

Press Release

RETROaction

Ida Applebroog, Charles Gaines, Mike Kelley, Zoe Leonard, Glenn Ligon, Cindy Sherman, Gary Simmons and Lorna Simpson with Kevin Beasley, Torkwase Dyson, Leslie Hewitt and Rashid Johnson

Hauser & Wirth New York, 69th Street
15 November 2023 – 27 January 2024

Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles
27 February – 5 May 2024



New York...In the early 1990s, a new generation of artists in the United States were using exhibitions to share their outlooks on the social and political turbulence of the time. Two of those exhibitions—which opened in the same year—were the 1993 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and ‘Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,’ curated by artist Charles Gaines at the University Art Gallery (UAG), University of California, Irvine.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of these landmark shows, Hauser & Wirth is pleased to present ‘RETROaction,’ a two-venue project that will begin at its Upper East Side location in 2023 and continue at its Downtown Los Angeles gallery in 2024. Many of the artists who participated in the seminal exhibitions that inspired ‘RETROaction’ are today recognized as having established the terms of critical cultural debates in the early 1990s. Eight of these artists also now work with Hauser & Wirth.

Thirty years later, in a sociopolitical context that bears many similarities, ‘RETROaction’ celebrates the impact those artists made and reflects their continued influence upon art and discourse while suggesting that our current moment is a time for retroaction—rather than retrospection—that the past and present are in an active, ongoing dialogue.

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Homi K. Bhabha, who wrote for the 1993 Whitney Biennial catalogue, explains the purpose of the exhibition at Hauser & Wirth, of which he is the co-curator: ‘A conventional retrospective *looks back* from the summit of the present to synthesize the past by giving it a culminating shape. In contrast, the ambition of ‘RETROaction’ is to configure the art of the past in a contemporary constellation of influences and interventions, rather than to synthesize it in the retrospective mode. ‘RETROaction’ *brings forth* the legacies of the early 1990s to interact with the lessons and lesions of art today. This show traces the momentum generated by a group of artists who, 30 years later, continue to make a compelling case for their ideas and beliefs. ‘RETROaction’ provides a double-frame. It takes a view of the present in all its decolonizing tumult—racial violence, pandemics, climate catastrophe, migration and displacement—pinpointing a critical moment of transition in the 90s from which to move forward.’

‘RETROaction’ has been curated by Kate Fowle in collaboration with Homi K. Bhabha, Charles Gaines and art historian Ellen Tani.

New York Presentation

On the first and second floors of its Upper East Side location, Hauser & Wirth will present works by **Ida Applebroog, Charles Gaines, Mike Kelley, Zoe Leonard, Glenn Ligon, Cindy Sherman, Gary Simmons** and **Lorna Simpson**. Selected in collaboration with the artists where possible, the works, made between 1986-1994, capture the spirit of cultural debates of the early 1990s, provoking relevant questions about the roles of racial address in a museum or gallery display, activist art and critical theory, sexual difference and the body politic.

On the third floor, works by New York-based artists **Kevin Beasley, Torkwase Dyson, Leslie Hewitt** and **Rashid Johnson** comprise an updated iteration of ‘Theater of Refusal,’ which in its original 1993 incarnation juxtaposed the contributions of eleven contemporary Black artists with published texts that critically discussed their work. Curated by Gaines and Ellen Tani, this current revisitation of the original show is entitled ‘Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Reconstitution.’ Featuring artists who are committed to both abstraction and materiality, the presentation will also include critical texts and raise important questions about the premise of the original exhibition while ‘rethinking structures of artistic knowledge and the critical discourse that surrounds it,’ as Gaines describes. When ‘RETROaction’ travels to Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles in 2024, this section of the exhibition will feature works by Los Angeles-based artists.

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In spring 2024, a new edition of the 1993 publication 'The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism' will be released by Dancing Foxes Press with Künstlerhaus Stuttgart and LAXART, marking the 30th anniversary of Charles Gaines' and Catherine Lord's exhibition and publication 'The Theater of Refusal.' Coedited by Rhea Anastas, Charles Gaines, Jamillah James and Eric Golo Stone, this publication reprints in facsimile the eponymous 1993 publication that documented the show, which contained essays by Maurice Berger, Gaines and Lord, as well as the transcript of a roundtable that included a range of artists and writers. Reproducing images of the exhibition for the first time in color, the new edition augments the original publication with an essay by poet and scholar Fred Moten; recent conversations between Lord and Gaines and between Moten and Gaines; a roundtable discussion that echoes the first, moderated and edited by Thomas (T.) Jean Lax and Jamillah James; and an afterword by Rhea Anastas. Supporters include Hauser & Wirth, Galerie Max Hetzler, the Rennie Collection and a Teiger Foundation Director's Award.

On 27 January 2024, Hauser & Wirth will host two live roundtable discussions at the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College in New York City, looking more closely at the 1993 Whitney Biennial and 'Theater of Refusal' with some of the artists and curators who initiated and participated in these shows. The roundtable events will explore the cultural and social issues of the 1990s in relation to our present moment.

About the 1993 Whitney Biennial

The 1993 Whitney Biennial was described to the press as 'guided for the first time by a single curatorial perspective and exploring both the primary artistic and social concerns of American art in the 1990s.' Involving more than 80 artists, it was curated by Elisabeth Sussman with Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt and Lisa Phillips. A 'vital dimension' to their thinking—as described by Sussman—was 'the ways in which artists confront such dominant issues as class, race, gender, sexuality and the family' as well as 'to show the growing influence of mass media and computer technologies in our visual culture.' The Biennial provoked—to quote Sussman again—'a gargantuan uproar' that fixated primarily on the show's seeming political correctness, which for others—such as Homi K. Bhabha—enabled people 'to think beyond narratives of origin and initiatory, initial subjects and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of 'differences.'" Another unusual aspect to the show was that it traveled to the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, Korea in 1994, where it inspired the creation of the Gwangju Biennial, which started in 1995.

About 'Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism'

Originally conceived in 1989 by artist Charles Gaines as an examination of Black artists' relationship with postmodernism, 'Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism' eventually opened in 1993. The aim was to challenge the art world to cultivate a new critical language by using the exhibition 'to reveal the strategies of marginalization about a group of contemporary black artists, and to propose an alternative,' as Gaines described it in the catalogue. Presenting works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Renee Green, David Hammons, Ben Patterson, Adrian Piper, Sandra Rowe, Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Pat Ward Williams and Fred Wilson, the curatorial innovation of 'Theater of Refusal' was to display work by the artists alongside previously published texts and reviews that Gaines highlighted to expose journalistic assumptions and ingrained attitudes which maintained marginality and normally remained invisible. The show opened in April 1993 at the University Art Gallery (UAG), University of California, Irvine, developed in close collaboration with its director, Catherine Lord, and traveled to other UC galleries through 1994.

About the curators

Homi K. Bhabha is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities in the English Department and Comparative Literature Department at Harvard University. He is the author of numerous works exploring postcolonial theory, cultural change and power, contemporary art and cosmopolitanism. His works include 'The Location of Culture,' which was reprinted as a Routledge Classic, and the edited volume 'Nation and Narration.' Bhabha has also written articles on contemporary art for Artforum and essays on the work of William Kentridge, Anish Kapoor, Taryn Simon and Matthew Barney, amongst others. With the support of the Volkswagen and Mellon Foundations, Bhabha has led a research project on the Global Humanities. He is a Corresponding Fellow at The British Academy, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and Critic-in-Residence at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He holds honorary degrees from Université Paris 8, University College London, Freie Universität Berlin and Stellenbosch University.

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Charles Gaines is a pivotal figure in the field of conceptual art. His body of work engages formulas and systems that interrogate relationships between the objective and the subjective realms. The concept of identity politics has played a central role within Gaines' oeuvre, and the radical approach he employs addresses issues of race in ways that transcend the limits of representation. Using a generative approach to create series of works in a variety of mediums, he has built a bridge between the early conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s and subsequent generations of artists pushing the limits of conceptualism today. Gaines is also exhibiting as an artist in 'RETROaction.'

Ellen Tani is an art historian and curator based in Rochester NY, where she is Assistant Professor of Art History at Rochester Institute of Technology. As specialist in contemporary art's intersection with critical race studies, with a particular focus on conceptual- and performance-oriented practices, Dr. Tani uses methods from the arts and humanities to explore questions of power, gender, and race and ethnicity from the 20th Century to the global present.

Kate Fowle is senior curatorial director at Hauser & Wirth. Prior to joining the gallery in 2023, she was director of MoMA PS1; chief curator at Garage Museum in Moscow; and executive director of Independent Curators International (ICI) in New York. She was also the first international curator of UCCA in Beijing and co-founder of the first Masters Program in Curatorial Practice on the West Coast. Kate started her museum career in the UK, where she initially trained as an artist. She has curated more than 50 exhibitions internationally and initiated numerous institutional programs to support artistic research and collective practices.

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Caption and courtesy information:

Installation view, 'The Whitney Biennial', The Whitney Museum, New York NY, 1993

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Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Installation view of 'The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,' organized by Charles Gaines, University Art Gallery (UAG), University of California, Irvine, 1993

From left: David Hammons, 'African American Flag,' 1990; Renée Green, 'Blue Skies,' 1990; Gary Simmons, 'Us & Them,' 1990; Pat Ward Williams, '32 Hours in a Box . . . and Still Counting,' 1988

Photo: Catherine Opie