



Whitney Biennial

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF
AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

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"2010": THE TITLE OF the latest edition of the Whitney Biennial, curated by Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari, is a literalist marker that establishes both the inexorable passage of the biennial calendar and the impossibility of subjecting any historical moment to a single explanatory theory. The result is an instant monument to the present that also describes a willing-forth of history, inviting us to conceive of a new 1922, perhaps, with its literary triumphs, or a new 1968, with its social and cultural upheavals, or even, maybe, the 2001 we never got. Such a blunt invocation of contemporaneity, in other words, strongly refers to the relationship that a community or a nation has with its past, and reaffirms the possibility of drawing a firm line between past and present by which one may gain control over the near future. Yet, contrapuntally, the curators posit their show's own relation to this march of history in nearly abject terms, framing the exhibition with self-conscious modesty and emphasizing, in their catalogue essay, that biennials "consistently fail to define a generation of artists."

In fact, history as the *mise-en-scène* of modernity and as the ground on which we may imagine alternative

futures is not only a concern of this biennial but also, more generally, a framework for critical discourse at present. Negatively received as it was, Roger Buerger and Ruth Noack's Documenta 12 in 2007, which asked "Is modernity our antiquity?" seemed to anticipate this: That query, with its explicitly archaeological overtones, proposed the modern as an ideological strata underpinning current practice and demanding excavation, its artifacts imbued with the spectral quality of a lost civilization. Well-informed portions of the current debate around such issues are served up in Bonami and Carrion-Murayari's essay. They propose the ongoing reanimations of modernist strategies, abstraction in particular (for instance, the sewn-canvas geometries of Sarah Crowner, or Suzan Frecon's meticulous yet sensual investigations of painting's first principles), in terms of a dialectical tension: They see this impulse on the one hand as signifying a broad trend toward artistic introspection (an effort to forge a "modernity of the self" or a "personal modernism") and on the other as evidence of a desire to unlock anew the political valence of aesthetic positions (e.g., "an embrace of the void as a model for an open society"). At the same time, the coyness of the title's indisputable historicity acknowledges the deconstruction of the notion of "contemporary art" that has recently occupied critics (most overtly in Terry Smith's 2009 book on this theme, with its exasperated-sounding title, *What Is Contemporary Art?* [see page 73]). The catalogue's list of every artist in every Whitney Biennial since 1932—along with a satellite exhibition, "Collecting Biennials," highlighting the fallible nature of efforts to anticipate which artists will enter the canon—further emphasizes the mutable and always already belated nature of "the contemporary."

But however elegantly the curators take up these problematics, and even if they in many cases press the right buttons to activate them in the show, it is hard to rid oneself of the impression that "2010" mainly entertains a mimetic relationship to such discussions. The theme of politics, for example, is administrated in

homeopathic doses. The curators' repeated references to collectivism—that anathema of the American mind—are immediately tempered by reaffirmations of artistic individualism. Commensurately, the exhibition toggles back and forth between the hermetic (Charles Ray's brightly inked flowers, beautiful hothouse blooms therapeutically disconnected from anything beyond the edge of the paper) and the communal (Rashaad Newsome's collaborative work with denizens of New York's voguing subculture).

The curators further state that the Obama campaign's activist slogan "Yes we can" has become the "Yes I can" of the contemporary artist, a mantra supposedly referring to the personal undertaking of every artist to "conquer something bigger than life." Such enthusiastic statements are too easy on the ears to prompt insight. After all, there is no such thing as bigger than life. Several works in "2010" do go further, inquiring what today requires a precise—verbal or material—formulation through artistic practice. The force of "Yes I can" lies in such inquiries, in the construal of "Yes I can" as a call to perform an exercise of the mind—that is, to explore how thought happens, and how in thinking we are able to develop new political forms, big or small. Put differently, the future used to depend on action; now it depends on thinking. In previous historical moments, avant-gardes called for action, but today's cultural condition requires a reflection on the elasticity of our logics and on the possibility that art and culture may provide different syntheses of the sensible, opening up our interpretation of the real. In order to escape sameness, we need bold imaginations.

All that said, what the show itself has to offer is in many respects above biennial average. Thanks in part to the curators' decision to include only about fifty artists, the installation creates a clear sense of space and an awareness of the building as site—not only of the present biennial but also of its past and future installments. No anxious hierarchies—in terms of media, or of varying ways of understanding art, or of art's proper relation to politics—have been imposed. By contrast, hierarchy of

This page, from left: Stephanie Sinclair, *Self-Immolation in Afghanistan: A Cry for Help*, 2005, one of nine color photographs, each 17 x 22". Kerry Tribe, *H.M.*, 2009, stills from a double projection of a film in 16 mm, 18 minutes 30 seconds. Opposite page, from left: Babette Mangolte, *How to Look*, 1978/2009, vintage photographs, vintage photo playing cards, 16-mm film, Blu-ray projection. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2010. Photo: Carolina A. Miranda. Roland Flexner, *Untitled*, 2008–2009, one of thirty sumi-ink-on-paper drawings, each 5½ x 7".



one kind or another wouldn't have been a bad idea in the case of the political positions on offer. The flow of works is punctuated by uncomfortable interludes of photographic journalism; both Nina Berman's *Marine Wedding*, 2006/2008, depicting a severely disfigured US soldier, and Stephanie Sinclair's *Self-Immolation in Afghanistan: A Cry for Help*, 2005, documenting desperate suicide attempts among Afghan women, deal with controversial and unshakably "real world" subject matter. The inclusion of these photographs is reminiscent of the 1993 Whitney

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Biennial's presentation of George Holliday's 1991 videotape of the Rodney King beating, but whereas the latter was an intervention that laconically upset any harmonious understanding of America, Berman's and Sinclair's works come across in the art context as apolitical humanist appeals to empathy with everyday tragedies that may reaffirm existing consensus. The empathy comes easily, unlike answers to the larger questions of why US soldiers are in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These photojournalistic dramas coexist with works that address the political in entirely different ways. Ania Soliman's *NATURAL OBJECT RANT: The Pineapple ("R")*, 2007–2009, for example, presents research on the pineapple as a study of the state of postcolonial dependence economies. In key with the exhibition's fleeting interest in the theatrical and the choreographic (e.g., Emily Roysdon's intriguingly oblique photographic performance scores), it is perhaps Sharon Hayes who gives the political, and its troubled but dynamic relationship to art, its most sophisticated treatment. Unfolding on several screens inside a makeshift wooden construction, her

Parole, 2010, is a multilayered story of love and language that leaps effortlessly between public and private desires and conceptual plateaus. Investigating public speech's relationship to both subjective investment and larger historical currents, Hayes steers clear of easy equations between agency and politics. Both Brecht and Godard abide in *Parole*'s interrupted narrative and its self-reflexive filmic tropes, but—or exactly because of this—the work possesses the force of a battle cry while it lingers like a lover's words.

Kerry Tribe's *H. M.*, 2009, a double-channel 16-mm film installation, presents us with the case of an epileptic patient who underwent experimental surgery in the 1950s. Instead of being cured, the man became severely amnesiac. Departing from the medical case history, *H. M.* becomes an allegorical space for reflection on the socio-cultural climate of the cold war (the end of which was infamously celebrated as "the end of history"—a loss of the present as much as a culmination of the past?), as well as a metahistorical narrative revolving around the power of mimesis. To lose one's memory is to lose not only the faculty of recalling information but the very capacity to imitate and hence to represent. In other words, mimesis is the nature that culture uses to create a second nature; it is history, since without a single stable representation of the present, the past would be impossible to grasp.

Take the camera, for example, a mimetic machine. In Babette Mangolte's impressive *How to Look*, 1978/2009, a remake of her first museum installation in 1978, portrait photography becomes a pretext for the documentation of the photographic act itself. The work (which revolves around a grid of photographs depicting the artist's friends and urban buildings) is a staging of the dynamics between viewer, photographer, camera, subject, and space, but one that seems to suggest a more polysemous and formally curious investigation than the Lacanian drama of misrecognition and disappointed desire that has informed so much theorization of the gaze. *How to Look* is an image pedagogy that brings to life our own eye-bodies, as well as a New York City of the late 1970s.

Art can be a great laboratory for understanding relations that are based not in identification or recognition but in new encounters and compositions. The strange drawings of Roland Flexner produce breaches through which such encounters and compositions may be accessed. By floating, washing, and blowing ink on paper, the artist produces drawings in which marbled effects define phantasmagorical spaces; one can discern fligree topographies or the faces of benign monsters looming out of black rain. Reminiscent of Japanese ink-drawing techniques (which he has studied) and the work of nineteenth-century Norwegian painter Peder Balke, Flexner's work spins off from a history of gestural proto-abstraction and reconnects it, in an unexpectedly material manner, to the notion of ephemerality and mortality implicit in the early-modern vanitas motif: Each of his works indexes the single, fleeting moment of possibility in which the ink is applied to its support.

As Mikhail Bulgakov wrote, "Freshness has only one grade—the first, also the last." A biennial has gone a long way when it succeeds in producing this alpha and omega. But one must acknowledge that freshness is a force that dies when it is born, and hence cannot be relied on to transport us into the future. Bonami and Carrion-Murayari—via their preemptive self-criticism and their casting of "2010" as one necessarily imperfect entry in a long history of attempts to capture the contemporary—concede this. As suggested by its inclusion of artists like those mentioned above—each in a different way performing the kind of active thinking that seems essential for art today—"2010" is aware of the need for critique that is not Manichaeian. Even if it doesn't articulate this awareness particularly well, the current edition of the Whitney Biennial makes an effort to conceive its task differently, to surpass the mandate of the survey show, and to locate emancipatory energies in culture—energies that will perhaps contribute to the development of a productive script for the future. □

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