I Can’t Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White

ON AGENCY AND SOCIAL PRACTICE  
// THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL THEN AND NOW

By Noah Hanna
When critic Glenn O’Brien received an admission tag at the Whitney Biennial in 1993 baring the statement; “I CAN’T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE,” he bluntly reflected on the experience in Artforum, “No fucking way was I putting that on.” Designed by artist Daniel Joseph Martinez, the tags gained notoriety due to the response they evoked, but also encapsulated a Whitney Biennial that was at the border of ideological reformations. Now close to three decades later, Martinez’s work continues to offer substantial implications for the consequential exhibition of American Art.

The 1993 Biennial was a polarizing iteration of the then forty-six-year-old exhibition. Curated by the Whitney Museum of American Art’s own Elisabeth Sussman, the Biennial followed what scholar Nizan Shaked described as a period of division between fault lines within American discourse and the art field. Through the 1970s and ‘80s, paired with the calamity of the AIDS crisis and continued racially motivated violence, forced artists and art institutions to negotiate both the rise of an art market increasingly driven by capitalist expansionism, and a greater necessity for political consciousness within artistic practice. For Sussman, the exhibition would serve as a way to “consolidate artworks concerned with actual political situations, which, for example, ask what constitutes a community, or examine its relationship to identity formation.”

The Whitney, like many of New York’s cultural cornerstones, aimed to draw the chasm between artmaking and political realities closer. As Shaked notes, exhibitions such as The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s in (1990), hung collaboratively by The Studio Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and the New Museum, as well as the New Museum’s own Let The Record Show... (1987–88), which featured the now iconic neon installation SILENCE = DEATH (1987) by Gran Fury and ACT UP, sought to bring the turmoil of the AIDS crisis and struggles for representation into the institutional mainstream. While these exhibitions featured work by many of the decade’s most prominent and politically active artists, such as Barbara Kruger, David Wojnarowicz, and Adrian Piper, they remained generally conceptual experiences. The museums set the stage and curated discourse, even while activist-minded artists composed much of the rosters. However, in the case of Martinez and the Whitney, this barrier was broken down in a way that was outside of the institution’s control, presenting what is perhaps the most significant considerations for the most recent presentations of the Biennial.

There are various interpretations of Martinez’s work at the Whitney in 1993, officially titled Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture) or Overture con Claque—Overture with Hired Audience Members. For example, the tags, once distributed at the front desk upon purchasing

“The 1993 Biennial lends credence to the most recent exhibitions in 2017 and 2019, which while being commended for increasing the space given to artists of marginalized groups, were also subjected to intense and public debates over artistic and institutional objectives.”
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artmaking and representation, despite neither being commissioned by the Whitney. Theorist Aruna D’Souza’s careful documentation of Tweets, letters, manifestos, and memes about the controversy unfolding at the Whitney amounted to a what could be considered a participatory artwork in itself—providing as much insight into the present American ideology as the 2017 Biennial curators Christopher Lew and Mia Locks provided in their curatorial statements. As a result, it has now become impossible to disassociate the 2017 Biennial from the public’s engagement with it.

Similarly, the scrutiny faced by the Whitney and other major institutions over the role philanthropy, and the methods in which wealth is acquired and distributed, brought activists again into the space in 2019 due to the Whitney’s associations with Warren Kanders, CEO of Safariland—a munitions manufacturer whose products have been used in conflict zones from Gaza to the US/Mexican border. Organizations such as Decolonize This Place and its many affiliates challenged the Biennial on their accountability, pressuring the institution to recognize an ever-growing variety of perspectives. The 2019 Whitney’s inclusion of Triple Chaser (2019), a video investigation by artist collaborative Forensic Architecture and Praxis Films, which compiled crowd-sourced research and computer algorithms to track the use of Safariland’s Triple Chaser tear gas grenades across the world, was a conscious effort by the co-curators (Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley) to acknowledge the need for such debates. However, despite the commendable and groundbreaking research done on behalf of Forensic Architecture, the work can only be interpreted passively in a gallery setting. Visitors enter the exhibition space, observe the atrocities committed with the aid of Safariland, Forensic Architecture’s attempts to document it, and subsequently move on to other work. The structure of communication and agency remains unchanged, despite curatorial intention. In July, when Forensic Architecture found ties between Kanders and the lethal suppression of protests in Gaza, numerous artists demanded their work removed from the Biennial. Faced with another identity crisis, the Whitney allowed the artists to protest and Kanders resigned his seat on the board of trustees shortly after. Even with Kanders gone, the affair has ultimately spurred far more questions than resolutions. The successful campaign against Kanders legitimized artist and public activated discourse within institutional space, but has left many wondering what precedent the 2019 Biennial will inevitably have on future exhibitions and social practice.

While much of the necessity that fueled the 1993 Biennial and Martinez’s museum tags remains unchanged in America, it feels wrong to gaze upon this work with a sense of nostalgia, or as a means to debate what constitutes a successful artistic practice within the frame of a substantial exhibition like the Whitney Biennial. Rather, it seems prudent to examine the continued relevance of this project analytically—asking how work like this can aid in accomplishing the many objectives faced by any exhibition of such a scope. How can exhibitions address representation in art and those it has historically neglected? How can it foster discourse and expression? Panetta and Hockley make note of such a desire in their introductory essay, stating, “Fundamental to the Whitney’s identity is its openness to dialogue, and the conversations that have occurred here and across the country became a productive lens through which to synthesize our own looking, thinking, and self-questioning.”

As the perspectives for exhibitions expand, so too must our practices. Progress must be collective, and agency malleable.

4 Ibid, 166.
5 Ibid, 161-162.
6 Ibid, 175-176.
7 Greenberger Alex, “’The Painting Must Go’: Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney About Controversial Biennial Work,” Artnews, March 21, 2017
9 Greenberger Alex, “’It’s Just the Beginning’: Art World Responds to Warren B. Kanders’s Resignation from Whitney Board,” Artnews, July 26, 2019


OPPOSITE: Forensic Architecture, Triple-Chaser, 2019. Video, color, sound, 10 minutes 24 seconds.

ABOVE: Forensic Architecture, Triple-Chaser, 2019. Video, color, sound, 10 minutes 24 seconds. 3-D models of the Triple-Chaser grenade and images of used canisters, distributed in digital space, help train a computer vision classifier.