

ON THE VIEW

AT THE NEW MUSEUM

Window on Broadway • **Let the Record Show...by ACT UP**

New Work Gallery • **New Paintings by Charles Clough and Mimi Thompson**

WorkSpace • **Social Studies: Recent Work on Video and Film**

November 20, 1987—January 24, 1987

THE WINDOW ON BROADWAY BY ACT UP

Last March, a small group of concerned men and women formed ACT UP, or the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power. Their intention has been to fight, with any means necessary—"zaps," more organized demonstrations, posters, letter-writing campaigns, T-shirts, banners, stickers, placards, video screenings, flyers—the often uninformed and negligent response of federal, state, and local governments to AIDS. Since March, ACT UP has grown to almost three hundred strong; it meets informally (and often chaotically) every Monday evening; it is nonpartisan and grass roots; and at this moment, it is still one of the few AIDS activist groups in the country.

I first became aware of ACT UP, like many other New Yorkers, when I saw a poster appear on lower Broadway with this equation: "SILENCE=DEATH."

Accompanying these words, sited on a black background, was a pink triangle—the symbol of homosexual persecution during the Nazi period and, since the 1960s, the emblem of gay liberation. For anyone conversant with this iconography, there was no question that this was a poster designed to provoke and heighten awareness of the AIDS crisis. To me, it was more than that: it was among the most significant works of art that had yet been done which was inspired and produced within the arms of the crisis. The poster was by ACT UP, and not surprisingly, many artists and arts-involved individu-

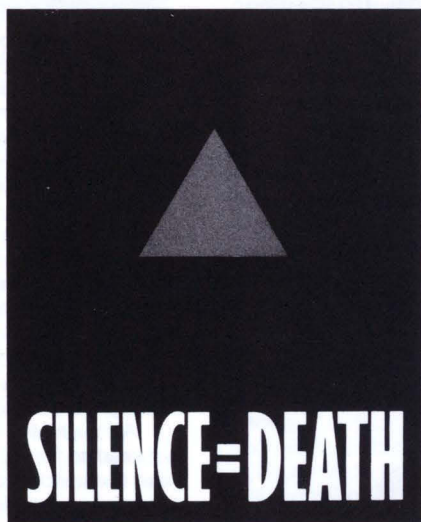
als are active in the organization. Last July, on behalf of The New Museum, I asked the group to do an installation in the Broadway Window.

Let The Record Show..., according to ACT UP, provides current information regarding the AIDS epidemic, as well as depicting the crisis in historical perspective. The intention is to make the viewer realize the depth of the problem and understand that history will judge our society by how we responded to this calamity, potentially the worst medical disaster of the century. Finally,

the installation is more pointedly directed to those national figures who have used the AIDS epidemic to promote their own political or religious agendas. It is intended to serve as a reminder that their actions or inactions will soon be a matter of historical record.

In discussions about this project, inevitably the question, "But is it art?" arises. Though my own response is, "not that again," it's a question that can be put to positive effect. That is, throughout

history, all periods of intense crisis have inspired works of art whose functions were often extra-artistic. Let's cite just a few of the more obvious modern examples: Jacques-Louis David's *La Mort de Marat*, painted in 1793 for the revolutionary national convention; the achievements of the Russian avant-garde, which sought to eliminate class distinctions between artist and artisan and emphasize the materialist basis of art production; and the so-called political art of our own time—a work like Hans Haacke's *U.S. Isolation Box, Grenada, 1983*. Of course, there is a propaganda aspect



embedded in these works; for instance, David's masterpiece was to serve as a rallying point for the popular and middle classes sympathetic to the radical vision of revolution promoted by Jean-Paul Marat. The point is a simple one: not all works of art are as "disinterested" as others, and some of the greatest have been created in the midst, or as a result, of a crisis. Many of us believe we are in the midst of a crisis today. Let the record show that there are many in the community of art and artists who chose not to be silent in the 1980s.

William Olander
Curator

2 PAINTERS: CHARLES CLOUGH AND MIMI THOMPSON

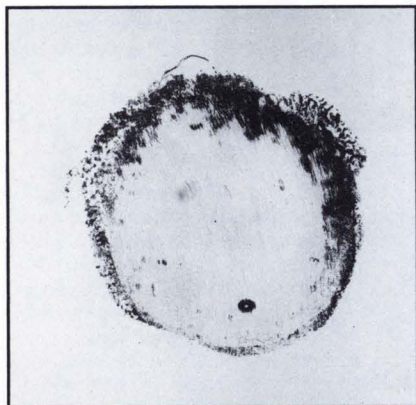
Much attention has been paid in the last few years to the resurgence of abstract painting, either in its late modern form (the work of, for example, Elizabeth Murray, Sean Scully, and Gary Stephan) or its revivalist, postmodern development (the new generation of artists, such as Peter Halley, Peter Schuyff, and Philip Taaffe). Too little attention, however, has been paid to yet another option: work which is skeptical of the first, suspending belief in the humanist tradition of modern painting, with its continuing faith; and self-consciously aware but uninterested personally in the second—sidestepping irony and appropriation in favor of something more "felt" if not more genuine. Key figures in the evolution of this curious dialectic include Jasper Johns, Joan Snyder, and Cy Twombly. More recent figures include Ross Bleckner, Carroll Dunham, and Deborah Kass. To the latter, I want to add Charles Clough and Mimi Thompson.

Charles Clough is well known for the

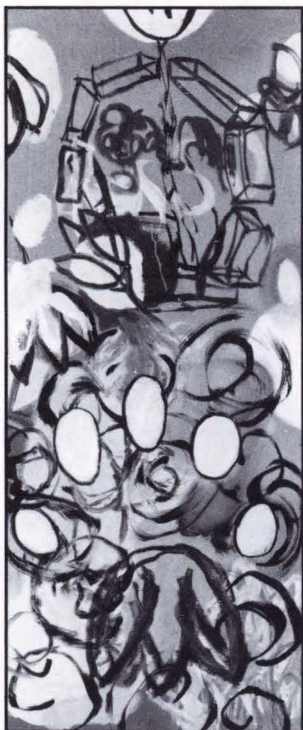
strange hybrids of painting and photography which he developed over the last decade. Indeed, if they had not been so curious and so hybrid—if one or the other of the photographic or painterly aspects had been more prominent—Clough could probably have counted on a secure place in the postmodern canon, either in the progressive arm, identified with appropriation, or the retro arm, associated with Neexpressionism. But since the beginning, he has been unwilling to disentangle either himself or his work from the various issues, even though of late he has devoted himself almost exclusively to painting. This shift, however, has not clarified matters. On the contrary, it has only made the state of his art more complex and contradictory.

For instance, when I first saw Clough's new paintings, I was unavoidably reminded of the "lyrical abstractions" of that second generation of color field painters which emerged in the late 1960s—work by Darby Bannard, Dan Christensen, and David Diaó—which was an attempt to extend the perimeters of late modern painting. That someone so sophisticated as Clough would turn to work so debased was surprising, to say the least. This interest, however, coalesced with another, in more recent and more advanced work, like Gerhard Richter's, whose pseudo-expressionist paintings also often look equivalently debased, and in the likes of a Leroy Nieman or Paul Jenkins, whose pictures currently function within the culture not as paintings but as signs of paintings. (It's not surprising that the Hollywood version of a painter, in films like *An Unmarried Woman* and *Legal Eagles*, is now a stain painter, like Jenkins, rather than an expressionist—a Picasso or a Pollock.) From out of this curious amalgam, Clough has developed yet another hybrid—a painting which is simultaneously genuine and artificial, cultural and natural, full and empty, without resorting, overtly at least, to the ideological apparatuses of late modernism.

Although Mimi Thompson's work does not tread so firmly on that line which separates the artificial from the natural, as does Clough's, on first viewing it too has a mildly off-putting atmosphere about it. The colors are too bright or garish or wildly synthetic; the way the paint has been applied lacks finesse, as if the artist did it with her eyes closed, or as if there is no interest in the way paint is brushed on rather than merely laid down; the grounds are too pretty (hot pink, lime green) or too flat (beige); the whole look is too stereotypically "feminine." And then there are those awkward shapes which don't resemble anything so much as arbitrary markings, and those too-tall canvases. But given time, we begin to warm up to this eccentric vision. I start to notice that certain



Charles Clough, *Si Si*, 1987, enamel on canvas, 37 x 36".



Mimi Thompson, *Window 1*, 1987, oil on canvas, 50 x 20".

forms are repeated from painting to painting; that those areas of paint which look so flat have a resonance of their own; that the colors are not so much garish as popular. Indeed, the paintings begin to look both pop (as much as an abstract painting can be pop) and expressionist, without exactly engaging in the rhetoric of either. As Thompson says, "Ambiguity...can create a vocabulary that resembles a backward thesaurus."

In many ways, our appreciation of both of these artists' work operates in a similarly backward manner. The paintings have to be metaphorically unfolded, laid out and then put back together—deconstructed, if you will. Once accomplished (and this is a timely and time-consuming process: these paintings do not give up their secrets easily), we can begin to experience the pleasure that is the act of looking at paintings, and we can recognize, in Thompson's words, "the point where the tension holds and there is a kind of hum," and in Clough's, "the indispensability of illusion, illusion and simulation, 'not what it looks like...other than it looks.'"

William Olander
Curator

Charles Clough

Born in 1951.
Lives in New York City.

*Works in the exhibition**

Bouquet, 1987
90 x 70"
Courtesy of Scott Hanson Gallery

Veronica, 1987
90 x 80"

The Green Back, 1987
84 x 25"

Tango, 1987
46 x 63"

Si Si, 1987
37 x 36"
Courtesy of Colin De Land

Sunny, 1987
52 x 56"
Courtesy of Colin De Land

The Dickens, 1987
66 x 44"
Courtesy of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel

Golden Gate, 1987
22 x 56"

Snare, 1987
35 x 27"

August First, 1986
24 x 14"

November Thirtieth, 1986
32 x 24"

*Unless otherwise indicated, all works are courtesy of the artist. All works are enamel on canvas.

Mimi Thompson

Born in 1954.
Lives in New York City.

*Works in the exhibition**

Inside the Bowl, 1987
108 x 48"

Untitled, 1987
108 x 48"

Window 1, 2, 3, 1987
Each: 50 x 20"

Hansel and Gretel, 1987
22 x 20"

Flower Painting, 1987
22 x 20"

*All works are courtesy of the artist. All works are oil on canvas.

SOCIAL STUDIES: RECENT WORKS ON VIDEO AND FILM

The realm of the social is most often identified with the documentary, whether it is a photograph, a film, or a videotape. The form itself originated in earliest photographic practice: police identification and surveillance shots; topographic photos designed to assist, for example, with the conquest of the American West; ethnographic studies, linked to the preceding; and diagnostic photos, used as much to promote racial and ethnic stereotyping as to assist in the supposedly disinterested field of medical research. The content, however, as an articulated social message, whose use value existed within the public rather than the private sphere, was not developed until the early twentieth century, in a climate of developing state liberalism and reform associated with the Progressive Era. Examples here include the contradictory and conflicting work of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hines; films such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera*, and Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice*; and as we approach our own era, the television documentary, made more complex by the fact that the interests of the subject could not be easily served by the interests of the broadcast industry. In some ways, the death knell of the documentary, as it had developed in the early part of this century as an instrument of exposé and reform, was sounded within the frame of network television; at that moment in the early 1960s, for example, when, as Martha Rosler has pointed out, Edward R. Murrow signed off the classic liberal documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, with an appeal to viewers "to write their congressmen to help the migrant farm workers, . . . because these people can do nothing for themselves." As Rosler wryly observes, "Luckily, Cesar Chavez was not watching television but rather, throughout that era, was patiently organizing farm workers to fight for themselves."¹

The decade of the 1960s, of course, was a period of often radical social change. In the area of fine art, a modest revolution took place which challenged the perimeters of high culture and ultimately led to a significant dismantling of the fine art apparatus. Both Pop and Minimal art, though ideologically and formally dissimilar, deflected attention, at least temporarily, away from the rarefied atmosphere of studio practice and toward other arenas of activity more commonly known as the everyday. Similar developments occurred in the areas of film production—Jean-Luc Godard's commitment to a political cinema, for example; Warhol's quite opposite though no less important explora-

tion of a film of duration; and the creation of what they called "direct cinema" by the Maysles brothers, Albert and David. Finally, there was the emergence of "guerrilla television," which resulted in various "documentaries" where the conventions of the form were simply ignored in favor of a style which can only be called casual. These developments had a profound influence on redefining what constituted the social. Each provided a more engaged and focused look, in a style which was deliberately unfamiliar, at some fragment of reality which had previously been ignored or taken for granted. (Some producers were more conscious of their own ideological strictures than others and attempted to investigate new relations between sound and image which would produce a "politically correct" version of both; *British Sounds* of 1969 by the Dziga Vertov group, for example, is significantly different from Frederick Wiseman's *Law and Order* made the same year.)

With few exceptions, the great experiments of the 1960s and early 1970s did not last out the decade. American television, including the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, seems to have abandoned any interest in producing or presenting programs as galvanizing, for better or worse, as the 1971 *The Selling of the Pentagon*, produced by CBS News, the 1972 production, *An American Family*, or Downtown Community Television's 1974 *Cuba: The People*, the latter two aired on PBS. Theatrical distribution for documentary films has been reduced to the level of entertainment, with concert film footage, such as Jonathan Demme's *Stop Making Sense*, inexplicably hailed as a documentary classic. And in the area of still photography, the documentary has been reduced to a formalist exercise in identifying, for instance, "color" as a key factor in the new photojournalism.² Indeed, in the 1980s, the documentary has been absorbed, like so much else, into the vast machinery of leisure, so that it too has become merely another instrument of tourism, voyeurism, and spectatorship. Thus, with no apparent irony, *The New York Times* observes of photojournalist Mary Ellen Mark: "When she's photographing, there's very little room for what you might call a life. In fact, the rest of life pales quite hopelessly by comparison."³

Clearly, there is a need to turn away from perceived notions of the documentary and to expand our field of inquiry. This is already being done in the area of still photography to informative and productive effect; see, for example, Martha Rosler, "Some Contemporary Documentary," *Afterimage*, XI, Summer 1983, 13-15, and Diane Neumaier, "Post-Documentary," *Afterimage*, XI, January 1984, 15-17. This program of videotapes and films (screened

on video) is a modest attempt in a similar direction.

The works included in "Social Studies" have been made by artists. This is not intended to privilege "artist" but rather, to note that few of the people involved in the production of these works has developed exclusively in the film/television axis; none were trained strictly as documentarists; and all, I believe, would prefer not to think of their work as simply documentary or its obverse, video poetry. Many are conversant with a wide range of critical theories concerning the nature of representation and are informed by a political awareness which is not limited to a



Mark Gash, who appears in Sharon Greytak's *Weirded Out and Blown Away*.

simple crusade. None of the works screened here are, in fact, "merely" documentaries.

For example, Sharon Greytak's *Weirded Out and Blown Away* is the one work which most closely resembles a classic documentary, both in terms of its subject (the disabled) and its form (a montage of on-camera talking heads). Yet, how many documentaries are produced by one of its subjects, as is this one? Greytak's willingness to turn the camera on herself, without creating a work which is confessional or solely autobiographical, in many ways is a complete reversal of one of the classic tenets of the so-called new documentary—the invisible author, as if documentaries are not included in the province of authorship. A similar twist on convention is also apparent in Ayoka Chenzira's *Secret Sounds Screaming*. Again, the subject is recognizably documentary (child abuse) but its treatment is not: actors are employed to relate the stories of victims. And what of works like Rea Tajiri's, which reverse the situation by assuming a conventionally documentary style with an unconventional content. Her three short works may be the first "deconstructive" documentaries produced in the 1980s.

Additional concerns which are explored in this program, other than the obvious ones which are the subjects of these films and tapes, include: the conflict between making a work which is theoretically and politically

"correct" and a work which will function as a didactic tool comprehensible to a public in need of the information contained therein (*Testing the Limits* and Caroline Sheldon's *17 Rooms*); the continuing exploration of a documentary style based in the "guerrilla TV" innovations of the 1970s (Aron Ranen's *Television Believers*); the possibility of creating a work which addresses a popular and sensational subject and still cuts through the glamour (Todd Haynes's *SUPERSTAR: The Karen Carpenter Story*); and finally, a similar problem, how to make a documentary which is also demonstrably a work of art (Daniel Reeves's *Ganapati: A Spirit in the Bush* and Andre Burke's *A*).

It is worth concluding with a brief look at where work like those included in "Social Studies" does and, perhaps more importantly, does not get shown. Museums, with some exceptions, have tended to focus increasingly on "video art" at the expense of works which are not overtly identifiable as such or have been created with an alternative function. Like photography departments, video departments (or film or media) have tended to aestheticize form and deny content, in often recognizably conservative attempts to deny the existence of a political dimension, distinct from a politics *per se*. As Martha Rosler notes, "the dialectical understanding of the relation between images and the living world has simply been severed."⁴ Thus, in the last few years, museums have focused almost exclusively on video installations or programs of single-channel tapes uncontroversial and artful in nature.⁵

The alternative spaces, fortunately, still function as genuine alternatives within this arena. Artists Space, for instance, has recently developed a regular screening program for video under the direction of Dan Walworth (last season's "TV Sandino" and "Buying In and Selling Out: Dealing with the Forms of Broadcast Television" both included works unavailable elsewhere). The Kitchen continues to screen tapes on a frequent basis, and The New Museum's own programming in this field has been increasingly extensive. And of course, there still exist the various theatrical venues for independent film and video—Global Village, the Millennium, Film Forum, the Donnell Library, although screenings of documentaries are still less frequent and often poorly attended.

In contrast, the broadcast industry, like the institutionalized art apparatus, has focused on "video art" (PBS's "Alive From Off Center") and in recent months, has often rejected works which it deemed unsuitable or reneged on commitments. For example, PBS canceled screenings of the anti-nuclear film, *Dark Circle*, the anti-apartheid work, *The Making of Sun City*, and most recently, the

British production *The Kingdom Come* and *Thy Will Be Done*, which includes segments showing links between Christian fundamentalists and conservative politicians.

As should be apparent from the above, the dream of the global village, the media revolution, public and community access, has not come true. Indeed, the situation today is more fragmented than ever, with more twenty-eight minute tapes being produced (the tell-tale sign that a work is designed for broadcast) and fewer opportunities for the same work to be shown and subsequently seen. Will a tape like *Testing the Limits*, devoted to the controversy surrounding AIDS testing, ever be seen by the audience for which it is intended? That is, the *same audience* that tuned into a recent episode of the CBS situation comedy, "Designing Women," which dealt with the subject of AIDS in a serious though highly emotional and predictable manner? There is no question that the artists participating in this program have little desire to operate in a "video ghetto." But from where will new and popular opportunities come in the 1990s?

William Olander
Curator

Notes

1. Martha Rosler, "in, around, and after-thoughts (on documentary photography)," 3 works, Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981, p. 73.

2. *On The Line: The New Color Photojournalism*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1986.

3. Vicki Goldberg, "The Unflinching Eye: Mary Ellen Mark," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 12, 1987, p. 58.

4. Rosler, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

5. An important exception is The Whitney Museum of American Art's "New American Filmmaker Series," which recently has afforded a venue for important works by Yvonne Rainer and Trinh T. Minh-Ha and a program, organized by Lucinda Furlong, devoted to "Social Engagement: Women's Video in the '80s."

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to the artists for their patience and cooperation in organizing these programs.—W.O.

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THE PROGRAM

Unless otherwise indicated, all works are courtesy of the artists. Sharon Greytak's film is being screened as part of the Artist and Audience Program of the New York Foundation for the Arts.

- 12:30 **Todd Haynes.** *SUPERSTAR: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1987, 43 minutes.
- 1:15 **Caroline Sheldon.** *17 Rooms*, 1985, 15 minutes. Courtesy of Women Make Movies.
- 1:30 **Testing the Limits Collective.** *Testing the Limits*, 1987, 28 minutes.
- 2:00 **Rea Tajiri.** *Vertigo, Psycho, and Torn Curtain*, 1987, 19 minutes.
- 2:20 **Andre Burke.** *A*, 1986, 8 minutes.
- 2:30 **Sharon Greytak.** *Weirded Out and Blown Away*, 1985, 43 minutes. Courtesy of Cinema Guild.
- 3:15 **Aron Ranen.** *Television Believers*, 1986, 30 minutes.
- 3:45 **Ayoka Chenzira.** *Secret Sounds Screaming: The Sexual Abuse of Children*, 1986, 30 minutes. Courtesy of Transit Media.
- 4:15 **Daniel Reeves.** *Ganapati: A Spirit in the Bush*, 1986, 46 minutes. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix.

On Fridays, beginning at 5:30, the program will repeat from Todd Haynes's *SUPERSTAR* through Andre Burke's *A*.

On Saturdays, beginning at 5:30, the program will repeat from Sharon Greytak's *Weirded Out and Blown Away* through Daniel Reeves's *Ganapati*.

The individual views expressed in the exhibitions and publications are not necessarily those of the Museum.