

frieze

Whitney Biennial 2014

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June - July - August 2014 Issue

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Reviews of the Whitney Biennial usually start by invoking the impossibility of the exhibition form and all the failed editions that came before, but here's the tricky thing: three of the last four were good. The 2006 edition, curated by Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne, was the best-received of the last two decades and gave us one of the truly great art works of the age: Mark di Suvero and Rirkrit Tiravanija's Iraq-vintage Peace Tower. Francesco Bonami's quietly intense 2010 biennial, my favorite of recent years, made a case for modesty and introversion in a frame that usually prefers bombast. The 2012 biennial, organized by Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders, garnered wide acclaim for its Occupy spirit and attention to performance, which took up a full floor of the Whitney's soon-to-be-vacated Marcel Breuer-designed HQ on Madison Avenue. (The 2008 edition, curated by Henrietta Huldish and Shamim M. Momin, was an overly busy, installation -besotted washout.)

So, in assessing the all-over-the-shop 2014 Whitney Biennial, I feel that I can apply at least a degree of critical leverage. Blame has to start with the museum's curatorial department and the biennial's curators Stuart Comer of the Museum of Modern Art across town, Anthony Elms of Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art and the Chicago-based artist Michelle Grabner - though the relative fault of each varies. Unlike previous editions, this time around the three curators did not collaborate on a single exhibition but took one museum floor apiece. The Whitney tried mightily to spin this curatorial renunciation as three shows in one, three views of one art world, or whatever excuse came to mind, but the original sin of the 2014 biennial could not be expiated, even if the resulting show was only substandard and not catastrophic. Like my colleague Andrew Russeth noted in his *Gal/erist NY* review, my initial reaction when I heard about the one-floor-per-curator wheeze was dread, while on opening day my fear had subsided into mere disappointment, perhaps because the biennial's scale and wildly divergent quality made it seem pointless to have any strong view at all.

The 2010 edition had 55 artists. The 2012 version had 51. This year's included a whacking 103 artists -and collectives, spilling out into the staircase (Charlemagne Palestine's sound work *hauntedddd" n huntedddd" n dauntless" n shuntedddd"*, 2013, recorded on site), the elevator (a taxonomic, muzakbacked video loop, *Metopoetaestheticism*, 2013, by Jeff Gibson), the lobby, the basement, the sunken courtyard, the entrance bridge, a park on the Hudson River (hosting a 400,000-name Artists Monument, 2014, by Tony Tasset, which was one of the strongest works in the show) and the apartment of a tarot card reader. A big biennial can work when it has a tight, cogent argument behind it; 2006 was large, but it hung together thanks to its Bush-era, midnight-in-America oppositionality. 2014 had no such through-line, and it's hard not to conclude that the exhibition came out at literally double the size of the previous two versions precisely because the curators did not work together, and some fraction of the poor art on display might have been edited out had they had a system of checks and balances. The result was a whirligig biennial, with dizzying variations in quality and relevance, though with so many artists included, even a much lower percentage of talent results in an acceptable number of hits. There's at least a little safety in numbers.

Elms's section was the weakest. Do not look for guidance to his obscurantist catalogue essay, larded with sentence fragments and non sequiturs ('At this moment, am I shitting or am I shit?'), unfunny and off-key jokes ('What's wrong with capitalism is we're all like Rihanna'), and a truly scandalous apology for Breuer's architecture via the teenage soap opera *Gossip Girl*. You had to be there to experience the timid selection that diminished the stronger works and made no case for the feebler ones. For every nice surprise - such as Susan Howe's terse letterpress prints of poetry, footnotes and marginalia - there were just as many strikeouts from gifted practitioners (small provisional sketches for works from Allan Sekula, minor collages from the usually excellent Charline von Heyl) and twice as many bland archival projects. One such was the musical archive of an antiwar activist, assembled by the Chicago collective Public Collectors - freighted with self-justifying texts that imputed some innate criticality to what was, in large part, just show-and-tell. Elms also commissioned one of the biennial's largest works, *945 Madison Avenue* (2014), a camera obscura designed by Zoe Leonard (for which she won the museum's Bucksbaum Award) that was installed in the Breuer building's trapezoidal bay window in the middle of Grabner's fourth floor section of the exhibition.

If you're feeling up for a little Judgement of Paris, Comer, by some margin, produced the best exhibition of the three, a pessimistic affair featuring many works that traced the contours of this post-American century. Yet it felt disjointed, due in part to an exhibition design with too many walls and, even here, far too little art generated sufficient heat. Fine works on paper from Etel Adnan (nearly 90 years old) and Channa Horwitz (dead) overpowered younger artists' efforts. One notes especially the paucity of moving images from

a curator who spent nearly a decade running the Tate's film programme, despite an outstanding contribution from Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab documenting the Melvillian intensity of industrial fishing (Leviathan, 2012). At least Comer got Bjarne Melgaard, stealing the show with *Ignorant Transparencies* (2013), a nightmarish fun house of sex dolls and rutting chimpanzees. Thank heavens there is still at least one artist in New York who goes for broke with every single outing. Indeed, there was an almost comic preponderance of dick in this exhibition, offered up by Melgaard but also Elijah Burgher, Miguel Gutierrez, Gary Indiana, Keith Mayerson, Jacoby Satterwhite and others. This is not something I usually protest, but it's striking how vocal the show was about sexuality and how quiet it remained about race and genderless than a third of the artists across the biennial were women, as critic Jillian Steinhauer astutely noted on the website *Hyperallergic*. The site also broke the news, two weeks before the exhibition closed in May, that the collective *HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINAFRICAN?* would be withdrawing its work. The group, whose members are mostly black, objected to the biennial's inclusion of the fictional character 'Danelle Woolford' - an African-American, female avatar of the artist Joe Scanlan, who is white. Whatever the merits or faults of Scanlan's racial drag, a biennial with a dismal historical record of minority and female representation is perhaps ill-equipped to handle the questions it raises about the fixity of the culture industry's power structures.

Though Comer's floor was the clear winner, the paradox of the 2014 Whitney Biennial was that Grabner, despite a much lower hit rate, produced the more memorable results. With 53 of the show's artists- almost as many as Bonami included in his entire biennial- her overstuffed fraction included numerous women working in abstract painting or fabric, notably a knockout Sheila Hicks tower that was, hands down, the best work in the show (*Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column*, 2013-14). (Sheila Hicks, people! Richard Serra wishes he could make anything this totemic, this sensitive to medium, this poised between noun and verb. If anyone at the Whitney is still reading, give her a solo show now.) Grabner's section also contained the most misfires, including an extraneous display of David Foster Wallace ephemera described in the wall text as 'a vital inclusion', but whose relevance was known only to the curator. What's more, Grabner exhibited some very bad manners, writing in the catalogue that 'as an artist, I am liberated from the stratagems girding today's curatorial industry, so in short, I am attempting to assemble an exhibition that is principally for me and other artists'. Besides insulting Elms and Comer, and sidelining the vast majority of non-artists who make up the biennial's audience, her statement also short-changes her own exhibition, reducing the overshadowed women and lesser-known Chicago figures in her section of the biennial to mere 'artists' art'. All the same, New York has not seen a show like Grabner's all-on-her-own biennial in a while. If I didn't truly like it, at least I remember it.

After multiple visits to the biennial, I became adept at averting my eyes from its worst errors and found, within its incoherence, a few moorings to cling to: Adnan, Hicks, Howe, Melgaard and some younger folk such as Ricky Swallow, whose modest and provisional bronzes took me by surprise, and Uri Aran, whose installations incorporate lovely drawings, hermetic symbolism and sheet music. I realized, not soon enough, that I long ago became gifted at such selective, superficial engagement. It's too big: the quality varies wildly; there's a lot of abstract painting and some performance, to make you feel like it matters; I liked a few things but don't recall much of it ... What does that response remind me of? It sounds like an art fair- and why shouldn't it, really, when the hallmark of contemporary art in 2014 is its fractal reproduction, directly or through disavowal, of the inescapable and insatiable market? The biennial's curators and artists may bridle at this point, and insist that the show's archival projects 'contested' hierarchies of value, that the performances 'problematized' notions of the self or the body, that the politically oriented works 'contested' the dominant order. The truth, however, is that there is no evidence that such practices have the impact they purpose, as Andrea Fraser insisted in her excellent essay in the catalogue of the 2012 Whitney Biennial. There she decried 'an ever-widening gap between the material conditions of art and its symbolic systems: between what the vast majority of art works are today (socially and economically) and what artists, curators, critics, and historians say that art works[...] do and mean.' Such a gap is understandable, in psychological terms, to justify the galling contradictions we all labour under in the art world today. But they cannot last forever, and the 2014 biennial suggests that this illusion is very close to cracking. If you haven't already, I'd recommend reading Fraser's essay in the catalogue of the last edition, if you can find a copy. Biennial catalogues go out of print very quickly.