This spring the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York has mounted the largest and most expensive as well as the most political Biennial Exhibition of contemporary American art in its history. Works by one hundred painters, sculptors, photographers, and film and video artists fill all five floors of the museum’s public exhibition space. This is the first time the Biennial has preempted all other activities and events at the Whitney, including the exhibition of its permanent collection. This is, without doubt, a Biennial with a mission.

What has compelled the special scale of this year’s Biennial is not, however, any desire on the part of the Whitney curatorial staff to organize an exhibition that would accurately represent the diverse artistic achievements of American art at the present moment. At the Whitney, as with so many of our cultural institutions nowadays, an interest in “concerns”—meaning the programs of political pressure groups in the art world—has triumphantly supplanted an interest in artistic achievement. From these “concerns” are derived the tests, which are blatantly political tests, that works of art are now expected to meet to be considered for the Biennial. The only exceptions in the case of this year’s Biennial are certain older artists who are exempted on the basis of prior reputation. Younger artists who fail to pass the requisite political tests are simply ignored.
The committee that sat in judgment over this Biennial is nothing if not explicit about the nature of these political tests—explicit, that is, for any reader practiced at parsing the poststructuralist political idiom that now passes for prose in the Brave New World of the contemporary exhibition catalogue. “If there is a single constant in the art exhibited here,” writes Richard Armstrong, one of the curators on the Biennial jury, “it is to be found in the ongoing elaboration of the taste for quotidian imagery and techniques—for the recontextualized over the purely invented.” Which, roughly translated, means: a preference for the political and propagandists over the purely aesthetic. According to Mr. Armstrong, political art of this persuasion is “clearly the preferred vernacular of contemporary American art.” Which means only that it is the preferred taste of the Whitney curators and the political pressure groups they are so eager to serve.

Another member of the Biennial jury—John G. Hanhardt—has also left us in no doubt as to what he was looking for in selecting the film and video contributions to the exhibition. It was primarily work concentrating on what Mr. Hanhardt calls “Important issues” that was deemed worthy of consideration, and these “important issues” were, of course, political rather than artistic issues. Again, the idiom may be odious, but the basic point is easily grasped. “These media artists,” Mr. Hanhardt writes,

are in fact contributing to the discourses that are redefining cultural practices. One crucial discourse concerns the changing definition of representation. . . . This investigation is renegotiating the boundaries between gender and sexuality through a deconstruction of the binary opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality, a deconstruction that questions the very invention of those terms.

This is an example of what, for Mr. Hanhardt and his colleagues at the Whitney, counts as an “important issue”—if not the important issue—for art today.

It was left, however, to another of the Whitney curators—Lisa Phillips—to spell out in detail the hard-core political beliefs that govern this year’s Biennial. In an essay called “Culture under Siege” for the catalogue of the exhibition, Miss Phillips has given us what amounts to a political manifesto—the first, as far as we can recall, to be issued by the Whitney. According to this manifesto, the controversies that have erupted over the arts in recent years—the public hearing that led to the removal of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* from the Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan, the uproar over NEA funding for Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* and the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition called “The Perfect Moment,” etc.—all have a very simple explanation. Owing to what Miss Phillips calls “the excesses of American life in the eighties” and the end of the Cold War, “a scapegoat was needed” by “the reactionary right” for its “unfocused anxieties.” With the loss of Communism as a “symbol of evil”—so this argument goes—the nation
needed a new enemy, and it found one readily at hand in Messrs. Serra, Serrano, Mapplethorpe, and sundry others. As a result, Miss Phillips avers, our entire culture now finds itself “under siege.”

Oddly enough, there is no mention in this political manifesto of the fact that the kind of art championed by Miss Phillips or her colleagues at the Whitney continues to enjoy an immense success in the galleries and museums—an in the mainstream press, too. In the universities, also, this is the art that commands esteem, emulation, and support. The art journals, needless to say, support it without even a hint of demurral. Yet Miss Phillips prattles on about “the nation’s endemic anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, and mistrust of artists.” And she is particularly condemnatory about the few critics who were guilty, in her view, for “publicly expressing doubts” about the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, for example. Just imagine! Critics actually expressing “doubts” about the work of these sanctified artists. With friends like Lisa Phillips, freedom of expression needs no enemies. “Culture under Siege” is a perfect example of the extent to which the campaign for Political Correctness—which is a campaign to place strict political limits on our freedom of expression—has now established itself in the art world. It is not only this year’s Biennial exhibition of contemporary American art that is illuminated by this political manifesto. The museum itself has been redefined by it.