



The Bronx Celebrates:
Cathleen Lewis

November 5, 1996 - January 15, 1997

Lehman College Art Gallery

*Organized by Susan Hoeltzel
Director*

The Bronx Celebrates:
Cathleen Lewis

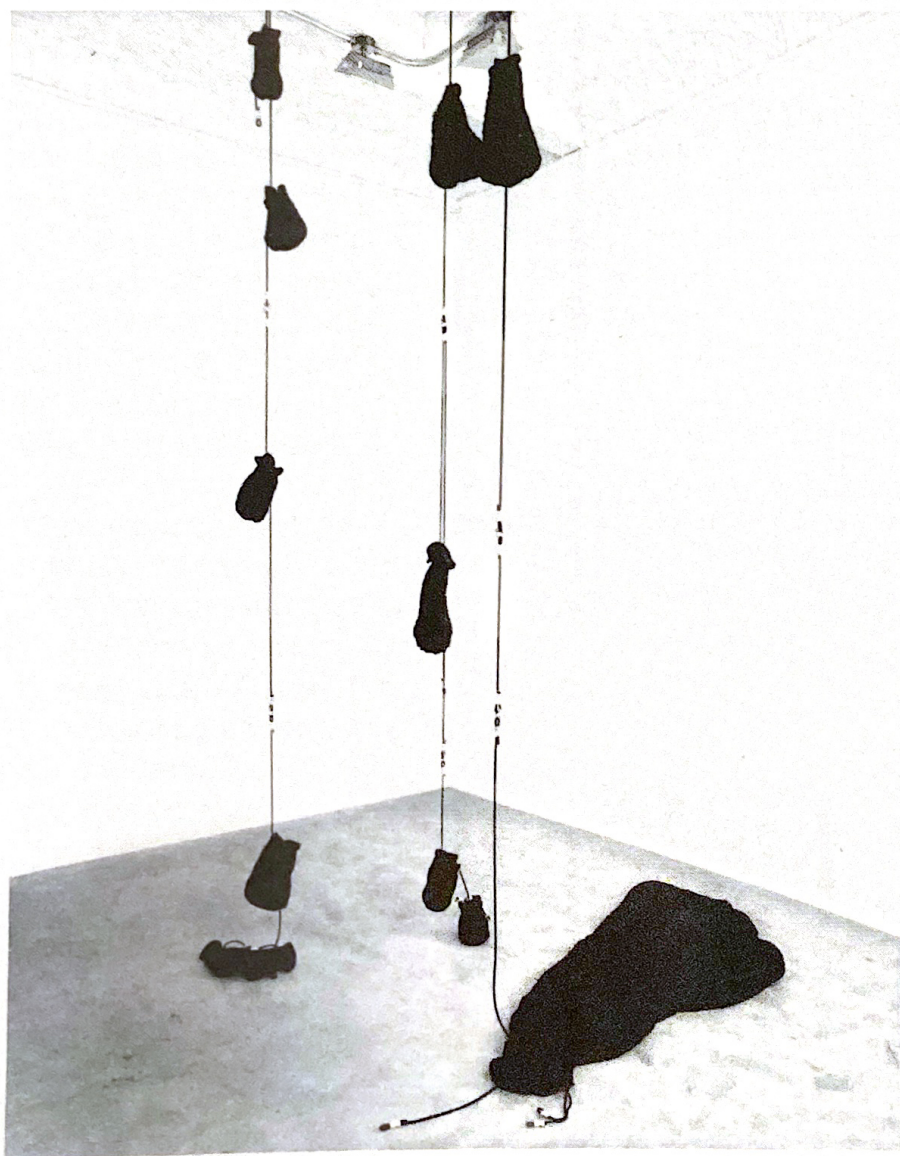
Susan Hoeltzel

The work of Cathleen Lewis is, at its core, conceptual. Her installations explore the issues of race, gender and identity through formalist abstraction and the framework of language. Lewis probes the exterior—the rituals of beauty, style, and fashion—for ethnic identity, history, and personal memory. The body is an implied source in much of the work and hair is a constant metaphor. Mirrors, reflections, and shadows function visually and create the illusion of an additional corporal presence—they also include the viewer in many of the works.

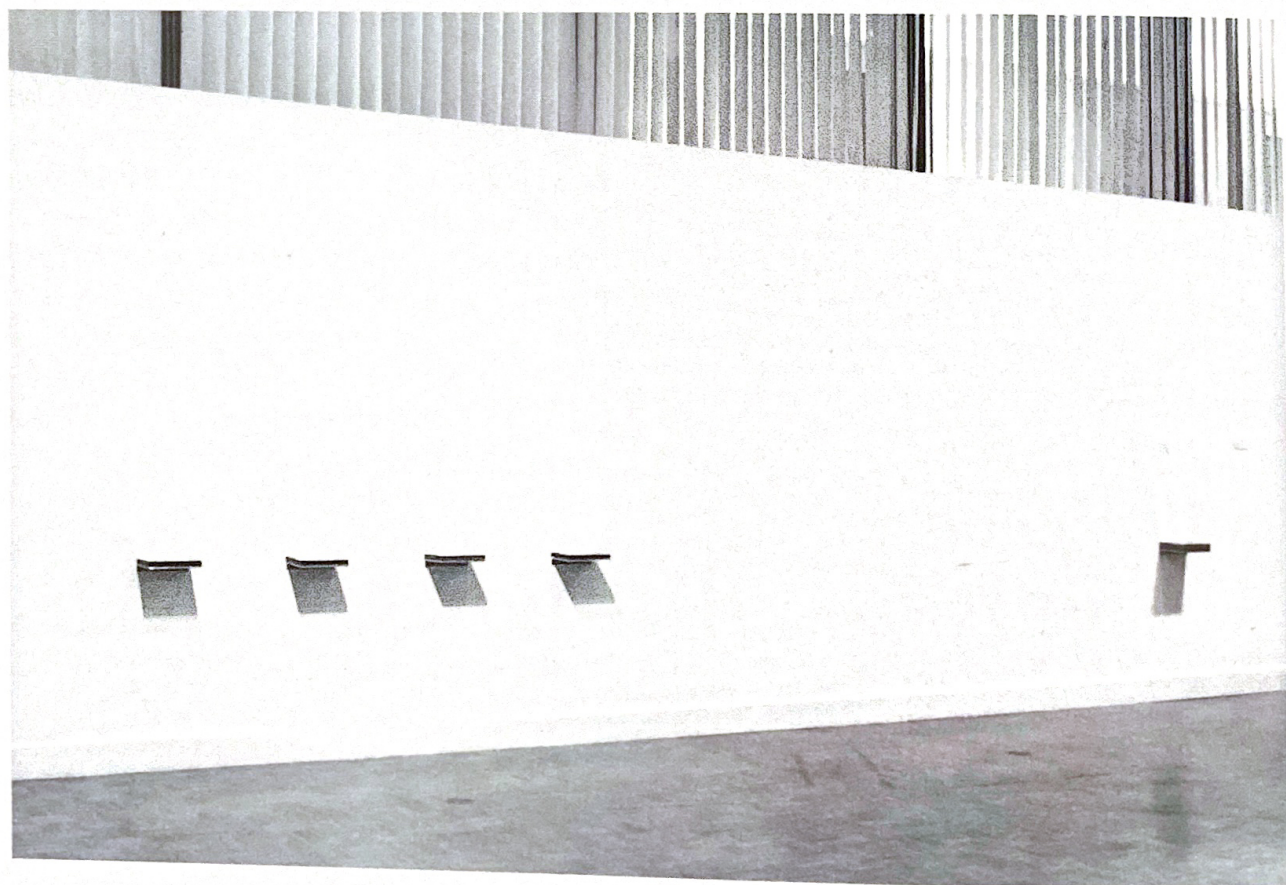
The scale of Lewis' work is often very large, creating an environment. *Extensions (Ethnic Signifiers)*, fills an entire gallery from floor to ceiling with a frenetic, maze of synthetic hair in which the viewer is a small element. Its twists and coils, shaped by a millinery wire sub-structure, read as a three-dimensional drawing and allude to the social constructs of adornment. The viewer enters and carefully maneuvers a constructed forest, moving from one end of the space to the other. Cast shadows add to the layers of line.

Lewis' work operates on multiple levels at all times. The clean, minimalist lines of many of the works are countered with a content which functions at subliminal as well as the conscious levels. *Black*, an installation of twelve bags crocheted from rubber, is strung from floor to ceiling. The stark, organic forms bring to mind a range of associations from fashion accessories to the sinister images of lynchings and castration. *Binary Oppositions*, a monumental installation which examines the language of race, is also a work in which the form and content convey different messages. Its minimalist stainless steel grid looks detached and institutional; its message is not. One hundred and forty-four panels with familiar sayings, word associations, and dictionary definitions examine the words "black" and "white" and the cultural/color coding of the discourse. The sort is personal and subjective. Black ink identifies terms connected to the word "white" and white ink to the word "black." The permutations are infinite.

Lewis is also interested in exploring how words and images are reworked, played back or interpreted by the outside world—ranging from the "found" language in *Good Presence* to the shocking Mexican ad campaign for a white sale presented in *Reflected*



Black, 1993

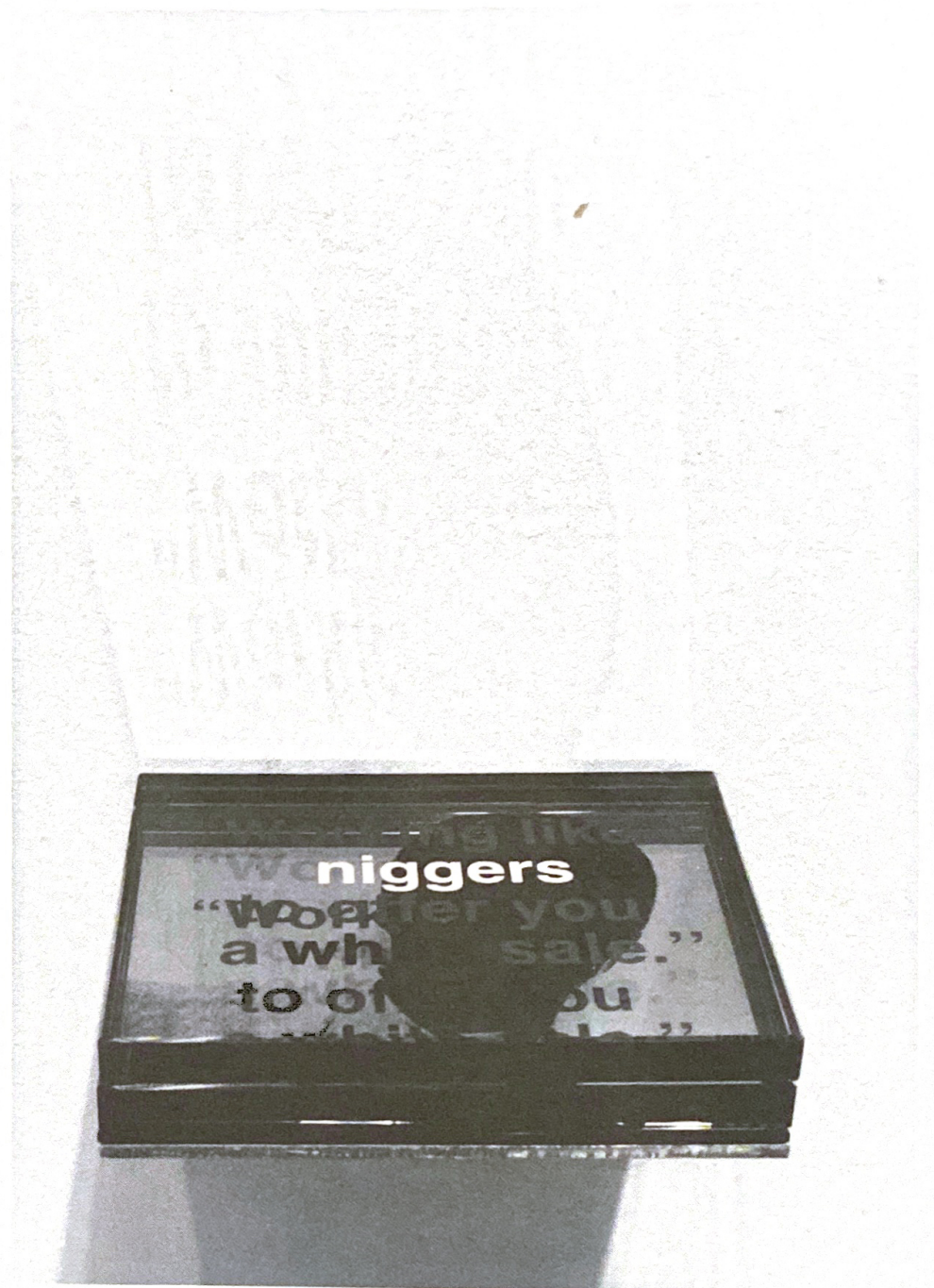


Detail, *Binary Oppositions*, 1995
Reflected Values, 1996

Values. *Good Presence* offers a series of mirrors with silk-screened text and images of coiffures in silhouette. The work mixes out-takes of conversations, childhood memories, and a chronology of hair style from 1955, the year of Lewis' birth, to the present. Much of the work evokes complex and paradoxical associations. In *Scarfication Proudly Made in the USA*, a canvas marked with hot comb burns, recalling early memories of the family—mothers, sisters and aunts—and the nurturing/grooming exercises of childhood. At the same time the work acknowledges a connection between pain and beauty and the intervention of culture over nature. Its title is a reminder that in part this ritual finds its meanings through commonly held values within a community. Hot combs, curling irons, and braids of blond and black hair—presented in 19th century museum-style vitrines in the work *Boxes*—read as both archaic devices of torture and trophies on display.

Lehman College Art Gallery is pleased to present the work of Cathleen Lewis in the gallery's ongoing series, *The Bronx Celebrates*. This series features the work of artists who have lived, worked, or grown-up in the Bronx and has included Vito Acconci, Lawrence Weiner, Ida Applebroog, Tim Rollins + KOS, and Rigoberto Torres, among others. Lewis was born and raised in the Bronx.

The Bronx Celebrates: Cathleen Lewis was made possible through a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts Visual Arts Program. The work of so many people has contributed to the success of this project. I would like to thank Cathleen Lewis for developing this installation with us and for the time she has spent discussing her work with staff, faculty, students and the public. I would like to acknowledge Carla Chammas, Richard Desroche, and Glenn McMillan of CRG for their assistance, and Ivan Vera for his help with the installation. I would also like to thank Maria Pagliarulo, Ron Cruz, and Jennifer Buckley, the student interns; Mary Ann Siano, the associate director; Phillip Kautz, education coordinator; and Denise Mediavilla, registrar, for their efforts on this project—as always, their advice and good humor has made this project possible.



Detail, *Reflected Values*, 1995

Navigating Momentary Lapses

Franklin Sirmans

Man passes through the present with his eyes blind-folded. He is permitted merely to sense and guess at what he is actually experiencing. Only later when the cloth is untied can he glance at the past and find out what he has experienced and what meaning it has had.

-Milan Kundera, *Laughable Loves* (1968)

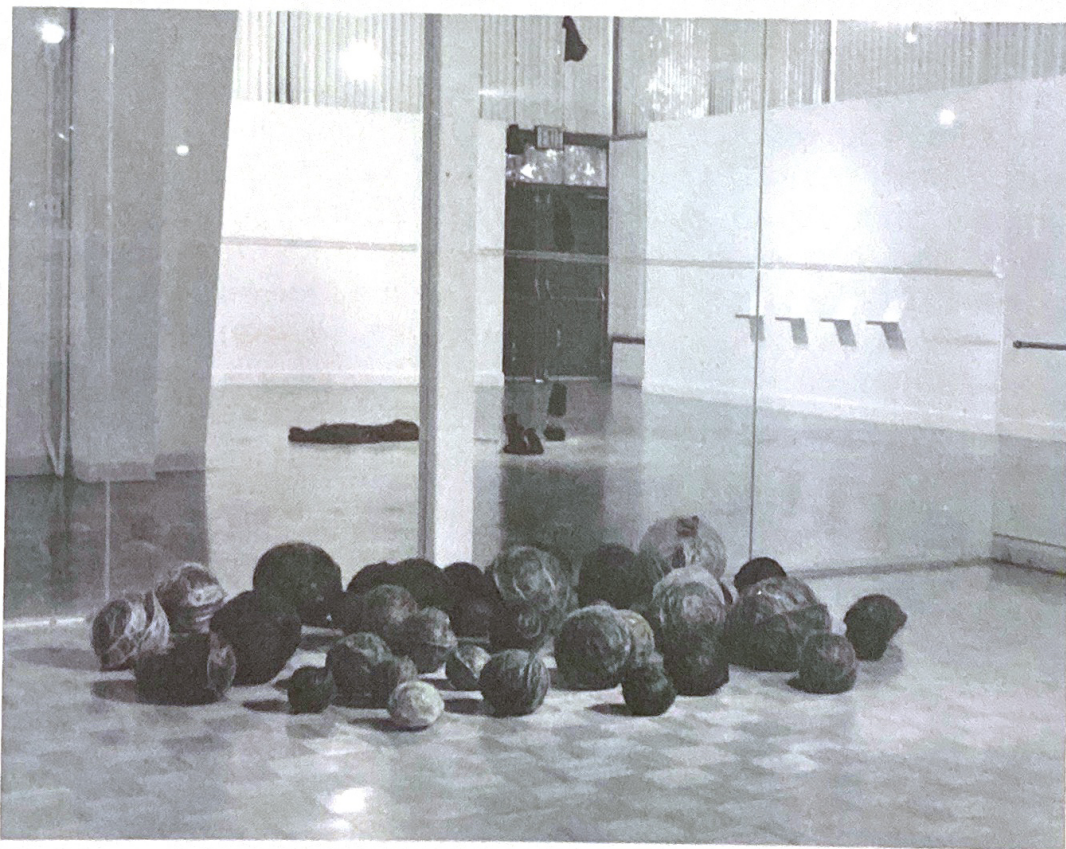
As a writer and a critic of contemporary visual art, at times I would like to be able to define the moment and spread that opinion among my peers. It ain't like that though. The only thing one could say as far as trends go in the art of this decade is "nothing much." I've been following Cathleen Lewis's work since 1993, when I was fortunate enough to catch a piece of her early output in an otherwise unremarkable group show somewhere down on Hudson Street in a now defunct gallery. When I wrote my first piece about her work, two years ago, I wanted to shed light on an artist who I feel embodies the moment in many ways and at the same time, send her a little sonnet in public text—a token of esteem for what I had seen. Was that accomplished?, who knows. Cathleen's work has all the trappings of what cult crits like to call "postmodernism." Yeah, whatever. The work looks good and most importantly it's smart and that's why it sticks out like your lucky twenty dollar bill under the token booth.

Thoroughly within the moment, Lewis's work on one hand invites the obvious comparisons with other women artists such as (Women's Work: she braids and sews) Lee Bontecou, Senga Nengudi, and perhaps most notably Eva Hesse. On the other hand, there are the less obvious comparisons with Ellen Gallagher, who also provokes a sensation of blackness out of the webs she weaves, albeit on canvas. The sources are there but what are we to make of sources? Until the gallerist, curator, or critic comes along, the source is irrelevant. And as much as these comparative claims are valid, their virtue lies in the fact that they all rely on materials at once suffused with content. Though they all do different things with varied materials that is somehow kinetically abstract. Lewis's installations and sculptures are first and foremost signatory poems. So attentive to formalist concerns, yet always wanting to make her point and make it clearly, which

leads to sometimes heavy-handed titling. But, as the consummate formalist that she is, Cathleen wants the work to look good regardless of content. And like Mona Hatoum or early Rachel Lachowicz, she casts a spell on the formalist ethics of purity and universality—it is what it is. By conceptually reworking the aesthetics of minimalism and abstraction, she is concerned with personalizing an artistic concept that originated greatly on the premise of mathematical science, the use of machinery, and depersonalization.

Entering *Extensions*, the viewer is forced to bob and weave through an obstructed path in a sea of swirling hair. Long whips of hair wound with thread hang from the ceiling and protrude from the walls, creating an all over Pollockian splash. The abstract installation manages to reference culturally-specific information, as in her many installations and sculptures dealing with the loaded subject of hair, inviting discussion on a range of topics, all touched upon so delicately by the hand of the artist or in the case of *Binary Oppositions*, her fabricator. In 1993, she discussed the issue of hair in *Burning Hair*, where she comments directly on the black hair practice of hot comb straightening. The burn imprints of hundreds of combs fill a large white canvas. At the foot of the canvas is a wooden box stuffed with the combs that produced these burns. "People always have this strange relationship to hair, especially for black women. My work with the hot comb goes back to Madame C. J. Walker's invention of the hot comb and I cannot remember ever being unconscious about my own hair."

The complementary piece in this exhibition is *Binary Oppositions*. In fact, it is a straight-up response/study on the supposed structural silence of the minimalist grid (see Donald Judd or Rosalind Krauss). "The grid announces modern art's will to silence,"¹ Krauss said almost twenty years ago. Lewis's grid is comprised of one hundred and forty-four stainless steel rectangles arranged directly on the wall with one word in black or white with a word that has been *read* as



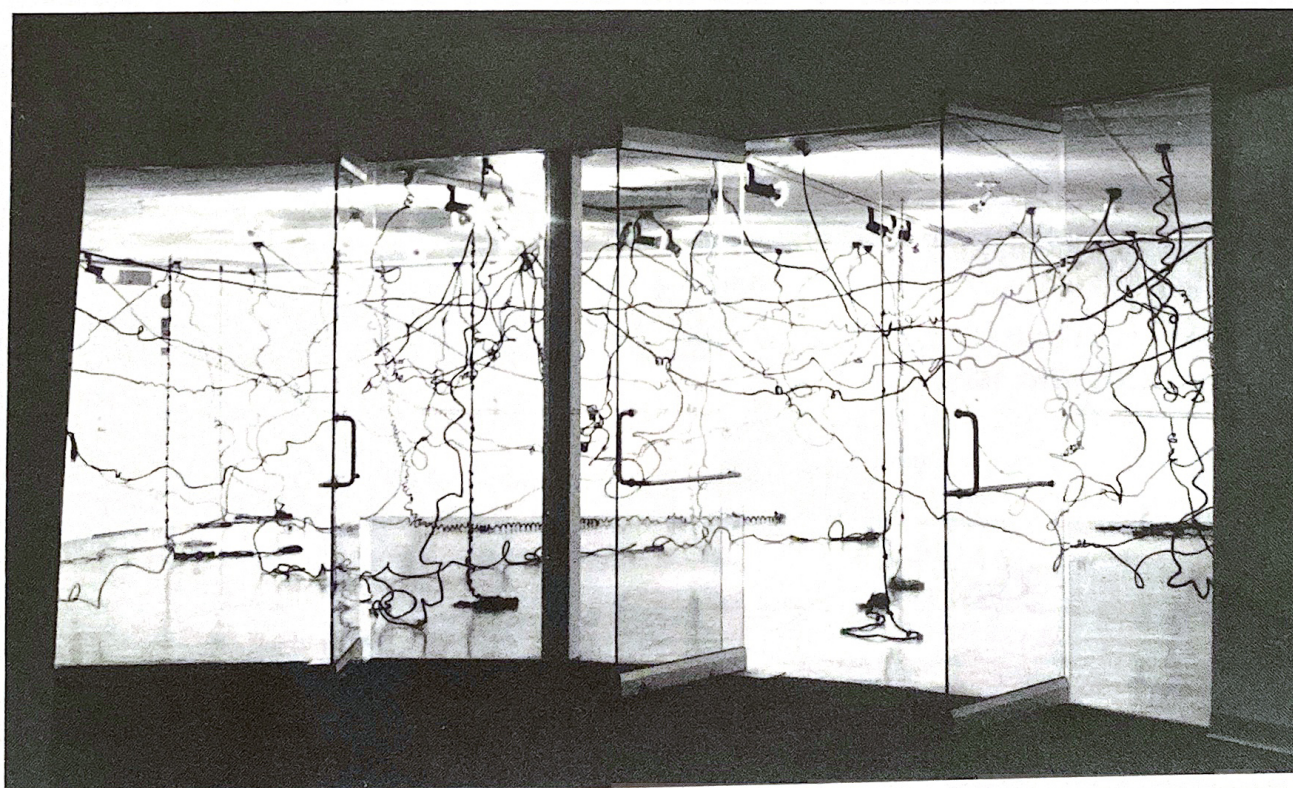
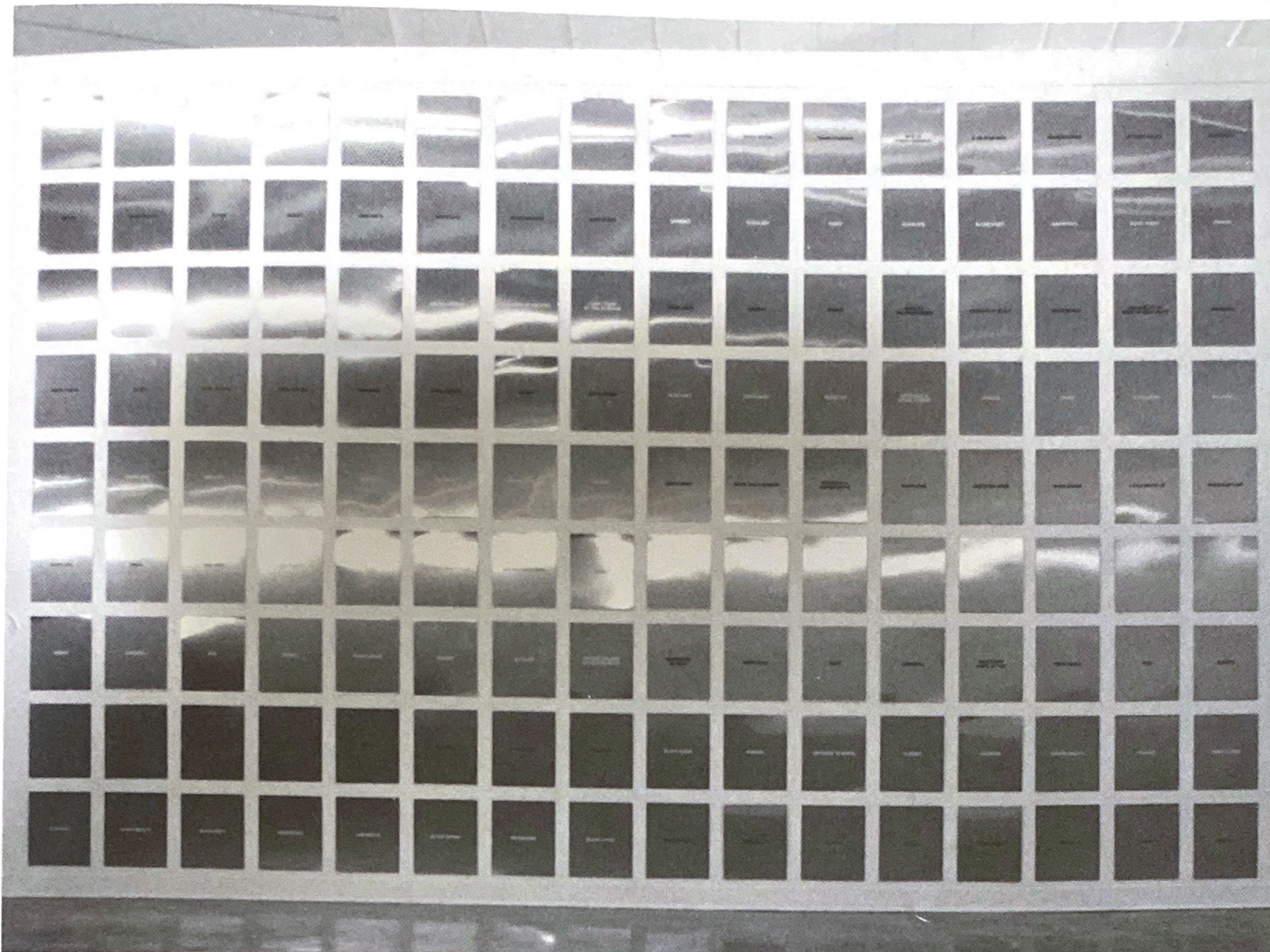
Moss, 1994-95

either "black" or "white." From twenty yards the piece is to the human eye an undescriptive tract reiterating the formalism of the 60's and 70's, yet closer inspection lends a sociological lesson in linguistics, hardly the subject of High Minimalism. Here the silent majority of minimalism has become one big argument filled with dissenting voices. Her words are monogamous like Ruscha's but by engaging language so plentifully upon the grid she has inherently given it a voice—a voice at once suppressed by modernist longing and secondarily oppressed from the stance of its history in onerous stereotypicality.

It's easy to look on the history of art as a succession of monuments visualizing whatever it is the critics said it was. Yet, conversely modern art is a living growing organism that, like Hip Hop, is born to recycle, reclaim, and make it "new." Art has come upon the end of the millennium with a multiplicity of meanings: some pointed and some pointless. Yet, some critics have finally caught wind of a "trend" in recent work by artists of color (firstly, women artists of all colors) reinvigorating the tenets of "big bad and universal" minimalism. Did someone say "palatable" and content-less? Actually, not. It's been going on ever since...you know what I mean. Artists of color have been imbibing strict formalism with content for years, such as Jacob Lawrence and Social Realism or Norman Lewis and Abstract Expressionism. In this radically apolitical moment when no one seems to have a clue as to political and economic reality, the art world mirrors "the real world." All this is to say, it's not necessarily a trend of contemporary visual art practice. People photograph, draw, sculpt, paint, scatter, and most absurdly cook and feed viewers, calling it art. Please. Cathleen does something of the first four, seducing on various levels through means subtle, mysterious, and subliminal.

¹. Rosalind Krauss. "Grids," October 9. Summer 1979, p. 51.

M. Franklin Sirmans
1996



Binary Oppositions, 1995

Extensions (Ethnic Signifiers), 1996

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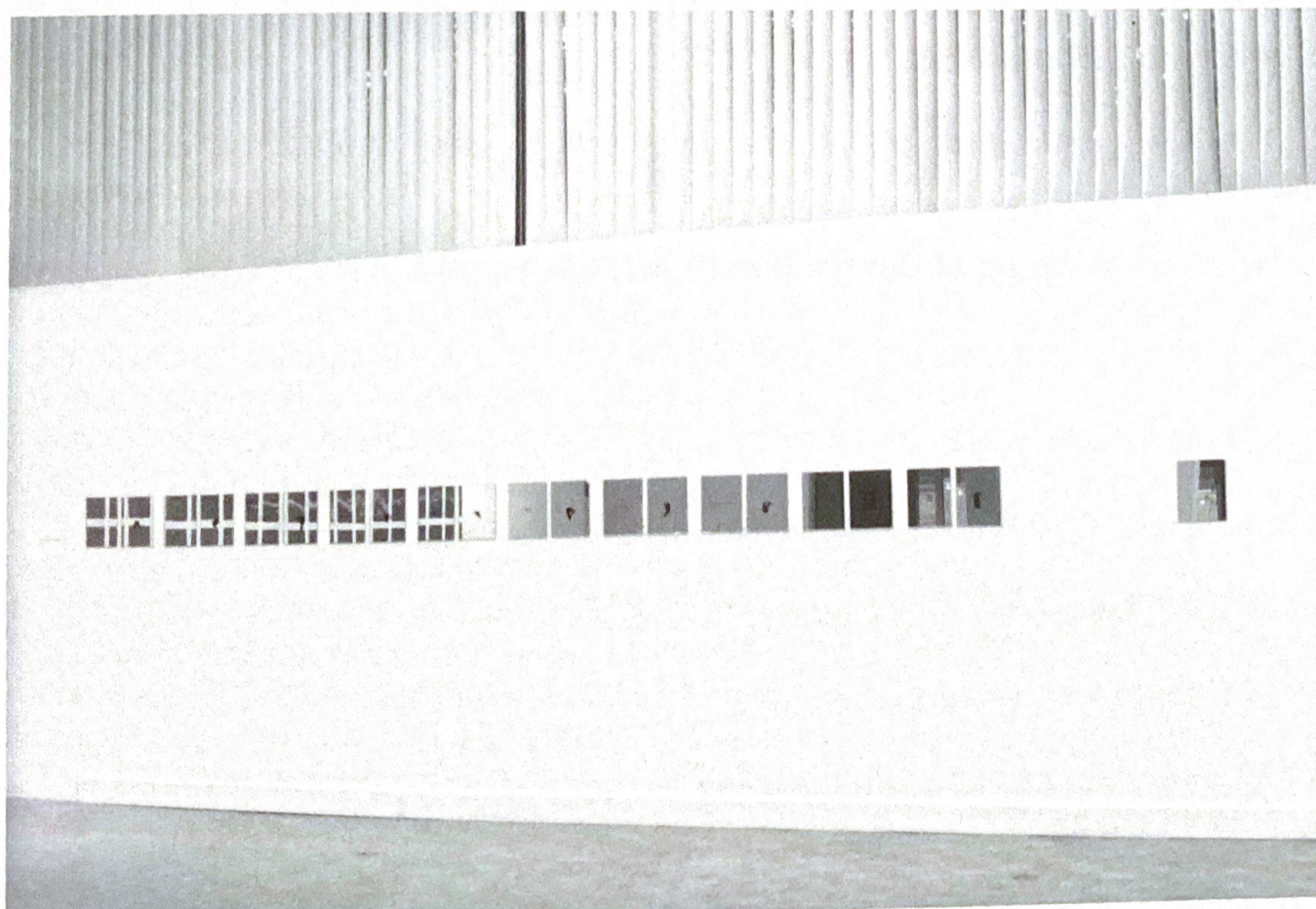
Cathleen Lewis

Artist's Statement

The work begins with a specific idea, usually around issues of gender and black identity. I then use an array of materials to actualize those ideas. The present body of work uses text, hair, and rubber as material as well as metaphor. I am addressing the ways in which visual images, as well as language, past and present, have helped to shape the way "others" see us, and ways in which we see ourselves. This "seeing" is predetermined by prevailing ideas in the dominant culture, which is often masked and subtly imbedded into the subconscious. The site is black bodies as battleground for this psycho-trauma, although the entire body is not often present. It could be a specific portion of the body as in "hair," or a reference to the body as in "savage beauty."

In pieces such as "Binary Oppositions" and "Reflected Values," I have used language based on dictionary meanings and common phrases to deconstruct perceptions of "otherness," demonstrating how language is not transparent, but instead like any other institution is embedded with racism reflecting the ideas and values of the controlling class. Both the language and the visual in "Reflected Values" are appropriated from a newspaper account of racism in Mexico. This image was actually used in a national television campaign directly signifying how "blackness" is perceived in other cultures as well as our own. Often what we see on television or read in books and newspapers we assume have an inherent truth factor. By using reflective surfaces such as mirrors and stainless steel, I am placing viewers in situations in which they might ask themselves how much they have invested in these perceptions of "blackness?"





Detail, **Good Presence**, 1996

Good Presence, 1996

Cathleen Lewis

Cathleen Lewis was born (1955) and raised in the Bronx.
She lives and works in New York City.

Education

- 1995 Whitney Independent Study Program
- 1994 M.F.A., School of Visual Arts
- 1993 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture
- 1992 B.S., Skidmore College

One Person Exhibitions

- 1996 "Binary Oppositions," CRG, NY
- 1995 "Cathleen Lewis," New Artists Warehouse Gallery, NY

Group Exhibitions

- 1996 "Benefit Auction" Bronx Museum of Art, NY
 - "La Toilette de Venus: Women and Mirrors," CRG, NY
 - "No Doubt," The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art
Ridgefield, CT
 - Benefit Auction, New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY
- 1995 "Summer Group Show," CRG, NY
 - "Wax," Nohra Haime Gallery, NY
 - "Resisting Categories," City Without Walls, Newark, N J
- 1994 "From Head to Toe," Longwood Arts Gallery, Bronx, NY
 - "Constructed Biographies," MMC Gallery, NY
 - "Nicaela Callimanopulos, Installation/Cathleen Lewis,"
Sculpture, PS 122 Gallery, NY
 - "Artists in The Marketplace XIV," The Bronx Museum of
The Arts, NY
 - "Women Take A.I.M.," New Artists Warehouse Gallery,
NY

"Hair: The Long and The Short of It," Smithtown
Township Arts Council, St. James, NY

"Go Back and Fetch It," Gallery Annex, NY

"New York Area M.F.A. Exhibition," The Art Gallery,
Hunter College, NY

"M.F.A. Special Projects," Visual Arts Gallery, NY

"Identity and Culture," Barrett House, Poughkeepsie, NY

1993 "1000 Drawings," Artist Space, NY

Honors and Awards

1996 Scholarship, Pilchuck Glass School, Washington

1995 Residency, Blue Mountain Center, NY

1994 Residency, The Virginia Center For the Creative Arts

1993 Alternate Fellow, College Art Association

Selected Bibliography

Berger, Maurice. "The Delicate Quest: Paradox in Contemporary
African- American Art," *No Doubt*, 1996

Clifford, Kathy. *Art Papers*, Review, Vol. 20 May - June, 1996

Koplos, Janet. *Art in America*, Review, April, 1996

Trebay, Guy. *Village Voice*, January 30, 1996

Levin, Kim. "Critics Choice," *Village Voice*, January 23, 1996

Sirmans, Franklin. *New Artists Warehouse*, April, 1995

Watkins, Eileen. *The Star-Ledger*, March 3, 1995

Amos, Emma. *Resisting Categories*, January 26, 1995

Groarke, Ciaran. *Norwood News*, December 14 -27, 1994

Raynor, Vivien. *The New York Times*, December 4, 1994

Simerman, John. *New York Newsday*, November 15, 1994

Sirmans, Franklin. *Shade*. "Notes On Hair," September, 1994

Cotter, Holland. *The New York Times*, August 19, 1994

Tagami, Ty. *New York Newsday*, August 16, 1994

Zimmer, William. *The New York Times*, July 31, 1994

Bronx Museum. *Artists in The Marketplace*, July, 1994

Stack, Sarah. *Taconic Newspapers*, January 27, 1994

Shine, James G. *Daily Freeman Preview*, January 21, 1994

Schetzl, Florence. *Poughkeepsie Journal*, January 7, 1994

Exhibition Checklist

Black, 1993-95
dimensions variable
12 crocheted black rubber bags

Scarification
Proudly Made in the USA, 1994
20" x 24"
diptych, c-print

Bows, 1994-95
dimensions variable
brass, wire, and thread

Moss, 1994-95
dimensions variable
horsehair, latex, and thread

Binary Oppositions, 1995
157" x 221" total
each panel 13" x 11"
silk-screen on stainless steel
144 panels

Fall, 1995
dimensions variable
brass wire

Good Presence, 1996
each panel 11" x 8"
silk-screen on mirrors
21 panels

Extensions (Ethnic Signifiers), 1996
synthetic hair and millinery wire
variable dimensions

Reflected Values, 1996
silk-screen on glass panels, mirrors
aluminum shelf

Boxes, 1995
14 1/2" x 9"
triptych

Trustees

Elisabeth Lorin
Chair

George A. Corbin
David Durst
Ricardo Fernandez
Charles Krasne
Penny Lehman
Irvine R. MacManus, Jr.
Dianne T. Renwick
Brian T. Robinson
Michael Seidenberg
Jeffrey F. Silber
Madelon Delany Stent
Nina Castelli Sundell
Edwin Torres

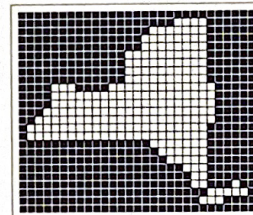
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