial of 1993, which was parked (not installed) outside on the street in front of the museum.

To its immediate right, is an extended wall with four or five hand lettered statements by Lawrence Weiner. They are conjuncted in between with a bold + sign carved into the wall through its various layers of paint that must be three quarters of an inch thick. It reads in parts: ...+ burnt cork rubbed on the garden wall + bowling balls stacked as high as they will go + etc...

Between the Ryman and the Ray is a doorway through which we see parts of a video installation projection by the artist \_\_\_\_\_. The work is Tarkofskiesque and seems

interested in memory (as the whole show is) and a romantic take on industrial landscape. To the left of the Ryman are three nice new Agnes Martin paintings, they have been deliberately, *strategically* hung on the wall oppositely backing a long computer imaged "painting" by Jack Pierson, it is an "anti-painting," and may even be designed to criticize the show (because for some time Kertess's plans for a "Painting Show" were well known). It consists of a colorful picture of Pierson with some tropical flowers and text which refers synically to the piece "Being excited about being a painting,"

Klaus Kertess' aim is to shock us with this kind of sly juxtapositioning in the hopes that we will "Get it," but the second thing he proposes is that the entire show act just as a kind of backdrop to its thick catalogue - "That's the only thing that really lasts anyway," "Memory - you know..."

Kertess deliberately hangs the large *abstract & monocromatic painting* (Ryman) next to the diminutive *figurative sculpture* Ray, next towards, ("*high conceptualism*" - Weiner) lettered directly onto the museum wall. Then there are *cold & geometric* paintings (Martin) hung next to the *warm, textural* Ryman. Martin being an *old, and sincere (female)* has the *young, jaded, gay* Jack Pierson (so is Martin, "Get it") on the opposite side of the wall from her, "Her flip side." etc.

Actually, manipulating a show like this is really not a bad idea, and it's method is fairly unrecognized and has a long tradition in the history of art and Philosophy going back to Picasso, Duchamp, John Cage, <sup>and</sup> Fredric Keisler. And also in Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Pierce, and Bergson, more recently, Arthur Danto. The only problem here is that the Show doesn't become a show, there's no experience, it doesn't *do* anything to the viewer, even in a real "dead" way that sort of stops time which would'nt have been half bad either.

Kertess takes the role of the artist himself, *he's* being manipulative and free in trying to make the point that the formal categories of art are relative. He tries to show that if you want to, you can find two artists that you thought were opposite in their approach and show them to be similar or mistakable for each other, on the other hand you can also find two similar artists and show them to be very different from each other, even mutually exclusive to each other.

Everywhere throughout the show is evidence of Kertess behaving like a bad artist rather than an instructive curator. He repeatedly shaves the truth towards unintended ends. Up on the fourth floor we get \_\_\_\_\_ immediatly, and hung like posters, but not enough so. To the right we get a deadend group of cast cubes and cylinders (in cement or plaster) as an installation by Berry Le Va, kaddy corner to which is another at least intended token Richard Serra sculpture. (*test footings punctured a river under the museum so they weren't* able to realize his initial plan to have a large sculpture emerge from the patio outside the museum rise up from the basement level beyond the height of the sidewalk outside) It is forged steel in the form of two one foot thick square stock right angles rising about three and a half feet from the floor ten feet opposite each other and meeting in the middle almost seamlessly. It is held in balance unbelievably by just its weight and the one foot by one foot friction of it's two touching forms. But it's an intentional bauble coming from Serra. Pinched in the corner between the two of these big "Guys" is new work by the sculptor, and designer, Andrea Zittel (a young woman, get it) it is also cubic in format.

Kertess places her in the corner behind a partially hidden wall. Zittel has several pieces which are supposed to be functional living units or domestic organizers for office, bedroom, entertainment, etc. They are punctuated by inserted video monitors which display a stereotypical enactment of what might go on in them in a dreamy way, but Kertess makes her *theinsert* between the two blue chip sculptors on both sides of her work. Just as above the Serra sculpture, on the wall opposite again to the Zittel works, there are arial views of huge Serra sculptures in ship yard warehouses, a reminder that the "real" thing or true thing isn't representable in the "loaded", "limited, and "artificial" context of a *museum* .

In keeping with the Gerald Edelman thesis, Kertess also hopes to illustrate the relativity of the categories of: abstraction, representation, sight and language, hoping that we will see that they can seem like the "same thing" or are as extensions of each other. And he is right they are extensions of each other. But a *show* has to be a *show* unless you are *really* an artist, rather than being it being a backdrop for the catalogue. And if you insist on this idea, you had better make a stunning catalogue. But unfortunately the catalogue isn't stunning.

In fact, while I was waiting for the 6:00 free admission so I could afford to see the show in the first place and I was through with trying to get excited with the catalogue, I walked over to the books for sale near the coat check. This is where the postcards are for sale along with the books the museum has published and thinks are ok, but is having a hard time selling. While browsing, I noticed two rare catalogues by the artist Robert Irwin, who had a retrospective at the Whitney some time ago, and will be having one soon at the Museum of Modern Art. They were for sale for rediculously low prices considering there importance. This was ironic because Irwin's whole project like that of Bruce Nauman who flamboyantly declined to be in the exhibit for this same reason, [INSERT #1] is premised on the premise of a conditionality or relativity of the artwork spectrum: That it goes without saying that all art comes out of the body (knowable only through experience) as its original source.

Nauman's and Irwin's work show that it goes without saying that perception makes thinking possible, and that concept makes perception possible, eliminating the mistake that places "conceptual" art as separate from "visual art." Because of the understanding that "conceptual art" functions not by its *idea* but by *how* the seeing it *makes you think* . An essay from the retrospective catalogue of Irwin has the title of: "Notes Toward a Model," with the first chapter called "The Process of a Compounded Abstraction..."1. Perception/Sense, 2. Conception/Mind, 3. Form/Physical Compound, etc.

> One typical visionary quote from it goes; We shall define perception as the originary faculty of the unique individual, our direct interface with the phenomenally given, that seemingly infinitely textured field of our presence in the world.. We should note that perception as indicated here is an actual process or state of being, having identifiable form- hence a form of knowing, (That is to say, we know the sky's blueness even before we know it as "blue," let alone as "sky.) Kertess should have read this essay in 1977.

Since Kertess fundamentally misappreciates the legacy of these two artists not to mention their antecedents as in Warhol, Rauchenberg, Beuys, Duchamp. It is no wonder that they, along with the Philosopher and art critic for the Nation, Arthur Danto, who is probably the most influential single writer of the last tens years in New York (his focus

is completely this issue of stereotype and the relativity of representation and artifice) had all declined to participate in this exhibit because they smelled a misrepresentation of their contributions in the making.

The show does have a few really good works in it. There are also great paintings by Brice Marden, who's webbed ganglia patterns must have suggested to Kertess the patterns of neural fibers, but they are strategically located between the painters who extensions of Marden paintings by his wife Helen Marden who's work unfortunately isn't interesting, and by Cy Twombly, who's supposed to be seen as his father or something. Formally there's a definite tinge of Joan Mitchell nostalgia in this room - she's a hero of Kertess'. There are very new Terry Winter paintings, which are jagged and "good/bad," in a move away from his usual sensuous biomorphic format. There's a great piece by Rikrit Tirijivana, which is a plywood room inside of which is a set of rock and roll equipment available to be played on by anybody who wishes to (you hear it while you are smell-seeing the burnt plate oil in the three Milton Resnick paintings preceding them.

There are the great light box photographs by Jeff Wall, one is a contemporary version of Hokusai's most famous Mt. Fuji painting, next to them are good film stills by Mathew Barney and Co. in the usual polyethylene frames we're all getting tired of. Barney has finally made the point Warhol already made, that a film is a series of consecutive photographs. The young artist Jason Rhoads seems inhibited in his first major American museum appearance. He hems in an installation on the next floor, with a pile of suburban garage detritus that's spread over celery colored, shag carpeting topped by flip juxtapositions of suburban basement settings beside Brancusi studio shots in funky home made frames. More Relativity, again.

And of course, Charles Simmons is in the show, with a great miniature sculpture installation. His lumpy bumpy, orafice riddled forms fit the show's *look* well. He gets into every Biennial, his terra cotta pueblo has been permanently intalled on a ledge in the museums staircase for umpteen years, that's *really* what memory is all about.

Paul Dickerson.

[INSERT #1] ...if you want it.

What's *telling*, is that Bruce Nauman made a *piece* out of the way he chose to decline on participating in the Biennial. As the story was told; It was of primary importance for Kertess to have Nauman as the center piece for the Biennial, so Kertess went to great pains to *court* Nauman. That is, to get him interested in it. Nauman responded by having a message sent to Kertess to have a meeting with him at a bar in town, on a certain day, and time, to talk about it.

But Nauman lives in New Mexico. So, Kertess flies to New Mexico, and rents a car, and finds this bar where he's to meet Nauman, and Nauman isn't there.

Kertess then asks the waitress after some time goes by, "Have you seen Bruce Nauman today?" The waitress says, "I don't know who that is." Kertess describes him, and then the waitress goes, "Oh, big Bruce." "No, I haven't seen him today." So after a while, Bruce Nauman shows up and listens to Klaus Kertess' ideas about the exhibit. After

hearing him out, Bruce just says something like, "I'm sorry, I just can't, I don't have any new work, at all." "You know, I'm doing this big retrospective at MoMa." And that was it. Klaus just had to leave town empty handed.