

Art in America

June 1992

Gayil Nalls at Philippe Staib

In her fourth solo show in New York since 1983, Gayil Nalls presented a puzzlingly disparate array of elements. Among the major pieces were a strange cast bronze object—an eyelike orb trailing veins or nerves—used as a counterweight to suspend a pallet piled with bundles of newspapers; a steel table holding a notebook containing 500 pages of diaristic narrative and philosophical rant; a bank of 12 video monitors showing celebrations at the demise of the Berlin Wall and scenes from the Persian Gulf War victory parade in New York; and four rough vertical slabs of cast titanium, each standing over six feet tall and imprinted with a letter so as to spell out HOME.

What holds these and a couple of other sculptures and a number of prints together is that they all refer to the artist's elaborately articulated fantasy that humankind is about to undergo a profound transformation. Nalls's word for this, which provides the title of her exhibition, is "Permutatude." According to her introductory text in the show's catalogue, it seems she believes that because of the hyperdevelopment of technologies of visual communication, people all over the planet are acquiring such strong feelings of global consciousness that some sort of mass unification—a new stage in

human evolution—must be in the offing. Related to this is Nalls's idea that we are now living in what she calls the Age of Titanium. A superstrong space-age metal that can bond with human bone, titanium symbolizes for her the possibility of a symbiotic relationship of humans and technology (hence the titanium slabs spelling HOME). Nalls is thus working out not just a *fin de siècle* but a millennialist vision. One of her photolithographic prints features a picture of her face; the date "1990" appears on her forehead like a stigma, suggesting that she herself has undergone such a massive permutation that even her body is emanating occult signage. The subtitle of her show indicates how urgent she thinks her prophetic mission is: "Adjust to the Great Evolutionary Forces of Change or Be Destroyed in the Upheavals."

Do the art works she presents in the gallery persuasively convey Nalls's messianic vision? Some of these pieces are compelling aside from the Permutatude mythology. The great veiny bronze eyeball holding up stacks of newspapers offers an intriguing juxtaposition of the archetypal and the mundane. An untitled floor-bound assemblage that involves a piece of corroded titanium that looks like part of an old machine, a collection of coconut-size balls of hair and a thin glowing neon tube is materially and poetically engaging in a way that calls to mind Mario Merz. And the

HOME slabs are ominously monumental.

But just making more or less successful sculpture is apparently not enough for Nalls: she wants us to be caught up in her fantasy of Permutatude. To be sure, there's an interesting if nutty portentousness about her enterprise. The problem is that Nalls's savvy and stylish sculpture is not nearly as astounding or eccentric as her evangelical rhetoric suggests it ought to be. The show never quite delivered the mystic thrill it seemed to promise.

—Ken Johnson

Gayil Nalls: View of work in the installation "Permutatude," 1989-91; at Philippe Staib.

