

CUMULUS

From America

IN EVERY EDITION OF PARKETT, TWO CUMULUS CLOUDS, ONE FROM AMERICA, THE OTHER FROM EUROPE, FLOAT OUT TO AN INTERESTED PUBLIC. THEY CONVEY INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS, ASSESSMENTS, AND MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS—AS ENTIRELY PERSONAL PRESENTATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ISSUES.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE ARE DEBRA SINGER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR OF THE KITCHEN, NEW YORK, AND FORMER ASSOCIATE CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, AND NATAŠA PETREŠIN, AN INDEPENDENT CURATOR AND WRITER BASED IN LJUBLJANA.

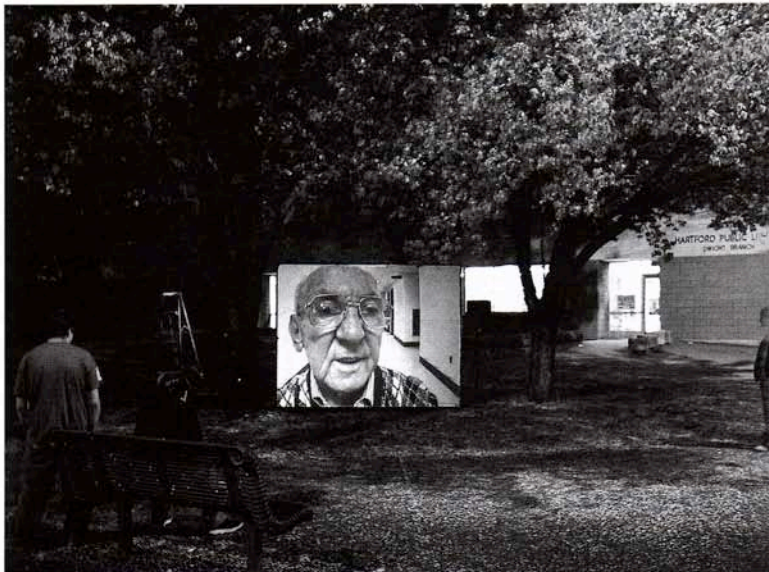
A POST-BIENNIAL POST-SCRIPT

DEBRA SINGER

As one of the three co-curators of the 2004 Whitney Biennial, the better part of my 2003 was spent in airports, automobiles, and, thankfully, artists' studios in various cities across the United States. If life on the road is *modus operandi* for most art curators, it goes into hyperdrive when Biennial deadlines loom. The endeavor, at least at the Whitney, becomes a thirteen-month, warp-speed sprint against the clock (and the budget) to come up with a list of artists that somehow re-

fects trends in American art-making in the last two years. With the exhibition having come-and-gone, I've recently found some blurred aspects of this intensely compressed experience coming into focus. One in particular keeps resurfacing, which is: a noticeable return, particularly by younger artists, to politically-engaged work that addresses difficult realities through nuanced rhetorical strategies and allegorical approaches, in lieu of strategies of didactic critique or ironic statement. There

were many artists in the Biennial—and myriad more outside of the exhibition—whose work represents this type of outlook; however, three quite distinct figures from the show seem aptly representative of this continuing, bubbling trend: Harrell Fletcher, Wynne Greenwood (a.k.a. Tracy & the Plastics), and Christian Holstad. These three artists seem paradigmatic of a range of current artistic practices that communicate, with refreshing sincerity, new, modest possibilities for social



connectedness, personal empowerment, and positive political change.

The Oregon-based artist Harrell Fletcher produces work inside and outside museums and gallery spaces predicated on harnessing the creativity of diverse groups of people who do not necessarily identify themselves as artists. Through rather simple participatory structures, Fletcher enables groups of people to both create and exhibit work, fostering new relationships through cooperative processes along the way. In the 2004 Whitney Biennial, for instance, Fletcher exhibited several works clustered around one kiosk-like station. The first was a video project, *BLOT OUT THE SUN* (2002), that came about through Fletcher's acquaintance with a gas station owner in his Portland neighborhood. The two created a movie together out of the owner's

favorite book, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Filming at the gas station, mechanics and customers alike read selected excerpts of the novel off of cue cards, resulting in an alternative narrative focused on themes of death, love, and social inequality. A second related video, titled *THE PROBLEM OF POSSIBLE REDEMPTION* (2003), was created at a senior citizens center in Hartford, Connecticut. This time, Fletcher worked with elderly people, who read aloud different passages from the same Joyce text, meditating society, war, and mortality. Both were rather enchanting works created with a great economy of means, and were remarkable for their unusual contrast between the settings, protagonists, and breadth of content.

Two other exhibited works included a stack of take-away free newspapers, which were part of his project

titled *THIS CONTAINER ISN'T BIG ENOUGH* (2004). The newspaper described and illustrated artwork by ten people whom Fletcher had met from around the country. It also functioned as a map for locations throughout the city, ranging from furniture stores to cafes to recreational centers where Fletcher had organized exhibits of this artwork. Featured alongside the newspapers was his collaborative project with artist Miranda July and designer Yuri Ono, titled *LEARNING TO LOVE YOU MORE* (2002–ongoing), which is a website dedicated to presenting artwork made by the general public in response to unusual, creative assignments crafted by Fletcher and July: they post and archive both the assignments and the results on the site as well as regularly exhibiting the original works at various venues when oppor-



TRACY & THE PLASTICS on stage / in Aktion.



tunities arise. The assignments range from something as simple as, "Take a photograph of the sun," to more complex endeavors such as, "Make an audio recording of a choir (real or constructed)." The basic assumption is that by giving out assignments, Fletcher and July offer the chance to bypass the often daunting challenge of coming up with an idea on your own. Reflecting an unusual combination of high-tech and low-tech, the project taps into the internet's potential to initiate new forms of virtual community with a parallel dimension of hands-on art-making. What perhaps is most refreshing about this ongoing collaborative project is the enthusiastic level of participation from individuals living all over the globe.

Like Fletcher's other endeavors, LEARNING TO LOVE YOU MORE emphasizes inclusiveness through do-it-yourself approaches, creating, along the

way, improbable connections between otherwise completely unrelated people. While the nature of his artistic practice is in a lineage of Beuysian social sculpture, and is reminiscent of modes of community-engagement that became particularly popular in the seventies, part of what distinguishes Fletcher's work is its consistent adaptability to generate poignant, site-responsive projects that succeed in a wide variety of contexts through noticeably ordinary and simple means.

In many respects, community and participatory social exchange are also at the crux of work by a very different Biennial artist, Wynne Greenwood, in her ongoing project *Tracy & the Plastics*. *Tracy & the Plastics* is a feminist-lesbian, art-punk band, in which Greenwood assumes the roles of all three band members, performing live on stage as Tracy, while also appearing as both Nikki and Cola in the form of pre-recorded video projections. Until recently, *Tracy & the Plastics* had performed mostly in clubs and underground music venues around the country. "Band practice" is often the guise of presentation during the performances, which establishes both an air of informality between performer and audience, as well as the rationale for frequent conversational interactions between Tracy and her band-mates on the video screen behind her. Throughout the show, interruptions in-between songs—or even smack in the middle of them—recur, as the trio discusses any number of topics that, while playfully humorous, allude to more serious concerns: like Nikki voicing a complaint about how she thinks the band's name upholds the "traditional hierarchy of the rock band," or explaining how to "do things like a lesbian," like drinking

tea or holding a baby. Such deliberate “disruptions” and “technical difficulties” result in synapses in the evening’s flow, creating unusual opportunities for Tracy to talk directly to the audience, to literally give them space to respond and participate in her world.

Recently, at The Kitchen, *Tracy & the Plastics* produced their first installation and full-length evening performance titled *ROOM* (2005), which was created in conjunction with the sculptor Fawn Krieger. The gallery installation was a kind of “utopian living room” made from cheap carpet, wood, and foam-mirroring, in a sense, the low-tech aesthetic of the video projections. The band performed in this built environment, which was designed so that musicians and audience members could share the same physical space, and was intended to re-imagine settings for feminist, consciousness-raising groups from the seventies. The project demonstrated how Greenwood weaves an idiosyncratic post-Seattle Slacker/post-Riot Grrrl sensibility with queer-punk politics and a surprising dose of pop-music virtuosity into an intensely engaging exploration of sexuality, collective identification, community, and home.

Offering up an equally hand-crafted but completely distinct style of work is Christian Holstad, who uses the popular aesthetics of sixties psychedelia, kitsch, camp, and seventies glam rock and disco styles to create vibrantly lavish installations composed of many disparate handmade objects, drawings, and collages. Strongly influenced by the films and performances of Jack Smith, Holstad often creates installations that are flamboyant memorials, dedicated either to real individuals or invented characters, made from won-

derfully intricate hand-sewn quilts and soft-sculptural forms as well as erased newspaper drawings, pornographic collages, papier-mâché balloons, and transformed found objects.

His installation at the Whitney, for example, was comprised of three distinct works, which conjured a fantastical graveyard vigil. It centered around a campfire made from stitched fabric logs and crocheted flames as well as a thirties-style funeral basket made primarily from re-sewn roller skates, whimsically decorated with mirrored testicle-like shapes. Other elements included a wool-felt funeral wreath ornamented with Venus flytraps, men’s leather underwear, and absurdly long red, white, and blue metallic pom-poms. Incorporating camp’s embrace of opposite sensibilities, Holstad’s works paradoxically also conveyed an elegiac aura, as the setting was equally tinged with tenderness and longing for the

lost “days of disco”—a more liberating, and liberal bygone era. The specificity and theatricality of the installation at once parodied recent over-the-top patriotic displays, while also expressing a celebratory affirmation of gay sexuality, which, in Holstad’s words, served also as a tribute to a “rebellious spirit everywhere.”

Within a broad spectrum, Fletcher, Greenwood, and Holstad represent different facets of a much broader trend among younger artists and art collectives based in New York and beyond, who, in an attempt to advocate for new possibilities for social transformation, are favoring tactics of deeply committed, hopeful engagement, rather than perspectives of overt protest. There is a lyrical politics filled with generous gestures and an optimistic spirit. In a world currently scarred by pervasive fear, prejudice, and violence, it’s certainly a welcome and productive respite.



CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD, *PRINCESS MIDDLEFINGER DRYING WINGS IN A SUNNY CEMETERY*, 2004, color photograph, 11 x 14" /
PRINZESSIN MITTELFINGER LÄSST IN EINEM SONNIGEN FRIEDHOF DIE FLÜGEL TROCKNEN, Farbphotographie, 28 x 35,6 cm.

(PHOTO: DANIEL REICH GALLERY, NEW YORK)

bildungstreffen stattfanden. Das Projekt zeigte beispielhaft, wie Greenwood eine eigenwillige *Post-Seattle Slacker*- und *Post-Riot Grrrl*-Sensibilität mit einer in der Schwulen- und Punkbewegung wurzelnden politischen Grundhaltung und einer überraschenden Dosis popmusikalischer Virtuosität zu einer überaus fesselnden Erkundung von Dingen wie Sexualität, Gruppenzugehörigkeit, Gemeinschaft und Heimat zu verbinden weiss.

Mit einer ganz anderen Art von Kunst, in der das Handwerk jedoch ebenfalls eine Rolle spielt, wartet Christian Holstad auf. Er verwendet ästhetische Phänomene, die in den 60er Jahren populär waren, wie Psychedelik, Kitsch und *Camp*, sowie den *Glam-Rock* und verschiedene *Disco*-Stile der 70er Jahre, um aus unzähligen, ganz unterschiedlichen handgefertigten Objekten, Zeichnungen und Collagen verschwenderisch lebhaft Installationen zu schaffen. Holstads stark durch die Filme und Performances von Jack Smith beeinflussten Arbeiten sind vielfach leuchtende Denkmäler für bestimmte Personen oder erfundene Figuren, die aus wunderbar kompliziert gemusterten, handgenähten Quilts und weichen plastischen Elementen sowie Zeichnungen auf Zeitungspapier, pornographischen Collagen, Ballonen aus Papiermaché und verfremdeten *objets trouvés* bestehen.

Seine Installation im Whitney-Museum bestand zum Beispiel aus drei verschiedenen Arbeiten, die zusammen eine phantastische Toten-Mahnwache darstellten. Im Zentrum stand ein Lagerfeuer mit gesteppten Stoffscheiten und gehäkelten Flammen sowie ein «Begräbnis-Blumenkorb» im Stil der 30er Jahre, der hauptsächlich aus rezyklierten Rollschuhen und ei-

ner frivolen Garnitur aus symmetrisch angeordneten testikelähnlichen Formen bestand. Des Weiteren gehörten ein mit Venusfliegenfallen geschmückter Trauerkranz aus Wollfilz, Herrenunterwäsche aus Leder und absurd lange, rot-weiss-blaue Draperien aus Metallfolie dazu. Holstads Arbeit hatte mit ihrer – für den *Camp*-Stil typischen – Vereinigung von Gegensätzen paradoxerweise auch etwas Elegisches, da die Szenerie gleichzeitig eine gewisse Sentimentalität und eine Sehnsucht nach den verflossenen «Tagen des *Disco*», einer liberaleren Zeit der Befreiung, ausstrahlte. Die detailgenaue Theatralik der Installation war wohl eine Parodie auf überzogene Patriotismusbekundungen in jüngster Zeit, gleichzeitig aber auch ein feierliches Bekenntnis zur schwulen Sexualität, das laut Holstad auch als Würdigung

des «rebellischen Geistes an allen Orten» zu verstehen sei.

Innerhalb eines breiten Spektrums repräsentieren Fletcher, Greenwood und Holstad unterschiedliche Facetten eines verbreiteten Trends unter jüngeren Künstlerinnen und Künstlern oder Künstlerkollektiven in New York und anderswo, die im Bemühen, neue Möglichkeiten zur gesellschaftlichen Veränderung zu eröffnen, dem ernsthaften, hoffnungsvollen gesellschaftlichen Engagement den Vorzug geben vor einer konfrontativen Protesthaltung. Ihre politische Einstellung ist quasi lyrisch, reich an grosszügigen Gesten und zutiefst optimistisch. In der heutigen Welt, in der Angst, Vorurteile und Gewalt allgegenwärtig sind, ist diese Haltung ohne Zweifel begrüssenswert und auf produktive Art erholam.

(Übersetzung: Bram Opstellen)



CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD, FEAR GIVES COURAGE WINGS, 2003,
mixed media installation / ANGST VERLEIHT DEM MUT FLÜGEL.

(PHOTO: DANIEL REICH GALLERY, NEW YORK)