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Charlemagne Palestine Brings a 'Sonorous Alter' to the Whitney

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

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Charlemagne Palestine created 'a sonorous altar' for the Whitney Biennial. *Agaton Strom for The Wall Street Journal*

With nearly every inch of display space enlisted for the Whitney Biennial, which opens Friday at the Whitney Museum of American Art, one New York native went to work on the periphery.

"I've been coming to the museum since it was built, and I've always loved the staircase," said Charlemagne Palestine, participating in his first biennial at the age of 66. "This particular kind of concrete has a fantastic resonance. It's Taj Mahal-esque."

For his installation in the Whitney's stairwell, he sought to create what he called "a sonorous altar," following visitors as they go up and down the museum's floors. Twelve speakers, set up in corners of the stairwell, play all day. Within the din are the sounds of his singing voice, which he recorded while walking the stairs with a glass of cognac, as well as an electronic drone.

"If it works well and the sound is encompassing enough, when people come up the staircase they will be nicely disoriented, even hypnotized," Mr. Palestine said.

There is a visual element too: Each speaker is adorned with some of the artist's collection of stuffed animals, or "soft divinities," as he calls them. Among the cast are a monkey, a rabbit, a bear and a droopy pink elephant.



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Mr. Palestine used 12 speakers adorned with stuffed animals in the hallway of the museum. *Agaton Strom for The Wall Street Journal*

How many plush animals does he own? "Ten thousand and growing," Mr. Palestine said. "I've become a kind of orphanage."

Most of the animals are back home in Brussels, where Mr. Palestine now lives, but some date back to his coming-of-age in New York. He grew up in Brooklyn and established himself as an artist in the 1960s and '70s. His activities included theatrical performances and concerts whose boundaries would blur, often with an aggressive edge that could find him destroying piano strings in recital or filming a video ("Island Song") for which he screamed and sang while racing a motorcycle.

"At the time, it was totally unheard of," said Antonio Homem, director of the Sonnabend Gallery, which staged a recent show of Mr. Palestine's early work in Chelsea. "He was such a perfect example

that what was going on in art didn't just have to do with painting or sculpting in traditional terms. There were many other possibilities."

During his formative years, Mr. Palestine held down a job performing music high above the streets of Midtown, in the bell tower at St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue. "I started to play this crazy stuff when he asked me to try them out, and he found it great," he said of the church's retiring bell master, who hired him while he was still in high school. "Nobody approached bells like a monster except for me, which goes to how I work in general."

For his piece on the stairs at the Whitney, Mr. Palestine channeled part of his past, as well as the past of the Whitney. For the last biennial before the museum moves to a new site in the Meatpacking District, his installation strikes up a last dance with the building itself, which was designed by the famed Bauhaus architect Marcel Breuer.

"I was trying to think about what kinds of voices I felt belonged in the Breuer building," said Anthony Elms, one of the biennial's three curators.

"He's a really important maker for me, and for a lot of people—curators and artists," he added. "He seems to be on lots of people's minds."

As one of several older artists in this year's biennial, which takes history as one of its themes, Mr. Palestine said he's happy for the attention granted to timely but fleeting work that for many years had been forgotten.

"Ephemeral is in again. It's fabulous for somebody like me," he said. "I like to make things, but my things can always transform."

He's no mere elder statesman, though.

"I'm a young emerging artist at 66," he said. "I need at least another 25 years to do all the things I want to do. It's always in process."

Representing New York

Six other Whitney Biennial participants with New York ties:

Zoe Leonard

A nook on the museum's fourth floor has been transformed into a giant "camera obscura," with a small hole in a window that projects a ghostly image of the skyline onto the walls of a darkened room.

VIDEO

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Jacolby Satterwhite

This artist's hyperkinetic video work makes use of computer animation that, the catalog says, can teach a viewer "to be elsewhere and present at the same time."



A tangle of thread by Sheila Hicks. *Agaton Strom for The Wall Street Journal*

Sheila Hicks

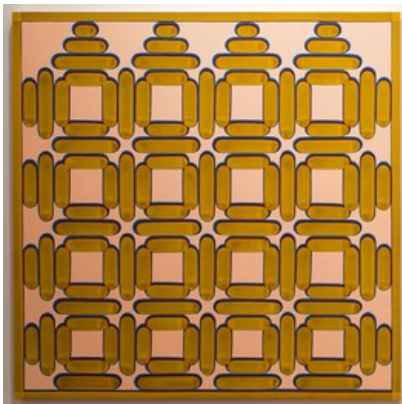
A colorful tangle of thread stretches from floor to ceiling in a sculptural work by Sheila Hicks, who splits her time between Paris and New York and draws on studies of ancient textile design.

Ken Okiishi

The traditions of painting and pawing at touch screens come together in this artist's work, which focuses on moments when creative methods and states of media begin to smear.

Semiotext(e)

This publisher of philosophy and critical theory, now based in Los Angeles but long stationed in New York, is represented by an installation and readable works by Jean Baudrillard, Eileen Myles, Chris Kraus, Sylvère Lotringer and more.



Dan Walsh

Geometric paintings by Dan Walsh are striking in their simplicity, with shapes that align grid-like patterns with Tibetan mandalas.

—Andy Battaglia

A Dan Walsh painting. *Agaton Strom for The Wall Street Journal*

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