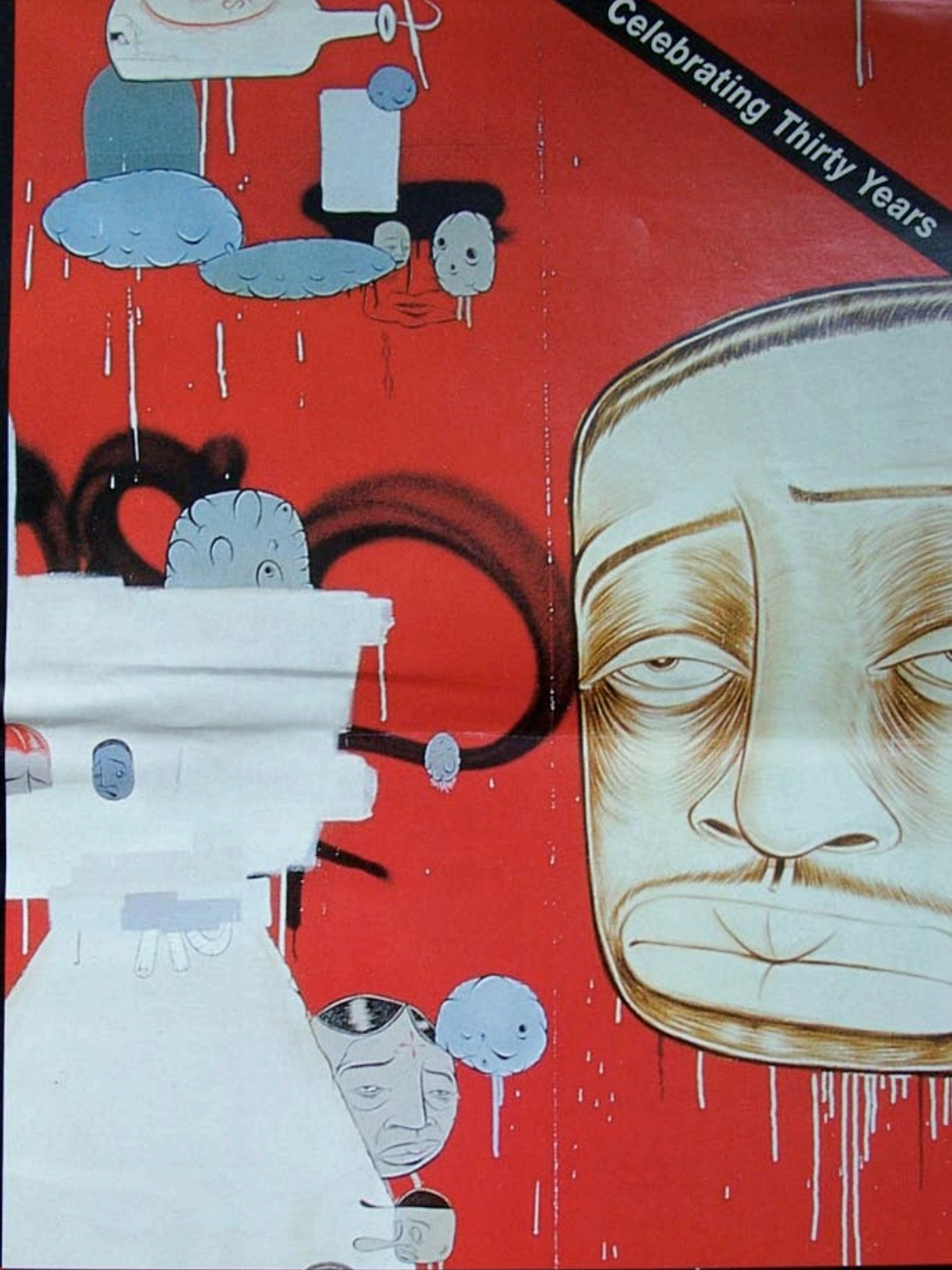


# Artweek

Celebrating Thirty Years



■ Whitney Biennial ■ Robert Heinecken ■ Margaret Kilgallen ■ Wendy Furman

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# Artweek

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# Lending New Form to Video

By Merrill Falkenberg

Inaugurated by New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in the late 1960s, the Biennial, the show that has become so hip to hate, is an invitational survey exhibition that attempts to present the general public with a clear, critical perspective on vanguard developments in contemporary American art. The scope of the exhibition as well as its definitive claims to represent the best of new art, has led to inevitable criticism of the arbitrary, hierarchical and often New York-centric nature of the selections. The museum has responded to these accusations with varying levels of success. In 1990, former Whitney Museum and now San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Director David Ross eschewed any blindly optimistic claims to objectivity, choosing to have the Biennials organized by a single curator armed with a thematic point of view. The 1993, 1995 and 1997 Biennial focus on issues of race, class and gender led to further controversy, precipitating tedious accusations in the popular press of political correctness and sensationalism. As with the recent brouhaha over Chris Ofili's portrait of the Virgin Mary in the aptly titled *Sensation* show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, critical reception of the last three Biennials has focused on the polemics of museum display at the expense of a more earnest engagement with the ideas and aesthetic or experiential value of the works themselves.

If the tumultuous events leading up to the opening of the 2000 Biennial is any indication, the critical response to this year's exhibition should prove to be equally contentious. This Biennial is the first show supervised by the new Whitney Museum director, Maxwell L. Anderson. Appointed in September 1999, Anderson's most distinct directorial decision so far has been to unceremoniously fire half of the museum's curatorial staff. The new director's peremptory move left him in the unique position of having to hire an outside group of curators from museums around the country to assemble a wide-ranging show in record time. Among the six individuals chosen for the committee is Lawrence R. Rinder, the current director of the CCAC Institute, who will assume a full-time position as curator of contemporary art at the Whitney this fall. While no one curator was responsible for a specific segment of the show, it is reasonable to assume that Rinder helped bring the work of certain Bay Area artists to the committee's attention. Lutz Bacher and Anthony Disenza are two Bay Area artists working in video who were selected as participants in this year's Biennial. Both are at opposite points in their careers, and both approach video from alternate perspectives. Bacher often chooses to record and manipulate scenes from everyday life, while Disenza approaches video within the genealogy of information technology, using video to critique that other, omnipresent source of imagery: television.

Contrary to the much-ballyhooed notion that the Whitney Biennial provides new, unknown artists with a career springboard, Bacher is a conceptual artist and former UCLA instructor who has been exhibiting photogra-



Above: Anthony Disenza, still of *phosphorescence*, 1999, DVD; below: Lutz Bacher, still of *Olympiad*, 1997, video.



phy, painting, sculpture and found objects since 1976. In the past fifteen years, Bacher has increasingly turned to video as another method with which to further explore issues of identity, seriality and perceptual space. Her inclusion of video within a wider oeuvre of media fulfills John Baldessari's clarion call to artists in the early 1970s, the first decade of video art's existence, to overcome the infatuation with video as a new technology. Baldessari predicted that for there to be progress in video art, the medium would have to be treated as neutrally as a pencil, as just one more tool in the artist's toolbox. In spite of thirty years of development in video art, most art critics have yet to grasp this concept. The technologically determined rhetoric surrounding video art and the insistence on categorizing artists who work with video as exclusive video artists, prohibits a deeper understanding of videotapes and installations as genuine works of art.

Having established Bacher as an artist who works with video rather than a "video artist," Bay Area audiences had an opportunity to see two of Bacher's video installations this fall, *A Normal Life* in CCAC's *Searchlight* exhibit and *Blue Angels and Butterflies* in Yerba Buena's *Bay Area Now 2*. Both installations reflected Bacher's interest in video as a means to consider visual and psychological perception as well as the experience of space. *A Normal Life* is a seemingly haphazard recording of men and women at an outdoor birthday party, alternately aware and oblivious to the video camera's presence. The tape seemed peculiarly

mundane within the grandiose context of *Searchlight*, a show devoted to the exploration of consciousness at the millennium. Yet the work was distinguished in part by its use of the installation chamber. Literally expanding the two-dimensional surface of the monitor, Bacher's room included a sliding glass door and built-in bench, enclosing the viewer in a space that mimicked the outdoor site of the videotaped party while underscoring the actual confinement and isolation from the events unfolding on-screen. *Blue Angels and Butterflies* similarly positioned the viewer in an ambiguous zone. Again occupying a single room, one corner was filled with a double video projection of the Blue Angels in flight, caught in glimpses against a cloudless sky. In the center of the room, recalling the white wooden rooftops of North Beach were three towering sets of open metal shelves, their rectilinear shadows marking the opposite wall. In the center was a television monitor playing a tape of butterflies in the Museum of Natural History, struggling to stay alive. Watching the sluggish museum visitors in the Natural History museum while hearing the thundering sound of the planes, the audience could simultaneously inhabit both zones while remaining perpetually aware of their fixed position within these images of flight.

*Olympiad*, Bacher's contribution to the Biennial is a black and white, 36-minute video recording of the artist's visit to the 1936 Olympic Stadium in Berlin, the virtually abandoned site of Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film, *Olympia*. The artist's recording of her visit is ironically enhanced by an unanticipated corrosion of the tape. After filming, Bacher discovered that a continuous band of static had marred both image and sound. As with Joan Jonas's famous 1972 tape, *Vertical Roll* (coincidentally now on view at SFMOMA), Bacher highlighted the interference as an aesthetic component of the finished work. Transferring the tape through a time-based corrector which could only process and record in silent black and white, Bacher stabilized and re-recorded various segments, allowing the freeze-frame, static and rectangular traces of digital coding to act as a palimpsest of manipulation and transformation. The deliberate overexposure of the video leads to a further dematerialization of the image, questioning the use of video as document, the artist's role as witness and the layers of history which haunt our experience of the site.

The most immediate link between *Olympiad* and the work of Anthony Disenza is the use of recording, editing and re-recording video as an aesthetic and structuring component of the work. A second-year MFA student at CCAC, Disenza's work stems from his love/hate relationship to television. His work attempts to deconstruct the ubiquity of television imagery which acts as an ersatz depiction of the real world, while at the same time, addressing the lurid fascination that keeps so many of us glued to the screen. Setting up his video camera in front of the television, Disenza obsessively channel surfs, re-scanning the imagery while moving the camera in and out of focus. The videotapes are then

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