Multiple identity

WORKS OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

December 20th 1996 - March 31st 1997
MUSEU D'ART CONTEMPORANI DE BARCELONA

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Works of the Whitney Museum of American Art

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For the first time, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) will exhibit a wide selection of artistic works from the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The exhibit encompasses some 70 works by over 50 artists and covers a broad variety of techniques including painting, sculpture, video installation, drawing and photography. The selection synthesizes a chronological period of artistic production in America from 1975 to the present.

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Drawing on these two decades of intense American artistic creativity, the exhibition includes large format works by classical contemporary artists such as Sol LeWitt and Dennis Oppenheim, a spectacular installation by Jonathan Borofsky, an outstanding sculpture by the controversial Jeff Koons and Barbara Kruger's critical social work.

The presentation is geared to offering a broad perspective on contemporary art in America and highlights the country's growing and fruitful artistic interest in social, linguistic and media topics.

Many of the creators participating in *Multiple Identity* build up a complex network of social, personal, cultural and historic interconnections, projecting concerns, subjects, reasons, artistic processes materials, traditions and sensitivities that hinge on factors that are exterior to the reality of the world and the history of art.

The works of Lynda Benglis and Ana Mendieta, which combine organic, personal and feminine aspects in the 70s, are complemented with the paintings of Leon Golub, an eminent anti-militarist, and the minimalist proposal of Carl Andre. From the 1980s to the present and from various perspectives, Sherrie Levine and Martha Rosler investigate the relationship between language and image; David Hammons and Jean-Michel Basquiat explore cultural indentity; Mike Kelley and Sue Williams explore memories of the conflicts of infancy.

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The Whitney Museum of Modern Art houses the world's most extensive collection of 20th century North American art. The initiative for staging this exhibition in the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona forms part of the collaboration agreement reached between the two museums in July 1996.

Whitney Museum of American Art: David Ross (Director)
Eugenie Tsai (Curator)

Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona: Miquel Molins (director)
José Lebrero Stals (curator)

Catalogue: Texts from Johanna Drucker and Coco Fusco.

DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN ART FROM 1975 TO THE PRESENT

JOHANNA DRUCKER

The visual arts have diversified to an unprecedented degree in the last quarter of the century and this is nowhere more evident than in the American scene. The present multiplicity of approaches to both materials and conceptions would seem to defy the notion of a unified framework for works as varied as those displayed in this current exhibition. The familiar traditions of the fine arts – seen in Nicholas Africano's delicate paint on canvas and Joel Shapiro's cast metal – sit next to Shigeko Kubota's video projections, Mike Kelley's stuffed animals, and David Hammons' recycled refuse from the streets of urban and suburban landscapes. Has the art world become so eclectic and miscellaneous that anything goes? Are there no standards or values that hold true across the board? Do the trends of artistic fashion change with the whim of each succeeding season in a constant craving for novelty? Or does the development of a widely heterogeneous arena of production signal something profound about the visual arts as a contemporary cultural activity? Looking at representative works from this apparently exploded field, it may be possible to sketch the shape of the changes observed during the last two decades and to tease out, if not unifying conceptual parameters, at least a coherent critical framework.

The 1970s are generally considered the decade in which stylistic diversity became so conspicuous that it is impossible to impose the usual art historical "periodization". Of course, this is often difficult, especially in the modern period. It's almost as difficult to imagine that Duchamp's Fontaine (1917) is contemporary with Marc Chagall's lyrical canvases, or that Picasso's Guernica is of the same moment as Mondrian's distilled abstraction, as it is to imagine Jackie Winsor's wood and hemp works falling under the same rubric of «contemporary sculpture» that includes the fetishistic figures of Alison Saar and the patina perfect pieces of Nancy Graves. It's easy enough to say that these are works whose differences and distinctions function to define each other by productively meaningful contrasts – that the "natural roughness" of Winsor's Bound Logs (1972-1973) serves as a referential foil for the "artificial finish" of Graves' Cantileve completed a decade later. But the contrasts are not merely at the level of material, or style, or theme, or even iconography. And looking closer, one begins to have the sneaking suspicion that works produced in the spirit of Minimalist aesthetics or from a politically motivated urgency or through a critical engagement with popular culture no longer share any continuous ground of connection that serves to define or differentiate one from the other. It seems that Alison Saar's use of nails, tin, and copper, worked into a figurative form in Skin/Deep (1993), cannot belong to the same universe of "metalwork" which contains Carl Andre's copper plates laid end to end, any more than it can to the universe of "figures" represented by Jonathan Borofsky's Running People at 2,616,216 (1979). The very notions of artistic work, of production, of figurative value and identity, and of cultural associations with form and process are so disparate that only the critical concept of heterology – of things so conceptually diverse they cannot exist within a single framework – seems an apt way to consider the fragmented field of visual art from the1970s onward.

Or does it? With a bit of perspective, the logical relations among these works can be understood in relation to changes that have taken place during the last twenty years or so both in the culture of the art world and in the larger social sphere to which it belongs. In art-world terms, this is the period that witnesses the dramatic demise of

modernism as the basis of artistic production and of the critical discussion used to apprehend it. Driven by the twin engines of formal innovation and the utopian vision of the avant-garde, modernism certainly contained a wide array of visual styles, especially in the early decades of the twentieth century. But by mid-century, many of these styles had been pushed to the margins by a dominant concept of modern art in which abstraction was considered the ultimate aesthetic expression. Although many critical agendas are attached to abstraction – from a politics of negation to an ideology of uninhibited individualism – abstract art established one crucial concept in the minds of those raised to appreciate its formal virtues: the idea that the meaning of a work of art should be evident in its visual form. Whether as an instrument for bringing about a radical change of consciousness for revealing sublime and universal truths, visual form was granted an unprecedented level of autonomy and power within the modern aesthetic.

This faith in the capacity of works of art to communicate directly through an otherwise unmediated aesthetic experience (in modernism's self-sufficient presence, to state it in critical terms) starts to crumble in the 1950s and 1960s. Artists involved in Fluxus, Situationism, Happenings, Gutai, and other groups in the international sphere place increasing emphasis on events and experience, rather than objects, as the primary aspect of artistic activity. As they do so, these artists begin to demonstrate that the meaning of a work of art must be constituted from a dispersed field which extends from the artist's personal life to the community, from the realm of mass media and popular culture to the topical domains of immediate politics and the issue-oriented moments of activist rhetoric. If modernism's identity up to and through the middle of the twentieth century can be understood in relation to the idea of autonomy (of self-sufficient works, functioning independently of their context, with readily apparent meaning based in their form) then the art that proliferates in the later twentieth century can be broadly defined by the concept of contingency. Scholars and critics have gradually abandoned the idea that any work of art reveals itself entirely through its visual means, and now contemporary artists have made the complex web of social, personal, cultural, and historical interconnections a conspicuous formal feature of much of their work – not just an aspect of the way context must be brought to bear on the work in order for it to be fully understood.

An exemplary piece of critical interrogation in this regard is Martha Rosler's The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems, made in the mid-1970s. Rosler interrogates the modernist aesthetic sensibility by showing that neither visual images – with their apparent capacity to document a scene or social circumstance – nor verbal language, with its seemingly accurate transfer of information – can communicate adequately the nexus of power relations, social spheres, and individual lives which are in fact being concealed by these "descriptive" forms of representation. Rosler forces the realization that nothing is without precedent or context, nothing is without resonance or connections, and that the meaning of every work of art is forged at the intersection of social and aesthetic spheres. In short, there is no formal value distinct from the cultural network within which that value is produced.

The historical processes which brought about this change are embedded in cultural transformations. In the 1960s and 1970s, the art world experienced significant shifts of power from center to margins: the elitist enclaves of the high art establishment were broken open through a series of systematic and strategic attacks by women and minority artists. The civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the antiwar protests mark three waves of assault on the mainstream status quo within American society. The civil rights movement laid the foundation for both increased professional

visibility, self-determination, and foregrounded identity for visual artists of color, even if art by those artists or about those crucial events was not widely exhibited by mainstream institutions during that period. The women's art movement – comprising many activist artists only loosely linked in a formal sense – forced open both the formal and conceptual boundaries of the establishment.[1] All manner of subject matter, themes, motifs, ways of working, materials, traditions, and sensibilities suddenly had to be considered within the domain of the world of art. This change cannot be underestimated: women artists such as Jackie Winsor demanded a professional identity as well as recognition of their work; Lynda Benglis inflected the materials of a formal practice with feminist associations, giving her strongly twisted knots a decorative surface that flew in the face of good-taste formalism, and Ana Mendieta infused the field of visual arts with personal meaning and traditional modes, offering an unprecedented challenge to the idea of the work of autonomous art whose formal properties were its sole and supreme carriers of meaning. The imprint of Mendieta's body into the earth inscribed a personal image in primal and essential terms, terms laden with cultural values that associate organic materials with femininity.

The crisis of conscience and power that artists experienced during the Vietnam war showed once and for all the impotence of abstract formal language as a force for social change. The poverty of abstraction to act in the face of real crises punctures the modernist belief system. It becomes impossible to imagine that any visual form which is merely an attack on or transformation of the established codes of visual meaning will bring about any kind of social change – let alone the long dreamed of modern Utopia. The paintings of Leon Golub – figurative, specific, suggestive, and yet shifting in the space between historical document and universal situations of human conflict – operate as exemplary instances of contingent work. At once legible and irreducible to a simple reading of their iconography, they vibrate between fixed and unfixable meaning – the references they invoke change depending on the year, the week, the time of day, the viewer, the location in which they are viewed, the latest newspaper headlines or news bulletin. But one has only to put Golub's work into relation to that of Robert Colescott, an African-American painter whose use of figural language contains a completely different critical agenda, to begin to realize the extent to which representational painting participates in the larger transformation from autonomous to contingent work while also being part of larger social and cultural changes. Colescott's artistic parodies and expressive violations of the taboo against figuration depend as much on the canonical art historical works to which they refer as on the specific issues pertinent to the years in which they are painted. All these are part of the field of contingent meaning – the vast network of interconnections to the artist's lived experience and received tradition, current context, and historical legacy.

The shift from autonomy to contingency is brought about in part by the urgent and immediate needs of various activist groups to make their social identity an aspect of their work and vice versa – to use the artwork as a means of leveraging identity into a more central and visible position. This shift becomes evident in almost every aspect of work produced from the late 1970s onward: an Ashley Bickerton construction, with its paradoxically techno-perfect form and techno-phobic theme of ecological disaster and what this implies about the necessity to see all acts of production – including artistic ones – in relation to the endangered condition of the material world; a Nayland Blake piece, where clinical associations and suggestive homoerotic subculture form an integral aspect of its threatening (or seductive) presence. No matter what the work, the requirement is the same: the observation of formal properties must be linked to the world which connects artist and viewer. Blake and Bickerton are part of

a sensibility in which the social crises of pollution, homophobia, and AIDS, of control of corporate profits, gay rights, and right-wing repression stage definite conflicts in the public sphere. The frames of reference implied by their work demonstrate how contemporary artists function in relation to specific communities and identities as well as in the broader public sphere.

But if one were to sketch an even larger picture of the changes that took place from the 1970s onward, the significant transformations of the art world conditioned by changes in the social and political sphere would be only one part of the picture. There is another, equally profound influence in mainstream art that introduces new images, new materials, and new media: the forceful presence and engagement with mass culture. Again one finds precedents for this interaction throughout the twentieth century. The Futurists and Cubists adored industrial production: Marinetti celebrated the machine-made shoe, while Picasso and Braque pasted cheaply printed wallpaper, journals, and newsprint onto their collages. Surrealist imagery was rapidly and readily appropriated by the advertising industry, which tamed its erotic edges only enough to subvert its shock techniques for its own purposes. Pop Art held a mirror up to the world of comics, commodity culture, and consumer capitalism. But the status of the art object, its secure site within the domains of galleries, museums, and the critical apparatus of reviews, was never seriously challenged. It was always clear where popular culture or mass media ended and where fine arts began. But while those institutions remain intact and functional, preserving the carefully guarded border between the culture of mass media and the culture of fine arts, artists themselves have increasingly eroded the grounds on which such distinctions can be maintained.

If the 1970s was the decade in which power diffused from center to communities in order to return to the center with transformative force, then the 1980s was the decade in which artists took up the language and forms and productions of media culture with a new degree of enthusiasm. At first sight, these agendas might seem diametrically opposed, but the concept of individual and community identity, on which activist movements depended, also had to come to terms with how concepts like "woman", "black" or "chicano" were played out in the images and operations of mass culture.

Artists paid attention to the ways in which stereotypes are passed on as part of everyday language and racism and sexism are inscribed in the iconography of daily life – and recycled through media imagery to lived experience. In many cases, this questioning process took visual form in projects that interrogated artists' own identity. Cindy Sherman's photographic self-portraits from the late 1970s and early 1980s are classic instances of such a mirroring query, one in which the artist seeks her "self" as a work produced in the image of a recollected media version. For women artists, this was a key moment, allowing them to break with earlier claims to their essential "femininity" and to turn their attention to the cultural construction of the category of "woman".

The flexibility with which artists move from personal to social construction of self, through the filters of media, language, image, and back again comes through clearly in Jimmie Durham's Self-Portrait (1986). Durham's life-size cutout figure bears the texts which stereotype Native Americans in mainstream culture, particularly with respect to myths of physical identity or character. Making these myths ruthlessly obvious, Durham confronts their brutality and dehumanizing force. Artists intent on revealing the terms with which an authentic – or stereotyped – ethnic or sexual identity is created also turned their investigation to many aspects of artistic practice that had typically been considered neutral. In his Untitled piece of 1992, sculptor David Hammons uses hair whose texture and color clearly indicate African heritage, revealing his con-

nection to a community traditionally excluded from the world of fine art, as have the bottles of cheap Thunderbird alcohol, bottlecaps, police barricades, and basketball hoops which show up as elements of his production. In one well-known work, Hammons transformed a face on a cereal box cover into an image of Jesse Jackson, pointing up the insidious insinuation of stereotypes into the most familiar and banal aspects of daily life. The insistence on the interconnection of the fine art and media worlds of individual identity and cultural production, has created a highly permeable boundary between these domains.

But if the works that transform media images or unusual materials into art can be understood in terms of the critical issues they bring into focus, then works that represent more direct appropriations have their own agenda. Jeff Koons' New Hoover Convertibles (1981-1987) are indistinguishable from their mass-produced original – are in fact the very same thing. The work questions the status of images in the art world and the privileged language used to discuss art images and objects as distinct from media images and the products of industry, and to distinguish an "original" from its exact visual replica. The 1980s art world ruthlessly interrogated the way the notions of value, authority, authenticity, and critical insight are bound up in the distinction between a fine art object and a media image. In a world where the sheer quantity of images produced in a media context threatens to bury art world images in an avalanche of advertisements, television, movie, and Internet images, the specific character of art objects becomes increasingly problematic.

But the status of the art image is only one aspect of the art-world fascination with mass media; the reverse aspect is the recognition that the media world is infinitely more powerful in shaping our sense of our selves, our world, our beliefs, and our understanding than is the art world. Suddenly it is the critical distance, the very disjunctive, nonseamless character of art-world images which becomes their operative distinction. The art world turns a lens on the media world, examining the fantasies of consumption and identity, of glamour and horror, and, ultimately, of power as they are produced in the daily spectacle of our lives. In some cases, this process involves a high-tech apparatus, as in Jenny Holzer's digital displays of running text, while in others the most basic means – Glenn Ligon's use of black oil stick on a pristine gessoed panel – can be equally effective in their confrontation with the coercive messages of dominant culture.

How far, then, does one have to move to get from the last-gasp engagements with formalism, which play themselves in the 1970s, to the current trends in contemporary art? Imagine, for a moment, the contrast one can establish between the delicately gridded Untitled #11 (1977) canvas of Agnes Martin, with its evident allegiance to lyrical formalism, and the critique of such an aesthetic posed by Ellen Gallagher's Afro Mountain (1994), which uses tiny icons of racist imagery to create equally elegant and aesthetically reductive canvases. Or between the flat metal plates of Carl Andre's Twenty-Ninth Copper Cardinal (1975) floor piece and the speaking presence of Tony Oursler's Getaway #2 (1994). Mute, gridlike, modular, and elemental, Andre's would seem to be the perfect example of the modern work. And yet this Minimalist piece threatens and questions the viewer's space, encroaching on the sacred boundary between the work of art and the viewer that was so carefully maintained within the modern extension of Western tradition. The anxious viewer, unsure whether to walk on the plates spread out with sublime modesty on the gallery floor, backs into another work and notices his or her own body, its presence in the gallery, and the uncomfortable absence of a clear line of division between perceiving subject and artistic object. But how much more disturbing it is to be addressed by the profoundly abject

body of a tiny Tony Oursler work, its anthropomorphic image sustaining an illusion of life as the projected face speaks from its crushed pillow ground: "Leave me alone". "How did I get here?" or "Stop looking at me."
Muteness, modesty, sublime autonomy – all are gone. The piece can be viewed without knowledge of the artist's personal neuroses or lack thereof, but the effect remains one of implication and suggestion, of linkages between the permeable space of the viewer's world and the fraught categories of almost-shared experience. The concept of contingency describes the way the work of art relies on this diffused field for its meaning – the Oursler figure is as far from Brancusi's Bird in Space as a McDonald's is from the cafés whose culture permeates the motifs in Braque's and Picasso's Analytic Cubism.
And invoking the lowest common denominator of mass marketing is significant here. For the fine arts of the1990s have to compete in a milieu of image saturation densely populated by figments of the commodified world of simulacrum and spectacle described by the critics of the so-called postmodern world (Guy Debord, Jean François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard). Sue Williams' The Hose, with its narratives of abuse mediated through bad drawing and hesitant technique, marks the subject's unhappy relation to the balance sheet of power in this exchange. Similarly, Lari Pittman's Untitled #16 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation) (1993) uses the visual language of mainstream advertisements and product design to articulate his sense of impotence and protest in the face of the increasing commodification of once private sectors of individual life. Nothing is stable in this process: Mike Kelley's animals in More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid (1987) do not provide reassuring tales of childhood, nor do Catherine Opie's portrait photographs present reliable documents of essential categories of gender.
The visual arts are now one tiny zone within the exploded field of visual culture; the line demarcating the fine arts from the mass media and popular arts defies easy or secure identification; the sites on which fine arts depend for their identity – museums and galleries – and the mediating institutions of criticism and publishing dissolve into the world of fashion, corporate sponsorship, publicity, and fund-raising. Was it ever really different? Or was there only a momentary dream in which a supposedly modern purity pretended to a clear autonomy and pulled visual arts from the site of church, carnival, world's fair, craft market, and technology exposition into a spotlight of mute focus? In an era in which visual images proliferate at the speed of electronic light, the role and status of art remains distinguished by one salient characteristic: it calls attention to itself as a self-conscious act of framing, of rendering something significant by a moment of separation from that prolific field. Art now functions to call meaning itself into question and requires us to attend to the complex ways in which such meaning is produced – rather than providing a stable, universal, or transcendent truth. Visual presence as pure meaning and aesthetic form is an impotent concept in a world in which hybridity, mutation, and contamination are conspicuous social and aesthetic features. The difficulty is not in reading the meaning of contemporary works of art, but in wishing that meaning to be stable, finite, and guaranteeable. If the early twentieth century was characterized by modern dreams of pure form and utopian change, then the close of the century is characterized by a fevered energy which drives the visual arts toward a dynamically fertile engagement with all the many contingencies of experience – real and imagined, packaged and produced, lived and recycled.

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1. Major figures in this movement included Faith Ringgold and Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago and Faith Wilding, Carolee Schneemann and Alison Knowles.

PASSIONATE IRREVERENCE: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Coco Fusco

Dream about the future of your America
Euro America
Your America
Su América
Suya
Sudamérica
Suda y sangra
Latinoamérica despierta
Hispanoamérica dormida
Iberoamérica borracha
querido, bórrame del mapa
adónde estoy?
adónde estamos?
Estamos Undidos en América
Estar dos Unidos
Estar dos Sumidos
el uno en el otro
el Norte
en el Sur
el Este
en el Oeste
Europa
Asia Africa
América
where Chingados are we?

From Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco,
Radio Pirata, Colon Go Home!

Hardly a week has passed in the last two years without public attention being drawn to yet another battle over identity and culture. Behind each debate lingers fears and hopes about the image this country projects of itself to its people(s) and to the rest of the world. Who are we? asked Time magazine, as statistics point to the changing (i.e., increasingly non- white) ethnic makeup of American society. Whose values? asked Newsweek, as many reel and others applaud at the radical right's neo-fascist, universalist rhetoric. These questions have spilled over into the world of art in several interrelated and volatile debates over censorship, cultural property, and cultural equity. Whose museums and whose aesthetics? asks a new generation of critics, curators, and artists. Whose icons? wonder multicultural theorists and activists, as familiar elements of foreign worlds are absorbed with increasing speed by American consumer culture. Whose image? argue the lawyers involved in the lawsuit against Jeff Koons who, in the eyes of the law, "appropriated" and, in doing so, capitalized on another artist's photograph by reinterpreting it as sculpture without acknowledging a "source".
Where are we? We are in America, five hundred years after the beginning of the con-

quest and colonization of the New World, five years after the beginning of sweeping transformations in the Socialist world, and seven years from the end of the millennium. The last great empires of this century – the United States and the Soviet Union – are on the decline as superpowers, their respective economies tip into tailspins, and their international work forces become migratory "social problems".

With the unraveling of these systems, the concept and reality of the unified, homogeneous nation-state and national culture have become highly contested terrains. To these political and ideological changes we must add the fact that advances in technology have disrupted geographical, political, and cultural boundaries forever.

The collectively experienced anxiety provoked by these transformations has generated a plethora of "identity" – related conflicts, from geopolitical boundary disputes and the resurgence of ethnic tensions in Europe, to the concomitant racial unrest of North America. In Europe, these issues are being fought over principally in the geopolitical sphere; in the United States, we find ourselves in more of an ideological battle over symbolic representation. This does not mean, however, that the battles in America are any less political; on the contrary, culture in this country is a critical, if not the most crucial, area of political struggle over identity. While the tensions in the East and the West do differ, then, they are nonetheless driven by the same underlying contradictory forces: on the one hand, economic internationalization and the formation of "global culture" (symbolized by the European Community and the North American Free Trade Zone); and, on the other, political fragmentation based on regionalism, ethnic separatism and extreme economic polarization. We struggle to preserve distinctions that, for some, can no longer be taken for granted, or, for others, appear for the first time to be within reach.

These conditions shape much of the art and the cultural debates of our historical moment. Physical and cultural dislocation characterizes the daily life condition of many, if not most, of the people of this world. Those in a position of privilege live this condition by choice, conducting international business, engaging with advanced technology, or playing with virtual reality games; others who are less privileged are compelled to live this sense of dislocation without respite as migrant workers, immigrants, exiles, refugees, and homeless people. Diasporic cultures parallel those of the homelands, and often sustain imperiled "centers", making exile and the split sense of self it entails the paradigmatic experience of identity for millions. Some nations exist without a place, while others exist only through authoritarian enforcement. The hegemony of national cultures is perpetually disrupted by "foreign" information, media, consumer items, and people. The once colonial condition of having to adjudicate between local and outside cultures and power structures has not been swept away by the post-colonial age; in fact, it bears resemblance to daily life in post-industrial societies, where advanced technologies facilitate continuous transmission of information and commodities to different ends of the globe. Nonetheless for some, these transformations do not necessarily signal greater availability of resources – only more intrusions into their lands and their lives. In such a state of things, the very notion of cultural purity can seem like something of a nostalgic fantasy, one that not even "non-Western" societies can provide proof of any longer. And, yet, these issues continue to trouble many, and are central to cultural debates about the condition of subaltern peoples in the United States. Our continued engagement with questions of identity would indicate that not even a shifting of borders will bring us to relinquish them altogether. Unlike many other interpretations of postmodernity that have suggested that the accelerated flow of cultural property has nullified fixed identities and power relations between them, subaltern theory and cultural practice have maintained the

need to account for distinctions between political power (i.e., those who make things happen and how they see themselves) and symbolic exchange of cultural symbols. While other schools of thought associated with postmodernism have interpreted identity as pure process, and as infinitely transformable and essentially performative, subaltern discourses have looked upon these positions as volunteerist characterizations that do not account for controlling forces that affect identity, such as racism and the determining force of collective historical experience. Such elisions still appear too similar to the racial violence that has robbed many in this country of the right, first to be considered human beings, and then to have access to political power. At this historical moment, then, the postmodern fascination with the exchange of cultural property and with completely deracinated identity can seem for many people of color less like emancipation and more like intensified alienation. Instead, for many, the times demand what Gayatri Spivak has called "strategic essentialism", that is, a critical position that validates identity as politically necessary but not as ahistorical or unchangeable.

Cultural identity and values are politically and historically charged issues for peoples in this country whose access to exercising political power and controlling their symbolic representations has been limited within mainstream culture. While some might look upon the current wave of multiculturalism as inherently empowering and/or new, others look upon the present in relation to a long tradition of "celebrating" (or rather, objectifying) difference as light but exotic entertainment for the dominant culture. From the perspective of those who have been geographically, politically, culturally, and economically marginalized in and by the United States, these celebrations and the curiosity that drives them are not necessarily disinterested or inherently progressive phenomena. They are, instead, potentially double-edged swords, signaling both the exercising of control over cultural difference through the presentation of static models of "diversity" and the potential opportunity to transform the stereotypes that emerge with the imposition of control.

Those stereotypes that have grown ingrained over time cannot be easily dismissed as ridiculous and then simply cast off; they are both reminders of a painful legacy of bigotry and disempowerment that has fueled their systematic misrepresentation, and the starting point for understanding the racially inflected voyeuristic impulses in Euro-American and other colonizing cultures. "Appropriation", a favorite buzzword of the 1980s art elite, isn't just about disinterested pastiche or tracing one's creative bloodlines to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol; it is also about reckoning with a history of colonialist power relations vis-à-vis non-Western cultures and peoples to contextualize certain forms of appropriation as symbolic violence. In other words, although appropriation may not connote power inequities when conceived within other strains of postmodern culture, its historical and political implications in relationship to European colonialism and American expansionism cannot be ignored, because the erasure of authorship and the exchange of symbols and artifacts across cultural boundaries have never been apolitical or purely formalist gestures. That mainstream culture has periodically expressed desire for subaltern art has never obligated anyone to deal with subaltern peoples as human beings, compatriots, or artists. That is, perhaps, until now.

While the claims to absolute authority in issues of cultural identity and property are at times problematic (since no one, in the end, speaks for every member of a group), the ways that these dealings are represented in the mainstream media and even most of the art press are invariably tendentious. Little effort has been made to distinguish between dominant cultural attempts to curtail on artist's right to express his/her aest-

hetic sensibility and a subaltern contestation of institutionalized racism and privilege; in fact, the blurring of these distinctions has fueled the debates over "political correctness" of the past years. Nonetheless, many if not most of the criticisms leveled at those who raise questions about cultural appropriation are hardly substantive; rather, masked by platitudes about quality and freedom, they are often expressions of displeasure that heretofore unheard sectors of society choose to have opinions about culture at all. As the left and right invoke "imagined communities" or "the audience" to justify their assuming the authority to speak, this "audience" is deemed either too sensitive and innocent or much too smart to mistake evil for good. Anyone who challenges an entrenched power structure's absolute "freedom" to make money or meaning in whatever way is desirable can be labeled anti-American, socially backward, and artistically ignorant. Any subaltern question or protest, even if the aim of it is not to curtail but to contextualize, can be perceived as threatening to the current cultural order of things.

For privileged purveyors of culture in this country – be they artists, teachers, critics, collectors, benefactors, or exhibitors – confronting the limitations of one's own knowledge and relinquishing authority can be seen as a challenge or a crushing blow. This prospect has generated another spate of defensive retaliation in the past two years, using very old tactics. When hundreds of Chicana actresses in California protested the production of a film about Frida Kahlo in the summer of 1992 because its producers refused to hire a Latina actress for the lead-claiming that "there weren't any big names" – many mainstream reports presented the protestors as having interfered with basic artistic freedoms. The Chicano/a position was seen as subjective and partisan and as a personal attack against the director. Such an analysis could not take into consideration that decades of absence of a substantial role for a Latina actress in Hollywood might not be the result of pure coincidence but of an unwritten and unchallenged policy. Nor could it, for that matter, stress an awareness of the sense of disempowerment provoked by the knowledge that rampant commodification of one's cultural heroes does not necessarily lead to gaining access to cultural resources for oneself or for one's community. On the contrary, the mainstream appropriation of subaltern cultures in this country has historically served as a substitute for ceding those peoples any real political or economic power.

Had it been the 1960s, and had the protestors been male, they might have been lauded as the leaders of a new lobbying group in Hollywood and protagonists of a chapter in Chicano history. Instead, they have been largely represented outside the Chicano community as the latest in a line of "politically correct" feminists to appear on the horizon. The commercial impetus and concentration of wealth of the movie industry has made it perhaps the toughest cultural arena to fight with, particularly for women artists of color, who have benefited the least from the latest round of investment in commercial films about African-Americans and Latinos. This is perhaps the saddest lesson about identity politics that we have learned in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and the backlash against its policies that the Reagan and Bush administrations have fueled: that superficial assimilation through consumerism and tokenism can be lauded as a sign of the mainstream's acquiescence, while the fundamental changes needed to bring out a more profound form of equity are still thwarted at every turn.

On the other hand, the world of the visual arts occasionally at times evinces more conciliatory signals. For example, in the midst of a myriad of Native American art showcases opening throughout the Midwest in the fall of 1992 as liberalminded counter-quincentennial gestures, a conflict erupted at a Minneapolis art museum over the

proposed exhibition of Native American pipes that are considered sacred by many indigenous peoples. It was only after lengthy discussion among Native elders, artists, activists, and museum staff that the institution was convinced of its error, a position that might not have been taken were it not for years of debates about the ownership of Native artifacts, and the fact that the American Indian Movement had just sent out something of a warning by filing suit against the Washington Redskins for the team's use of a racial slur as its name.

Another indicator of this changing tide is that recent complaints in New York City over representations of blacks and Latinos in public art by white artists have been met with unprecedented willingness to pay them heed. Such communally oriented and ethnically divided discussions of the role and quality of public art strike at the core of the radical individualism that characterizes the mainstream's notion of the artist in this society. These discussions also test the limits of power of dominant cultural institutions and curators, whose longstanding authority to act as arbiters of taste is now being continuously questioned by "lay" critiques of their notions of aesthetic value and "realism". I cannot say that I have always found these criticisms to be devoid of extra-artistic motives – some have been used as indirect attacks on politicians, for example. Furthermore, these criticisms would be more convincing if they were more systematic, more clearly directed at perceived misrepresentations in the commercial media, and not only the arts. Nonetheless, these protests offer a critical opportunity to reconsider relationships between culture, art making, community, and public space. However they may be manipulated by the press, these encounters are multicultural identity politics made manifest in everyday life.

They speak to the complexities of negotiating diverse views on culture and identity in our society. Together with public actions by such groups as the AIDS activists of ACT UP, the feminists of WAC and Guerrilla Girls, and the artists of color of PESTS, they constitute some of the most interactive public engagements with the media and the arts that have emerged in the past decade. Each, in its own way, seeks to redress inequities by taking their concerns to the street and other public spaces, merging activism with spectacle.

These conflicts over self-definition of one's culture and icons resonate with similar battles from the past, but in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they have become increasingly concentrated within the arts, the media, and education, and have taken on a particularly strident tone. They signal a growing awareness of symbolic representation as a key site of political struggle. These conflicts also herald important shifts in how we must understand postmodernism and "difference". By giving abstract concepts and formal operations more overt social content, they localize, politicize, and historicize postmodern cultural debates that had been at one time excessively formalist and ethnocentric, even in the characterization of "difference" itself.

At the heart of these other postmodernisms lies an insistence that art and politics are never truly extricable. While a more formalist approach to appropriation and pastiche characterized much of the art and art criticism of the early eighties, the subaltern cultural strategies that have gained attention more recently foreground the connection between the political and the symbolic. The surrounding debates also involve explicit critiques of liberal humanist claims that legal equality ends significant difference between peoples, and of the relativist postures of certain strains of poststructuralism and their accompanying volunteerist propositions for understanding identity. Scores of feminists and postcolonial theorists have rejected formulations of poststructuralism that declare the death of the subject, the end of meaning, the decline of the social, and the failure of political resistance; these proclamations, they argue, speak only to

the realities of those few who once could claim absolute rights, absolute truth, and absolute authority. They also turn a skeptical eye to popular interpretations of the poststructuralist stress on the performative dimension of identity that reduce subjectivity to pure, self-determined artifice. Despite cataclysmic changes in the ways that communities are defined and information circulates, only an infinitely small sector of society actually chooses freely where they are, who they are, and how they live. And even the limited ability one might be able to acquire to alter aspects of one's identity cannot completely obfuscate the impact of outside social, political, and economic factors in the constitution of the self. To paraphrase the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, not all symbols and exchanges are interchangeable – there still are differences that make a difference. What emerges, however, is not a romantic form of essentialism, but a fluid notion of identity that is imbedded in but not mechanistically determined by history.

Within the realm of culture, then, two interrelated but seemingly contradictory struggles are in the foreground: one, waged in the realm of political representation, is an interracial, intercultural battle in the public sphere over appropriation, in which people of color are demanding the right to determine the meaning of their culture and delimit its identity – or rather, to point to borders that still exist. This is a battle that seeks to resolve a legacy of inequity by addressing the power relations involved in symbolic representation. On the other hand, the artistic outpourings from these same communities in recent years have stressed hybridity as a cultural experience and as a formal strategy. Performance artist and musician Alvin Eng, for example, sets his experimental video, Rock Me Gung Hey, about being Asian in Chinatown, but tells his story in rap idiom. Interestingly, rap music, which is often characterized as the expression of black male youth, is perhaps today's most resonant cross-cultural American language for defiant self-affirmation; its use has spread to Chicanos such as Keith Frost and A Lighter Shade of Brown, Cuban-Americans, such as Mellow Man Ace, and Nuyoricans such as Latin Empire – as well as to several young black women in the US whose voices often counter the malecenteredness of the practice, and to other young people throughout the world.

Although some might cling to the idea that all artists are bound to a specific, group-oriented mandate, or a fixed notion of community, the most challenging work takes these assumptions apart and presents new possibilities for old terms.

Adrian Piper's media installation Cornered, for example, is an indictment of American prejudice that demonstrates how the legal definition and social understanding of the term "black" are incompatible, compelling us to rethink our own understanding of our racial makeup. Rather than celebrate the survival of a "pure" tradition, James Luna's moving performance, It's Not Always Nice To Be an Indian, depicts some of the most saddening aspects of contemporary Native American experience, inviting us to enter into a poignant and enriching process of redefining his culture.

Perhaps the best result of the cultural climate of the past decade has been the flourishing of a variety of artistic practices and perspectives, which testifies to the impossibility of reducing cultural identity to a simplistic paradigm. It appears that we have worked away from the once widely held belief that artists of color must all be engaged in what Stuart Hall has called the act of imaginative re-covery of a singular, unifying past in order for their work to be valid. No longer bound to a sense of having to restrict one's focus, materials, or genre, many contemporary artists of color move back and forth between past and present, history and fiction, between art and ritual, between high art and popular culture, and between Western and non-Western influence. In doing so, they participate in multiple communities. Artists such as Fred Wilson

and Renée Green excavate the European and Euro-American colonial past, drawing our attention to often horrifying elements many ignore or take for granted, but also underscoring our attraction to and even fascination with the artifacts and documents themselves. Pepón Osorio's ornate and intricately redesigned domestic objects and theater sets blur commonly held distinctions between original and copy, and between reliquary and sculpture, forcing us to redefine Euro-American notions of taste and originality.

These artists reflect the hybrid experiences that shape so much of contemporary life. They emerge from the dynamics of moving between worlds and feeling at home and not at home in more than one. They deploy different languages, and cross aesthetic genres as they follow ideas through multiple media. They express the ambivalence produced by being out of sync with dominant media constructs and yet fascinated with its images and with the creative possibilities for their recontextualization. Similarly, they look at Western history and art history not to excise its racism but to excavate and play with symptomatic absences and stereotypes, creating a counter-history by bouncing off negative images and teasing out hidden stories.

Rather than reject dominant culture for its exclusionary tendencies and retreat, literally or figuratively, many artists of color who have matured in the last decade are forcefully engaged with it in ways that make it new. I am reminded here of the New York-based Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman's description of his own strategy of creating a new visual syntax out of bits of footage from television: "In a war in which you have no weapons, you must take those of your enemy and use them for something better – like throwing them back at him".

The strategy of taking elements of an established or imposed culture and throwing them back with a different set of meanings is not only key to guerrilla warfare; the tactics of reversal, recycling, and subversive montage are also aesthetics that form the basis of many twentieth-century avant-gardes. Nonetheless, a more profound understanding of the influences affecting many artists of color demands that we also perceive their connections to the semiotics characteristic of the colonial condition. Syncretism, or the fusion of different forms of belief or practice, enabled disempowered groups to maintain their outlawed or marginalized traditions. It also paved the way for a host of cultural recycling methods that infuse old icons with new meanings. Symbolic action, in the form of spirituality and art, have been critical arenas for the self-definition of politically disenfranchised peoples for centuries. One might recall the importance of African-American spirituals in the civil rights movement, or the role of the corridos for Chicanos in the Southwest as conveyors of a history suppressed by dominant Anglo society. Culture and communal self-expression are perhaps their most important sites of resistance, the signs in everyday life of an ongoing political struggle. Yet, resistance within a colonial context is rarely direct, overt, or literal; rather, it articulates itself through semantic reversals, and through the process of infusing icons, objects, and symbols with different meanings. As Henry Louis Gates has argued in his analyses of African-American signifyin', it is in these dynamics that one finds echoes of the creative defense of the enslaved against his/her master. They are among the many ways oppressed people have developed to take their identity back.

However bittersweet, they are also, often, very humorous. Parody, satire, and carnivalesque unsettling of established orders continue to thrive as creative strategies for temporarily subverting authority. Not surprisingly, the government of the Viceroyalty of Peru issued a law to outlaw comedy in the sixteenth century, out of fear of its potential political repercussions. Today, those who identify with the established order of things respond in a literal-minded manner to the playfulness and double entendres

of subaltern creative expression by reading only at face value. They insist that art should not "offend", that sophisticated appreciation must be distanced and reverent; and that serious criticism be dispassionate and "objective". What these dismissive attitudes cannot understand is that the irreverence and exuberant energy of these aesthetic strategies is evidence of the survival of subaltern practices that have created the conditions for spiritual and cultural renewal, as well as for critical reinterpretations of the world in which we live.

The identity battles of recent years are among the variety of ways in which the peoples of this country are transforming our vision of American and its cultures. To do this, we must look back to histories that have circulated mainly in marginalized communities. In the debates and art emerging from the tumult of the present are reflections of the many legacies of the conquest and colonization of the Americas, among them, its limiting views of art and culture. Although American society has defined progress as a focus on the future, we must now return to the past in order to place ourselves in that history and understand how we got to where we are. As we try to grasp at crucial parallels, and tease new stories out of them, new alternative chronicles surface; these are the latest examples of how collective memories, those storehouses of identity, once activated, become power sites of cultural resistance.

Europe owns no other continent
Eurown discovery
not continent
disco–
very strange
co–
descubrimiento
descubro
miento
I lie to you
we never lie together
vecinos abismales
still undiscovered
to one another
not quite carnales yet
not quite connecting
you are here
against my will
I am here against yours
we are damned
to repeat
la conquista y liberación
del Nuevo Mundo.

From Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 1992

Reprinted from the catalogue of the *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1993.

Multiple Identity
WORKS OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

(List of works)

AFRICANO, NICHOLAS
Sprained Ankle - 1977

ANDRE, CARL
Twenty-Ninth Copper Cardinal - 1975

AYCOCK, ALICE
Untitled (Shanty) - 1987

BARTLETT, JENNIFER
Falcon Avenue, Seaside Walk, Dwight Street, Jarvis Street, Greene Street - 1976

BASQUIAT, JEAN-MICHEL
"LNAPRK" - 1982

BENGLIS, LYNDA
Bravo 2 - 1975-1976

BICKERTON, ASHLEY
Stratified Landscape #1 - 1989

BOROFSKY, JONATHAN
Running People at 2,616,216 - 1979

BURDEN, CHRIS
America's Darker Moments - 1994

CAIN, PETER
Z - 1989

CHIN, MEL
HOMEySEW 9 - 1994

COLESCOTT, ROBERT
The Three Graces: Art, Sex and Death - 1981

DUNHAM, CARROLL
Pine Gap - 1985-1986

DURHAM, JIMMIE
Selfportrait - 1986

EISENMAN, NICOLE
Lemonade Stand - 1994

GALLAGHER, ELLEN
Afro Mountain - 1994

GOLUB, LEON
White Squad I - 1982

GRAVES, NANCY
Cantileve - 1983

HALLEY, PETER
The Acid Test - 1991-1992

HAMMONS, DAVID
Untitled - 1992

HARING, KEITH
Untitled - 1983-1984

KELLEY, MIKE
More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid i The Wages of Sin - 1987

KOMAR AND MELAMID
A Suite in Chrome Yellow. A Suicide in Bayonne - 1993

KOONS, JEFF
New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Blue; New Hoover Convertibles Green, Blue; Double-decker
1981-1987

KRUGER, BARBARA
Untitled (We Will No Longer Be Seen and Not Heard) - 1985

KUBOTA, SHIGEKO
Meta-Marcel: Window - 1976

LEWITT, SOL
A six-inch (15 cm) grid covering each of the four black walls. White lines to points on the grids. 1st wall: 24 lines from the center; 2nd wall: 12 lines from the midpoint of each of the sides; 3rd wall: 12 lines from each corner; 4th wall: 24 lines from the center, 12 lines from the midpoint of each of the sides, 12 lines from each corner
1976

LEVINE, SHERRIE
"La Fortune" (After Man Ray: 4) - 1990

LIGON, GLENN
Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored) - 1990

LIGON, GLENN
Untitled (I Am Not Tragically Colored) - 1990

LOBE, ROBERT
Facial Structure - 1986

MARTIN, AGNES
Untitled # 11 - 1977

MENDIETA, ANA
Untitled, from the series "Fetish" - 1977

MENDIETA, ANA
Untitled, from the series "Silueta" - 1979

MILLER, JOHN
Untitled - 1988

MORRISROE, MARK
Untitled (Self-portrait Standing in the Shower) - 1981

MORRISROE, MARK
I Dream of Jeannie (Stephen Tashjian's head) - 1983

MORRISROE, MARK
Untitled (Self-portrait With Broken Arm) - 1985

MURRAY, ELIZABETH
Children Meeting - 1978

OPIE, CATHERINE
Mike and Sky - 1992

OPIE, CATHERINE
Self-portrait - 1993

OPIE, CATHERINE
Ron Athey - 1994

OPPENHEIM, DENNIS
Lecture #1 - 1976-1983

OURSLER, TONY
Getaway #2 - 1994

PIERSON, JACK
Will You still love me tomorrow? - 1994

PITTMAN, LARI
Untitled # 16 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation) - 1993

RAY, CHARLES
Puzzle Bottle - 1995

RHOADES, JASON
Swedish Erotica and Fiero Parts - 1994

ROSLER, MARTHA
The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems - 1974-1975

ROTHENBERG, SUSAN
Holding the Floor - 1985

RUPPERSBERG, ALLEN
Remainders: Novel, Sculpture, Film - 1991

SAAR, ALISON
Skin/Deep - 1993

SALLE, DAVID
Splinter Man - 1982

SCHUMANN, CHRISTIAN
Hoot - 1995

SHAPIRO, JOEL
Untitled (House on the Field) - 1975-1976

SHERMAN, CINDY
Untitled # 311 - 1994

THATER, DIANA
Scarlet McCaw Crayons - 1995

TOMASELLI, FRED
Ocotillo Nocturne - 1993

WEINER, LAWRENCE
Here, There & Everywhere - 1989

WILLIAMS, SUE
The Hose - 1994