

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments April 2000

Dull, tedious, boring

On the Whitney Biennial.

Now we know why the Whitney Museum of American Art commissioned Hans Haacke to create a work of art for its 2000 Biennial exhibition: sheer desperation. They must have hoped that Mr. Haacke, who specializes in delivering left-wing political sermons dressed up as art, would inject a few red corpuscles into an exhibition that turns out to be notable only for its unrelieved tedium. In the recent past, the Whitney Biennial has been repellent. It has been silly. It has been full of ugly, pathological, pointless objects. But has it ever been quite so uniformly dull?

It was a good thing that the Whitney Museum leaked details of *Sanitation*, the work they commissioned from Mr. Haacke, before the Biennial actually opened. That at least generated some controversy. Otherwise we doubt that anyone would have paid much attention to it. Yes, it is certainly outrageous that Mr. Haacke should compare Mayor Giuliani and other public figures to Nazis; but once you have said that, you have said everything. Like all of Mr. Haacke's work, *Sanitation* has no independent existence as a work of art. It exists only in its message: it is political propaganda pure and simple. Indeed, it was far more interesting in its description than in its reality. When we read about garbage cans and loudspeakers reproducing the sound of marching soldiers and some statements about art from Mayor Giuliani printed in Gothic script we were free to imagine some sort of melodramatic mise-en-scène. At the press view for the Biennial, people were crowded around the room that contained Mr Haacke's opus: but the quizzical look on everyone's face spoke volumes: "Is this what all the fuss was about?"

This season's Whitney Biennial does raise some important questions, but they are not *aesthetic* questions. Rather they are questions of what we might call cultural politics, questions such as: What role does the Whitney Museum play in cultural life today? Why is it that virtually every object on view in the new Biennial is a tired art-world cliché? Why is it that six curators scouring this great country for the most interesting art produced in the last two years came up with an assemblage that could be stuffed into the garbage cans thoughtfully provided by Mr. Haacke without subtracting one iota from the sum total of genuine artistic achievement? The answers to these questions form a melancholy commentary not only on the Whitney Biennial but also on established "art world" culture. Words like "challenging" and "destabilizing" occur with

monotonous regularity in the wall labels accompanying the works in the Biennial. (One work even claims to “destabilize our ‘natural’ view of rain.”) In fact the only thing that this exhibition “challenges” is the credulity of a public that, we suspect, is rapidly tiring of having its intelligence insulted.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 18 Number 8 , on page 3

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