

Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria

25 YEARS

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 Flowers in Folk Art • Alexander Calder • The Art of Music: Amer
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 Retreat • Judith Shea: Monuments and Statues • Alison Saar
 Turtle Boat Head • Glenn Ligon: Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap
 Chapter One (or the First Holy Communion Moments Before the
 Biennial Acquisitions • Sylvia Plachy: The Call of the Street
 Water • Sam Gilliam: Golden Element Inside Gold • Leone & Ma
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 Kang: 8490 Days of Memory • Beverly Semmes: She Moves •
 1964 • Quicker Than a Wink: The Photographs of Harold Edg
 an Exhibition: An Installation by Christian Marclay • Garden
 Carrie Mae Weems • Hope Sandrow: Water Life • Shirin Neshat
 Yamamoto • Wall Drawings by Byron Kim • Jeanne Silverthorn
 Tomaselli: Gravity's Rainbow • Correspondences: Isamu Noguch
 Pop! • Expanding Horizons: Landscape Photographs • Sowon Ky
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 Stage—Secrets of Scene Painting • Lucky DeBellevue: Khlysty
 Contemporary Art: Reed Anderson, Rina Banerjee, Susan Gr
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Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria

25 YEARS

Foreword by Adam D. Weinberg
Introduction by Shamim M. Momin

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WHITNEY

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Frontispiece: Installation view of *Lee Borosan: Underpass* (see page 90).

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Altria

Since the Whitney Museum of American Art first opened its branch at our company's headquarters at 120 Park Avenue in New York City, it has made an indelible mark on the art world, while profoundly enriching our everyday work life and experience. This unique space has touched each and every one of us. It has been a source of inspiration, a catalyst for conversation, and a living testament to the power of the arts. For that, we are most grateful.

Sponsor's Statement

We thank and applaud each of the branch directors, staff members, and artists who over the past twenty-five years have created the most extraordinary exhibitions, installations, performances, and educational programs. The branch location in the heart of Manhattan, just steps away from Grand Central Terminal, has given hundreds of new and emerging artists the opportunity to share their innovative vision with the people of New York City and far beyond.

We are truly proud to support this important anthology documenting the history of the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria and to celebrate its achievements. There is no doubt that the Whitney at Altria has forever broadened the cultural landscape of our city, and perhaps more importantly, our individual perspectives on the world.

On April 1, 2008, Altria Group, Inc., relocated its corporate headquarters to Richmond, VA.



In April of 1983 the Whitney Museum of American Art opened a branch museum at the new Philip Morris headquarters, strategically positioned at the crossroads of New York City, on 42nd Street and Park Avenue across from Grand Central Terminal. As of January 2008, this branch—the last of four Whitney branches—has closed. This closing does not simply mark the end of the great and long-term generosity of Altria Group (known until 2003 as Philip Morris) but the end of an era for the Whitney and American museums in general.

The Whitney Museum opened its first branch in 1973 on 55 Water Street in downtown Manhattan. The fact that it was referred to as a branch, an outgrowth of the Whitney on Madison Avenue and 75th Street, causes one to consider this initiative in light of the great American public library system, which made its intellectual resources accessible to as broad a public as possible through its neighborhood branch system. The establishment of the downtown branch museum, the brainchild of then Whitney director Tom Armstrong, was with the intent “to provide cultural activities in an area of the city which has no comparable program.” In the populist spirit of the early 1970s it was also an effort to make the Whitney’s growing permanent collection more accessible to a larger and more diverse public as well as provide opportunities for contemporary artists to exhibit new work. It was in effect “outreach”—one of the most popular political terms of the period—to bring the art to the people. In this spirit, admission to the branch museum (as well as the three subsequent branches) was and continued to be free-of-charge as were the performances, education programs, and publications.

Director’s Foreword

The branch museum concept also signified a new relationship between America’s flourishing corporate sector and the country’s museums during a period of quantitative growth in the 1980s. This ambitious type of corporate sponsorship coincided with the lavish underwriting of large-scale exhibitions that occurred at museums throughout the United States. While the first Whitney branch was operated by contributions from thirty local businesses, the branch museums of the 1980s were not shoestring operations. The Philip Morris branch—as well as the Champion and Equitable branches—was conceived of as a self-contained, semi-autonomous unit with a director/curator, educator, and support staff who had their offices onsite. This situation enabled each branch to have a substantial impact on the neighboring community. And, while it maximized benefit for the company’s employees and bur-nished the corporation’s image as a cultural leader, it must be acknowledged that the creation of a museum branch also provided the corporation with certain zoning and tax benefits. (These incentives were established by New York City to encourage corporate give-back for the public good.)

The idea of establishing the branch at Philip Morris was initially encouraged by Ulrich Franzen, the architect who had designed the headquarters of Champion International in Stamford, Connecticut, the site of the second Whitney branch, and George Weissman former chairman and CEO of the Philip Morris Companies, an

enlightened and culturally-involved executive. Given the great spirit of social service through cultural involvement at the time it is not surprising that the architect conceived a spacious public court with seating and plantings as well as an enclosed gallery space. The court enabled the Whitney to install large sculptures and eventually Museum-commissioned sculptures and installations in this casual setting that bridged the public sphere of the street with the private zone of the corporation. While the gallery allowed for traditional small-scale exhibitions, the projects and performances conceived for the court were among those that most distinguished the programs of the Whitney at Altria.

From 1983 until 1991 the Whitney at Philip Morris was primarily utilized for thematic exhibitions of works from its permanent collection and small loan exhibitions organized by the Whitney and other museums such as *Calder: Selections from the Collections*; and *The Changing Likeness: 20th Century Portrait Drawings*. However, many exhibitions responded to the specificity of the midtown location, among them: *On 42nd Street: Artist Visions*, *The Viewer as Voyeur*, *Urban Figures*, and *The Surreal City 1930's-1950's*.

From 1991 forward, the Whitney branches served as laboratories. While they had periodically presented commissioned works and installations before this time, the early 1990s marked a new direction for the branches especially as they offered exhibition spaces that could accommodate the increased scale and burgeoning number of contemporary works. In addition, there was increasingly a need for space to introduce the work of emerging artists and to provide opportunities for the presentation of new works by mid-career artists. Many important artists were given their first one-person museum exhibitions at the Whitney's branches.

The Altria branch was not only a testing ground for art and artists but also a platform for aspiring directors and curators. The lineage of these directors and their subsequent accomplishments is indeed impressive. Lisa Phillips, who initiated the branch at Philip Morris, became a celebrated and seasoned curator at the Whitney uptown and today is the Toby Devan Lewis Director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art; Susan Lubowsky Talbott, the second director, subsequently held numerous directorial posts and most recently was appointed director of the Wadsworth Atheneum; Josephine Gear, her successor, is currently an independent curator and writer as well as an adjunct associate professor at New York University's graduate program in museum studies; Thelma Golden, who initiated the project-based program at the branch, is presently director and chief curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem; Eugenie Tsai, curator of branches in the late 1990s, has since held numerous curatorial posts and is now John and Barbara Vogelstein Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum; Debra Singer continued her curatorial career at the Whitney uptown and is today director of The Kitchen; and last, but far from least, Shamim Momin, who in addition to her role at the branch is an associate curator at the Whitney, has just completed co-curating her second Whitney Biennial. It is to these passionate and inventive curator/directors and their staffs that the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria owed its great success.

ADAM D. WEINBERG

ALICE PRATT BROWN DIRECTOR, WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART



Introduction

For the past twenty-five years, since its inauguration in April 1983, the Whitney at Altria (known as Philip Morris until 2003) has been a venue supporting the visual and performing arts, and has proven itself as a leader in the field of organizing and producing contemporary art projects by emerging and mid-career artists. Throughout the majority of its history, the central focus of the Whitney at Altria has been site-specific projects highlighting the relationship between artist, site, and institution. Built specifically to house the Whitney branch, the 5200-square-foot street-level plaza/sculpture court and 1100-square-foot gallery of the Altria Group headquarters housed the longest-running of the Whitney's branch museums. The past quarter century has also provided an opportunity for the Whitney to expand its reach, whether through the branch's countless innovative education programs, the hundreds of exhibitions and performances, or by providing an escape from the

chaos and anonymity of midtown Manhattan. Therefore, it is with great fondness that we take this opportunity to look back on the past and look forward to the future.

In creating this anthology highlighting the creative achievements of the Whitney at Altria, the staff and I have been able to rediscover the initial plans for the branch and speak to many of those who influenced its evolution. The primary intention for the space was to enable the public, as stated by the first press release, "to view important works of art, which, because of their scale, can rarely be shown at the main Museum on Madison Avenue." George Wiessman, Philip Morris Companies chairman and chief executive officer at the time, noted that the partnership "adds a unique dimension to our business and daily life. It suggests, I hope, new ways in which American business can work with museums in offering art to the American people." Lisa Phillips, the Whitney's director of branches, was responsible for the set-up, hiring, managerial structuring, and opening programming (a precursor experience to her most recent endeavor, building and opening an entirely new home for the New Museum of Contemporary Art). She recently reflected on the experience: "It was a wonderful opportunity to be able to share some of the great masterpieces from the Whitney's permanent collection with the midtown work force and tourists coming out of Grand Central Terminal in a free public space. It was also not without its challenges—like animating the rather cold corporate, monumental architecture with works of art that could tolerate and change the environment. For the opening of the space, I invited a number of sculptors to create or place pieces in the atrium—including George Segal, John Chamberlain, and Claes Oldenburg. Louise Lawler chose to photograph details of the sculpture in the space for a series of photos of collections and installations. The small exhibition gallery was devoted to drawings by sculptors from the permanent collection of the Whitney." In a way, this idea of working directly with Whitney artists to create or locate their works in the space prefigured the more well-known incarnation of the branch as a commissioned project space. Phillips also worked closely with Stephanie French, who for many years was the guiding force within Philip Morris' philanthropic giving department, and who was invaluable in helping to shape the branch museum as an autonomous curatorial space. Entirely devoted to assisting the Whitney Museum with outreach and accessibility, French was adamant that the space and all of its programming remain free to the public.

Susan Lubowsky Talbott, the branch's first director, was charged with developing a full program that echoed the activities carried on uptown but that would also reach new audiences. She established the multilevel offering that became the core of the branch's activities: a full educational program that in later years functioned as the entire arts programming for a number of underfunded New York City

public schools, a performance program that took place on the architectural "stages" of the sculpture court, and an exhibition program that largely highlighted works from the permanent collection, often on the recurring theme of the "city." The gallery also housed exhibitions curated by students of the ISP (Independent Study Program), a seminal and signature education program of the Whitney Museum, founded in 1968 and continuing to this day to foster emerging curators, critics, and artists. Lubowsky Talbott recalls this time: "The populist ideal of art that emerged during the formative years of the Whitney Museum was at the heart of the branch's activity. . . . Our audience was perhaps the most diverse in the city—from office workers and executives at Philip Morris and nearby businesses and corporations, to bicycle messengers who visited the exhibitions, welfare mothers from West Side SRO hotels who brought their children after school, and artists and art lovers who were our core audience. The branch truly reflected the diversity of the city itself."

In 1991, the branch shifted its focus to presenting commissioned exhibitions and projects by contemporary artists, thus forming an entirely unique niche within the New York art world. As a free exhibition space that functioned both under the aegis of the Whitney Museum and maintained its own autonomous identity, the Whitney at Philip Morris enjoyed great programmatic freedom, offering exciting new work while simultaneously maintaining the qualitative rigor of a major museum. The branch, now under Thelma Golden supported progressive, cutting-edge projects by contemporary artists, many of whom have become major art world figures. Building on the populist gesture of the previous years, Golden sought to explore the potential of a quasi-public, multi-use exhibition space (the sculpture court has over the years housed several different stores, cafes, and of course has functioned as a seating and meeting area as well), and to redefine for artists how and where a commissioned project might function and live: "It seemed to me that the space could provide an amazing laboratory to offer artists the chance to test their ideas in a site-specific format, but also, from the other side, to really engage the audience without the usual barriers inherent in a traditional institutional building. The space allowed for a direct conversation with the public about contemporary art, and moreover a public not necessarily coming to the space for that reason. It could provide an introduction to a much more diverse range of art and artists without the dimension of institutional authority attached that can often feel alienating or off-putting—and the audiences were consequently more open in that experience to what they were seeing and engaging with."

At the same time, the Performance on 42nd series had grown in reputation and audience demand to such a degree that the branch staff now included a dedicated performance curator, Jeanette Vuocolo. For many years, in fact, the branch's

performance program served as the Whitney's main venue for such activity, as the Breuer building uptown had no space comparable to the sculpture court. The program functioned analogously to the mission of the visual arts exhibitions. Vuocolo recalls, "I saw the program as an open laboratory where artists interested in performance could work in a public space under the embrace of the museum and in the gaze of the corporate world. I loved the planning process when artists came in the space and envisioned what was possible. I enjoyed the unpredictable in performance . . . the commuters glancing in, the mash-up between the corporate folks, the artists, and the museum . . . all for the goal of presenting fresh new ideas and artists in the contemporary performing arts world. I loved how the artists 'took on' the space: using, being fascinated with every inch and always pushing the boundary of what was permissible. It was a rich time, a very creative time, a very public time, a kind of romance between the museum world, the corporate world, the public, and the artists."

In subsequent years, the branch maintained this general profile, though with certain shifts pursuant to the specific visions of the curators in charge. Eugenie Tsai continued to expand the diversity of the artists invited to engage with the branch space during her stewardship there, while Beth Venn (currently curator of modern and contemporary art at the Newark Museum), who was the director of branch museums from 1999 to 2000, instituted a program at the uptown Museum that used the smaller scale of the branch spaces (both the Philip Morris and Champion spaces were still active at that time) to its advantage, presenting focused group or "dialogue" exhibitions intended to carry on as part of the Whitney's Traveling Exhibitions Program, which she also initiated. Deb Singer, who began as the branch's performance curator and then took over as director, felt that this dual programmatic role allowed for "the opportunity to conceive of programming in the most holistic way, where all types of work both object-based and performative was considered as a total organism, each element in balance with, or presenting a challenge to, another."

As for my tenure at the branch, I took over the reins in 2000, and over the past eight years have tried to continue that mission of support for contemporary artists but in an expanded way that reflects shifts and developments in artistic practice, while also being attendant to our now long-standing public. I modified Venn's focused collection projects through a series called "Contemporary Artists on Contemporary Art," in which invited artists were asked to use the permanent collection as the locus for their proposed commission. I revised the programming format somewhat in order to present fewer exhibitions but with more ambitious scale and which could increasingly take on the mammoth space of the sculpture court as well as work with the more traditional gallery space. We also engaged a performance

curator again, Boo Froebel, who approached the challenge of presenting progressive contemporary work with a similar vision, "When I think of the atrium, I remember the huge walls of windows looking onto 42nd Street and Park Avenue, where tourists and locals alike would stand and look in, becoming a part of the piece; the granite floor (sorry dancers!!); the five stories of reverberation; the different levels; and the trees with real trunks and fake leaves. I tried to program artists who were inspired by the space, and used it in ways that reflected/exploited its singularity. . . . It was wonderful to put performance in that space, in the heart of New York City—and surprise countless strangers who just happened onto magical happenings as they left Grand Central, or walked down 42nd Street. . . . The Whitney at Altria was an important part of the New York performance ecosystem and it will be missed."

In 2006, the Whitney Museum at Altria presented an exhibition in both its sculpture court and gallery spaces entitled *Small Liberties*, a very ambitious project by Andrea Zittel that involved more than a dozen customized "wagon station" modules. These pod-like forms were intended to present intimate, personal environments tailored to the invited inhabitants' ideas of what would best provide a small space of freedom, one that could function in the desert (at Zittel's compound in Joshua Tree, for example) as well as it could in midtown Manhattan, where its incongruous presence might challenge notions of personal space—small acts of subversion that might create "small liberties" within what is often felt to be a cold, anonymous architectural and urban environment. While this exhibition—as with any other art presentation in a public space—came with its familiar difficulties, what struck me then, and at so many other moments in my years at the Whitney's Altria branch, was the amazing sense of care, of protection, and of personal ownership our audience felt over the space, and the work presented within. On several occasions, for example, our "regulars" were captured by security cameras preventing other visitors from tampering with the wagon stations, all of which had very easily removable elements. In other exhibitions employing delicate or easily damaged material, it was remarkable how careful our visitors were—often, it seemed, more so than in the museum space proper. While there were certainly incidents to the contrary over the years, in general I found that our audience, when given the respect to engage challenging and often provocative contemporary projects, would step up to that opportunity in remarkable ways. Similarly, the artists that we worked with over the course of the branch museum's history have consistently impressed the art world with their sense of innovation and commitment to stretching the bounds of what commissioned public art projects can be and can achieve.

In recent years, working closely with our amazing team at the branch, we developed hybrid programming intended to reflect the shifting state of contemporary

practice. In concert with Howie Chen, for example, we initiated "Breakout Sessions," an artist event series reflecting the diverse ways in which artists engage and present visual culture. As a departure from conventional formats, the series invited artists to present work, performances, and ideas that spoke to the constellation of influences informing their overall creative practice. Promoting an "open studio" format, the series provided rare access to artists' visual inspirations ranging from works by fellow artists to interdisciplinary elements of pop culture. This way of working, inspired directly by the extraordinary privilege of working closely with an artist throughout the development of a commissioned project and the discourse about the way he or she works that was central to that process, has been deeply formative in my curatorial practice overall.

Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria: 25 Years would not have been possible without the significant and continued support of a range of organizations and individuals. First and foremost, I would like to thank Altria Group, Inc. and its chairman and chief executive officer, Louis C. Camelleri—not just for their support of the branch throughout its twenty-five-year history, but also for their understanding of the need to chronicle that history in a permanent and accessible fashion. This book, made possible entirely by Altria's generous financial support, allows the important contributions of the many wonderful artists, performers, and curators who worked within the space to become a part of art historical scholarship, as it should be. In particular, I would like to thank Jennifer Goodale, vice president, contributions, and Diana Echevarria, manager, contributions, for their steadfast support of the branch's mission, and for recognizing the importance of creating this publication. My thanks as well to Adam D. Weinberg, Alice Pratt Brown Director, Whitney Museum of American Art, and the directors that preceded him, as well as to the entire Whitney staff for their unwavering support of the branch museum throughout its history.

The book itself would have been impossible to produce in such a concentrated time frame without the extraordinary efforts of the Whitney at Altria staff. In particular, Howie Chen, senior curatorial coordinator at the branch, spearheaded the production of this catalogue with indefatigable dedication and efficiency, spending countless hours sifting through the extensive archives for material, and coordinating the many different voices, elements, and input to create a coherent yet accurate reflection of the branch's history. His efforts were immeasurably enhanced by the commitment of Marianna Pegno, our intern, who dedicated herself entirely to the project for many months. Additional assistance came from Lee Clark, curatorial assistant at Altria when the book was first conceived, Graham Coreil-Allen, gallery assistant, and Elizabeth Lovero,

curatorial assistant. In the Whitney's publications department, I am indebted to the tireless commitment of Rachel de W. Wixom in her role as head of publications, as well as to Beth Turk, assistant editor, for her rigorous editing of the publication's texts and Anita Duquette, manager, rights and reproductions, for ensuring that all images were correctly captioned and credited. Nerissa Dominguez Vales coordinated the production with dedication and skill, and Barbara Glauber, assisted by Erika Nishizato, designed an original and elegant volume that captures the essence of Whitney at Altria's mission and impact.

SHAMIM M. MOMIN

BRANCH DIRECTOR AND CURATOR, WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

NOTE TO THE READER: This anthology is intended to function both as a means of capturing the spirit and mission of the branch museum and as a sourcebook for readers interested in the institutional history of contemporary art in New York. To that end, we have provided multiple points of access for the reader: chronological spreads of either excerpts or full reprints of brochure essays accompanied by visuals from the exhibitions and selected images from concurrent performances that provide a sense of tone and experience, followed by comprehensive listings of all of the exhibitions and performances, indexed chronologically and by artist. Texts without attributions were produced by the staff of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

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3-1991

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In 1977, the Whitney Museum was invited by Philip Morris Incorporated to consider operating a branch museum in the new Philip Morris headquarters to be built at Park Avenue and 42nd Street, one of the busiest intersections in the world. For the first time, a corporation was proposing to act as host for a cultural facility. . . .

The arrangement first suggested by Philip Morris, whereby a corporation supports American art—primarily the work of living artists—for the benefit of the public, is especially noteworthy. In essence, the corporation is publicly and proudly identifying itself with the achievements of American artists.

—TOM ARMSTRONG, DIRECTOR,
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

The opening of the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris is the culmination of several years of planning and discussion. Without the support of our host, Philip Morris Incorporated, the project would never have been conceived and realized. Those artists who have created works especially for the Sculpture Court—John Chamberlain, Mark di Suvero, and George Segal—deserve the deepest gratitude for their exceptional contributions.

—LISA PHILLIPS, ASSOCIATE CURATOR,
BRANCH MUSEUMS

Twentieth-Century Sculpture: Process and Presence

April 8 to May 11, 1983

Modern art has taken as its principal challenge the testing of its own definitions. This is why much work, when it is new, often seems to have departed from everything previously known as art. By necessity, the testing must take place in those borderline areas between art and non-art. —LISA PHILLIPS, ASSOCIATE CURATOR, BRANCH MUSEUMS



Left to right: Claes Oldenburg, *Ice Bag-Scale C*, 1971; Roy Lichtenstein, *Gold Fish Bowl*, 1977; Frank Stella, *Gran Cairo*, 1962; Alexander Calder, *Big Red*, 1959 (Installation view of *Twentieth-Century Sculpture: Process and Presence*).
OPPOSITE: Exterior view of Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria (Philip Morris), c. 1983.