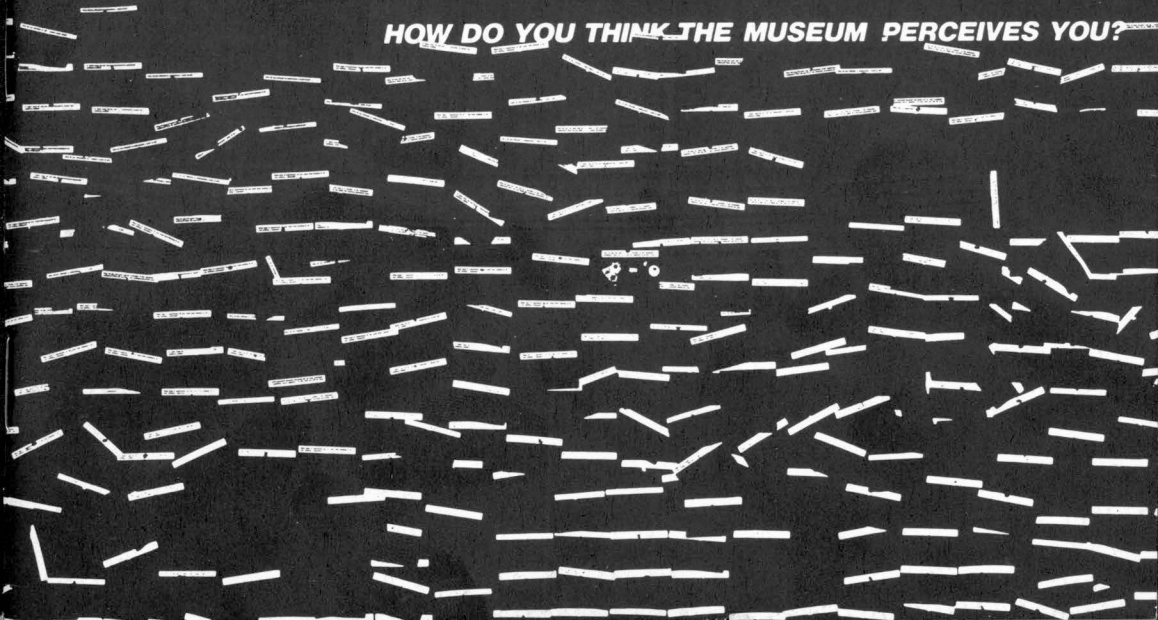


**HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR RÔLE AS A MEMBER OF THE MUSEUM'S AUDIENCE?**

**HOW DO YOU THINK THE MUSEUM PERCEIVES YOU?**



## THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

583 Broadway New York, NY 10012

### RHETORICAL IMAGE

Organized by Milena Kalinovska, guest curator

December 9, 1990 - February 3, 1991

Dennis Adams, Art & Language, Judith Barry, Lothar Baumgarten, Braco Dimitrijevic, Rose Finn-Kelcey, Félix González-Torres, Tomislav Gotovac, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Thomas Huber, Ilya Kabakov, On Kawara, Jiří Kolář, Jarosław Kozłowski, Cildo Meireles, Tatsuo Miyajima, Muntadas, Barbara Steinman, Lawrence Weiner, Krzysztof Wodiczko

Design: J. Abbott Miller, Design Writing Research

Photography: Sara Krauskopf

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# **RHETORICAL IMAGE RESOURCE ROOM**

A Viewer Participation Project of  
The New Museum of Contemporary Art

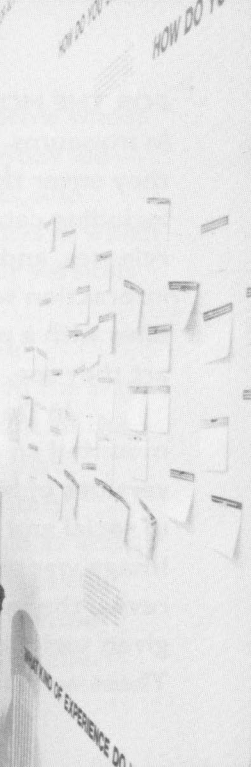
The Rhetorical Image Resource Room was co-organized by  
Susan Cahan, Education Curator, and Julie Ault with Milena Kalinovska and Alida Vega;  
and designed by Mark Kloth.

HOW DO YOU ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND A WORK OF ART?



WHAT WAYS DO YOU SEE ART CONNECTED TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REALITY?

HOW DOES THE MUSEUM ENVIRONMENT AFFECT YOUR VIEWING



WHAT KIND OF EXPERIENCE DO

**FOR THE MOST PART, MUSEUM VIEWERS DO NOT HAVE MUCH POWER** in museums. All artistic and programmatic decisions are made before they enter the gallery. All discussions as to the meaning of the work—including catalogues, wall texts, brochures, lecture programs, press releases, and audioguides—are prepared far in advance of the viewers' interaction with the art. Once an exhibition opens, art critics are the only ones with a public forum in which to respond and critically evaluate the art they see.

In December 1990 The New Museum of Contemporary Art mounted an exhibition which challenged the idea of singular, "official" versions of history and examined the ability of art to influence processes of social and political change. Organized by Milena Kalinovska, Rhetorical Image was an international group show of works which were intended to reveal the intricate play of forces that condition communication in a given society and, by extension, the distribution of power in that society. These works examined the dimension of power in obviously persuasive

forms, like advertising or political propaganda, as well as in forms whose aura of authority is more subtly woven into the fabric of everyday life—public architecture and public space, mass media, monuments, and cultural symbols. These works were intended to reveal the ways in which authoritative representations can not only convince us of their versions of reality, but also convince us of their authority.

Given the content of the work, it was essential that the educational projects accompanying the exhibition shed light on the ways in which power is also constituted within the museum. Adjacent to the exhibition was a Resource Room, conceived as a comfortable place within the Museum where viewers could look over supplementary materials related to the artists and ideas in the exhibition, such as artists' books, documentation of public projects, and interviews. Perhaps the most important component of the room was a project which invited viewers to respond to the issues raised in the exhibition and to reflect upon their own experiences of visiting museums.

Participants were asked questions like, “How do you attempt to understand a work of art?” and “How do you see your role as a member of the museum’s audience? How do you think the museum perceives you?” These questions were stencilled on the walls in bold graphics and printed on postcards which viewers were invited to fill out and hang on one wall exclusively devoted to public participation. Over 4,000 responses were collected over the nine weeks of the project. Eventually, the cards spilled over onto all the walls in the room.

The Rhetorical Image Resource Room was intended to disrupt the passive role offered to visitors in most museums, to actively engage participants in a critical and analytical process, and to foreground the value of viewers’ experiences in art interpretation. It aimed to demonstrate that meaning is not a pre-existing entity lurking below the surface which only the scholar can uncover using the special tools of expertise, but is something which is socially constructed, fragmentary, and contin-



gent on the position of the “knower.” Our goal was to subtly shift the discursive focus onto voices which are seldom, if ever heard, to blur the distinction between speaker and listener, and to problematize the separation between authoritative and nonauthoritative positions within the museum. In the process, we hoped to create a vehicle through which the Museum’s staff could learn more about what really happens for people when they visit a museum, not what we hope or imagine happens.

The assemblage presented here cannot duplicate the actual installation. But it can convey something of the content of viewers’ responses. It is not a “collective” response, nor a “representative” selection. Rather, it is partial and suggestive of the range of the responses generated and the potential for museums to create conditions for public dialogue and criticism around issues of cultural politics.

Susan Cahan and Julie Ault

**What kind of experience do you want from looking at art and visiting a museum?**



Translation:  
**Awakening.**

**What kind of experience do you want from looking at art and visiting a museum?**

I want the world to look different when I walk out than it did when I walked in.

**How do you attempt to understand a work of art?**



**How do you attempt to understand a work of art?**

No deseo nunca

Translation:

**I don't desire to understand.**

## How do you attempt to understand a work of art?

IF IT ISN'T CLEAR FROM  
THE PIECE, YET IT SEEMS  
TO BE SAYING SOMETHING—  
DO SOME RESEARCH

ASK SOMEONE

ASK THE GUARD WHO  
WATCHES + LIVES WITH IT  
5 DAYS A WEEK

# How do you see your role as a member of the museum's audience? How do you think the museum perceives you?

• ↖ badass biker babe  
(looks cool in black leather)

• ↗  
chi-chi  
Soho duo -  
sniggering and pointing  
finger at PRETENTIONS.



a combination of all these =

(enlarged 1,000,000 times)



**In what ways do you see art connected to social and political reality?**

ask

Jesse Helms!



**In what ways do you see art connected to social and political reality?**

Art can change the world

if only it was on TV!

click



**The New Museum**  
OF CONTEMPORARY ART