

# REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

## NEW YORK

### Wolfgang Staehle at Postmasters

Like paintings, the projected video images in Wolfgang Staehle's "2001" were static. And like movies, they weren't: every four seconds, around the clock, they were minutely adjusted, as the video-fed, Internet-transmitted photographs of three far-flung sites were continually updated.

at the bottom of each image marked the date and time—these images (which could only be viewed in the gallery; they were not accessible over the Internet) quietly played havoc with what we think we know about the world before our eyes.

And, of course, they were played havoc with in turn. The World Trade Center catastrophe caught Staehle's work, like everything else, by surprise. An attack shaped in part (as many

Other equally haunting speculations come to mind concerning the conjunction of Staehle's media-driven esthetic and the movielike quality of the images issuing from the tragic events of September 11. "Why are there two towers at New York's World Trade Center?" Jean Baudrillard asked in 1983. "The fact that there are two of them signifies the end of all competition, the end of all original reference," he concluded. They are "the visible

world traveler with an interest in the art and artifacts of many cultures and a fascination with the essential qualities of materials; the works reflect that and also convey intelligence, energy and sensuality.

The gallery's main room was dominated by a waist-high fiber-board table on metal legs that drew a large arc in the space, furnishing a notably quiet, orderly platform for 10 antsy sculptures dating from 1998 to



One showed an 11th-century monastery in rural Comburg, Germany; a second displayed the upper portion of the Fernsehturm in Berlin, a TV tower and tourist landmark that houses a revolving restaurant. The third, a 9-by-23-foot panorama, gave us the lower Manhattan skyline, seen from the waterfront in Brooklyn. The regular, soundless lurch of these scenes, a kind of decorous visual stutter, was barely detectable in the Comburg and Fernsehturm projections, where the only changes were the diurnal and meteorological rhythms of light and occasional flights of birds. But the cameras aimed at lower Manhattan also captured river and bridge traffic, its halting progress oddly serene, the four-second intervals pushing the little boats and cars along like a child playing with toys. Patently artificial yet obviously real and live—a counter

commentators have observed) by imagery, it generated a great deal more of it as the towers went down. Measured by the impassive, steady blink of Staehle's cameras, a world was blown apart, and among the infinity of things whose meanings changed utterly was his project. Faith, communication and commerce, the triad for which his three subjects stand (or stood), are only some of the cultural signal systems that were irreparably scrambled.

Staehle is a video artist widely acclaimed as a Web-art pioneer; he launched the indispensable Internet forum *The Thing* as an independent media project in 1991. This is his first solo gallery exhibition in a decade. He invokes Martin Heidegger to help frame the ideas his project engages. In an eerily prescient 1935 text cited by Staehle in English and German on a monitor at the entrance to the show, Heidegger laments the moral implications of the globalization of technology and capital.

sign of the closure of the system in a vertigo of duplication." Baudrillard's writing, as emblematic of the 1980s as the towers, and, in some quarters, as inescapable, later came to sound shrill, even a little silly. Now the media-brokered version of events, the "vertigo of duplication" in which Staehle's work participates, is another lesson that must be relearned from scratch. —Nancy Princenthal

### John Newman at Von Lintel & Nusser

John Newman's appealing small sculptures make you think of cartoons and computer animation, yet they're emphatically three-dimensional and tactile. That isn't the only contradiction this body of work presents. The surface details and the intense sense of touch may remind you of tribal fetish objects, while the compositions, which usually involve one element framing or holding another, may evoke scientific equipment. Newman is a

2001. The works vary enormously in configuration, color and medium. Faced with this teeming profusion, you looked for commonalities beyond the modest size (the largest was under 2 feet). You noticed that there are curves in all the works (as well as in the table), that Newman favors spiky things and tangles of all sorts, and that the sculptures frequently suggest actions: tying, squishing, bending, rubbing, penetrating.

Most works incorporate two versions of a single form, and usually one of the elements holds the other up off the table. For example, in *Homespun (with a copper braid)* the doubled form is a short, fat, tailed object that might bring to mind a children's-book image of a sprightly whale. One is part waxy yellow, the other flocked deep purple, and they are lashed together tail to tail, the yellow one lifted. The head of the purple "whale" has dozens of little protrusions in concentric rings. From the head of the yellow one, copper wires

Wolfgang Staehle: Two stills from *Untitled, 2001*, video transmission, 9 by 23 feet each; at Postmasters.



don't merely protrude but are braided into a strand more than a foot long. *Homespun* (disk trouble) consists of a U-shaped iron bar resting on the table with a shiny copper rod joining its ends; attached to that rod is a two-part construction of little paper boxes tied with jute string, which forms the double-C shape of ice tongs. Clutched in the "tongs" is a segment of spine, the vertebrae made of glass and terra-cotta, the disks of felt. The whole is both logical and fantastic.

Other works employ cast iron, plastic, wood, foam, bamboo,

contemporary feel. In fact, he was one of the first to abandon the open constructivist idiom that became pervasive in the '70s and move toward a more organic approach that seemed to refer back to the notion of a sculptural body. In Tribe's case, the method is to form massive agglomerations of smaller steel parts that are forced into a unity through careful fitting and lots of welds. His recent exhibition featured nearly 30 pieces, including a few standing arabesques in his older mode, some delicate wall-hung work and a preponderance of

ical associations with iron lungs and artificial organs, as well as the more obvious emotional implications. Both the horn and the heart have strong sexual overtones, and it seems possible that one of Tribe's sources, as he developed the vocabulary of these pieces, was tantric sculpture. The clenched sexual metaphor for the simultaneity of life and death that you see in those abstracted images of intercourse seems to underlie much of Tribe's new work.

Some of the very best pieces in the show are tiny. *Steel Stone 1*

seen moving in a few different directions, but one major tendency dominated: fantasy now supersedes any interest in architectural reality. In fact, Simonds's obsessive imagining of a lost civilization seems to have joyfully regressed to the thrill-seeking bent of an adolescent model-builder.

Looking at *Smear*, a large wall relief, you first register the piece as a fierce abstract gesture. But when you notice the completely fantastic little brick chimneys at the top of the relief, the work is transformed into a tidal wave or



stone and such oddities as "aerogel," a lightweight synthetic substance that looks, in this use, like cubed mist. The gallery's second room featured 31 bright, lively color drawings, all sympathetic to the sculptures yet neither illustrations nor plans. What is the sum? Nancy Princenthal writes in the show's catalogue, "Newman has devoted himself to three-dimensional fictions, to objects with an extreme degree of specificity but barely any descriptive relationship to the real world." That's the marvel: glorious stuff unconstrained by its realness.

—Janet Koplos

### Lee Tribe at Robert Steele

Lee Tribe is one of the few sculptors with roots in the abstract tradition of Julio González, David Smith and Anthony Caro who has stuck to his guns and successfully forged a personal style with a

solid or near-solid nuggets ranging in size from tiny fistfuls to substantial pedestal pieces.

The latter remain the most fascinating for this viewer. They often look like a twisted sort of still life or an implement or specimen that has been laid out for viewing. There are usually no holes all the way through but lots of protuberances and concavities. *Searching for Bolden* (2001)—presumably titled for the legendary jazz trumpeter Buddy Bolden—is like a horn metamorphosing into a snail, or vice versa. It lies heavily on its side and, like many of the other pieces, recalls a crustacean, armored yet alive, with a distressed surface, as if it had been underwater a long time. *Ironheart Locked* (1999-2001) is a hefty bent-heart shape covered with knobby protrusions and zigzagging ribs and bars. It might be a reliquary, but it looks more like an old pump, rusted solid. Given the title, this sculpture summons up somewhat melancholy med-

(2000) and *History Eyes* (1999) would fit in your pocket and have a wonderfully talismanic quality, like a charm or a fossil. William Tucker has also cast some tiny pieces of this sort, and, in fact, there has been a fascinating interplay between these two sculptors. Tribe was Tucker's fabricator in the '70s but made his own contribution by exploring the vocabulary of mass and core, an approach that Tucker subsequently developed by abandoning construction altogether. I used to think Tribe should move to casting as well, but now I see that the way his pieces are built up by accretion, like a piece of coral, is essential to their power. —Robert Taplin

### Charles Simonds at Joseph Helman

For more than 30 years, Charles Simonds has been creating miniature archeological tableaux out of sculpted clay. In this show of works from 2001, he could be

a piece of land suffering a massive earthquake. In another wall piece, a tableau of blunt mountains features abandoned villages perched on outcrops of rock. Miniature carved stairways lead from one part of the sprawling settlement to another. Elsewhere, Simonds creates several ominous-looking buttes that have a quasi-figural presence. Here, human settlement is suggested by more meandering stairways and by doorways hidden on the sides of cliffs. The sense of remoteness and dizzying heights is palpable.

Perhaps the best work in the show was a jutting untitled clay wall relief that is best described as UFO-like. Sprinkled across this tortured outcropping of rock are what appear to be the remains of a civilization. It's an affecting vision of culture surrendering over time to the power of nature. Even in a period when many artists are drawn to the creation of miniature worlds (think of Julian LaVerdiere or