

# I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White

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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 bearing 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.<sup>2</sup> American policy—both economic and social—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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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

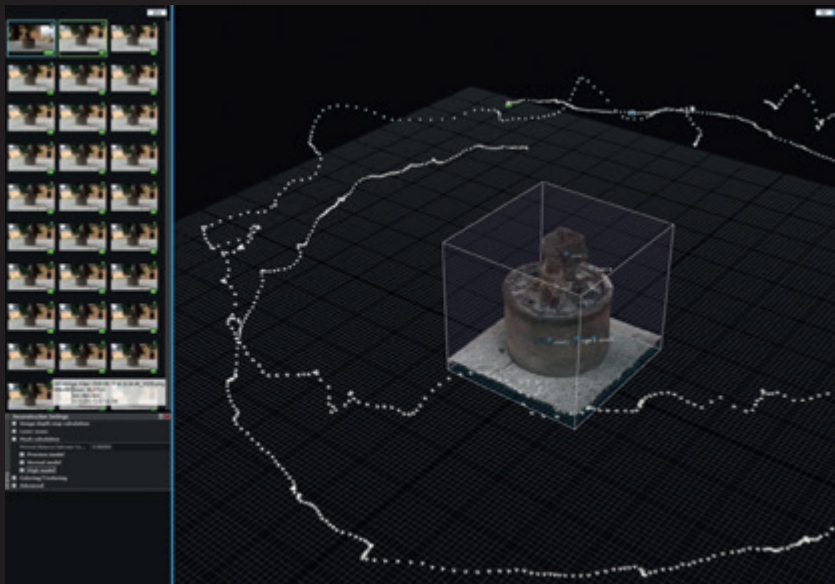


**“The 1993 Biennial lends credence to the most recent exhibitions in 2017 and 2019, which while being commended for increasing the space given to artists of marginalized groups, were also subjected to intense and public debates over artistic and institutional objectives.”**









admission, could be read as a socioeconomic exchange—essentially mimicking the sale of artwork, scaled down to the level of the everyday consumer. The work also questioned inherent bias within art museums, as it occurred at the point of transition between public life and the socially autonomous institution, where judgments are passed between communities.<sup>6</sup> However, the continued poignancy of this work is ultimately derived from the expanded notions of social practice and relational aesthetics that occupy our contemporary moment. Once acquired, agency for the work essentially became that of the recipient, who was free to interpret it as they saw fit. Documentation of visitors at the Biennial displayed the many ways that the work became appropriated; guests intentionally and unintentionally arranged the tags upon their bodies to make statements about personal identity—including race, class, and gender. The museum security staff, a position that was disproportionately held by minorities, wore the tags on their own accord as a display of subversion.

Discussions of agency have steadily continued at the Whitney. 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. For example, the outrage generated from the inclusion of Dana Schutz’s controversial painting *Open Casket* in 2017, depicting the body of Emmett Till, and the Whitney’s ongoing financial connection to arms dealer Warren Kanders, which defined a noticeable portion of discourse surrounding the exhibition in 2019. While the Biennial itself has done little to reach resolution on these matters, the nature in which these debates have occurred has fueled new considerations in exhibition making, especially as institutions address colossal overarching themes such as ‘identity’ to produce snapshots of entire geographic zeitgeists. At the heart of this transformation continues to be the role of agency and social practice.

In the cases of Schutz and Kanders, discourse was overwhelmingly developed and executed by members of the public and museum staff members in non-leadership positions. Artist and activist Hannah Black’s open letter<sup>7</sup> calling for the removal of Schutz’s painting, as well as Chicago artist Parker Bright’s performance and subsequent documentary painting *Confronting My Own Possible Death* (2018), came to define the most pressing concerns of 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup>

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





**The 2019 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art runs through September 22, 2019.**

- 1 O'Brien, Glenn. "Dividing the Sheep from the Goats." *Artforum* 31, no. 9 (1993).
- 2 Shaked, Nizan. *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 156.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 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
- 8 D'Souza, Aruna, *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018).
- 9 Greenberger Alex, "'It's Just the Beginning': Art World Responds to Warren B. Kanders's Resignation from Whitney Board," *Artnews*, July 26, 2019
- 10 Hockley, Rujeko and Jane Panetta, "2019 Whitney Biennial Introduction Text", 2019.

**TITLE PAGE:**

Gran Fury and *ACT UP, SILENCE = DEATH*, 1987. Neon. Installed at the New Museum, *Let The Record Show...*, November 20, 1987–January 24, 1988.

**PAGE 93:**

View of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**

Daniel Joseph Martinez, *Museum Tags: Second Movement (overture) or Overture con claque - Overture with Hired Members*, 1993. Paint and enamel on metal. 12 x 15 inches. Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

**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.