

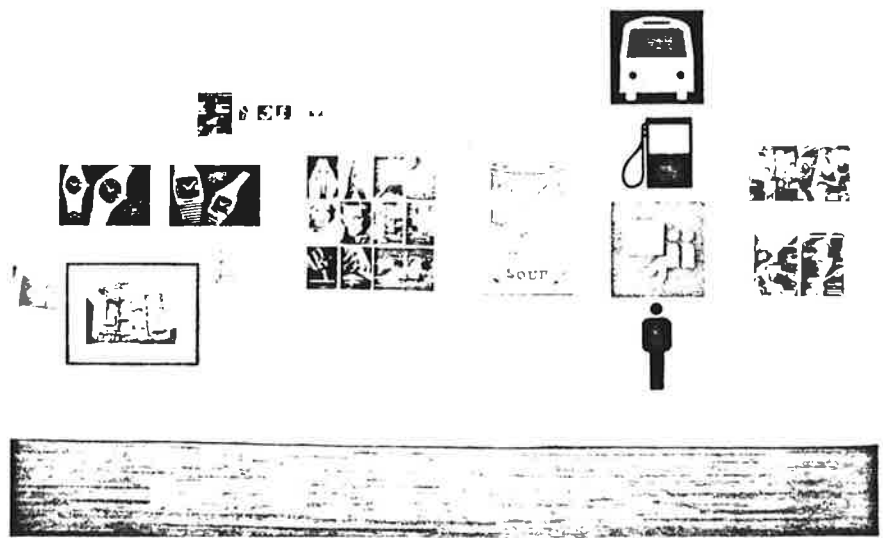
Doubtless the most provocative show during January was "Pictures and Promises," "gathered" by Barbara Kruger for the Kitchen. It's the kind of assembling that can be viewed many different ways, depending on what propaganda you marshal to describe the visual propaganda. For those who argue that art is in a crisis, on a trajectory hurtling towards devolution, this collection of images—which includes art "information" by Hans Haacke juxtaposed with advertising "information" by Seagram's—can be used as propaganda on behalf of their argument—in this show, "art" and "commerce" are indistinguishable. For those who think that all visual information is created equal, "Pictures and Promises" proves that the point of any image is communication—no matter whether the message is to buy liquor (as in a Seagram's ad) or to question corporate America (as in a Hans Haacke polemic).

In a city where museums like the Cooper-Hewitt so cavalierly (and correctly!) give equal time to the history of advertising *and* to the history of ceramic tiles, it's hard to believe that the devolution argument holds any water. The crossbreeding of popular culture (from cartoons to rock'n'roll) with so-called high culture (Art and Music with Capital Letters) has produced hardy hybrids—Roy Lichtenstein, Milton Glaser and the incidental music in Richard Foreman plays. Nevertheless, the people who are collectors of a Lichtenstein "Terry and the Pirates" quotation would hardly be disposed to buy Milton Caniff's original drawings for his comic strip. The general argument for the reluctance to see Lichtenstein and Caniff as equals is that the former works in the high art context while the latter is mass-market oriented.

This capricious argument—that if it's in a gallery or museum, it must be Art—is mustered repeatedly in the course of anyone's cultural day. To valorize a Warhol or a Lichtenstein, the argument is that they elevate the craft of mass-market signage to an art. Do the art directors and copywriters of Madison Avenue, conversely, "depreciate" Art to a craft when they incorporate the visual/verbal ideas of a Rauschenberg or a Poe in a billboard sign or magazine ad campaign? Why defend artists' poaching off the mass market if you can't countenance the reverse? Probably because "slumming" is respected social behavior while upscale moves are viewed with suspicion, with taunts of "Carpetbagger!"

been) about what qualifies for the encumbrance. What's refreshing about Kruger's collection of visual information is that it prevents dissenters from saying, "If it's in a gallery, it must be art"—by this token, Cheryl Tiegs jeans and Piaget bijoux certify. Kruger gets straight to the point: her modest presentation implicitly says, "Okay, here are various forms of visual information; do they share a collective semiology, and, if so, how can we decode them?" Which seems to be about the most important question—and an intelligent, uncondescending one—that one can ask about art.

The net effect of "Pictures and Promises" goes beyond the typical rear-guard maneuver of obliterating the dis-



"Pictures and Promises" installation view, 1981. Photo: Paula Court.

tinctions between mass culture and high culture (which artists from William Morris through Alexandra Exter through Picasso through Kurt Schwitters through Jasper Johns have been doing for a century, anyway). Kruger has taken the necessary next step in seeing "art information" and "commercial information" as (temporarily, perhaps) convergent parallel lines, subsets of an inclusive repository of images, a stockpile so vast and infinite that it would take the encyclopedic skills of a Diderot and lexicographic patience of a Webster to catalogue. Kruger convinces us that the only question is not "Is it art?" but rather,