

# SIGNS OF THE TIMES

## THE ATLANTA BIENNALE

BY LAWRENCE HETRICK

**A**lan Sondheim's unusually close association with artists here, and his keen curatorial instincts, have facilitated his presentation of a 1987 Atlanta Biennale that fairly represents the major trends and themes of an important, loosely associated artistic group. No one should be mesmerized into thinking this art is the only kind being done here, but it is an important, relatively new sort, the product of a distinct community of interest.

From the beginning Nexus advertised the show as a homecoming for Sondheim and a renewal for the artists whom he had encouraged during his tenure as director of the Nexus gallery. Whether these mythic returns came to pass, what seems clear is that on this occasion of their interaction with Sondheim, Atlanta artists have achieved an artistic identity as a body, with characteristic strengths and weaknesses revealed by the show.

Some facts:

The Atlanta Biennale has been held annually since 1984.

As Nexus' gallery director, Sondheim curated the first two.

The Biennale is modeled after the Whitney Biannual, which shows new, innovative work.

Biennale is pronounced Bee-in-ahl, as a knowing joke on (our) provincial pretensions.

Sondheim has cleverly used all available space from floor to ceiling in five rooms, plus a loft from which much of the art downstairs can be seen.

Over 100 artists showed this year. Over half live in Atlanta, many others in Athens. Some live in Nexus' own neighborhood.

Sondheim wrote copy for a brochure, and gave a talk, a version of which will appear in *Art Papers*. In these, and in an interview before the show, he explained his ideas about the art he selected. He described not only the aesthetic qualities and interests of what he of course regards as the Atlanta art community, but also something of its social character.

The show can be generalized distinctly, and since practical criticism may result, it ought to be, with exceptions duly noted.

It is a bright, glittering, jagged sign-system of ironies and parodies, a funhouse of criticality. Its colors are not primaries, as Sondheim asserts, but pure hues in a high key, not derived from Georgia's physical environment, but simply the kind of color folk artists everywhere tend to use. The show represents an incipient urban folk art. Not only does it look like the art of a previously unknown tribe, it works in a folk art way in the lives of the artists. Urban themes dominate. An underlying sense of apocalyptic geopolitics pervades most work, perhaps influenced by the dominant apocalyptic religion of the region. Christian motifs abound. Sexuality is represented as a war zone of ruin and conflict, sad, tormented, embarrassed, fearful, enraged by turns. Death is seen not as a naturalistic fact but as the evidence of the victory of evil.

There is that exaggeration of forms and heightening of texture and color characteristic of expressionist art, and we see many examples of the

placement of figures away from center, a post-expressionist device, or cliché. There is the dislocation and recombination of images characteristic of surrealism, but without surrealism's purposes, a surrealist mannerism, also evident in some "poetic" texts offered, as though artists hadn't imagined that counterfeit surrealism could be detected.

Almost all the work is in a critical mode, socially, politically, culturally, economically. It is not art for art's sake. There is very little interest in visual effect. Rather, under the influence of contemporary schools of criticism, the artists present signs, interesting in terms of what or how they signify. The criticism, of and by the sign-systems, seems not so much directed at a

public as toward those resembling the artists themselves, the tribe. It seems, then, oddly like preaching to the saved. This double awareness, of criticality combined with a condition of knowing that one must correctly be agreed with, makes me feel uncomfortable in a way I don't think anyone intended.

The show's characteristic art reflects contemporary critical concerns interacting with regional orientations. While many artists seem to have carefully thought through their regionalism, few seem to have gone to the same trouble in sorting through contemporary criticism, the various gumbo stews of post-structuralism, semiotics, pragmatism, Marxism, and others that have dominated art

criticism for 15 years. Post-structuralist tenets have become unexamined assumptions. Among them:

Physical reality cannot be perceived directly, but only through sign-systems.

All sign-systems are incoherent: that is, they deconstruct themselves.

The artist is an illusory construct for a process occurring within a sign-system.

A work of art may be redefined by being bought and sold, subverted by commodification.

Simpleminded as they may sound to the uninitiated, all these matters need looking into. Nevertheless, the overwhelmingly successful purveying of narrow nonsense by French academics has to be one of the strangest, unlikeliest cultural events of the 20th century.

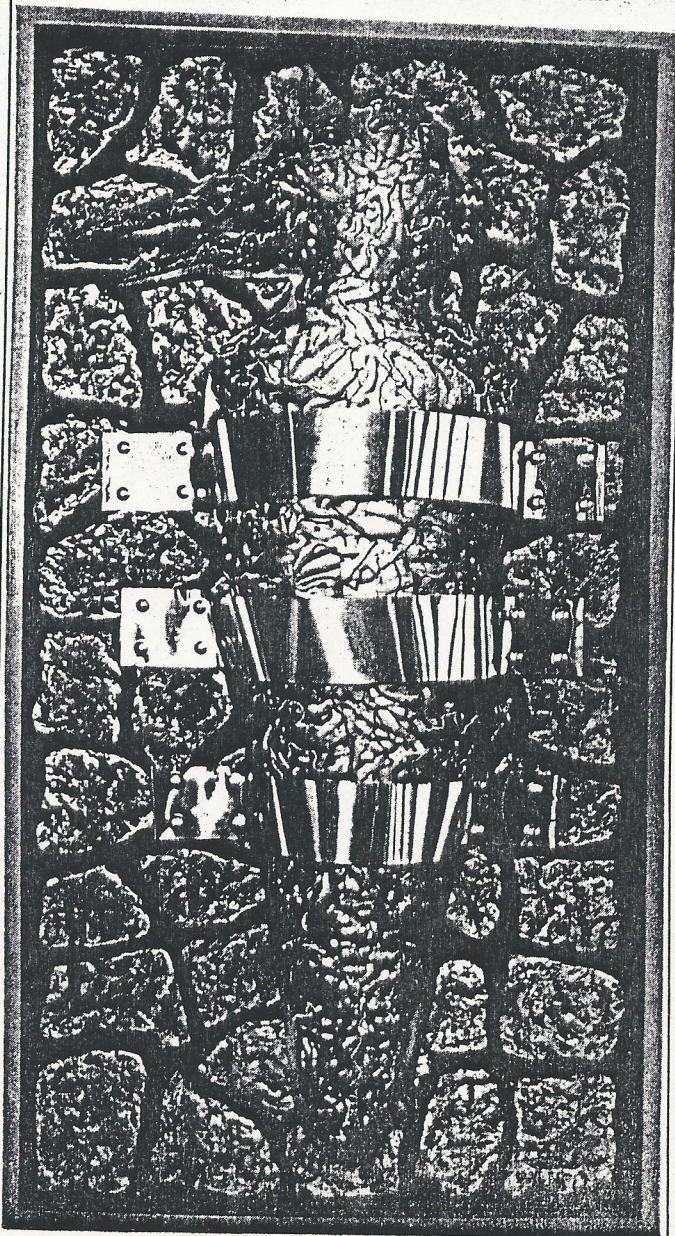
The results of the influence of post-structuralism can be seen clearly in a group of installations that make themselves felt as postmodernist by means of their accumulations of dissimilar sign-systems. Joni Mabe's installation "It's Easier to Love a Dead Man" is a churrigueresque shrine of junk and pop accumulation analogous to certain yards by the side of the road one tends to see in the rural South. Hubcaps, curlers, a deer head, coffee cans of nails, phonograph records, neckties, bells for sanitary napkins, lamps, tinsel, but most of all pictures of pop stars and athletes, as well as Jesus and Mary in several versions. Some of those pictured are dead, others alive, leaving me not at all sure that the repulsive dead (Liberace, Hitler, and John Wayne look equally repulsive in these versions) are easier to love than the living (Shaun Cassidy, Jim and Tammy). The piece enshrines Southern kitsch as a sort of ruin, giving these artifacts and images a sense of being under the aspect of the Last Days. It is an intensely Baptist work.

Bill Paul's installation "Death from a Walk through a Lead Forest" is likewise overloaded both with objects and an oppressive sense of judgment. It's an assemblage of a large number of individual pieces, all grim, heavy, dark, foreboding, intimidating, brutal, and shocking, made mostly of hanging tire rubber and driven nails like spines or quills, reminiscent of alien insect or crustacean forms. The point of all this is explicitly stated by the AIDS literature stacked on the floor. Phallic pottery mushrooms set in a row are intended to draw all this and much else together formally.

I would have appreciated two or three of Paul's major pieces in their own spaces. They are only made less horrible by the attempt at post-modernism through mixing modes with the AIDS literature and by giving out condoms on opening night.

Patrick Keim, E.K. Huckaby, Beth Ensign, and David Pierce in various ways try the same sort of overloaded installation as Mabe and Paul, with similarly mixed results, in that parts seem better than the whole and the overall effect is indecisive. The most successful of these, Pierce's "Throne of Narcissus," has the glittery nostalgic look of a costume jewelry department at a Kresge's in 1961.

The dominant mode of the show — demonstratively critical, semiotic, apocalyptic, and sexual — seems interesting to me because it is distinct, and distinctly represents the needs of its community, which may have more



"THE PURIFICATION OF EASY LIVING" BY JAMES FLOURNOY HOLMES.