

Art in the '90s: A mixed prognosis

by ELEANOR HEARTNEY

A few short months into the new decade, the '80s already seem a distant memory. The buzzwords of the day—trickledown, luxury condo, DINK, LBO, Yuppie, simulation—have a quaint and rather tarnished ring, though it is not yet clear, as the ground seems literally shifting beneath our feet, what will replace them.

There are still those who laud the Reagan days as a period of unprecedented growth and prosperity. For those of us with incomes under \$100,000, however, it is clear that the glittering facade concealed a multitude of ills. Any number of events could be chosen to mark the passing of an era—the fall of the house of Drexel Burnham Lambert, the failure of Campeau Corporation, the dethroning of Leona Helmsley, the HUD revelations, even the War of the Trumps.

Each of these dramas has the aspect

of a contemporary morality play, revealing the unpleasant consequences of indulgence and greed when they are left free to develop unchecked by the natural restraints of commonality, social responsibility, or at the very least, good old-fashioned government regula-

Neo Geo's dual rhetoric
of critique and complicity
formed the perfect mirror
for '80s-style liberalism.

tion. Much of our government's attention these days seems focused on the growing lawlessness of the drug culture, but it is clear that the disrespect for law in the streets of America was more than matched during the '80s by a disrespect for it in the nation's corporate boardrooms and government offices.

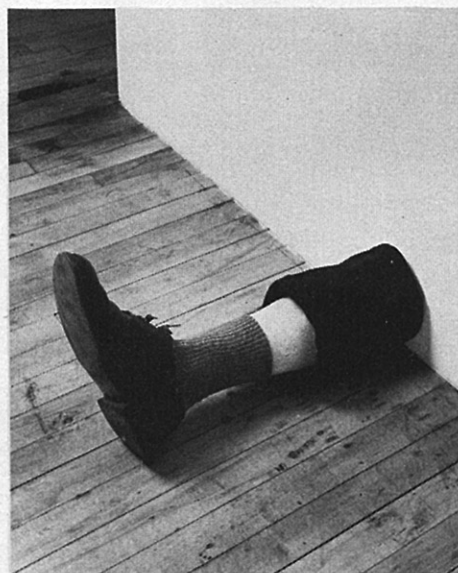
For a while, the philosophy of greed seemed to work, at least for some. But today, as Wall Street whiz kids join the unemployment rolls and Leona Helmsley prepares to check into rather less queenly quarters, privilege no longer seems the ultimate protection.

What will the '90s have to offer? With the orgy over, are we in for a decade of grim austerity and bitter turf battles? Will we find, as we shake ourselves awake the morning after, that egotism and greed have become so entrenched that they have supplanted all our better impulses? Or will the crises of the '90s rekindle an almost extinguished sense of common cause?

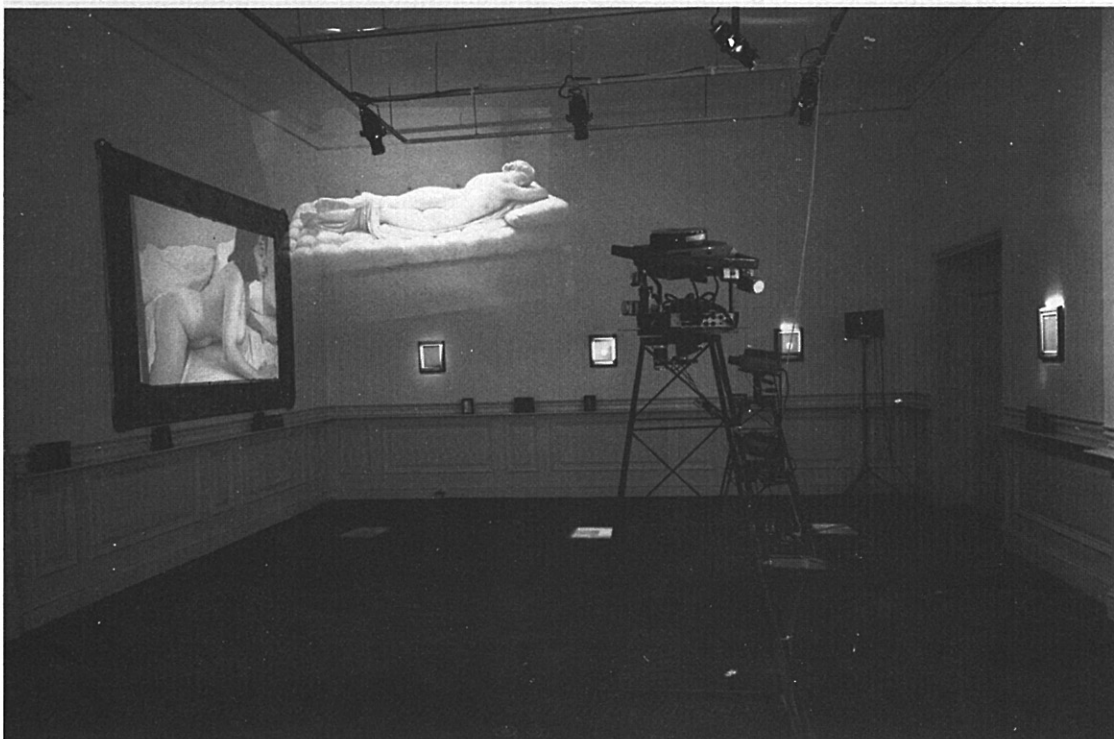
One of art's more useful qualities is the light it sheds on the state of the culture. In the '80s, art, or at least that

portion of it which was most visible in galleries, museums, and on the pages of magazines like this, seemed largely a creature of the economic boom. Such odd mutants as "Born Again" painting, resurrected from the ruins of Modernism for the nourishment of a Born Again market, the return of the heroic artist in a mold which complemented the new fashion for the swashbuckling entrepreneur, and Neo Geo whose dual rhetoric of critique and complicity formed the perfect mirrors for '80s style liberalism, could only have been possible in the hothouse atmosphere of the Reagan era. Even the arcane language of criticism, which one might expect to be so removed from the mundane world of dollars and cents as to be irrelevant to it, played a role in legitimizing the flight from social consciousness. For, despite its derivation from Marxist thought, the World according to Baudrillard, with its replacement of concrete reality by the "forest of signs," in the end provided perfect justification for the transformation of politics into image manipulation.

As we settle into the '90s, the art world seems to be undergoing one of its periodic shifts. Interest in the kind of theory that brought us hyper-reality, the simulacrum, hover culture, and their brethren seems on the wane. (A small but telling indicator: while an entire bookcase of the "new titles" section at the East Village's ultra hip Saint Mark's Bookstore used to be devoted to Baudrillardian musings on Postmodernism and consumer culture, such titles are now being crowded out by books on Third World women, the politics of AIDS, the origins of psychoanalysis, and other such topics.) It seems likely that the declining popularity of '80s-style theory may be linked to the fact that many of the entities which it attempted to theorize out of existence have turned out to be stubbornly real. Nature and the body, for instance, may be social constructs,



ROBERT GOBER, "Untitled Leg," wax, cotton, wood, leather, human hair, 12 1/2" x 5" x 20", 1985. Photo by Andrew Moore, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery.



DORIT CYPIS, "The Naked Nude," mixed-media installation, 1989.

but developments like AIDS, ozone depletion, and the hazards of toxic waste suggest that they may have some concrete existence as well.

As the theory of simulation fades in importance, so does the once de rigueur focus on art's commodity status and its complicity with consumer culture. Instead, a growing number of artists and galleries are presenting work touching on environmental and body themes. On one end of the spectrum are artists like Ashley Bickerton, whose latest pieces of hardware carry an ecological message, and Ronald Jones, who recently pre-

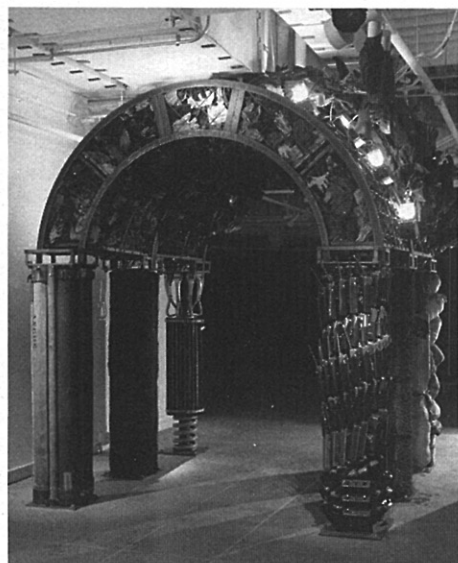
sented a series of elegant Brancusi-esque abstract sculptures based on the forms of diseased human cells, for whom these subjects seem merely the latest fashion.

Other artists seem to have a more

Mary Miss, works such as her remarkable shoreline environment along the shoreline of lower Manhattan at Battery Park City, blur the distinction between nature and culture.

Artists working with the body range from Dorit Cypis, whose installations and performances attempt to cut through the culture's idealized female body to the real, imperfect organism beneath, to artists like Robert Gober and Tishan Hsu, whose peculiar sculptures are body objects which mix references to tissues and organs with references to sinks, tubs, and medical and domestic environments in order to suggest how dependent modern human life has become on artificial support systems. There are as well numerous artists dealing directly with the issue of AIDS, among them David Wojnarowicz, Nan Goldin, and Nicholas Nixon.

The declining popularity of '80s-style theory may be linked to the fact that many of the entities which it attempted to theorize out of existence turned out to be stubbornly real.



MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES, "Ceremonial Arch Honoring Service Workers in the New Service Economy," steel, donated materials, 11' x 12'4" x 9', 1988. Photo by D. James Dee; courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.

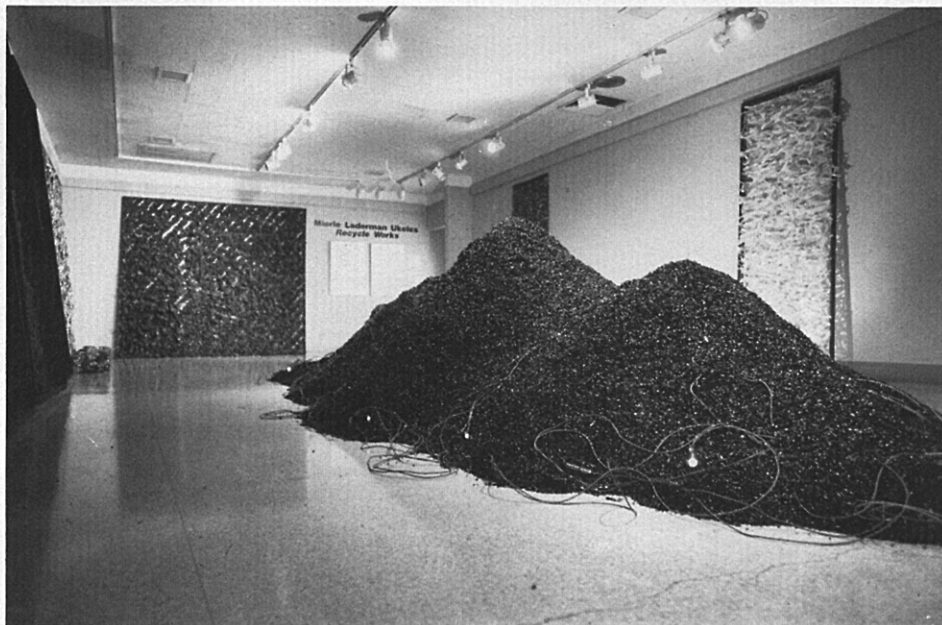
serious commitment to the issues. Mierle Laderman Ukeles's long-in-the-works *Flow City*, for instance, is an installation slated for completion in 1992 which will provide public access to New York City's new Marine Transfer Station. Alfredo Jaar's recent installations explore the international politics of waste disposal, focusing on the dumping of American-generated toxic waste along the Nigerian coast. Others work in a more poetic vein. Mary Lucier's video installations touch on the dichotomies between the idealized landscape of art and the realities of the industrial transformation of nature. The site works of

Another possible indicator for the '90s is the emergence of multiculturalism as a force to be reckoned with both inside and outside the art world. In part, this reflects the simple fact of the growing ethnic diversity of the American population and the increasing interdependence of all strands of the world economy. There are as well the remarkable events of the last year, as governments toppled in the wake of popular demands for political independence and self-determination. And finally, in academic circles, the popularity of deconstruction has led to a critique of all systems of order, whether

they comprise gender roles, political ideologies, or once inviolable academic canons and standards.

The result has been a shift of attention to those entities, peoples, or value systems which formerly seemed peripheral. In a word, the Other is in. In the art world this has manifested itself in the proliferation of exhibitions that focus on multicultural themes, on the art market's acceptance of such new categories as Russian art, Latin American art, Japanese art, etc.; on the increasing prominence of artists like Lorna Simpson, Adrian Piper, Robert Colescott, and Joe Lewis, who deal specifically with questions of racism and prejudice; and on an increasing awareness that the categories of Modernism and Postmodernism are too limited to contain the real diversity of contemporary art production.

However, while this new openness is all to the good, it does contain hidden dangers. As the center gives way, it appears that some Others are more Other than other Others. A divisive rhetoric of separatism sometimes accompanies efforts to promote work by formerly excluded groups, as if there could be no communication across gender or ethnic lines. Nowhere is this clearer than in current debates over the composition of high school and college curricula. While Allan Bloom calls for a rigid canon of standard works, radical feminists discard the works of William Shakespeare as mere propaganda for patriarchy, and a report on multicultural education issued last summer by the New York State Department of Education accused the state high school system of "intellectual and educational oppression" of minority students through "a systematic bias toward European cul-



MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES, "Recycle Works," mixed-media installation, 1989. Photo courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.

ture and all its derivations."

The polarization developing around these issues is disturbing. Certainly the elitism of Allan Bloom is reprehensible. On the other hand, is it only

venting or changing it.

Which brings us to a third possible indicator for the '90s—the growing move to go beyond the fashionable salons created by the commercial galleries. An encouraging development over the last decade has been the emergence of a kind of "social sculpture," a public art which takes the meaning of that word seriously and attempts to grapple with issues of tangible social, political, and economic importance in a space frequented by non-art world types. Among the more visible practitioners of this mode are Krzysztof Wodiczko, Dennis Adams, Jenny Holzer, Alfredo Jaar, and Vito Acconci. Such a development, of course, could easily be stifled if the politicization (pursued, oddly enough, under the guise of de-politicization) of the National Endowment for the Arts continues, since non-commercial projects of this nature often depend on government support.

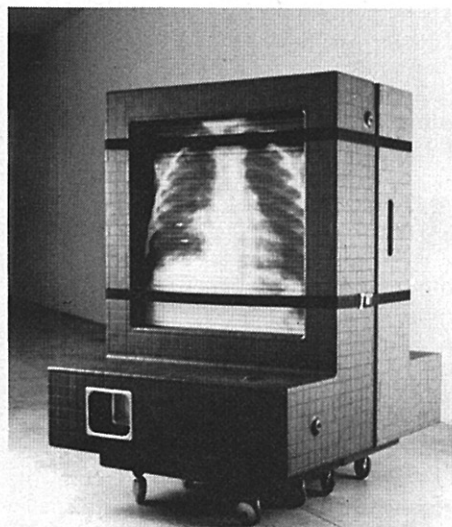
The '90s, then, come to us with a mixed prognosis. Hints of a resurgence of social conscience and global thinking mingle with symptoms of isolationism and factionalism. As the threat of nuclear holocaust recedes, the dangers of ecological disaster, overpopulation, and nationalism loom large. For artists, as for society at large, the choices in the '90s oscillate between withdrawal and engagement, a retreat into a fantasy world of easy scapegoats and simple answers or a commitment to hard thinking about complex problems. Beyond that, the crystal ball fades, and the real work begins. ■

Eleanor Heartney is a free-lance writer in New York who writes for many art publications.

Will the crises of the '90s rekindle an almost extinguished sense of common cause?

possible to redress the white Eurocentric bias of our educational and art systems by discarding Western culture wholesale? Will we not all be diminished if we conclude that only women authors are relevant to women readers, black authors to black readers, Native American authors to Native American readers? If, as deconstruction has demonstrated, no values are universal, does that mean no values can be shared? How do we find a middle ground?

This is not merely an academic question. Racial questions seem poised to turn our major cities into armed camps, while internationally, the resurgence of nationalism threatens the stability promised by the dissolution of the Cold War. In the art world, the separatist mentality creates antagonisms between groups which might more fruitfully work together. And while it may be illuminating to point out the exclusionary structure of the current art system, this energy might be better spent on the more important task of circum-



TISHAN HSU, "Double Bind," mixed media, 74 1/4" x 48 1/2" x 61 1/4", 1989.