

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Martinez, Alanna. The New Museum's "1993" Is a Meandering Nostalgia Trip - But for Whom? Blouin Artinfo. 19 March, 2013. Web.



The **New Museum's** "NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash, and More Star" conjures the strongest and most uncomfortable feelings of nostalgia I've felt in years – which is the whole point. The star-packed, vintage hodgepodge of political installations and rough-edged, chaotic work amounts to a trip back in time to what curators **Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Jenny Moore,** and **Margot Norton** have designated a game-changing year. The museum's intent may

have been to assemble artwork from the (in)famous 1993 **Whitney Biennial**, alongside a handful of other standout pieces from of the time, which together supposedly laid the groundwork for the art world's subsequent 20 years, but the big names in the show and the visceral emotional reaction that 1993's historic events spark are more memorable than the art itself.

Nearly all of the opinions about this show that I've gleaned from reviews or conversations with friends touch on the powerful emotions it inspires, from the excitement of seeing the early work of **Sadie Benning** to the time-warp feeling produced by the restaging of the seminal installation "Crime Scene" by **Pepon Osorio**.

The show trips over itself a little with its repetitive use of the exhaustive map of world events. This device was put together to provide context, but ends up muddling the idea that the show is about 1993 in the unique microcosm that is New York City, rather than about this year all over the world – unless it's trying to drive home a point that many New Yorkers essentially believe: that New York City is the center of the world. Then again, maybe the way the timeline relentlessly recurs on every page of the catalogue or is seamlessly woven into all of the wall text manipulates viewers in just the right ways, forcing them to reflect on a moment 20 years ago that really isn't worth remembering.

A video version of the timeline, presented on an array of vintage televisions, is organized by month and separated into vignettes that focus on four categories: world affairs, U.S. affairs, pop culture, and the arts and sciences. Displayed on the fifth floor on glitchy analog television sets that blast snow and noise between newsreel clips of important events, this contextual installation is a strong visual force by itself, and well-curated to provide a real-world background for the artistic interpretations to come. It perfectly sets up the undertones of nostalgia that the show capitalizes on.

Holland Cotter's piece for the *New York Times* seems defensive when assessing the New Museum's attempt at charting the year's historic milestones, saying the show's take on history is "often also written by people who weren't on the scene and have to take the winners' word for what happened and what mattered," and that it was "assembled by curators who were in their teens or younger during the year examined." On the other hand, New York's **Carl Swanson** meditated heavily on the significant dates of the year and fittingly wrote, "Nostalgia has a life cycle, and usually it runs about twenty years." The later statement is the crux of the show, which celebrates the 20th anniversary of the '93 biennial as the career-starting moment of its featured artists, and gives weight to early works from that biennial that are not that strong on their own, but when seen together are more powerful now because of the successful careers of many of the artists.

The fifth floor contains the most contemporary and relevant pieces in the whole show. While considering that the bulk of the works chosen reflect the tensions of 20 years ago, only a handful can be said to reflect motifs still being explored by contemporary artists working today. What is the point of a retrospective if not to be able to pinpoint where history has repeated itself or changed the world? "NYC 1993" is light on pieces like that, but does have a few.

"The Thing," founded in 1991 by **Wolfgang Staehle** in Lower Manhattan, was a temporary "sculptural" project in the form of a functioning text-based electronic bulletin board system – the pre-Internet version of what would today be a mix between a blog, eBay, and a chat room. Here it is represented in the form of an old, clunky computer, set on an exhibition stand. The international BBS became a digital networking platform for artists' discussions, debates, and even exhibitions and auctions. Integral to the sculpture's history is "Superdream Mutation," also by Staehle, a downloadable GIF file that is one of the first examples of an artwork bought and sold (as an unlimited, numbered edition) online. Unfortunately, as "The Thing" predates the World Wide Web, the artwork only exists in the show in hardcopy form on a floppy disc displayed under glass in the show, alongside a rare print of the image done by the artist that same year.

One floor lower, timeless pieces from **Felix Gonzalez-Torres** break the overwhelmingly historic rhythm felt so far, but produce their own brand of visceral emotional pleasure: "Untitled (Couple)," a string of warmly glowing lightbulbs that hang from the ceiling to the floor like an iridescent waterfall, and his black-and-white billboards of two obscure birds flying in opposite directions. These work harmoniously with **Kristin Oppenheim's** dreamy and morose sound work "Sail on Sailor," and the lusty, orange-cream colored, wall-to-wall carpeting by **Rudolf Stingel**. In an accidentally beautiful occurrence, the light from the bulbs reveals the impressions visitors' footprints have left on the carpet, forming a halo of prints around the work itself, becoming more erratic the further away in the galleries one gets. If nostalgia is a longing for times or friends past, then this is the point in the show to feel that longing.

AIDS is a recurring theme throughout the exhibition, one of which we are constantly reminded. However, there are stark variations in its portrayal – some more abstract like Gonzalez-Torres's poetic meditation on fading life, and others more overtly political like **Greg Bordowitz's** "Fast Trip, Long Drop" or **Nan Goldin's** "Gilles and Gotscho, Paris," which function like PSAs about the devastating illness. The differences in the visual interpretations of disease represent a continual divide in the show, between works responding directly to the impact of the virus and those that use a more conceptual treatment to reflect a personal experience.

The third and second floors are where the bulk of the 1993 Whitney Biennial kids are bunched, and the feeling is overwhelmingly that of a scrappy, DIY, fresh-out-of-an-MFA-program, un-finish-fetish chic. Osorio's "Crime Scene" installation shocker is still moving and mysterious, and for those who saw **Ryan Trecartin's** work in the New Museum's 2009 "The Generational: Younger Than Jesus," it's hard not to see a similarity – another place where the artwork still seems fresh. These large-

scale ramshackle installations may have been born in that era, but the trash-filled, precarious Plywood environments built by **Jason Rhoades** are still very much in vogue.

These floors present the challenge of finding hidden gems amid an onslaught of pre-Internet, material-based, conceptually dense pieces very much rooted in the politics of the moment. Though it's interesting to note that many of the pieces could have taken a completely different form if they'd only been produced a year or so later, after the World Wide Web went live – **Sean Landers's** "Inprobable History" would clearly have just been a blog – this doesn't make them especially moving now. Instead, the history lesson overwhelms the art, leading to my feeling that the bookending floors of the show – the fifth and the lobby – are the most powerful and well organized.

The real kicker, for me personally (as someone who is of the generation Cotter criticizes for being too young to have absorbed the scene), is in the fishbowl gallery on the ground floor, which holds the work of world-famous, trend-setting photographer, filmmaker, and controversial icon **Larry Clark**. His "1993 Wall Piece" (2013) is a varied collection of stills from his disturbing cult film "Kids," offering a collection of worn-and-torn skateboard ephemera with straight-up smut imagery he's glued onto the decks. This was the moment of the show where my own nostalgia kicked in. The images of a young **Leo Fitzpatrick** and **Rosario Dawson** glowing with adolescence and mischief under the guidance, and surveillance, of Clark's camera evokes feelings of teenage transgression, and of roaming free and unsupervised in New York's streets.

The work best embodies the agitation and naiveté of the time. Startlingly, though his images depict a very specific age group, it may transcend its own boundaries, showing that regardless of visitors' ages, this show succeeds by speaking to multiple generations. The collective **Artclub 2000's** ironically pretentious fake GAP ads, featuring group members posing like the models from the era's signature clothing brand, are pieces that feel just as dated. While highly staged, there is still a candid legitimacy to these satirical spreads, in much the same way that Clark's characters weren't trying to be anything they weren't already – just kids in the city. That work, combined with **Nari Ward's** spine-tingling "Amazing Grace" next door at the New Museum's **Studio 231** space, left me exiting the museum thinking a lot about the ways the rough edges of the city's gritty day-to-day in the early '90s permeated the creative individuals that made it their home.

Ultimately, what the show conveys is that in the big scheme of things, 1993 was neither memorable nor stellar. It was just another year where terrible and wonderful things happened on top of the events that set the tone for the coming decades. It may still be important to all of us who were alive then in some individual way, mostly because it wasn't that long ago. Anyone who lived through that time should find at least one piece here that will move them – even if it is just **Bjork** playing the lobby. The show offers a happy dose of nostalgia porn for some, or an unhappy reminder that the world hasn't changed as much as we may have hoped in the last 20 years. Either way, it is meant to take the viewer back in time, and whether you were 25 or 5, if you were alive in that time and place in history, you will certainly feel something.