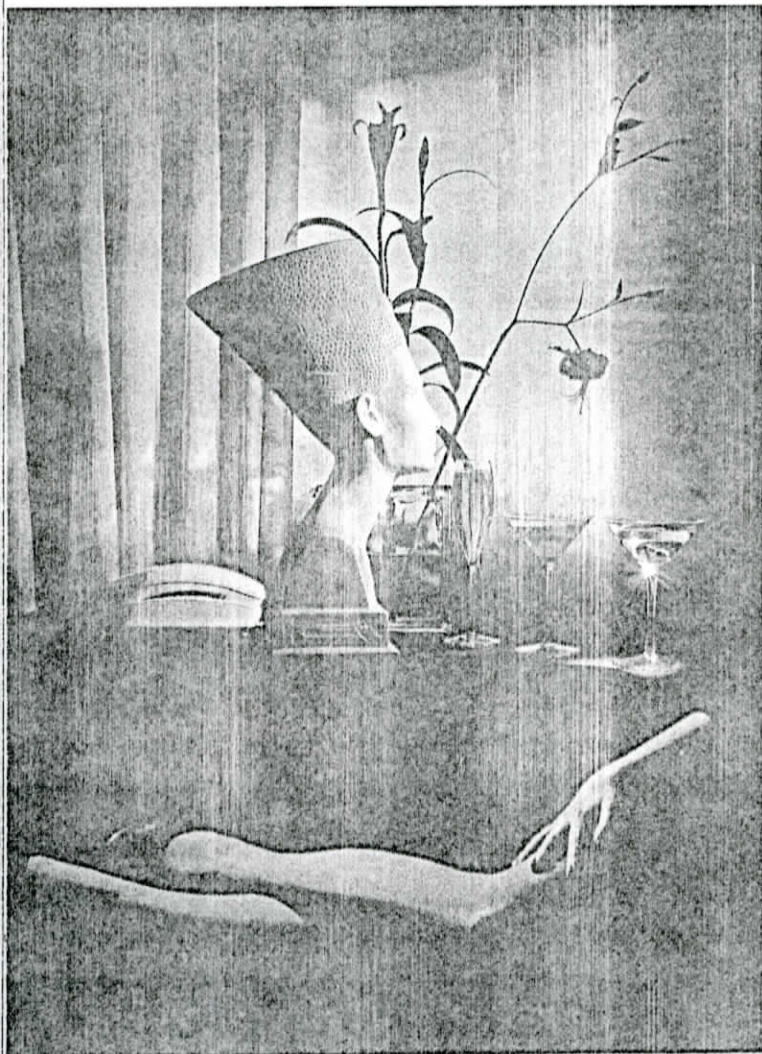
PICTURE PUZZLES: THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL

Much of the new art is based on a simple question and the need to find an answer to it: Pictures lie, but *how*?

By Gerald Marzorati



COURTESY MARVIN HEIFERMAN

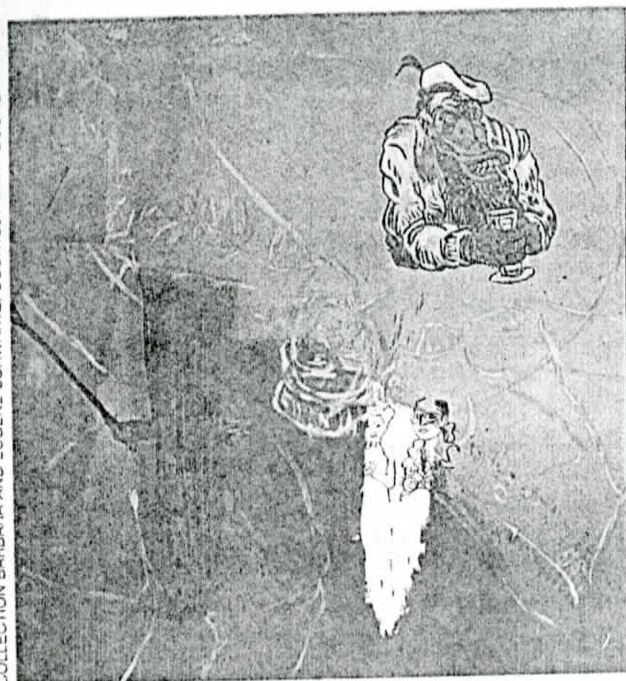
In Nefertiti, 1984, Cibachrome, 39 by 29⅞ inches, Frank Majore explores the seductive power of contemporary advertising.

IN THE '80S, WHICH BEGAN SOMETIME IN THE mid-'70s, the new American art that has *mattered*—that has recognized its time and seized it—has been about pictures. What is meant by "pictures" is this: photographs in newspapers, scenes from films (moving pictures), advertising posters and billboards, cartoons and illustrations, signs of all sorts (words can be pictures too), images on the TV screen (and the computer terminal), even works of art (especially reproductions of them). In America, pictures are everywhere. Being everywhere, they have come to be every*thing*—they have become the reality, or our experience of it. Making art about pictures, artists in the '80s aren't making art about art, but art about American life.

There was a time, and it ended only a moment ago, when there were very few pictures. Experience was direct, firsthand. In America, there was the Self and there was the World. The few pictures there were told simple stories. One picture might illustrate the everyday; another the miraculous: Christ ascends into heaven. Pictures mediated; they arranged, interpreted, recalled. If you had a picture in your house or saw one somewhere else, you could probably say who had drawn it or painted it or (later) photographed it. Or if you didn't know this, you at least knew where the picture was *from*. All this is a way of saying that there were no mass media.

Times changed; era followed era. People found other uses for pictures. Those with things to sell made pictures of them. The story this kind of picture told was: *You want this*. People got more sophisticated; they discovered that not only things but ideas and feelings could be sold. In ads, in movies, on TV, the story in the pictures went: *You want to be like this*. Other people, powerful ones, began to use pictures to show the world (so simply! so graphically!) and what went on in it. In magazines like *Life*, and then on the evening news, the story went: *That's the way it is*.

Things are no longer direct, firsthand. It is no longer possible to say who makes the pictures. The pictures are everywhere, everything. Pictures are American life.



COLLECTION BARBARA AND EUGENE SCHWARTZ. COURTESY MARY BOONE

LEFT David Salle deconstructs and reconstitutes meaning in ***B.A.M.F.V.****, 1983, oil on canvas and satin with object, 101 by 145 inches.*

How have artists in the '80s been making art about pictures? Not, as is sometimes said, by making art *of* pictures. Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol—they made art of pictures, art that had as its content the news photo, the comic strip, the ad. These artists approached pictures as Constable approached a tree. They *represented* pictures, accurately and often to great effect.

Artists making art about pictures have been doing more than representing pictures. Maybe it has to do with their having grown up at a time when the accumulation of pictures had reached critical mass. Maybe it has to do with the increasing understanding (scholarly, critical) of pictures as something more than representations, simple and benign. Maybe it comes down to this simple question and the need to find an answer to it: Pictures lie, but *how*?

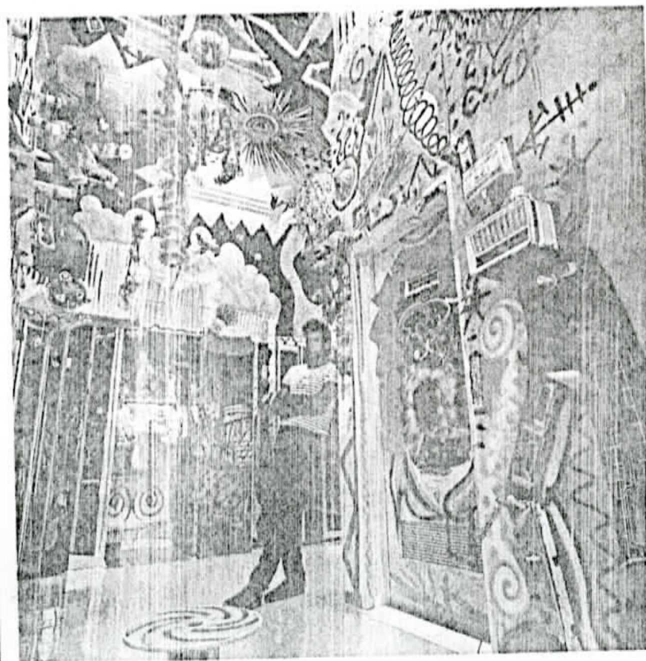
The artists making art about pictures understand that pictures are reality, or the way we experience it. They understand that pictures tell stories. But they also understand that when a picture is removed from its original context (a Ralph Lauren ad in *Vogue*, news footage from Lebanon on the CBS Evening News), it is likely to shed some or all of its intended meanings and to suggest others. What those making art about pictures have sought to show is that reality, as experienced in America through pictures, is as thin and fragile as the film and paper and videotape it exists on.

These artists want to confront you with the fragility of your reality. They want you to confront your assumptions about the world and your place in it: *What is it? Where is it? Is it?* To confront the art of the '80s, art about pictures, is to feel (often in this order) wonder, doubt, resentment. To understand this art is to feel ambivalent. Whether any of these feelings are experienced as pleasure (and in looking at art they can be) depends on how comfortable you are about confronting your assumptions.

THE WHITNEY MUSEUM'S 1985 BIENNIAL WAS (according to the catalogue) committed to: "multiple examples of work made during the previous two years by artists chosen collectively by the curators as the most representative of the best American art . . . ; as cohesive an overview of current activity as possible . . . ; meaningful, if loose, coherencies."

Such commitments usually ensure disaster (think of the Museum of Modern Art's international survey of new art last summer). The 1985 Biennial was not a disaster; it was one of the best (accurate, timely, pleasurable) museum shows to date having to do with the new American art of the '80s.

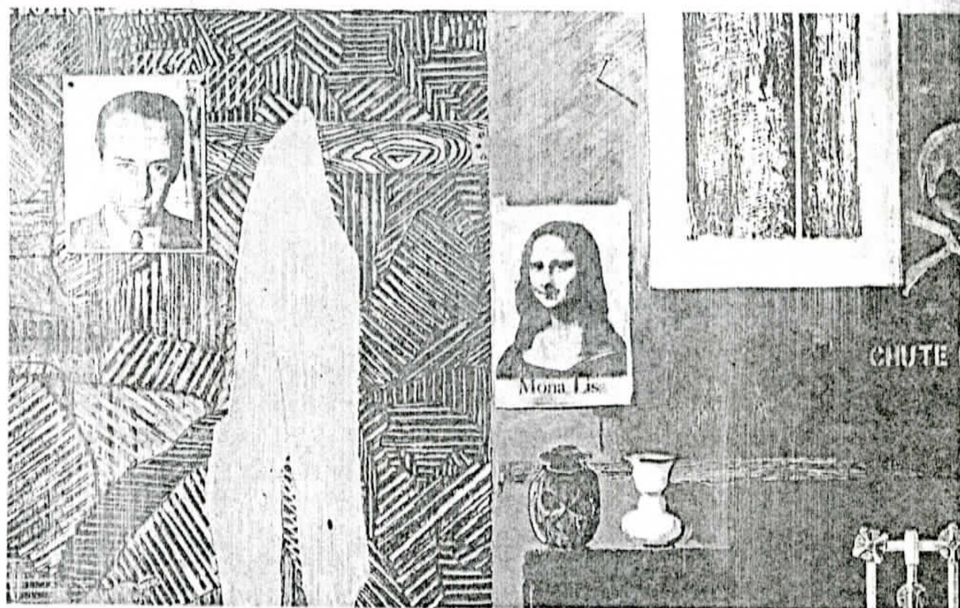
The Biennial's success owed something to the artists selected for inclusion—but only something. There were, in fact, artists left out of the show who will not be left out of an understanding of the art of the '80s: Robert Longo, Julian Schnabel. There were artists included in the show whose work is clearly of another time: Donald Judd, Robert Mangold. And owing to notions of fairness (geographic, demographic), there were artists in the show who will not soon be heard of again. (Current museum etiquette seems to dic-



TSENG KWONG CHI/COURTESY TONY SHAFRAZI

BELOW Kenny Scharf's installation ***Closet #7****, 1985, mixed media, is a neo-Surrealist glimpse of American life.*

Jasper Johns' **Racing Thoughts**, *1983, encaustic and collage on canvas, 48 by 75⅛ inches, is a biography of the artist in pictures.*



tate leaving out one or two big names—*we are independent*—and "discovering" an artist or two passed over by everyone else—*we take risks.*)

What made the Biennial the success it was had mostly to do with how the works were arranged to be seen and understood by the viewer. To enter the Whitney and begin walking through the Biennial was to sense immediately that those making the new art that matters are dealing with pictures.

In the Whitney's small lobby gallery, not far from the entrance to the museum, Group Material had assembled a big installation (it took up the whole room). Group Material is an artists' collective; for the past four years it has operated out of a storefront on New York's Lower East Side, organizing shows on social and political themes. The installation for the Biennial was called "Americana," and what it showed was the social fabric, or what passes for one—a warp and weave of pictures. The walls of the gallery read as giant collages. Pictures of all kinds were hung edge to edge, floor to ceiling. Drawings, packages off supermarket shelves, magazines opened and mounted, book jackets, posters and photos and paintings: *Why throw all these things together? How should this be seen? Be understood?*

Four Norman Rockwell commemorative plates were mounted together on one of the walls; they read "nostalgia," plain and plaintive. Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans* (1981), hung across the room from the plates, read "nostalgia" too. Levine's picture is an exact copy of a famous Walker Evans photograph of a fresh grave; Levine's picture, like Rockwell's, says something about the longing for an innocent time (did either time ever exist?) when it was possible to be "original," to make a picture that would forever yield its true meaning, timeless and inviolable.

A big part of the Group Material installation was a black and white console TV: always on, it relayed endless stories and always a picture. Not far from the TV was a print by Eric Fischl entitled *The Year of the Drowned Dog* (1983). It is made up of five separate prints, each a fine picture in itself (they have on at least one occasion been hung as individual works). There is one of a boy bent over a dog lying on its side near the ocean's edge; another of three men in bleached-white slacks and shirts. Placed next to each other just so (some of the images overlap), the five prints form a picture that tells a story: one day in the hot sun, a dead dog washed up on a quiet beach—a bad sign, one best ignored by the vacationers. But there is another story as well: how pictures can be pieced together into narratives, and how a desire for a story, for a *meaning*, can burn like a welder's iron, joining pieces, smoothing rough edges, hiding all the seams.

The Group Material installation, situated at the beginning of the exhibition, provided an overture: pictures, assumptions, longings. Downstairs, in the lower gallery, were three pictures by James Casebere. In lightboxes the size of small windows, Casebere shows black and white transparencies of intimate places that seem happened upon, spotted through trees, then studied from the shadows. These are storybook scenes, cute at first glance, then a bit eerie (for one thing, they are unpeopled). But are they real? Close inspection reveals the photo transparencies to be lying (despite your belief that they can't). Casebere's places are fictions: *Stone House* (1983), *Cotton Mill* (1983) and *The Lighthouse* (1983) are made up, confected—little stage sets of sticks and clay, real only for the camera.

Upstairs, on the museum's fourth floor, were pictures by Laurie Simmons. More lies. Simmons has for some time now been placing little plastic dolls in settings and photographing them. The places, it is always clear, are no more real than the dolls. They are pictures of places: a *House & Garden* living room, a *Travel & Leisure* Paris. And nothing is truly "real" (that is, nothing is not a picture) in the work of Richard Prince. In his new work, he incorporates into plaquelike and larger sculptural pieces (the latter lean against the wall) color pictures of faces and talking heads lifted from the TV screen or the movies or magazine ads. The faces (such a blur) seem so familiar, the smiles and perfect cheekbones so similar and so "right." The faces are always fresh and well kept; they see nothing but the lights from the cameras. They are images, nothing more.

Elsewhere in the show were pictures by Frank Majore, pictures dealing with four-color advertising, with its powers (its stories) of seduction and consumption. Majore stuffs his big Cibachrome prints with signs of modern-day opulence

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and exotica. In one, *Nefertiti* (1984), film-noir lighting in a darkened room reveals two martinis, champagne in a tulip glass, silky legs (in heels), fresh-cut flowers and a bust of Nefertiti herself, set in profile, poised coolly (and quite improbably) like a piece of Waterford in a *New Yorker* ad. *What's being sold here?* It's as if Madison Avenue, its circuits overloaded, had gotten its signals crossed.

MUCH OF THE ART ABOUT PICTURES IS OF the same stuff as pictures: photographs, transparencies, signs. (In the Biennial, pieces by Jenny Holzer and Bruce Nauman took the form, respectively, of the electronic message board and the flashing neon marquee.) Making art about pictures of the same stuff as pictures is supposed to enhance the seduction and ambiguity necessary to mediate—to show the thinness and lies of the new reality. *Are these things pictures or art about pictures?* Tension.

The problem is this: the seduction often quickly withers, the ambiguity too easily clears up. These things are *art*. Readily, effortlessly, the museum (or, in other cases, the gallery) puts things in their place. If something is on display in a museum, it is art.

A painting is art. It has no place outside art (pictures in the media have usurped its previous roles, its other meanings). It has a provenance: the history of art. It is fragile, with no place outside art, and it is freighted, burdened with a history.

But it is precisely these weaknesses that make painting so effective just now—so effective in dealing with pictures. There can be no tension now about what is art and what is not—not in the museum, not in the gallery. But tension can crackle elsewhere. It takes only a moment for the hand taking a picture to squeeze the shutter, and the picture preserves that moment. A hand making a painting takes more time. A photograph captures a moment, a painting invents one. In the space between these times, there is tension. The hand squeezing the shutter admits of little effort; the hand pushing the brush admits of a certain desire: angry or elegiac or melancholy. To squeeze the shutter is to be behind the camera (to be hidden, anonymous); to paint is to acknowledge, however embarrassing it may be, a will to power. Between these acts, there is tension.

To make art about pictures is to try to mediate. To make paintings about pictures is to hot-wire.

In one room at the Whitney, hung adjacently, were paintings by Jasper Johns and David Salle. Johns painted *Racing Thoughts* in 1983; it is something of a mid-career breakthrough for him, one inspired, it seems, by the work of younger artists (those dealing with pictures). In the lower right corner of the painting—it is technically an "encaustic and collage on canvas"—is an old bathroom tap with the water running. A bath is being drawn. There is also a small wicker basket (only its top is visible) on which rest two pieces of pottery. This then is the setting. All the rest is images, signs, posters—painted pictures of pictures. There is an old photo of Leo Castelli, his face veiled with markings that suggest a puzzle; Johns' own name, done in familiar Johnsian stencil; passages of crosshatching (a Johns trademark), looking here like simulated wood (a reference to Picasso and early collage?); Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (a reference to Duchamp, Johns' touchstone?); a long, lava-pour brushstroke (think of Clyfford Still) of the sort Johns so long ago rejected. *Racing Thoughts* is a tide of suggestion, a reverie (the warm bath), a biography of Johns in pictures. But who wrote it? Johns himself? Or his readers, those of us who have tried to construct him from pictures, his own and those that preceded them? Is *Racing Thoughts* our art-historical Johns, the story we've pieced together? These questions are unresolvable. What is certain is this: chilling and elusive, the work haunts.

And hung next to it, a masterpiece (a loaded word but a useful one: the nexus of ambition and achievement). Salle painted *B.A.M.F.V.* in 1983. There was a time—several years ago, when he first achieved notoriety—when he (and others) would speak of his work as so much icy calculation; painting was dead (again), and Salle would take care of the autopsy. From the start, though, Salle's painting has spoken of other things. It was never enough for him to paint pictures of pictures hacked from their contexts, all veins of meaning and original intent neatly cauterized. There was also the urge, however perverse, to inject sentiment and subjectivity (were such things still plausible?), to think bad thoughts and make them manifest, to fan meanings nearly spent. It is as if in the vast space provided by canvas—its ability to hold images not only in different spaces but seemingly in different *times*, like pieces in a narrative—Salle found room not only to deconstruct but to rewrite meaning.

B.A.M.F.V. is perhaps Salle's greatest painting. In its pastel softness (when will his critics see that he can *paint*?); in its fleeting eroticism (breasts and buttocks deliquesce on a ground of tarnished gold satin); in its harshness (that wire-mesh stump leg) and goofy-crude adolescence (the duck-billed cartoon tough); in its blatant utilization of a small early painting of his (a woman, nude and melancholy, smoking), together with flourishes of brushwork and Johnsian deadpan (a toothbrush, simply rendered); in its many pictures of pictures to be assembled by the viewer with unrelieved uneasiness—in all of this, *B.A.M.F.V.* is a hall of mirrors of our time. In it we glimpse our contingent selves.

THE '80S ARE OVER, OR NEARLY SO; THE moment, one in which art has been about pictures, is nearly played out. Maybe this is why the Whitney was able to get such a good grip on it. It may also be the reason why, on entering many galleries just now, there is this feeling: a flint was struck sharply in the dark; now the fire is dying down. Artists of the '80s will continue to deal with pictures; some of them will continue to do important work, and there are those (Louise Lawler, Gretchen Bender) who are just hitting their stride, who have their best work before them.

But a certain edge has been rubbed smooth. Time does this. And perhaps a certain despair will surface: for how long, and in how many ways, can pictures be dealt with, can feelings of doubt and ambivalence about pictures be kept knife-keen?

Cindy Sherman is one of the most important artists of the '80s; there is not a dimension of American life—a life now of pictures—that she has not dressed for and attended to. In a new work, included in the Biennial, she sits before the camera in dark, purplish light. Her eyes, partly hidden by thick strands of dark, lank hair (a wig), are moist and blank; the nose is huge, fleshy, vaudevillian. One hand is wiping it with a tissue, the other clutches her stomach: she is sobbing. Why? It almost looks as if the camera itself is causing the pain; the lighting and cropping close off other possibilities. The picture seems to tell this story (there are, of

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The multitude of images in Group Material's installation, "Americana," 1985, gave a group portrait of the United States.

course, others): How long do you expect me to satisfy your appetite for my role-playing, my way of dealing with pictures, my *art*?

So, after the '80s, after art about pictures, where to? On the Whitney's second floor, in and around the bathrooms and phone booths toward the back, Kenny Scharf installed *Closet #7* (1985). Scharf did his first closet in the spring of 1981 in a big walk-up apartment on Sixth Avenue in the 30s that he shared with Keith Haring; Keith and Kenny and their friends would sit in it for hours, talking and listening to music and having fun (this at a time when artists a little older than Scharf—he was born in 1958—were beginning to make names for themselves making art about pictures).

For *Closet #7*, Scharf first brought to the museum a grille from an old Dodge, boxes of Cheer and of Ritz crackers, posters (one may have been of Jim Morrison). These he fastened to the walls and ceiling or strewed about the floor. Then he proceeded to cover everything—walls, floors, ceiling, objects—with fake fur and tinsel and Day-Glo paint. (When Scharf does this to an individual object, say a portable TV, he calls it "customizing.") In some places, he painted shapes and patterns, loony and sci-fi; elsewhere, he painted cartoony monsters or actual cartoon characters like the Jetsons (his favorites). The entire installation was black-lit and glowed; dance-funk, from a ghetto-blaster hung from the ceiling, gave the space a party pulse.

Things are changing; period follows period. Scharf in a certain way, a very different way, is dealing with American life, with all of the pictures. He's not uncomfortable with them. He's erasing some with Day-Glo, drawing others he's grown up with. *Closet #7*, like a horror movie or a fun house, is weird but not unsettling. Everything is innocent, reassuring. The installation is a hallucinogen without the possibility of estrangement or paranoia. The story in *Closet #7* is this: *Girls just want to have fun. We're gonna party like it's 1999.*

Scharf is something of a neo-Surrealist, as are the other two East Village artists who made it to the Biennial: Rodney Alan Greenblat and David Wojnarowicz. Their surrealism is that of the sci-fi book jacket and the head shop, of Ed "Big Daddy" Roth's custom cars and the Smurfs on Saturday-morning TV. It is the surrealism of American youth—visit any high-school art department and see what the kids are drawing. It is the ascendant esthetic of the under-18, and of the pictures (particularly TV) aimed at them. It is surrealism as "fun."

Scharf is on to something. (This has not gone unnoticed: he is the most widely imitated artist since . . . since David Salle.) The America of pictures, of photos and ads and especially TV, has produced a public at a distance, at one remove: an *audience*. And this audience has particular qualities. It has a short attention span. It is easily bored. It wants sensation. It wants hits. It wants innocence (which it never had). It wants fun. This audience has the qualities of a child—or, better, of an adolescent (pained, self-conscious, insecure) longing for childhood.

Scharf *is* fun. And in the context of the '80s—a time when art has been about pictures—there is one thing more: he can be read and thought about as well as danced to. But what happens if the tension gives way, as it already has in countless East Village galleries? What happens when you can't stop the fun? Perhaps the '87 Biennial, on the edge of the '90s, will have an answer. It may be the art of the '90s, beginning to be made now in the '80s, that will finally tell us what is art and what is not art—and what all along we wanted from it. ■