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THE MAX FACTOR: WHITNEY BIENNIAL 2000

THE OPENING THIS MONTH OF THE 2000 BIENNIAL EXHIBITION—the latest installment of the Whitney’s flagship show and the most-talked-about event on the museum’s calendar—also marks a closing of sorts: that of the moderately embattled first chapter of Maxwell Anderson’s tenure as director. Seventeen months into his term and with his final key appointment in place—Biennial team member Lawrence Rinder was recently named curator of contemporary art (see page 39)—the upcoming exhibition affirms one thing for certain: Any organization with the size and stature of the Whitney Museum of American Art inevitably does as much to shape the person at its helm as the person does to shape the institution.

From the start, Anderson’s group-curated effort—he named a six-person curatorial body amid a firestorm of staff defections—played more as necessary expedient than motivated innovation. The exodus was precipitated by early attempts at organizational restructuring—one curator got promoted, a couple more got mad, and the resulting rush for the door left the new director in something of a fix. The tailwind of toxic PR had many Whitney watchers fretting that the museum’s Kunsthalle edginess was about to go white shoe.

Of course, the Whitney’s not a Kunsthalle—it’s a museum; and surely Anderson had the collection in mind when he moved to reassign the institution’s loose consortium of curators to period-specific departments with responsibilities in corresponding areas of acquisition. Contrasting himself with predecessor David Ross, Anderson points out, “I’m a director, not a curator.” On to the deeds.

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If Marla Prather, Anderson's appointment to the new position of curator of postwar art, seemed to many solid but "safe," she boasts a pretty starchy pedigree (i.e., the National Gallery in Washington, DC); as Anderson's reported first choice, her coming on board counted as a show of strength. Next up: Lawrence Rinder. The thirty-eight-year-old California-based curator of shows by the likes of Jack Smith and Andrea Fraser may nevertheless appear a tad too white male to repair the blow those early defections dealt to the institution's justly lauded diversity. Still, the appointment was a far cry from the auto-return to the blue-chip-cozy days of Thomas Armstrong (Ross's predecessor) that many had feared of an Anderson Whitney. And the announcement of the Biennial artists—a roster notable for fresh names and the demonstrative absence of high-end New York gallery representation—has prompted even some cynics to ask whether the dark-age forebodings were exaggerated. Will necessity, as one member of the Anderson quick-fix team suggests, prove the mother of invention?

We called on the six Biennial curators—Michael Auping, Jane Farver, Hugh Davies, Andrea Miller-Keller, Lawrence Rinder, and Valerie Cassel—and judging by the balance of spirited advocacy and informed compromise their comments reveal, the collaboration seems to have been a living, breathing one. By all appearances, Anderson remained, in his own words, "a time keeper." "My role was not to choose the work," he emphasizes; while not every curator was 100 percent thrilled with the outcome, the collective effort may yield a result greater than the sum of its participants.

As for the Whitney as a whole? So far, so not-so-bad; but with the key positions, by Anderson's own reckoning, all sewn up (Prather's mandate covers the broad stretch from '50 to '85; Rinder picks up from there), some are wondering whether the '60s and '70s—arguably the most fertile (but also most challenging) period in American art—will get the short shrift. Where, too, are the high-style scribes and public presence to keep pace with the MoMA lineup? To keep its place next to its august peers as the feistiest of New York's modern venues, the Whitney will need to be more than a well-meaning (and oiled) machine—it needs to make itself a midwife of ideas and debate, not just a packager of crowd-pleasing formulae. That is the challenge ahead as Anderson's tenure enters episode two. Necessity, once again. Is it too soon to call it the Max factor?

—Eds.

ANDREA MILLER-KELLER

CARLOS BASUALDO: In putting together the Biennial, did you have any opportunity to accommodate art beyond the museum walls?

ANDREA MILLER-KELLER: The kinds of explorations that move beyond the bounds of the museum take considerable time to nurture and develop. The absence of such public work is for me probably the greatest weakness of this Biennial. When the six of us gathered for the first time in April (and learned that the catalogue deadline would be October), we talked about choosing a theme but felt that there were hazards in making too rushed or casual a choice. We decided it would be smarter to put our efforts into showing good work by strong artists. Remember, we all had our “day jobs.” We also agreed that if we couldn’t get the strongest work available, then we would not show a given artist.

CB: It looks to me like there were other things going on—inviting non-US citizens, including a number of younger artists.

AMK: At the beginning, we talked about what kind of balance would be wise. We thought we’d aim for a show that had —these were our starting figures —maybe forty percent younger artists, forty percent midcareer, and twenty percent older. We never went back and checked to see how we did with those numbers —it wasn’t about rigid categories or quotas at all —but that was what we thought the Biennial should present to the public.

CB: Are you satisfied with the structure of the show?

AMK: No, not entirely. I think it is appropriate and accomplished given the circumstances, but it would be much better to have a curator of contemporary art at the Whitney who takes the lead on the Biennial. Personally, I had to make a difficult decision about whether or not to participate. The five curators who had left the Whitney were all people I admired and there were other curators who were invited to participate and said no.

CB: What was your main reason for taking part in it?

AMK: A lot of people see the Biennial, so I hoped I would have a chance to speak on behalf of some artists who maybe have not been in past shows. Of those selected, only thirteen have been in previous Biennials.

CB: Could you tell me about some of the people in the show you feel most strongly about?

AMK: First, I’d rather tell you about some who I wish were in the show but are not. For example, there’s Michael Singer, who made his reputation as a sculptor and is now leading architectural teams involved in major recycling projects. I think that’s something that needs to be acknowledged—an artistic vision that has both

aesthetic and political implications. There are others I would have included: With her large-scale Polaroids, Ellen Carey is working at ground zero in the field of photography. Beth B's portraits of women are art-historically important as well as beautiful. Then there's someone like Betty Woodman, who started out in ceramics and craft and has come to a completely different place as she turns seventy. I wish we could have introduced the general public to the work of filmmakers Diane Nerwen and Lucia Davis. On the upside, I'm delighted that the Biennial includes T. Kim-Trang Tran, Mandy Morrison, Sadie Benning, Jennifer Reeder, Sharon Lockhart, Carl Pope, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Louise Lawler, Franco Mondini-Ruiz, Arthur Jafa, Bill DeLottie, ^{®™}ark, and many, many others.

CB: In what way was the show important for your own practice in terms of how you think about your own work?

AMK: I don't know that it was important for me, although it was a positive experience. It's almost the total opposite of my twenty-four years of running matrix [at the Atheneum], which was small, low-key, low-profile, and independent. With matrix, each artist and I worked together in some depth, often challenging institutional boundaries, for instance, Julie Ault's 1997 "Power Up: Sister Mary Corita and Donald Moffet," or, in my last official show for matrix, the historical reclamation of Mierle Ukeles's 1973 "Maintenance Art" pieces inside the very museum that had totally forgotten about them.

CB: Was the avoidance of the bigger-name galleries a comment about the art world?

AMK: Well, probably for some of us. Certainly undue influence from such sources is always on my mind. But I can't speak for the other curators because that tendency wasn't by design.

CB: Were there any pressures?

AMK: There were none—except for time and money! In the past I gather that it was common to turn to galleries for substantial support when their artists were selected. That would augment the budget in a substantial way, and it's probably standard practice in many shows. I think in this respect this year's Biennial is certainly an exception.



MICHAEL AUPING



KATY SIEGEL: How do you think this Biennial will come to be regarded in relation to others?

MICHAEL AUPING: It will arguably be the first in a series of international Biennials, because of the way we migrate today. An artist could be born in Beijing and end up working in New York. It forces the issue of what we mean when we say "American." There are also fewer artists recognized by galleries.

KS: I think some gallery people are a little ticked off about that.

MA: I've gotten two responses. One is that they're a little ticked off that some of their more stellar artists aren't in. The other is that we've done a lot of legwork, and a number of these artists will have galleries before the opening dinner.

KS: What were the biggest

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JANE FARVER



JULIE CANIGLIA: How will this Biennial be regarded in comparison to others?

JANE FARVER: I think it will be seen as more international—this is reflective of where America is going and who really lives here—and also possibly less predictable. For instance, artists like Cai Guo-Qing, Yukio Kurosawa, and Lito Camatter have all lived here for years, yet they are more often labeled as representing China, Japan, or Uruguay than the US. I'm excited about their work being seen in the context of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and I'm also excited about the inclusion of artists like Michael Joo, Paul Pfeiffer, and Rosa Ramirez, whose work may be informed by their Asian or South Asian heritage but who've grown up here.

JC: Was there any kind of mandate to look outside the group of artists considered part

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HUGH DAVIES



KATY SIEGEL: How do you think this Biennial will come to be regarded in relation to others?

HUGH DAVIES: The net was cast nationally in a way it has not been before. When you're in New York and everyone's just born to the same opening, there's a kind of unexamined closed-mindedness. People who live somewhere else bring breadth.

KS: Who were some of the lesser-known artists you championed?

HD: Roman de Salvo and Marcos Ramirez Eraz, two San Diego artists my fellow curators knew little about; and Joseph McElherry from Seattle. I'd seen his work in a small gallery in New York, and then at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. Larry Rinder had seen that show too, and there was sort of a groundswell that, yeah, this guy has been seen in

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Special report: Curator in Charge: Peter Palumbo, 2000, curates a who's-who of contemporary art.

by Katy Siegel

with Hugh Davies

and Julie Caniglia

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