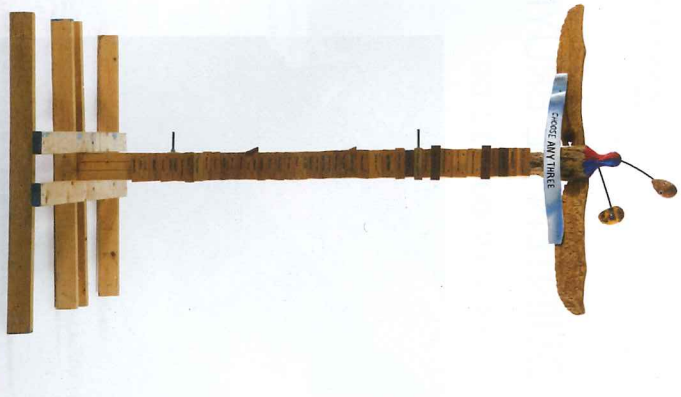


## The 2014 Whitney Biennial in New York

### ART IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Despite the Whitney Museum of American Art's having outsourced its 2014 Biennial to curators living beyond New York City (London, Chicago and Philadelphia), exhibition formats that occur on one curator's floor recur on another's. Unexpected artistic practices featured in this biennial include sixteen collaborative practices (rarely exhibited in US museums despite their prevalence); posthumous re-creations; seven archives; three shows within an exhibition and seven discursive projects.

Sue SPAID



Jimmie Durham, 'Choose Any Tree', 1989, carved and painted wood, metal and glass, kurimanzutto, Mexico City, courtesy the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City, © Jimmie Durham, photo Jean Christophe Latt

Still, this biennial's most novel strategy concerns the 'homage' artworks produced to address or honor earlier artists like Paul P.'s 'Writing Table for Nancy Mitford (Blitz Era)' or Elijah Burgher's 'Beacon to Beacon (for R. Hawkins)'. Some might complain that this biennial feels way too sentimental, as if this show is a farewell to the museum's beloved Breuer building, but it's not. In fact, it's difficult to pinpoint whether its source springs from the curators' curious inclusion of works by nine dead artists, an unusually high number of older artists (half over 45), the plethora of artist homages (more than 25 projects), three suicidal references or the hand's predominant name (drawing/animation, hand-held recordings, knitted protest gear or recovered personal treasures). If yesterday's artists boldly appropriated earlier artists' strategies, imagery and styles, today's cadre explicitly credit influential mentors. Rather than taking credit for their singular efforts, one senses artists finally emphasizing the collective nature of artistic production.

Although I cannot explain this Biennial's sentimentality, one senses a shifting attitude whereby community trumps production, a vision that hopefully protects these artists from the vagaries of shifting preferences/tendencies, art-fair hype, gallery misrepresentation and auction-price mania. Since this exhibition bucks the imprimatur of past biennials co-produced alongside whatever New York galleries dominate the current scene, one senses individual artists' greater vulnerability. By contrast, collectives like Academy Records (2000), Public Collectors (2007), Critical Practices Inc. (2010) or HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINAFRICAN? (2013) not only function off-the-grid, so-to-speak, but their durability depends on their autonomy and flexibility viz. otherwise institutionalized practices.

#### SELFIE

Despite the worry that the 2014 Biennial includes fewer women and artists of color than before, female abstract painters are present on every floor, despite art school tendencies to discourage women from becoming painters. By including abstract paintings by Etel Adnan, Louise Fishman, Charline von Heyl, Channa Horowitz, Jacqueline Humphries, Suzanne McClelland, Rebecca Morris, Dona Nelson and Amy Sillman, (aged 45 to 89), the curators acknowledge the art world's having neglected a vital art movement



Zachary Drucker, 'Relationship (Zachary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, 2011)', courtesy of the artists and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

that crystallized over twenty years ago. The inclusion of ceramicist John Mason ('1925) suggests yet another overlooked artist, yet this is his sixth Whitney exhibition since 1962.

In addition to painting, performance and photography are present throughout. The strongest and most memorable artwork is the incredibly loving, tender and ongoing 'selfie' 'Relationship' (2008-2013), a series of photographs documenting the transgender couple Zachary Drucker and Rhys Ernst undergoing the process of becoming woman and man, respectively. While I don't imagine that they view their transformations as art the way Orlan opted to become a mélange of feminine ideals, I definitely appreciate their presenting this otherwise private affair in a manner that inspires viewers to empathize with their experiences, however far out. Initially, their photos recall those of Nan Goldin's 'Ballad of Sexual Dependency' (1986), yet one soon realizes that these are self-portraits.

Like the 2011 Biennial, dance and movement play significant roles here given video recordings of Jacoby Satterwhite's break-dance moves, Yve Laris Cohen's lively postmodern steps and Jennifer Bornstein's recreation of historical dance moves. Political art is represented by

Pedro Véllez's humorous institutional critique and Fred Lonidier's analysis of NAFTA's victims.

The main thing limiting this Biennial is the fact that videos and performances are screened/performed at different times, so no two Biennial visits result in shared experiences. It's simply impossible to experience all that is available without repeat visits. Even so, numerous intriguing projects remain, whether Lisa Anne Auerbach's megazine and knitwear protests, the video of the collective My Barbarian, Carol Jackson's sculptures, Gretchen Bender's fabulous wall-work re-fabricated by Philip Vanderhyden, Joshua Moseley's fascinating animation of a historical tennis game, Shana Lutker's explorations of art world fistcuffs, Jimmie Durham's genius totem, Joel Otrerson's amazing wire-glass chandeliers and quilt-flap tent. Still, one wonders whether all of the selfies, homages and memories are the result of social media's impact on the art world, including the curators' access to and interest in particular artistic practices. Despite social media's presence, everything feels surprisingly authentic and sincere.

2014 Whitney Biennial until May 25 at Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Ave, Manhattan, NY, USA  
www.whitney.org