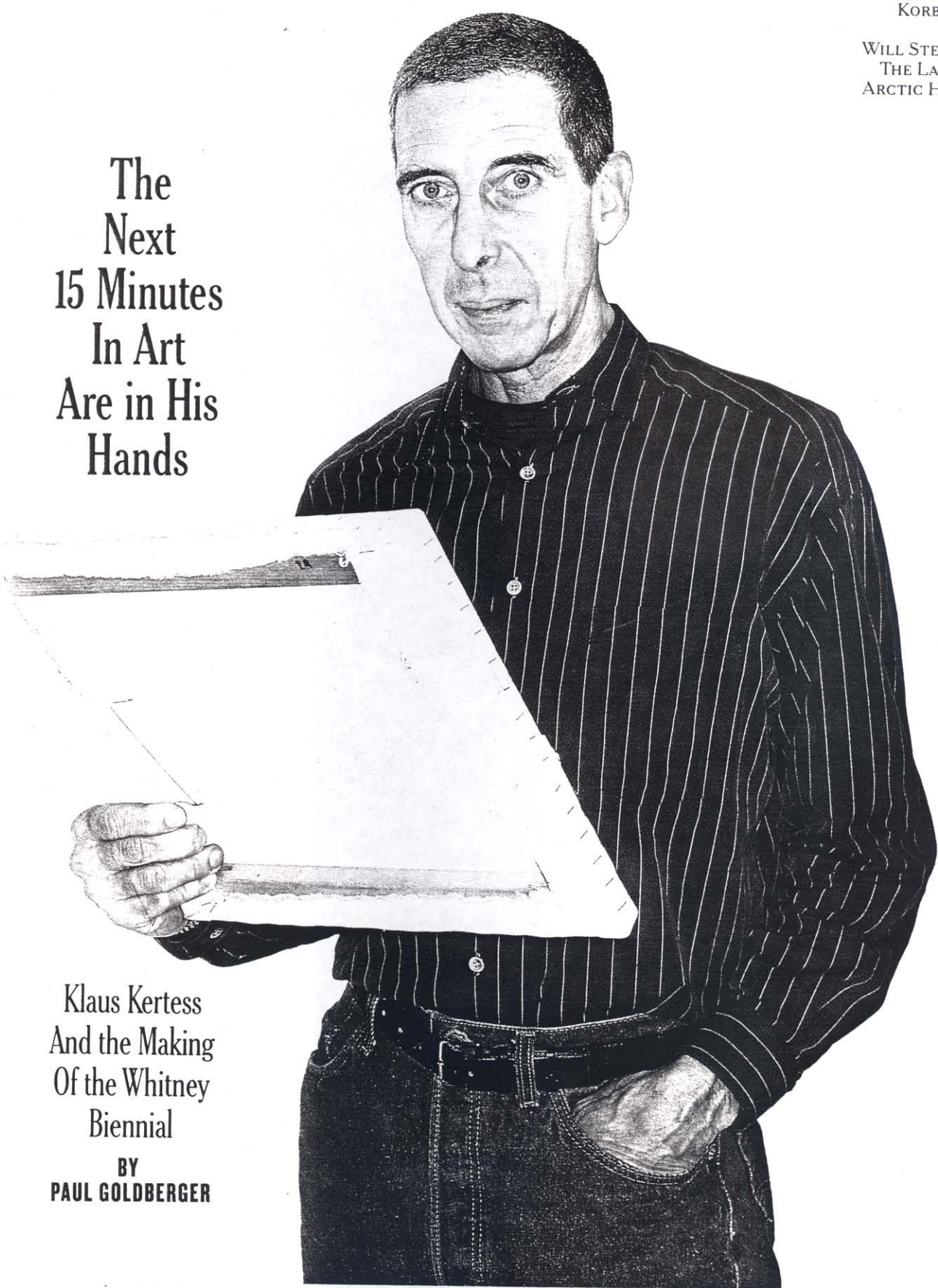
THE READINESS GAP: A MILITARY MYTH
BY LAWRENCE J. KORB

WILL STEGER, THE LAST ARCTIC HERO

The Next 15 Minutes In Art Are in His Hands



Klaus Kertess And the Making Of the Whitney Biennial

BY
PAUL GOLDBERGER

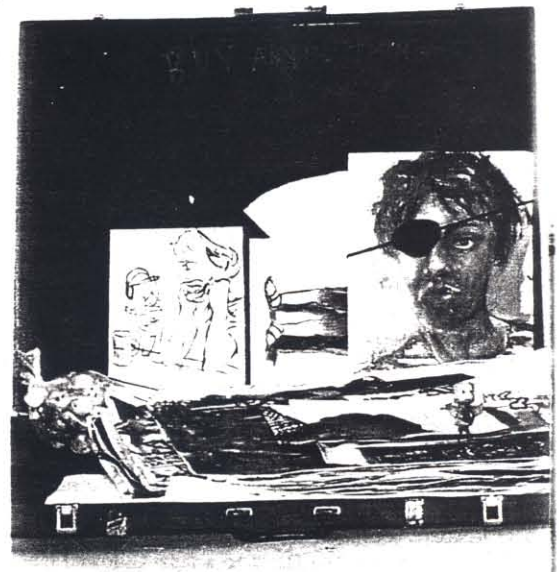
Klaus Kertess has spent two years judging American artists for the 1995 Whitney Biennia Now it's he who's about to be judged.

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

Photographs by Barron Claiborne

THE ART OF HIS CHOOSING

Klaus Kertess, a pencil-thin, 54-year-old art curator and writer with a long, somber face and a gentle manner, steps onto the sidewalk in front of a Chicago hotel with the hesitant air of someone in foreign territory. He looks up as an old brown Toyota swoops to the curb; he climbs in somewhat gingerly and sits beside the driver, a 39-year-old painter named Kerry James Marshall. In search of small talk on a subject other than art, Kertess takes a cue from the music on the radio and starts a conversation about Chicago blues that, thankfully, lasts until they arrive 10 minutes later at an office building in an industrial neighborhood south of the Loop.



Once inside Marshall's third-floor studio — a small room with a view of the Sears Tower, crammed with paintings,

American art, the biennial — which opens at the Whitney on March 23 and will remain on view until June 4 — has a special imprimatur. Museumgoers look to it for direction and the art world looks to it for, well, all sorts of things. As the biggest nod that the art establishment (that is, the museums) gives to the commercial world (the galleries), the biennial can raise the value of a younger artist's work substantially. (It has less impact on the prices and reputations of established artists, for whom appearing in the biennial is more an honor than a necessity.) The show is really the New York art world's only wide-open casting call, the chance for a relative unknown to suddenly ascend to Broadway. At a time when the market for contemporary art still languishes far below its late-80's peak, it is more important than ever, granting a chosen few artists an exposure far beyond the limited world of gallery browsers. And so Klaus Kertess, for the moment at least, is the art world's most powerful bestower of approval, its El Exigente.

In a sense, Kertess has been working toward this moment all his life. A former dealer — he founded and ran the influential Bykert Gallery from 1966 to 1975, helping to start the careers of Brice Marden, Chuck Close and David Novros — he is also well-known as an art essayist and fiction writer and has served as the Whitney's adjunct curator for drawings since 1989. Neither fully comfortable with the formality of the museum or the hustle of the gallery, he is trusted by each realm as a bridge to the other. He has always sought out new artists and new work and is a fierce advocate of those who please his catholic taste.

This breadth of taste may be the most important thing he brings to the Whitney, since the last biennial, in 1993, was one of the museum's most embarrassing critical disasters. Organized by Elisabeth Sussman, a resident curator, it emphasized political art over all else and included considerably less painting than in previous shows, leaving critics to shriek that the Whitney had abandoned the very idea of art as a visual medium. Even advocates of art as political statement wondered whether that trend hadn't already peaked and complained that the Whitney was behind the curve.

"A saturnalia of political correctness, a long-winded immersion course in marginality ... one big fiesta of whining agitprop," the critic Robert Hughes called the 1993 biennial.

Michael Kimmelman, the Times's chief art critic, was even more blunt. "I hate the show," he wrote. "There is virtually nothing in the biennial that encourages, much less rewards, close observation."

The Whitney has been mounting survey exhibitions of new work either annually or biannually ever since its founder, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, put up the first one in 1932, a year after the museum opened. From the outset, the Whitney has done as it pleased, guiltlessly offending those who were left out and those who were upset about who was let in. "Museums have had the habit of waiting until a painter or sculptor had acquired a certain official recognition before they would accept his

IN...

'Well, I guess I should tell you now; you're in the biennial, you are' is how Kertess greeted Ellen Gallagher in Boston on Sept. 16.

...AND OUT

Kertess went to Jersey City to see Paul Bloodgood on Aug. 4. Bloodgood didn't make the cut.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARRON CLAIBORNE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

work within their sacred portals," Whitney declared in 1930. "Exactly the contrary practice will be carried on in the Whitney."

At least in retrospect, some of the surveys were extremely successful. In the 1940's, they brought the first museum appearances of Milton Avery, Georgia O'Keeffe and Edward Hopper, fulfilling the museum's stated aim of introducing contemporary American art to a wide public. In 1957, the museum began alternating sculpture and painting shows, but returned in 1973 to the practice of combining all media into a single show; soon after, the biennial was expanded to include work in video and film.

For decades, the exhibitions were organized by the museum's entire team of curators, who would vote for one another's favorites just as Congressmen vote for each other's pet bills. The amorphous, everything-but-the-kitchen-sink biennials rarely fared well with critics, who made a habit of bashing the Whitney's taste. It was with the goal of ending the cycle of committee shows and art world griping that David Ross, who became the museum's director in 1991, decided to turn each biennial over to a single curator. "The curator makes the exhibition, not the institution," Ross says. "There is an honesty to doing it that way, an intensity of vision that you don't get with a committee."

The potential of this system notwithstanding, all bets were off after the drubbing of 1993. The Whitney, bothered for years by its reputation as a kind of art world temple of political correctness, badly needed to return to a more solid middle ground, where paintings and sculptures weren't perceived mainly as vehicles for political sloganeering.

In fact, Ross had picked Kertess to run the 1995 biennial before Sussman's show even opened. The choice was hailed by most of the galleries representing painters, which felt shut out by the 1993 exhibition, but sent a shudder through the art world avant-garde, which feared that its pipeline to the establishment was about to be cut off.

The 1993 show did not draw badly — with nearly 105,000 admissions, it was the museum's second-most-popular show in this decade, behind Jean-Michel Basquiat. But it did little to assuage the sense that the Whitney had a manifest weakness for trendiness. Among the show's dreariest works were

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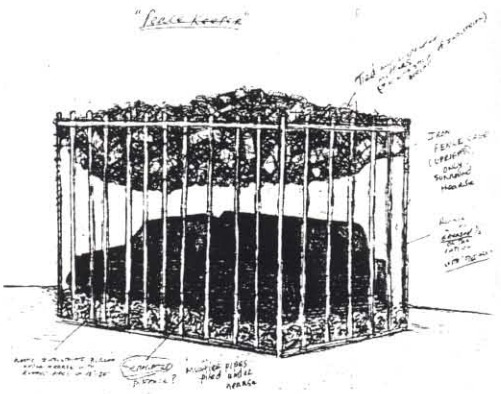
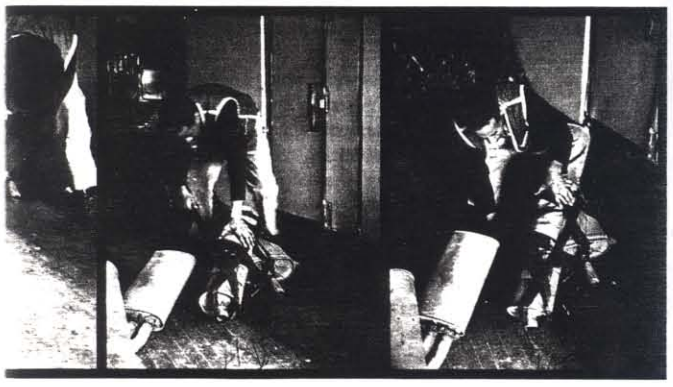


BIG PRODUCTION

Nari Ward's 'Peace Keeper' consists of a hearse topped by a mass of mufflers and set inside an iron cage. A welder, chopsaw in hand, helped prepare for the installation on Feb. 3. Three days earlier, the artist wrapped the mufflers with industrial burlap.



A Biennial Scorecard

The Preordained
Brice Marden
Agnes Martin
Robert Ryman
Richard Serra
Cy Twombly

No Big Surprise
Matthew Barney
Stan Brakhage
Carroll Dunham
Todd Haynes
Jim Jarmusch
Elizabeth LeCompte/ The Wooster Group
Stephen Mueller
Jack Pierson
Cindy Sherman
Philip Taaffe
Terry Winters

Assumed to Be Preordained (But Didn't Make It)
Ross Bleckner
John Chamberlain
Chuck Close
Peter Halley
Roni Horn
Bill Jensen
Elizabeth Murray

Assumed to Have a Good Shot (But, Alas, Were Omitted)
Chris Burden
John Currin
Lyle Ashton Harris
Mary Heilmann
Barbara Kruger
Sean Landers
Jonathan Lasker
Malcolm Morley
Martin Puryear
Ed Ruscha
Andres Serrano

Those Who Said No
Lee Bontecou
Bruce Nauman
Albert York

Re-Emerging Artists
James Bishop
Jane Freilicher
Harriet Korman
Milton Resnick
Peter Saul

Surprisingly Mature First-Timers
Judy Linn, 47
John O'Reilly, 65
Lawrence Weiner, 53

Some Younger First-Timers
Nicole Eisenman, 29
Ellen Gallagher, 29
Toba Khedoori, 30
Siobhan Liddell, 29
Catherine Opie, 33
Christian Schumann, 24
Rirkrit Tiravanija, 33
Nari Ward, 31
Andrea Zittell, 29

Nafta Artists
Stan Douglas
Jeff Wall
(Canada)

Julio Galán
Gabriel Orozco
(Mexico)

New York Galleries That Scored Big (And the Biennial Artists They Show, Represent or Co-Represent)
Matthew Marks Gallery (5):
David Armstrong
Peter Cain
Nan Goldin
Brice Marden
Richard Serra

David Zwirner Gallery (4):
Stan Douglas
Toba Khedoori
Jason Rhoades
Diana Thater

Gagosian Gallery (3):
Andrew Lord
Philip Taaffe
Cy Twombly

Nolan/Eckman Gallery (3):
The works on paper of
Carroll Dunham
Barry Le Va
Joe Zucker

Sonnabend Gallery (3):
Carroll Dunham
Barry Le Va
Terry Winters

Repeat Artists From the 1993 Biennial
Matthew Barney
Roddy Bogawa
Peter Cain
Shu Lea Cheang
Jeanne C. Finley
Nan Goldin
Mike Kelley
Elizabeth LeCompte/ The Wooster Group
Jack Pierson
Lari Pittman
Charles Ray
Cindy Sherman
Willie Varela
Sue Williams

Number of Artists Who Showed Paintings at the 1993 Biennial: 7

Number of Artists Showing Paintings at the 1995 Biennial: 26

Other Artists in the 1995 Biennial
Peggy Ahwesh
Karim Aïnouz
Lawrence Andrews
Hima B.
Gregg Bordowitz
Emily Breer
Cheryl Donegan
Harry Gamboa, Jr.
Joe Gibbons
DeeDee Halleck
Thomas Allen Harris
Bessie Harvey*
Peter Hutton
Ken Jacobs
Tom Kalin
Lewis Klahr
David Knudsvig*
Harriet Korman
Greer Lankton
Paul McCarthy
David McDermott
Peter McGough
Helen Marden
Frank Moore
Catherine Murphy
Frances Negrón-Muntaner
Andrew Noren
Raphael Montañez Ortiz
Scott Rankin
Michael Rees
Sam Reveles
Nancy Rubins
Gretchen Stoeltje
Margie Strosser
Leslie Thornton
Alan Turner

*DECEASED

COMPILED BY MICHELLE SHIH