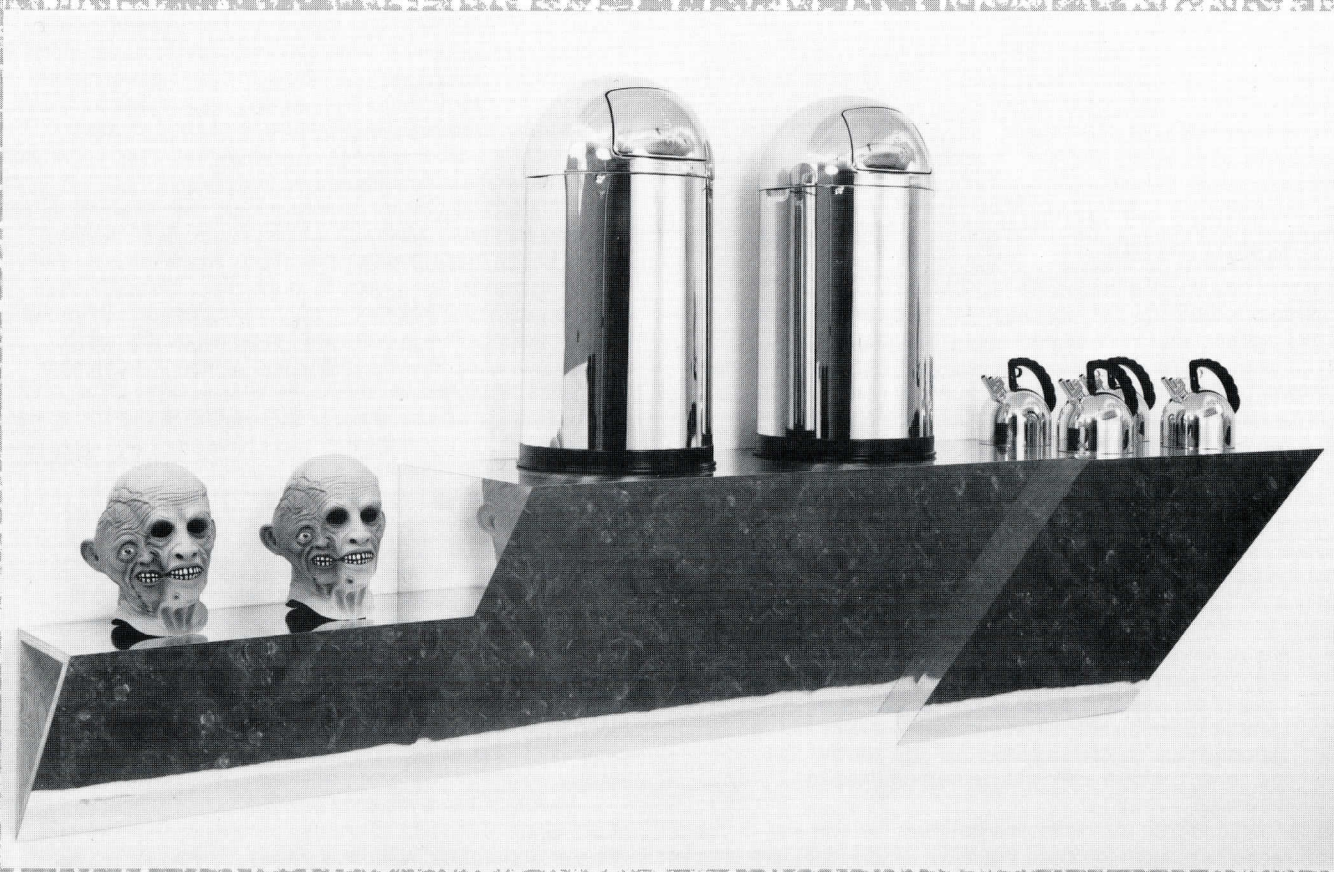


*Currents 12 :*

# ***Simulations***

***New American Conceptualism***

November 13, 1987 - January 24, 1988





## Currents 12: Simulations, New American Conceptualism

In 1977, the art critic Douglas Crimp organized *Pictures*, an exhibition of five American artists who used media-based images in their work.<sup>1</sup> Since these artists appropriated pre-existing images, Crimp believed they did not create "original" art, but instead made "pictures." The artists in Crimp's exhibition questioned notions of originality while investigating how the meanings of images change within a given context. This exhibition now seems prophetic for these issues have dominated much of the art produced during the 1980s. In the ten years since *Pictures*, artists have borrowed images not only from the media but also from art history, botany, biology, medicine, and have even appropriated styles of painting, including expressionism, surrealism, op, minimal and hard edge abstraction.

*Simulations, New American Conceptualism* brings together seven American artists — Ashley Bickerton, Jeff Koons, Annette Lemieux, Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, Haim Steinbach and Meyer Vaisman — who have further extended the parameters of appropriation. Fueled by debates concerning the role of art in an era driven by the mass media, each of these artists investigates aspects of originality and reproduction in their work. In contrast to earlier appropriators, who seemed to revel in the possibilities of an unlimited source of images, these artists lament art's "loss of innocence."

As one soon realizes, the artists in this exhibition are keenly interested in art's ability to convey ideas. Their works not only address topics relevant to the visual arts, such as issues of artistic originality and modes of production, but they also evoke states of the human condition, including death, survival, desire, pleasure and memory. This interest in conveying ideas aligns them with earlier Conceptual artists. During the mid-1960s, many artists, in reaction to the strict doctrines of formalist painting, became involved in art forms in which the formulation of ideas became the desired artistic function. Certain Conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt, followed Minimal art's intentions of reducing art to its primary structures, while others, such as Joseph Kosuth, concerned themselves with the processes of language and how ideas are communicated. Since ideas took precedence over production, Conceptual artists did not feel it was essential to be involved in the realization of the object. LeWitt, for example, had his grid sculptures fabricated by outside contractors. Similarly, the fabrication for many of the works in this exhibition was not carried out by the artists.

Just as earlier Conceptual art was indebted to the theories put forth by European philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, younger artists, including those exhibited here, have rallied around a new roster of "post-structural" philosophers, including Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and particularly, Jean Baudrillard. Though Baudrillard's writings have centered primarily on mass culture at large, his theories have become relevant for recent ideas concerning representation. Baudrillard argues that we live in an "age of simulation," a culture filled with reproductions, counterfeits and "signs without meanings." He writes,

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself.... Simulation takes ideas of mere representation one step further in that simulation not only believes that the sign and the real are equal, but believes in the negation of the sign as value.<sup>2</sup>

As we begin to lose our distinction between the real and "simulacra," we begin to desire the latter. These ideas are visualized in this exhibition. In contrast to earlier forms of appropriation, however, these artists choose not simply to borrow images; instead they are concerned with specific objects. Since objects can illicit feelings to the same extent as actual human experiences, the objects act as simulacra for reality.



17. Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (Chair Seat #4)*, 1986

The work of Sherrie Levine demonstrates these ideas most clearly. After receiving critical attention as part of the "Pictures" group, Levine began around 1980 to make identical copies of famous modern art works. In 1981, she exhibited photographs after Edward Weston and Walker Evans. These photographs were not reinterpretations or set ups made to resemble the work of these classic photographers, but were the actual images rephotographed from books. Soon after, she began making precise watercolor copies after modern painters, including Mondrian, Malevich, Matisse and Léger. Again, Levine based these copies on art book reproductions, always remaining true to her source by duplicating their small size and the graininess inherent in such reproductions. With this body of work Levine successfully debased modern art's primary components — originality and personal expression.

Since 1985, Levine has been making "original" art works, stripe paintings which vary only in the width and color of their stripes. While undoubtedly her own creations, these paintings, still on a small and intimate scale, consciously appropriate the "look" of modern abstract art. She explains,

I think of them as distillations of formalist, late modernist paintings. They are stripe paintings. But I don't think that they will give you that kind of satisfaction — the closure, balance, harmony. I wanted the ones I was making to be uneasy. They are about death in a way: the uneasy death of modernism.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, Levine has made paintings which seem yet more familiar, including stripe paintings on chair seats and paintings resembling checkerboards. By simulating things from everyday experience she further comments on art's function within our society.

Allan McCollum similarly deconstructs the functional role of art. Since 1982, McCollum has produced what he calls "Plaster Surrogates," vacuous pieces of hydrostone painted to a matte black finish. Though apparently homogeneous, each plaster surrogate varies either in size or in the color of its simulated frame. Each is, therefore, "original" and distinctive. Void of any image or implied meaning, the surrogates are meant to be replacements for "real" paintings. McCollum has



carried this logic into both sculpture and photography. For the "Perfect Vehicles," he painstakingly designed a baluster-shaped vessel to serve as surrogate sculptures. McCollum feels that the perfect vehicles are,

the most perfect art objects possible: they are irredeemably useless as vases since they are solid, and eminently "useful" as the (substitute) Fine Art objects since they are used exactly as they were intended.<sup>4</sup>

In his paintings, sculptures and photographs, McCollum reduces art objects to signs. By distributing them through traditional dealer networks, he further comments on the commodity function of art.

The commodification of art is also addressed in Ashley Bickerton's elaborate wall structures. Adorned with side bars, protective braces, and even instructions for installation, Bickerton emphasizes their status as objects. Bickerton includes representational elements, ranging from simulated wall textures to futuristic networks of pistons and levers, in his works. The surface of *Le Art (Composition with Logos)* is covered with decals, most of which are corporate logos for the suppliers of the tools and materials used in its construction (X-Acto, Liquitex, Formica). Stripped away of any narrative content, this piece is ultimately suited to carry out its role as art object.

Meyer Vaisman's paintings also are intended to resemble fine art objects. Each is silkscreened with a pattern resembling canvas weave. Enlarged to abstract proportions, this faux-canvas surface emulates the "look" of actual paintings. Ideas and emotions are suggested by Vaisman through the addition of objects, substances and images. In *Painting of Depth*, the artist has carved out deep holes from this highly corporeal work and filled them with axle grease. Instead of conveying depth in a traditional, illusionistic way, Vaisman gives the viewer "real" depth. Although Vaisman mechanically reproduces his images with process inks, the petroleum-based grease in this piece acts as a substitute oil-based medium.

While Levine, McCollum, Bickerton and Vaisman use methods of simulation to comment on the role of art in our society, Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach and Annette Lemieux address broader cultural issues by bringing actual objects into their work. Jeff Koons has been especially provocative in the choice of objects he wishes to implant with specific meanings. Since 1980, Koons' work has evolved through various series. In one, titled "The New," Koons displayed various brands of vacuum cleaners in brightly lit plexiglas boxes. While seemingly indebted to Duchamp, Koons' vacuum cleaners took on a pristine elegance when encased in an art context. In this series, Koons hoped to reveal the psychology associated with newness and desire. The vacuum cleaners could only maintain their pristine quality if they remained unused and permanently encased. To make use of their intended function would only "use them up," resulting in a sense of loss. Koons' next body of work consisted of one to three basketballs immersed in half or entirely filled aquariums. Again, these pieces were about perfect states, or equilibrium, as Koons dubbed this new body of work. In each of his series, Koons intended that the objects take on life-like qualities, equating the sucking action of vacuum cleaners to the process of breathing and the round, floating basketballs to embryos. Koons has said of these works,

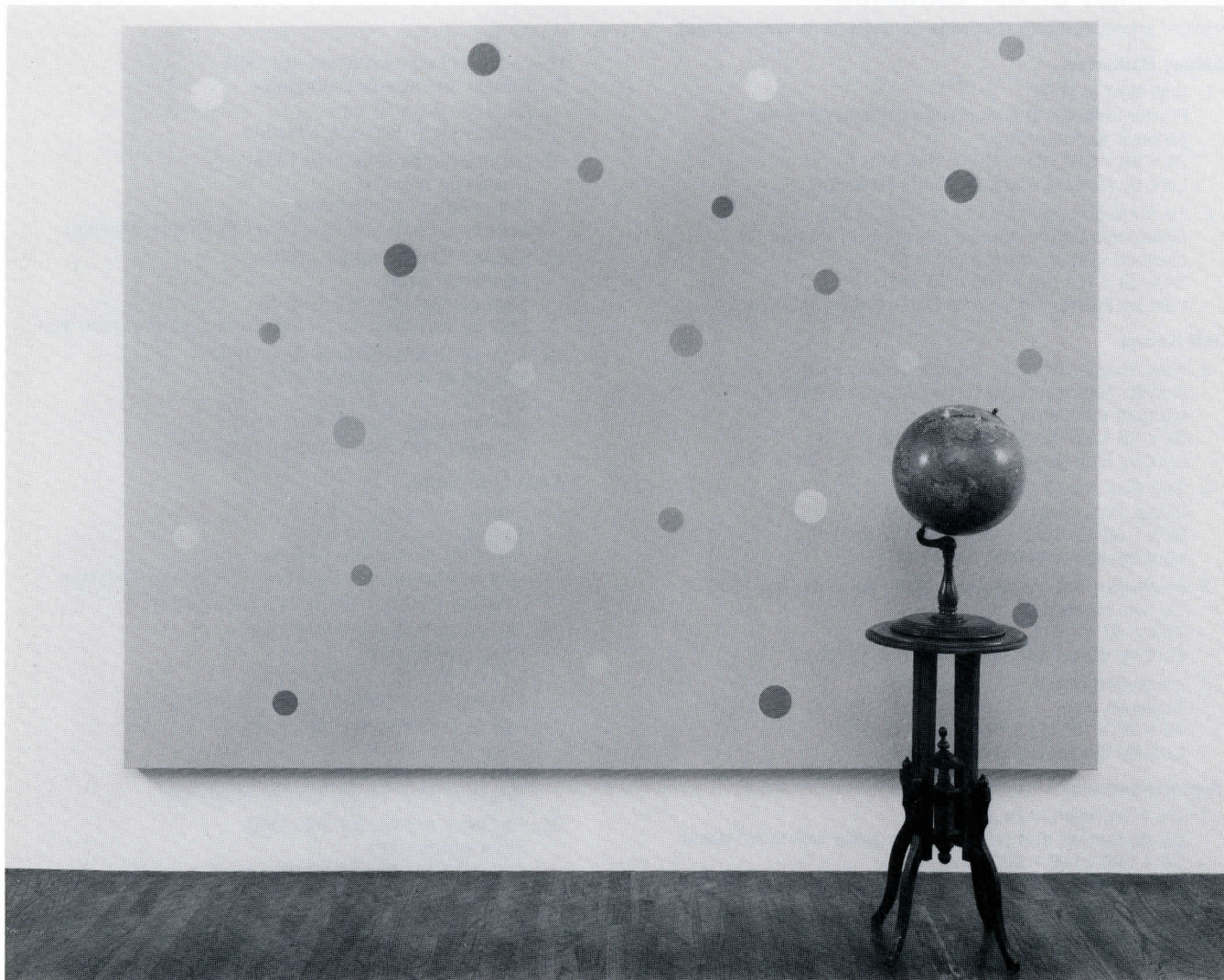
The idea behind this is that objects can achieve such ultimate states-of-being, while we as humans cannot: we have to deteriorate. This confrontation shows the threatening aspect of the object, the power it has over us, because in many ways it is stronger and better prepared to survive.<sup>5</sup>

Koons' most recent series, "Luxury and Degradation" featured a range of objects — statues, toys, liquor decanters — each cast in stainless steel, the material favored for many consumer items. Like his mechanically reproduced copies of liquor and sporting goods ads, these pieces, some of which verge on kitsch, stand for different classes of society. The bust of Louis XIV not only represents "art in the hands of a monarch," but also "the confidence that can be placed in an authoritarian regime."<sup>6</sup>

2. Ashley Bickerton, *Le Art (Composition with Logos #1)*, 1987







7. Annette Lemieux, *It's A Wonderful Life*, 1986

Haim Steinbach is similarly concerned with the objects of our society. Since 1979, Steinbach has been interested in the placement of common objects on shelves. Like Koons, Steinbach is preeminently concerned with newness and the pleasure associated with purchasing objects. Selecting his sculptural elements while out shopping, Steinbach is interested not only with the aesthetic possibilities that can result, but also with revealing the range of objects that people buy, collect and preserve. Cleanliness and preserving states of newness seem to be overriding concerns for Steinbach, as many of his pieces contain objects of cleanliness (detergent, toilet brushes, trash receptacles).

In contrast to Koons and Steinbach, who are obsessed with newness, Annette Lemieux is drawn to things from the past. In *Portable World*, Lemieux presents an antiquated typewriter which, though functionless, still has sentimental value. In *It's A Wonderful Life*, Lemieux recounts Jimmy Stewart's trip through time in this famous Christmas film. Sympathetic to the hardship's faced by Stewart's character, Lemieux has included a period globe as a symbol for the character's dream to someday travel around the world. Lemieux's paintings, objects, and photographs refer back to a simpler time, before the advent of mass consumerism, and always conjure up feelings of longing and nostalgia.

Like the other artists in this exhibition, Lemieux attempts to expose the shortcomings of our materialistic society, forcing us to examine our individual and collective values. Each of these artists reflect the attitudes of an entire generation who were raised during a time when the media gained considerable control over our society. They are committed to revealing our reliance on images and reproductions, and by doing so, continue some of the radical aspirations inherent to modern art.

Dean Sobel  
Assistant Curator

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Pictures*, presented at Artists Space in New York, featured the work of Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith.

<sup>2</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, et al. (New York: Semiotexte, 1983), pp. 4, 11.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Gerald Marzorati, "Art in the (Re)Making," *ARTnews* (September 1986), p. 96.

<sup>4</sup>Daniela Salvioni, "Interview with McCollum and Koons," *Flash Art* (November 1986/January 1987), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>Giancarlo Politi, "Luxury and Desire: An Interview with Jeff Koons," *Flash Art* (February/March 1987), p. 73.



# Checklist of the Exhibition

(Height precedes width precedes depth in all measurements)

## Ashley Bickerton

1. *Wall Wall III* 1986  
Plaster, metallic and aluminum paint, hydrostone, plywood and aluminum  
24 × 48 × 6½" (61 × 122 × 16.5 cm)  
Lent by Richard and Lois Plehn, New York
2. *Le Art (Composition with Logos #1)* 1987  
Silkscreen, acrylic, bronze powder with lacquer on plywood with anodized aluminum  
34 × 72 × 15" (86 × 183 × 38 cm)  
Lent by Elaine and Werner Dannheisser, New York

## Jeff Koons

3. *New Shelton Wet/Dry Double Decker* 1981  
Acrylic, fluorescent lights, two Shelton Wet/Dry vacuum cleaners  
82 × 28 × 28" (208 × 71 × 71 cm)  
Lent by Elaine and Werner Dannheisser, New York
4. *Two Ball Equilibrium Tank* 1985  
Glass, iron, water and basketballs  
62¾ × 36¾ × 13¼" (159 × 93 × 33 cm)  
Lent by Jeffrey Winter, New York
5. *Hennessy, the civilized way to lay down the law* 1986  
Oil inks on canvas  
45¼ × 57½" (115 × 146 cm)  
Lent by Susan and Lewis Manilow, Chicago
6. *Louis (XIV)* 1986  
Stainless steel  
46 × 27 × 15" (116 × 68.5 × 38 cm)  
Lent by Gerald S. Elliott, Chicago

## Annette Lemleux

7. *It's A Wonderful Life* 1986  
Oil on canvas and press tape on globe with wood stand  
78 × 102" (198 × 259 cm)  
Lent by the Collection of Brooke and Carolyn Alexander, New York
8. *Portable World* 1986  
Typewriter and black and white photo scroll  
198 × 13 × 12" (503 × 33 × 30.5 cm)  
Lent by Michel F. Tournadre Comte de La Tour, New York
9. *Ring Around* 1987  
Black and white photograph  
31½ × 48" (80 × 122 cm)  
Lent by Dennis and Ellen Schweber, Kingsport, New York;  
Courtesy Josh Baer Gallery, New York

## Sherrie Levine

10. *After Walker Evans* 1981  
Silver-gelatin print  
6½ × 9½" (16.5 × 24 cm)  
Lent by the Collection of Richard L. Sandor, Chicago
11. *After Fernand Léger* 1985  
Watercolor wash on paper  
14 × 11" (35.5 × 28 cm)  
Lent anonymously; Courtesy Feature Gallery, Chicago
12. *After Henri Matisse* 1985  
Watercolor wash on paper  
14 × 11" (35.5 × 28 cm)  
Lent by Susan and Lewis Manilow, Chicago
13. *Untitled (Broad Stripe #8)* 1985  
Casein on wood  
24 × 20" (61 × 51 cm)  
Lent by Marianne and Sheldon B. Lubar, Milwaukee
14. *Check #5* 1986  
Casein and wax on mahogany  
24 × 20" (61 × 51 cm)  
Lent by Camille and Paul Oliver-Hoffmann, Chicago

15. *Untitled (Two Inch Stripe #6)* 1986  
Casein and wax on mahogany  
24 × 20" (61 × 51 cm)  
Lent by Donald Young, Chicago
16. *Untitled (White Knot #10)* 1986  
Casein on plywood  
31¼ × 25½" (79 × 64 cm)  
Lent by Camille and Paul Oliver-Hoffmann, Chicago
17. *Untitled (Chair Seat #4)* 1986  
Casein on wood  
18 × 24 × 2" (45 × 61 × 5 cm)  
Lent by the Collection of Raymond J. Leary, New York
18. *After Alexander Rodchenko: 4* 1987  
Black and white photograph  
20 × 16" (51 × 40.5 cm)  
Lent by Hugh Freund, New York;  
Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York

## Allan McCollum

19. *Plaster Surrogates* 1983-85  
Enamel on cast hydrostone  
Set of 20, dimensions variable  
Lent by Camille and Paul Oliver-Hoffmann, Chicago;  
Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago
20. *Perpetual Photograph #18* 1985  
Silver-gelatin print  
13¼ × 13¼" (33.5 × 33.5 cm)  
Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York
21. *Perpetual Photograph #32* 1985  
Silver-gelatin print  
12¾ × 17½" (32 × 44.5 cm)  
Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York
22. *Perpetual Photograph #63* 1985  
Silver-gelatin print  
16½ × 13¼" (42 × 33.5 cm)  
Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York
23. *Perfect Vehicles* 1986  
Enamel on solid cast hydrocal  
5 pieces, each 19½ × 8 × 8" (49.5 × 20 × 20 cm)  
Lent by Camille and Paul Oliver-Hoffmann, Chicago;  
Courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

## Haim Steinbach

24. *supremely black* 1985  
Mixed media construction  
29 × 66 × 13" (74 × 167 × 33 cm)  
Lent by Eddo A. Bult, New York
25. *pink accent<sup>®</sup>* 1987  
Mixed media construction  
55 × 110 × 23" (140 × 279 × 58 cm)  
Purchase, Milwaukee Art Museum Collection M1987.11

## Meyer Valsman

26. *Painting of Depth* 1986  
Process inks, plexiglas, axle grease  
72 × 72 × 10¾" (183 × 183 × 27 cm)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Emily L. Ainsley Fund, 1987.63
27. *The Left Behind* 1987  
Process inks on canvas  
68 × 108 × 11" (173 × 274 × 28 cm)  
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York

Cover: 25. Haim Steinbach, *pink accent<sup>®</sup>*, 1987

## Biographies

### Ashley Bickerton

Born in Barbados, West Indies, 1959  
B.F.A., California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, 1982  
Lives and works in New York City  
Selected One-Person Exhibitions  
1984 Artists Space, New York  
White Columns, New York  
1986 International With Monument, New York (also 1987)  
Cable Gallery, New York  
1987 Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

### Jeff Koons

Born in York, Pennsylvania, 1955  
B.F.A., Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, 1976  
Lives and works in New York City  
Selected One-Person Exhibitions  
1980 The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York  
1985 Feature Gallery, Chicago  
International With Monument, New York (also 1986)  
1986 Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles  
1987 Sonnabend Gallery, New York

### Annette Lemieux

Born in Norfolk, Virginia, 1957  
B.F.A., Hartford Art School, University of Hartford, West Hartford, Connecticut, 1980  
Lives and works in New York City  
Selected One-Person Exhibitions  
1980 Joseloff Gallery, Hartford Art School, University of Hartford, West Hartford, Connecticut  
1984 Cash/Newhouse Gallery, New York (also 1986 and 1987)  
1987 Josh Baer Gallery, New York  
Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

### Sherrie Levine

Born in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, 1947  
M.F.A., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1973  
Lives and works in New York City  
Selected One-Person Exhibitions  
1981 Metro Pictures, New York  
1983 Baskerville + Watson, New York  
1984 Nature Morte, New York  
1987 Donald Young Gallery, Chicago  
Mary Boone Gallery, New York

### Allan McCollum

Born in Los Angeles, California, 1945  
Lives and works in New York City  
Selected One-Person Exhibitions  
1983 Marian Goodman Gallery, New York  
1984 Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago  
Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, Los Angeles  
1985 Cash/Newhouse, New York, (also 1986)  
Lisson Gallery, London (also 1987)  
1986 Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia  
Diane Brown Gallery, New York (also 1987)

### Haim Steinbach

Born in Israel, 1944  
M.F.A., Yale University, New Haven, 1973  
Lives and works in New York City  
Selected One-Person Exhibitions  
1979 Artists Space, New York  
1985 Cable Gallery, New York  
1986 Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York  
1987 Sonnabend Gallery, New York  
Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

### Meyer Vaisman

Born in Caracas, Venezuela, 1960  
Studied at Parsons School of Design, New York  
Lives and works in New York City  
Selected One-Person Exhibitions  
1986 Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles  
Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York (also 1987)

### Selected group exhibitions featuring two or more of the artists exhibited here

- 1985 *Objects in Collision*, The Kitchen, New York (Bickerton, Koons, Steinbach)  
1986 *Art and Its Double*, La Fundacion Caja de Pensiones, Barcelona (Bickerton, Koons, Levine, Steinbach)  
*Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (Koons, Levine, Steinbach)  
*Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object*, The New Museum, New York (Koons, McCollum, Steinbach)  
*Paravision*, Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles (Koons, Steinbach, Vaisman)  
Group Show, Sonnabend Gallery, New York, (Bickerton, Koons, Steinbach)  
1987 *Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (Koons, Lemieux)  
*Avant-Garde in the Eighties*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Koons, Levine, McCollum, Steinbach)  
*Post-Abstract Abstraction*, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut (Koons, Levine, Steinbach, Vaisman)



6. Jeff Koons, *Louis (XIV)*, 1986