

Echoes**Jens Hoffmann****Institutional Certainty and Curatorial Ambiguity: The Whitney Biennial****Abstract**

The rise of more critical and radical political debates has made museums intensely risk-averse such that self-regulation, self-censorship, and most importantly pure self-preservation have become the foundations of museum operations. Whereas the 1990s and early 2000s were broadly seen as a period of bold, critical, and unflinching curatorial undertakings, especially in the context of biennials, the last decade has witnessed clear shifts toward benign, almost anodyne programming for fear of being perceived as offensive or insensitive.

This essay considers the Whitney Biennial as a case study, tracing an arc from the lauded 1993 edition to the projected 2022 edition, which may be curated entirely by algorithm so as to please the broadest possible swath of the public. Stops along the way consider various controversies that have befallen the biennial despite its efforts otherwise: Donelle Woolford in 2014, Dana Schutz in 2017, and Warren B. Kanders in 2019.

Keywords

Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, Algorithm, Curating, Donelle Woolford, Joe Scanlan, Dana Schutz, Warren B. Kanders

OBOEJournal On Biennials
and Other Exhibitions

ISSN 2724-086X

obojournal.com**Published online:** August 15, 2021**To cite this article:** Jens Hoffmann, "Institutional Certainty and Curatorial Ambiguity: The Whitney Biennial", *OBOE Journal* 2, no. 1 (2021): 71-75.**To link to this article:** [10.25432/2724-086X/2.1.0005](https://doi.org/10.25432/2724-086X/2.1.0005)

Echoes

Institutional Certainty and Curatorial Ambiguity: The Whitney Biennial

Jens Hoffmann

When the German sociologist Max Weber published his noted essay “Bureaucracy” in his 1921 book *Economy and Society*, he was proposing to make working conditions more humane and efficient. In Weber’s eyes, bureaucracy would bring order to the workplace by setting rules and norms toward a more intelligent, organised, and rational workflow. But of course bureaucracy, as we popularly invoke the term today, is about the exact opposite: unnecessary regulations that are obstacles to efficiency, let alone imagination, creativity, inventiveness, or ingenuity. Bureaucracy is perhaps the last thing we would imagine encountering in conversations around art and exhibitions. Yet over the last decade, we have seen a widespread institutionalisation of the art world, in particular in museums, resulting in the supreme reign of red tape.

But why? In great part because museums have become risk-averse, indeed frightened, by the spectre of radical political debate, and thus ultimately concerned with projecting a progressive and thoughtful public image that directly translates to how much money can be raised. As a result, self-regulation, generally in the form of self-censorship, is the name of the game. Negative publicity is the last thing any museum wants, yet negative reviews of exhibitions or programmes are hardly what I have in mind here. The danger rather revolves around whether an artwork, an exhibition, an idea, or an acquisition could cause offense to anyone.

I would assert that it is only in moments when we risk offense—when an artist or curator dares to push buttons about established opinions or popular beliefs—that actual dialogue ensues. Yet the internal politics of museums have become minefields in which no buttons may be pushed, ever. Pleasing administrators and bureaucrats, especially those who control the exhibition budgets, is a relentless truth of every museum curator’s existence. Although timid museum programming has been with us for a very long time, particularly in the United States, where museums fear being too experimental and thereby losing patrons, donors or sponsors, now they must constantly dread being “canceled” and losing their public.

Whereas the 1990s and early 2000s were broadly seen as a period of bold, critical, and unflinching curatorial undertakings, especially in the context of biennials, the last decade has witnessed clear shifts toward benign, safe, almost anodyne programming for fear of being perceived as offensive or “toxic.” Institutions now prioritise control and certainty over every aspect of their public offerings, which of course stands in total contrast to the idea of artistic, curatorial, and creative experimentation and ambiguity. Large museums work with focus groups to glean

information on what people want to see—or not see. Some are even considering using algorithms to curate new exhibitions based on visitor feedback from previous shows. The 2022 Whitney Biennial is toying with the idea of being entirely curated like this. Following inputs such as the social background, age, race, gender, preferred medium, and home base of previously exhibited artists, a curatorial algorithm would be developed to produce the “perfect” biennial. It would even formulate the show’s installation. Nothing would be left to chance.

There was a time when participating in or organising the Whitney Biennial was a career highlight for any artist or curator. The invitation only came to those artists who had demonstrated consistent relevance and excellence in their field, and had made remarkable contributions to art’s discourse over an extended period. The chosen curators were likewise firmly established and highly respected: Louise Neri, Francesco Bonami, Donna de Salvo, Larry Rinder, Thelma Golden, Lisa Phillips, Chrissie Iles, Elisabeth Sussman, to name a few. And while this already sounds like a relatively safe and conservative formula, the recent Whitney Biennials have taken a very different tack that is far more calculated and controllable.

The 2014 Whitney Biennial (the last one to be presented in the iconic Breuer building on Madison Avenue) [figs. 1 and 2] was a significant turning point from the traditional format of the previous decades in that the curatorial team was comprised exclusively of outside curators: Stuart Comer, Anthony Elms and artist Michelle Grabner. And indeed, the resulting exhibition was very disjointed; each curator was given one floor of the museum, which effectively resulted in three mini-biennials. While individually solid exhibitions, one had to wonder if the decision about three smaller group shows was intentional. It effectively turned the focus onto the individual shows and their respective curatorial ideas, and consequently the presented art felt deemphasised.

fig. 1
Whitney Museum till 2014
designed by Marcel Breuer
(1964-66).

fig. 2
Current Whitney Museum
designed by Renzo Piano
(2015).



Except, of course, for the infamous situation with black female artist Donelle Woolford, which overshadowed the entire event. According to the Whitney press release, she was born in 1977 in Conyers, Georgia, and part of the section overseen by Grabner. As it turned out during the show’s run, Woolford was the invention of Joe Scanlan, a white male artist born in 1961 in Columbus, Ohio. Woolford had publicly appeared as an artist as early as 2005 and was incarnated by black actors coached by Scanlan for her various public speaking engagements. It is hard to say if the Whitney knew going in about Scanlan being behind the Woolford character. Still, one could argue that this particular work was a perfect match for what the exhibition set out to do, which, in the words of the curators, was to present the “profoundly diverse and hybrid cultural identity of America today”.¹

1

Stuart Comer, Anthony Elms and Michelle Grabner (eds.), *Whitney Biennial 2014* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 2014)

When the news came out, a relatively mild scandal (by today's standards of outrage) erupted. The YAMS collective, participating in the exhibition under the name *HowDoYouSayYamInAfrican*, dropped out of the show, calling Scanlan's work "conceptual rape" given that Woolford's art centred on "a troubled model of the black body".² For better or worse, Scanlan had hit a nerve. He brought in ambiguity and criticality by having his invited persona participate in an exhibition that was anything but diverse—less than a third of the featured artists were women, and only nine out of 109 were black (and that's counting Woolford).

The Scanlan commotion barely made it beyond the borders of the art world, yet it was enough for the institution to change gears thereafter. The idea of curatorial teams had a history in the Whitney Biennial, but in iterations before 2014, each show was spearheaded by one senior curator acting as artistic director, heading up a group of co- or assistant curators. From here on, the exhibitions would be officially curated by a collective team of emerging curators, with the upper curatorial level at the museum only overseeing and, in some cases, pulling strings in the background. Another remarkable shift at this moment was that the Whitney Biennial was now marketed as a discovery exhibition of young artists, lesser-known older artists, or artists belonging to marginalised or underrepresented groups. No longer could it be regarded as a showcase of proven artists (read: older white men).

On paper, all these changes seemed a noble idea: give a group of young curators the chance to organise a prestigious exhibition and have them pick from among the most talented younger or otherwise unknown artists in the United States, while at the same time directly answering an ever-increasing demand for the latest and freshest in the art world, something that the New Museum Triennial and PSI's (MoMA's) Greater New York were already doing. But the reasons behind the changes were perhaps less magnanimous. And dispute, controversy, and scandal would continue to dog the Whitney Biennial.

Under the earlier model, in which the curatorial team was a mix of in-house and outside curators, it was unlikely that any of them would have previously worked together. Tensions would build, threatening the coherence of the exhibition, but in the end, the clear hierarchy among them would prevail. One could argue that the museum created these situations on purpose, as they weakened the outside curators' position and thus served to make them more controllable. A group of young thirtysomething curators with very little name recognition and no curatorial CV to speak of can be herded much more readily than a seasoned curator such as Francesco Bonami, for example, who organised the 2010 edition with the help of in-house assistant curator Gary Carrion-Murayari.

Trustees, who are usually also collectors, love discovery shows. They absolutely relish being in the know, bragging about the latest young artists they discovered at some small Lower East Side gallery, where the work is still selling for low prices. Discovery exhibitions are interesting typologies. The general public have no idea about the difference between, say, Kerry James Marshall (established) versus Heji Shin (emerging), so they will come either way. The museum can claim they have their finger on the art world's pulse, which right now is political art dealing with racial or gender equality. The younger artists, most of them from New York or Los Angeles, bring with them a whole new audience of friends, other young artists, and so on, who might otherwise view the Whitney Biennial as old-fashioned. (An entirely different problem facing the biennial is that it feels compelled to include specific prominent names as evidence that the curators are up to date on the latest and greatest in contemporary art while at the same time perpetually fretting that there might not be enough high-calibre artists and artworks out there, even in a country as large as the United States, to mount a significant show every two years.

This may at some point become true if the curators refuse to expand their purview beyond the usual art hot spots).

2

Comer, Elms and Grabner, *Whitney Biennial 2014*.

There is always the chance that a few of the emerging artists in a discovery exhibition will later make it big, and the institution can then claim to have seen their talent all along and boast about its foresight in supporting them. Let's not forget that *When Attitudes Become Form* and *Primary Structures* were essentially discovery shows. The now-household names who participated in these exhibitions in 1969 and 1965, respectively, were hardly such at the time. And they became canonical exhibitions, which is not something one can say about any of the Whitney Biennials—apart from the 1993 edition, and in that case it wasn't only because of the artists it showed but thanks to the political position it took during that decade's wave of identity politics.

Starting in 2014, it seemed as if the position and status of the Whitney Biennial was suddenly reevaluated. Fees for the outside curators were cut, the budget for the overall exhibition was trimmed, and the publication became a small paperback with scant exciting information, maybe one step up from an art fair catalogue. Younger curators cannot make budget demands in the same way that someone who curated the Venice Biennale or documenta can. In addition, should something go wrong PR-wise, or if the show is a critical flop, the museum can blame the younger curators' lack of experience. The failure or scandal won't haunt the inside curatorial leadership, which stays publicly an arm's length away, and don't get their hands dirty.

What I've outlined here is based on my own observations combined with conversations with some of the younger Whitney Biennial curators and the artists participating in these shows. It is also grounded in ongoing discussions with senior curators at the Whitney, whom I know well and with whom I've had long, albeit civil and friendly, arguments about institutional programming.

It is astounding to me that these are the realities around which museums programme these days, and that similar conditions exist in one form or another for most museums in the United States. What looks good in public and will create as few waves as possible is the favoured path. There is minimal interest in honest discourse or education. Most museums are primarily concerned with just existing, staying alive, not stimulating or encouraging conversation. It almost doesn't matter what is actually in the galleries.

Whereas the Scanlan-Woolford scandal was relatively corralled, the 2017 Whitney Biennial made actual mainstream news thanks to several controversies over political sensibilities, the most far-reaching and profound of which swirled around the inclusion of Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016) [fig. 3], a painted portrait of Emmett Till, a black fourteen-year-old boy lynched in Mississippi in 1955. Some artists and a large group of activists wanted it removed from the show.

fig. 3
Dana Schutz, *Open Casket*,
2016. 99 × 130 cm. Collection
of the artist. Courtesy: Whitney
Museum of American Art, New
York.



Then in 2019 another scandal hit: Whitney board member Warren B. Kanders, who has since left the board, faced enormous criticism for his leadership of a company that manufactures police and military gear, including tear gas used against migrants along the Mexico-US border.

For the last twenty years, the Whitney Biennial has by and large been promoted as an overview exhibition, a typology with a simple objective: to offer a summary of the latest developments in contemporary art in the United States. The museum typically adds a few other lines about political concerns, or reevaluations of the self vis-à-vis society. Long gone are the days of the 1993 biennial, a firebomb of artist-driven criticality (just think of Daniel Joseph Martinez [fig. 4], Cheryl Dunye, Renée Green, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Coco Fusco, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, and many more at that time unknown and emerging artists), which makes the Kanders controversy particularly interesting here. Only one artist, Michael Rakowitz, actually withdrew from the exhibition because his political convictions did not align with the presence of a weapons manufacturer on the museum board; he called Kanders's involvement with the Whitney "toxic philanthropy". (There is undoubtedly a whole book waiting to be written about toxic philanthropy, since no museum in the United States lacks skeletons in the closet regarding how and by whom it is funded).³ All the other artists, including the curators, stayed on but did pen a letter of protest that most of them signed. If capitalism makes the world go 'round, hypocrisy greases its wheels. Everyone seems so accustomed to having their cake while eating it too.

fig. 4
Daniel Joseph Martinez,
*Museum Tags: Second
Movement (overture) or
Overture con claque – Overture
with Hired Members*, 1993. Paint
and enamel on metal. 30,48
x 38,1 cm. Courtesy: Whitney
Biennial, Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York.



One always hopes that exhibitions will be more than the sum of their parts—that something collectively significant will emerge from the dialogue between the artists' works and the curatorial aims. This has sadly not been the case with the Whitney Biennial lately, and the prospects for 2022 do not promise anything different.