



MAKING SENSE

A LOS ANGELES MUSEUM PRESENTED ARTISTS WHO DON'T LIKE THE DISTORTED SENSE THE MEDIA MAKE. "YOU MADE ME, NOW YOU HAVE TO DEAL WITH ME," ONE ARTIST WARNS

BY
HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

With all I've heard about A-bombs that'll destroy a city and H-bombs that'll destroy a state and chain reactions that'll destroy the world... you know I just don't have any incentive to buy a two pants suit.

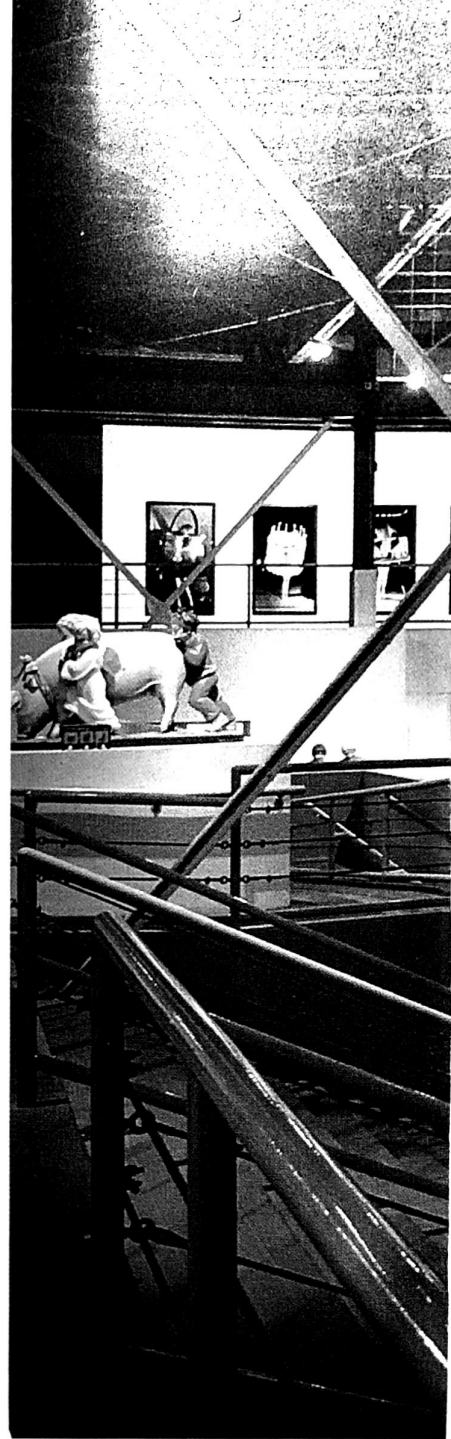
—From a 1988 painting by
by Richard Prince

THE LOS ANGELES Museum of Contemporary Art's exhibition "A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation" is the first significant overview of the strain of 1980s art derived from the style and substance of the media and popular culture. Focusing as it did, the show provided a counterbalance to the Neo-Expressionism that gained so much attention earlier in this decade—and it also provided a very particular kind of art world revue, replaying what happened to the '80s as the decade comes to its close. While the exhibition's 30 artists range from the mediocre to the exceptional, all either question or reject such modernist ideals as the transcendent possibility of art and even the idea of originality.

Modernism's utopian longings apparently don't provide answers for these artists, whose work responds to the decaying conditions, as they see them, of a postmodern world. Thomas

Lawson, who was represented in the show by his 1980 paintings of victims of violence in newspaper photographs, could be speaking for many of the artists when he says: "Our daily encounters with one another, and with nature, our gestures, our speech are so thoroughly impregnated with a rhetoric absorbed through the airwaves that we have no certain claim to the originality of any of our actions. Every cigarette, every drink, every love affair echoes down a never-ending passageway of references—to advertisements, to television shows, to movies—to the point where we no longer know if we mimic or are mimicked."

There were times when the '80s seemed as heady and hopeful as the '60s, and this show amply demonstrated the legacy of Pop—but with a difference. The ethos of the Age of Aquarius died long before Warhol himself, and the work exhibited in "Forest of Signs"





has a more distinctly political flavor. A repressed rage seeps through the precious veneer of this work like corrosive glue, suggesting that the arguments presented are not confined to the tidy boundaries of art history.

Like the Dadaists' reaction to the chaos and repression of their times, these artists have turned away from the more traditional mediums of painting and sculpture. The seductive technology of TV, film, and commercial photography or the authoritative voice of the printed text motivated their choice of imagery and styles. There were slide-projection installations by Richard Baim and Judith Barry; staged photographs by Ericka Beckman, Sarah Charlesworth, Laurie Simmons, Cindy Sherman, Christopher Williams, and James Well-ling; paintings or drawings from media sources by Thomas Lawson, Jack Goldstein, Troy Brauntuch, Sherrie Levine, Matt Mullican,

Peter Nagy, and Robert Longo; text as image by Jenny Holzer, Richard Prince, Stephen Prina, Mitchell Syrop, Larry Johnson, and Barbara Kruger; altered video monitors by Gretchen Bender and Dara Birnbaum; politically trenchant installations by Ronald Jones, Mike Kelley, and Louise Lawler; and common-object sculptures by Allan McCollum, Jeff Koons, Barbara Bloom, and Haim Steinbach.

Former MoCA curator Mary Jane Jacob's catalogue essay, "Art in the Age of Reagan: 1980-1988," locates the icy attitude and slick, manufactured style of this distinctly intellectual art in the teachings of art schools. "The professionalization of the art student has led to the professionalization of the artist," she writes. "The goal of the artists is now to build a career, not just to make their art." In addition, she cites the influence of the burgeoning

Installation view of "A Forest of Signs" at MoCA's Temporary Contemporary. Beauty disguising decay was the esthetic of the show, concealing a sense of society's disintegration.



ANN SLIMMA

Curators Ann Goldstein and Mary Jane Jacob. Jacob writes in the catalogue, "the professionalization of the art student has led to the professionalization of the artist."

Looking back from the vantage of the end of the '80s, this exhibition seemed to embrace the most relevant reflections on a decade of subtle yet ultimately staggering social and political change. Certainly, one might quibble here with specific choices. Why Judith Barry and not Nancy Dwyer? But the curators exhibited a two- or three-year period of each artist's work in some depth, capturing the zeitgeist without resorting to an exact chronology. Some of the pieces most seminal to the art of this decade—Cindy Sherman's self-portrait film stills from the late '70s—shared space with some of the newest, such as the 1988 paintings of Sherrie Levine, though she, too, was most influential in the early '80s.

At times these decisions seemed whimsical or gratuitous, but the process wound up being the secret of the show's success. Taken as a whole, it got beyond the often obscure and stifling arguments of art about art. The accepted critical jargon of "appropriation," "deconstruction," and "simulation" fell away

to reveal an art about the malaise of life in the age of disinformation: the despair of seeing too clearly in an atmosphere of denial, of a willingness to stare directly into the face of our social condition. In many ways, this work turns out to be a more disciplined and exacting vein of expressionism than the gestural painting usually associated with such angst. If the clean, cool surfaces of this art read as cynical, they can also be read as evidence of a sort of burned romantic school, seething with gagged passion.

For the most part, these artists reject the 1970s Conceptual art market that grew with the expansive economy of the Reagan years. "Not only have the artists benefited from the decade's financial boom, but their art also reflects this new, closer relationship between art and commerce. . . . These artists have redirected the strategies of Conceptual Art and of the business of art to the making of art. Theirs is a self-conscious art."

While education and economics are important factors in the evolution of this work, they do not account for the undercurrent of profound disaffection. The catalogue's capsule biographies, supplied by MoCA curator Ann Goldstein, sharpen the focus by quoting the artists and offering valuable insights. Sherrie Levine, for example, expresses a dilemma common to many of the artists in the show when she says, "Reluctant moralists, we make art that suggests our simultaneous longing for anarchy and order—to have nothing and everything. An uneasy peace is made between the reassuring mythologies society and culture provide and our wish to see ourselves as free agents. The very best in art makes public our private anguish in the face of this ineluctable conflict."

Forest of Signs" describes the artists' widespread interest in semiotics—the science of analyzing signs and symbols and what they represent. The title of the exhibition is a phrase taken from a poem in Charles Baudelaire's book *Les Fleurs du Mal*. "Flowers of Evil"—beauty disguising decay was the prevailing esthetic of the show. The electric colors and flawless, reflective finishes of the exhibition's works seem like the mortician's final touches, cosmetics concealing the imputed disintegration of society. The subtitle of the show, "Art in the Crisis of Representation," refers to this particular moment of our postmodern era and to the various working strategies an artist feels increasingly obliged to consider before creating images and objects. Yet the crisis these artists acknowledge seems equally the result of postmodern life.

Richard Prince, *The Salesman and the Farmer*, 1989. Hostile turns on the sorts of jokes found on Catskills cocktail napkins.



A traveling salesman's car broke down on a lonely road late at night in the middle of nowhere. He walked to the nearest farmhouse and asked the farmer if he could stay the night. "No," said the farmer and then shot the salesman in the head with a shotgun.

SOJDS & NUNNS/BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

alists' use of the camera as a neutral tool. Here the work operates under the assumption that photographs lie, the media lie, and manipulation through presentation is all. "Truth is always mediated," says Jack Goldstein, whose glamorous paintings of lightning, solar eclipses, and time-elapsed star tracks were in the exhibition. "What can anyone be witness to in life? The films of Hitchcock, like *Rear Window*, answer that question. . . . There is always a distance—a space—between us and the world, that frustrates our attempt to get closer to that world."

These artists feel compelled to respond to the media's influence—what Gretchen Bender calls the "cannibalizing river" that sweeps everything before it. The exhibition was rife with art that expects a viewer to doubt what he sees, reads, believes. Mitchell Syrop's photographs, for example, are matched with authoritative yet ironically misconnected texts. In one series of works, the Maidenform dictum "lift and separate" subtitles a variety of 1984 black-and-white photographs of mundane objects or scenes—an operating room, a car key, Millet's painting of women gathering wheat. Each combination underscores the endless mutability of language and the

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impression that, in this obvious advertising format, none of the meanings are fully credible.

Larry Johnson's photographs of texts examine the confusion between the fictive and the real in the biographies of movie stars and in his own life. *I'd Never Seen Anything Like It* (1988) includes words of bright red and pale and dark blue on an orange background. The close values of the colors make the texts nearly impossible to read, confounding the viewer's initial instincts. Yet the stories told are seductive and tease a reader into a kind of tacit agreement.

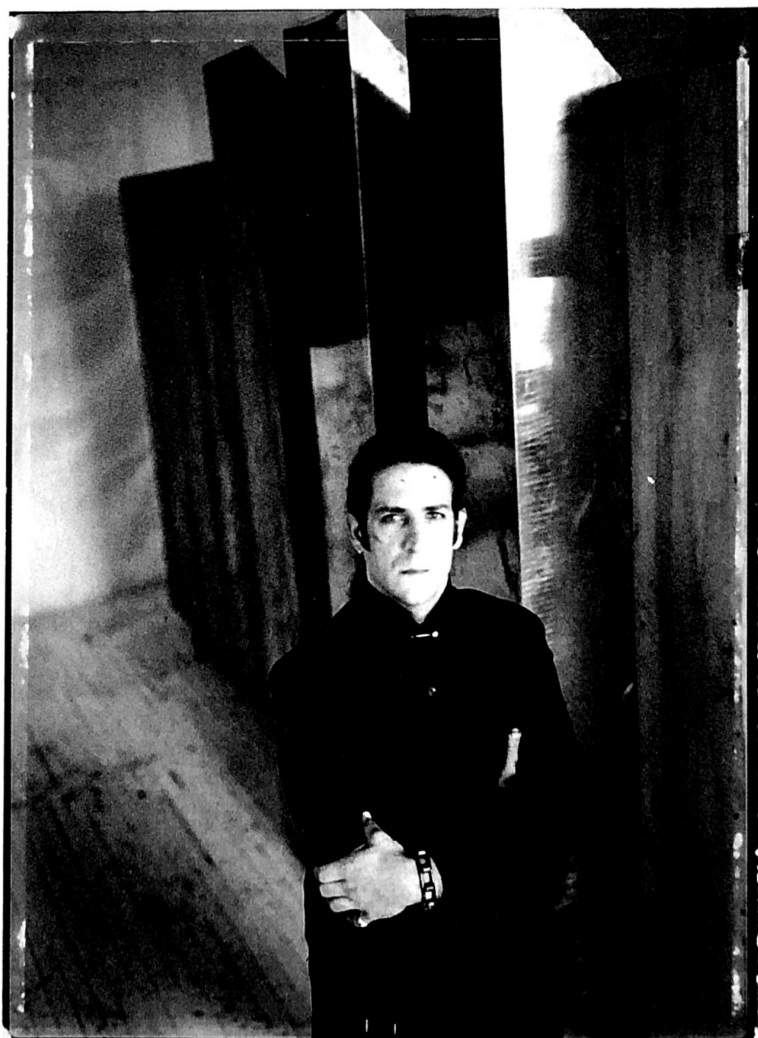
Christopher Williams' 1989 series of black-and-white photographs, "Angola to Vietnam," seemed at first to be harmless pictures of flowers, but each is a glass model from a botanical museum, selected because the country of its origin practices the terrorist tactic of "disappearance." Thus, the way we approach the natural world is perverted; the viewer's initial perceptions are overturned.

These artists are of the TV generation and believe they are confronted daily with doublespeak and simulated reality. And there was much recent evidence to confirm their views. For example, last summer "ABC World News Tonight" aired a simulation of U.S. diplomat Felix S. Bloch handing a briefcase to a Soviet agent, with the roles of both parties acted by ABC News staff members. Many viewers thought

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it to be footage of a real event. The distorting effect of the media is so completely accepted that Isuzu carries a popular television ad campaign featuring a salesman who tells outlandish stories to sell cars while a caption states, "This man is lying."

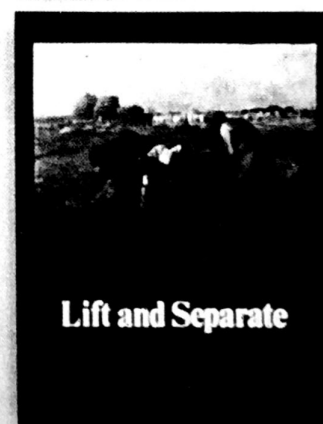
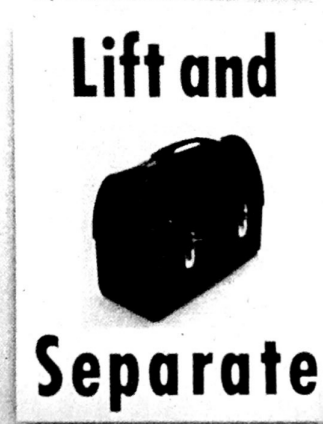
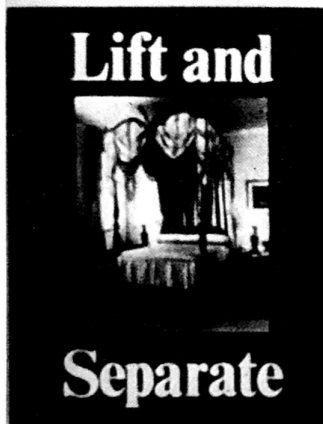
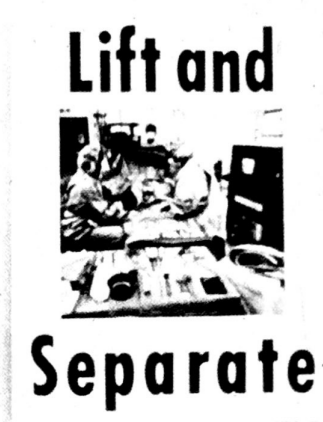
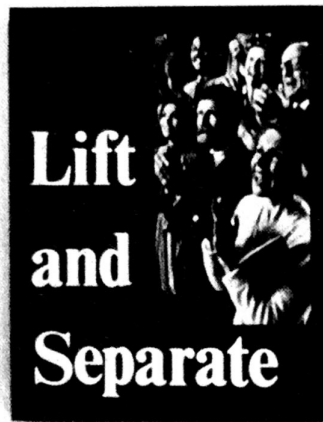
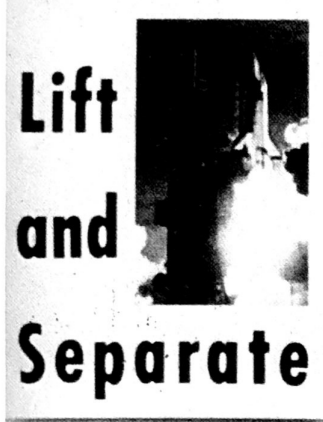
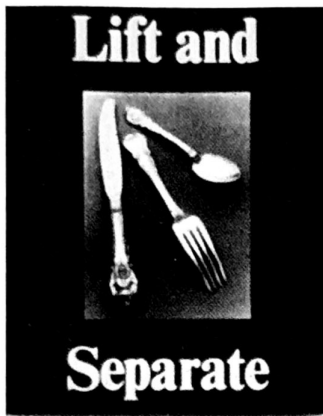
Barbara Kruger, a virtuoso with acerbic slogans, addressed this kind of manipulation and distortion of language in a caustic mural on the exterior of MoCA's south wall. It alluded to the way political rhetoric took the Pledge of Allegiance hostage during the last presidential campaign. Executed in a familiar flag pattern in red, white, and blue, the pledge was surrounded by these questions: "Who is bought and sold? Who is beyond the law? Who is free to



Robert Longo, whose survey opens this month at the L.A. County Museum, says of his role, "You made me, now you have to deal with me."

choose? Who follows orders? Who salutes longest? Who prays loudest? Who dies first? Who laughs last? Who does time?"

Reality, what a concept!" raved Robin Williams in the mid-'70s. That's the philosophy of the influential French thinker Jean Baudrillard in a nutshell. His essay "Simulations" is regularly quoted by critics writing about many of the artists in this exhibition. Baudrillard asserts that reality has been subsumed by simulations, which constitute, as he calls it, the "hyperreal." People accustomed to the reality presented by television, film, and the news media are now, he says, disappointed in the merely real. To many, Disneyland's Main Street, with its charming stores, friendly clerks, and immaculate landscaping, seems



Mitchell Syrop, *Lift and Separate*, 1984. The artist's black-and-white photographs of mundane objects are matched with ironically misconnected texts so that the viewer doubts what he sees.

more "real" than its source—the Main Streets in towns like Lima, Ohio, where many of the stores are closed because factories have shut down and the street itself is seedy, untended, and littered with refuse.

Baudrillard writes: "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and simulation."

Coincidentally, Walt Disney founded the California Institute of the Arts, in the suburbs of Los Angeles, where many of the exhibition's artists have studied or taught. But the air of Disneyland is breathed everywhere these days and many of these artists grasped Baudrillard's position immediately on an intuitive level. They seem to be inventing their work out of the chasm between what is said and what is meant—frustrated in their desire for what seems unattainable. Their art is a shelter from the storm, as everything they know seems to be blowing away. They find themselves yearning

salesman in the head with a shotgun."

The dry wit of Pop and the factory-fresh geometry of Minimalism are hijacked and pressed into service by a less optimistic present. Prince implicitly reiterates the premise that inspired his "re-photography"—that "making it new" is as obsolete today as other goals of the Great Society.

The humor of alienation also fuels Levine's paintings—two frames from the comic strip "Krazy Kat," painted in black on mahogany panels, showing Ignatz Mouse throwing a brick, hitting the lovesick puss in the head. The diptych of this toss is repeated three times in the installation, so the cat's unrequited affection for the abusive rodent is experienced over and over and over again.

Both artists selected jokes about victims who are amusing precisely because they can't recognize their own dire straits. The material is "appropriated" from dated sources, significantly the humor of their parents' generation. Both use these gallows gags to indicate cycles of behavior that could be called insane.

to connect cause to effect, language to meaning, action to consequence.

It is significant and interesting that Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, who came to critical attention in the early '80s by re-photographing photographs from advertising and fine art respectively, were represented by their paintings of 1988. Prince has confronted modernism's relentless pressure to produce formal innovations with the statement: "Make it again." But "play it again" is the operative phrase to describe the defensive humor of his newest work. On tastefully colored canvases, Prince prints hostile turns on the sorts of jokes often found on Catskills' cocktail napkins: "If I refuse to go to bed with you," she whispered, "will you really commit suicide?" "That's been my usual procedure." Or he shows a vintage cartoon image with an unrelated, bristling punchline. "A traveling salesman's car broke down late at nite in the middle of nowhere. He walked to the nearest farmhouse and asked the farmer if he could stay the night. 'No,' said the farmer and then shot the

Similarly, Mike Kelley's "Pay for your Pleasure" corridor of 1988 is lined with portraits of notable intellectuals, executed by a sign painter, along with notorious quotations. For instance, André Breton's remark: "The simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street pistol in hand, and firing blindly. . . into the crowd." At one end of the corridor is a drawing by William Bonin, a.k.a. L.A.'s Freeway Killer. At the other end, Plexiglas boxes collect donations for victims' rights organizations. The installation questions the role of the artist—often presented romantically as being mad or outside the law—when the rest of society has turned anarchic and self-destructive.

JAMES FRANKLIN/RICHARD KUHLENSCHMIDT GALLERY



Barbara Bloom, "The Reign of Narcissism," 1989. Her installation of objects and furniture imprinted with her self-image addresses the relationship between power and fear.

Inevitably, at the heart of this role, the experience of powerlessness is central. Issues of power and control have been forced to the surface by feminist theory in recent years and are evident in the work of the 14 women artists in the show. Power, as linked to perception of identity, is the subject of Laurie Simmons' oversize photographs of objects with stereotypically feminine properties, such as *Walking Purse* (1989). Chilling texts on the abuses of power are presented by Jenny Holzer in the "Inflammatory Essays" (1979–1982)—multicolored posters in which the obsessive tone of the seriously disturbed

is evoked in such phrases as "It's mostly love that makes you look at fine ankles and then break them." Barbara Bloom addresses the relationship between power and self-centered fear in "The Reign of Narcissism" (1988), the sort of period room one might find in a museum appointed with upholstered furniture, leatherbound books, and decorative accessories—all bearing the artist's signature or profile.

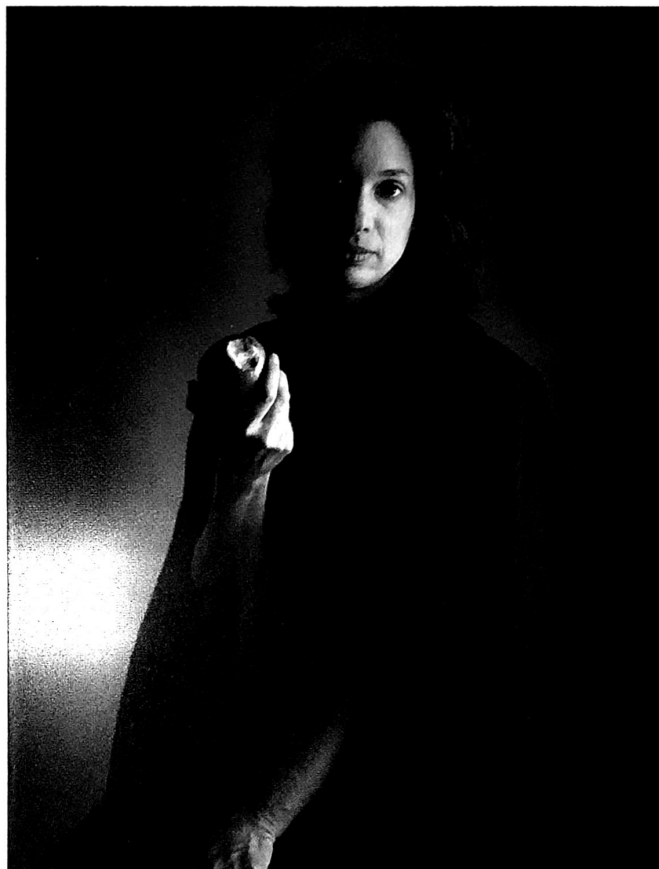
These artists apparently retain power by acting as double agents. Acknowledging what they consider the untenable purist position of the Conceptual artists of the '70s, these artists operate as collaborators, trying to sabotage from within. They frankly address the influence of market forces, denying the more romantic view that art is free from the taint of money. In this, at any rate, Warhol is their role model—not the least for his ability to operate within the world of high society and, until the mid-'70s, produce work that was provocative and ironic. It was a tightrope walk for him and remains so for many of the artists in this show. They produce marketable goods, but ticking within is the time bomb of a socially critical message.

Robert Longo's dramatic drawings of "Men in the Cities" from the early '80s are a case in point, often bought by the very businessmen whose agony they portray. His quote about the duality of the artist's position is germane: Longo said he wants to "grow out of the living rooms of [TV producer] Aaron Spelling the way the thing pops out of the guy's chest in *Alien*. You made me, now you have to deal with me."

This is art in the age of the triumph of the media, which is to say an age in which the media are always dissembling.

Appropriationist Sherrie Levine: "Reluctant moralists, we make art that suggests our simultaneous longing for anarchy and order."

These artists admit that they are lost in society's trough between role and reality, a landscape of denial where neither the answers of history nor the expediences of the present seem to suffice. They need more than signs to find their way out of this forest. ■



TIMOTHY GREENFIELD SANDERS