

An Interpretation of "The Composition of Self and Personal Space in a Turbulent Society" - Looking Back at the 2017 Whitney Biennale

Wang Lin^{1,*}

¹ Luoyang Vocational College of Science and Technology

* Corresponding Author: 68657667@qq.com

Abstract: Whitney Biennale, as a private gallery, which aims to promote American avantgarde art, becomes the vane of American contemporary trendy art, and the exercise ground of American artists entering the world stage. The Biennale is the highest level exhibition activity of international contemporary visual art, and it is an important window to launch the new artistic achievements of all countries in the world. Through a detailed introduction to the history and inheritance of Whitney Biennale, combined with the analysis of the artistic style, characteristics and achievements of Whitney Biennale from a new modern perspective, this paper puts forward its own unique views and the prospect of the future development trend, so as to improve understanding of art and promote the development of international art.

Keywords: Curation; Self; The sound of art; Personal space.

Tob Regul Sci.™ 2022; 8(1): 602-614

DOI: doi.org/10.18001/TRS.8.1.53

The seventy-eighth Whitney Biennale was held at the new Whitney Museum in downtown New York from March 17 to June 11, 2017. It was the first exhibition since Whitney gallery moved to its new site. The 78th Whitney Biennale was postponed by a year due to the replacement of the Whitney Museum of American Art. The new site of the Whitney Museum of American Art, with an area of 18200 square feet, is the largest of the Whitney Biennale. The Biennale is attended by 63 artists and art groups from more than 40 cities, including 11 from the United States, 7 from outside the United States and 41 from New York or California.

1.The development of Whitney Biennale

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by Ms. Gertrude Whitney, and opened the following year on West eighth Street, Greenwich Village. It is located in downtown New York and has branches in Equitable Building and other places. From the 20th to the 21st century, more than 21000 works have been created by more than 3000 artists in the United States, as well as well-received paintings, sculptures, photography, installations, architecture, performances, experimental films, videos and new

media exhibitions. It is regarded as the windward of contemporary American trendy art, and the exercise ground of American artists marching into the world stage. It shows the latest development trend of American contemporary art.

In an era of emerging cultures and changing political climate, it is the core of the Biennale that artists show the complex and changeable world by using a variety of media and multiple artistic languages.

In 2010, in the face of the economic downturn, the Biennale was attended by only 55 artists, smaller than in the past. In 2008, it was 81, compared with 100 in 2006. By 2012, Whitney Biennale was curated by Francesco Bonami borned in Italy, with artists including Lorraine O'Grady, a well-known conceptual artist, and Tam Tran, a 23-year-old photographer. Its exhibits dabble in a wider range, participate in more people, and have more and more influence in the international community. The Whitney Biennale, with the theme of "the composition of self and personal space in a turbulent society", brings together 63 artists, including Leslie Bluhm, Raymond J. Leary and Brooke Garber Neidich, to show the development of American avantgarde art and to push American contemporary art to the public. At the same time, it also provides a good platform for promoting world art exchange. So that art blooms a unique charm in the collision reorganization, application, blending.

2. Artistic inheritance

The 76th Biennale in 2012 is known as "different flavors." Curators broke the oppression, boredom and lack of taste brought about by conventional exhibitions by making full use of the spatial structure of museums to display emerging art forms such as behavioral art and movies. As *Devotion Study* □□ *The American Dancer*, the British choreographer Sarah Michelson shows us the established display space has been rearranged in cooperation with a group of professional and unprofessional dancers who love art. Sarah Michelson asked all the models to wear masks and travel through the scenery of the city, showing that people live in the city like walking corpses, and that no one can understand what life really means. So Sarah is thinking about it in this detached and worldly way.



Sarah Michelson, *Devotion Study-The American Dancer*

"Different flavors" is not only a radical creation of new art forms, but also a breakthrough in the choice of traditional paintings. On the second floor of the exhibition is a dreamy semi-abstract painting from Forrest Bess, (1911-77), a fisherman from the Gulf Coast who often draws his dreams and often

wants to show his female side by turning himself into a hermaphrodite. And this exhibition he finally realized his dream. His work *The Painter's Table* is his daily life. The table is disorganized, but full of warm life flavor, from the color and the overall composition and other aspects can be seen in the female thinking. Paintings such as those intended to promote same-sex art groups are no longer spurned, and as people become more open-minded, there are more and more acceptable types of art.



Forrest Bess, *The Painter's Table*, 1935

At the 77th Whitney Biennale, held in 2014, what the three curators had in common was to broaden the choice of exhibitors and make the exhibition more diverse, not to limit their vision to young artists and artists with American experience, and older or female artists who could also be listed as exhibitors. Sheila Hicks is an 80-year-old female fiber artist. Sheila attended, using colored cotton thread to create a large fiber device called *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column*. The colored rope hangs from the roof to the floor, in sharp contrast to the cold gray building full of Bauhaus style, which in turn produces a wonderful aesthetic feeling. And the very affinity of the selection of materials makes people can not help touching and playing, which also coincides with Sheila's original creative intention "to think imaginatively by the works of art."



Sheila Hicks, *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column*, 2013

Judging from the development process of the 2012 and 2014 Whitney Biennale, art is the release of people's deep feelings. Whether *Devotion Study -- The American Dancer*, *The Painter's Table* or *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column* is the expression of artists their own life experience and social phenomena. And they express in their familiar art forms. So art should be diverse. This exhibition has also been undertaken at this point. Although these years' exhibitions have been criticized by different voices, they have not become a chaos and lost the direction of progress. On the contrary, because of these disharmonious voices, the Biennale is more in line with the call of the times. The success of a exhibition mostly relies on the curator. These two exhibitions of Whitney Biennale have made great efforts in this respect, which can be said to have been improved in accordance with the shortcomings of previous years. Although the selection of exhibitors is becoming more and more extensive, the theme has a lot in common. People can't help but look forward to the Biennale this time which has a veil of mystery.

3. New perspectives

The exhibition has passed on to the previous exhibitions in many aspects, such as the content and main purpose of the exhibition, in order to tap the artistic potential stocks and find new art forms. Scott Rothopf, Whitney's chief curator and project chief executive, said: "I hope to use a new concept to drive the curatorial exhibition.....I hope to bring some sense of adventure to this biennial exhibition. " The age of the two young curators also demonstrate that the 2017 Biennale will have a "fresh" perspective.

In the context of the US presidential election and Brexit, two young curators set a theme for the Whitney Biennale from a unique new perspective: the composition of self and personal space in a turbulent society. "This is a special moment when race relations intensify, economic forms are out of balance and the political situation is extreme," wrote the brochure of the Biennale in an ambiguous tone specific to the serious art exhibition. "Many of the exhibitors force us to think about the impact of these realistic factors on personal and group perceptions." Political Instability has inevitably penetrated into artistic creation, inequality, class, race, politics, body. These topics have sprung up one after another in the exhibition, but the Biennale is more about scrutinizing society than focus only on politics itself. Curators also strive to create the exhibition hall into a pluralistic, personal and multi-angle space, as well as a space to promote dialogue, exchange and artistic development.

The curator of the Whitney Biennale, Christopher Y. Lew and the independent curators Mia Locks used to work for MoMA PS1. Christopher Y. Lew is currently deputy curator of the Whitney Museum and host of Whitney's project to support young artists, who is planning the Rachel Rose and Jared Madere solo exhibitions. Mia Locks is currently an assistant curator at the MoMA PS1 Pavilion. Since 2013, she has helped organize the *Greater New York* exhibition of MoMA PS1 in 2015, as assistant curator of MoMA PS1 at the Museum of Modern Art. She has also planned some solo exhibitions by Korean artist IM Heung-soon and American artist Math Bass, and co-planned the 2012 Gatti Art Foundation's Los Angeles Queer Art theme exhibition.

The archival materials of the 2012 Gatti Art Foundation's Los Angeles Queer Art theme exhibition were selected by curators from a national gay archives, attesting to the achievements and efforts of artists and Los Angeles gay activists in document archiving. The art works on display, as well as mayflies (letters, newsletters, snapshot, clothing, and the first gay publication, film, magazine) in the United States, were selected from the country's largest LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) materials. The result is that we look at queer activities and community building from an interesting, fascinating and informative perspective, highlighting not only the holding of archives, but also the dialogue between artists and scholars in the future.

Whitney Biennale has been criticized for its low proportion of women and people of color among exhibitors and for paying too much attention to foreign artists in the United States and neglecting local artists in the United States. This exhibition breaks through the limitations of the past, balances the proportion of men and women participating in the exhibition, and pays more attention to the works of art of native American artists. Curators bring us a new artistic experience with different perspectives and reasonable spatial layout.

Based on the current state of art development in the United States, the Biennale is committed to assessing the current art situation in the United States, exploring the formation of self and the role of the individual in this turbulent global society. Artists express their own voice through a variety of media and languages, showing the real state of American artists, enhancing the sense of regional identity, and also conveying the current widespread feelings of Americans: sympathy, action, anger and reflection. This exhibition will become an iconic memory of this era in the United States.

4. The voices of art

Most of the themes of this work cover many sensitive issues, such as race, violence, immigration, economy, women's rights, climate change, social contradictions and so on. The highly political posture also makes it impossible to associate the recent US presidential election with it, and we can say that this Biennale is the last Whitney show of the Obama era, at least a cross-border exhibition linking two times. Many exhibitors also respond directly or mediately to the current political pattern in their works.



Deana Lawson, *Nicole*, 2016

Courtesy the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery

As far as Deana Lawson is concerned, her narration, examination and discussion of "the Other", "Otherness", and "Othering" are from the identity of the African-American to which she belongs. She attaches great importance to material culture and family space in Diane. In Lawson's works, touch is used as a way of expressing intimacy, linking vision to photography. The photographers often appeared in their living environment in an extremely private manner, showing a hug for themselves and love with each other. And most of the subjects were strangers she met randomly in public. After meticulous arrangement and depiction, the people in the image echo with the things, and the subtle cultural symbols are revealed in all kinds of details. The subject often appears in the picture with the posture of facing the lens, showing bright and sharp eyes, wonderful posture or the strength of the muscles, which is the "visual proof" of each of her subjects' lives. This kind of active gaze actually converts the passive posture of the subject in the traditional concept into a kind of "touch" of the same viewer. At the same time, her arrangement of the subject also subverts the prejudice against the black image in the traditional American culture, and gives the black identity, which was transformed by the other, a kind of human dignity while retaining its cultural characteristics.



Tommy Hartung, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*,
Courtesy the artist and On Stellar Rays, New York.

Compared with Lawson's euphemism, another artist, Tommy Hartung's ultra-high-definition short film, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, is much more direct. Tommy used freeze animation and misappropriation of online material to build a special montage that uses the cultural ideology shown in removable pictures and videos to question the racial discrimination, the prevalence of violence and the struggle for power in the current society.

The film begins with a YouTube video warning people to stay away from witchcraft, and after babbling to warn people not to touch Solomon's little keys (calling for the devil's dark magic), the narrator begins to sigh at the suffering of the world. Using a piece of music, the passionate speech and the nature of human nature are stacked in a kaleidoscope animation, in which the distorted black image of the face, which is constantly flashing as a result of violent injury, and makes the viewer feel deeply panicked and uncomfortable. In the second half of the film, Tommy Harton make the speech of Leo Muhammad, a member of Nation of Islam, as a narrator. When he repeatedly condemned the oppression and dehumanization of blacks in white-dominated society, "when did I become a person?", his exuberant speech coincided with the fixed animation made by Harton, which included strange devices and image projection, made the viewer feel worried and uneasy at the same time.

Dana·Schutz, *Open Casket*, 2016
Oil on canvas, 99cm x 135cm

Most of Dana·Schutz's works combine a variety of references, including daily, real, imaginary and painting rhetoric borrowed from the history of art, and are good at redeploing the whole picture with inflated energy and strong colors. In this exhibition, *Open Casket*, a controversial work, was created by

Schutz based on Emmett Till, an African-American prototype in 2016. Till was lynched in Mississippi when he was 14 years old on false charges of flirting with a white woman. And the picture in the work comes from some pictures from Till's open casket funeral. Schutz's paintings reflect the goodness of human nature, with a strong expressionist strokes, surprisingly sweet and saturated colors, and ironic celebrities and politicians from the real world. This writing is magnified by fragility or violence, and these characters shape these imaginary worlds. Emotional confusion and perceptual confusion are strongly combined with seemingly incompatible experiences.

The work was protested against its misappropriation of black bodies by Parker Bright and Hannah Black and some other artists, arguing that the problem is comparable to the killings of African-Americans by police and domestic terrorists in the United States in the past few years. By contrast, *Open Casket* is not particularly good in Schutz's overall artistic creation, nor has it established any status, but it has still become a bright spot at the Whitney Biennale.



Dana·Schutz, *Fight in Elevator*, 2015

Oil on canvas, 243.8cm x 228.6cm

Dana·Schutz's other two paintings at the Biennale, although less commented on than *Open Casket*, may be better works. One of them, *Elevator*, created in 2017, is a large oil painting hanging outside the largest elevator at the Whitney Museum. It describes a dizzying moment, with an angry color and a huge brush, when there is a crowded elevator full of scuffling, pushing, spinning, screaming for a place. The crowd was caught up in noisy clashes, with only shoes pinning other people's faces and severed limbs hovering over the top and bottom. But as long as you look at the picture for a long time, you will find that, unlike the crowded crowd, there is a person sitting safely on the porcelain-white toilet in the upper-left corner of the picture, dismissing the dispute behind him. The truth is, as long as you stay in such a space, no matter what role you play, you will be direct or indirect, active or passive involved in this conflict or war, in exchange for a breathing space and the space on which you can live, which reflects a state of anxiety and panic.

The work, (which is similar in size to the museum's large freight elevators), worked over time because movements and posture were suspended. Like a cut-off historical painting, an epic scene can be seen between the two doors, which may or may be open. In a chaotic, material conflict experience, people fall into the critical point of hypnosis. In this public and private, unfamiliar and intimate relationship, we must consider our positions or roles in chaos. Today's American culture is a lot like that elevator, constantly running with everyone huddling together, but no one is sure if the elevator will install all of them.



Rafa Esparza, *Figure Ground: Beyond the White Field*, 2017

Exhibited at the Whitney Biennale

Most of the works on display at the Biennale use different creative media that fit the current theme and exhibition concept. Rafa Esparza's exhibition, *Figure Ground: Beyond the White Field*, is lined with irregular black bricks in front of the walls, showing a gesture that mimics American colonization, and bricks are handmade of clay, horse dung, hay and water from the Los Angeles River. Compared with the regular stone bricks on the wall, it looks fragile.

For thousands of years, survival of the fittest has been an everlasting law of nature. As has been the case in history, colonialism imposed European buildings on the red land from east to west. As shown in the photo, the "accomplice" of the architect, or colonist, is the locals in the clothes of the architect and the young people who are willing to accept new things and blindly chase after foreign cultures. Esparza turned the land from Los Angeles into bricks and shipped them to New York. It is hoped that under the environment of increasing cultural and economic globalization, people can arouse people's attention to local culture and arouse the resonance of society. Dorian Ulises López Macias's photography, *The Mexican*, also appeared in the exhibition as part of the Rafa Esparza installation. In a different form, it shows the influence of colonization on local culture and economy.

The exhibition pays positive attention to racial, violence, economic and other issues, and sends out a cross-examination of what the contemporary United States is. There are also some artists from the expression of the works to innovate, with machinery, sculpture, cloth art and even illusory space to interpret the theme of the exhibition.



Jon Kessler (b. 1957), *Exodus*, 2016.

205.7cm x 119.4cm x 167.6 cm.

Jon Kessler was born in 1957 and specializes in the production of mechanical works. The work *Exodus*, completed in 2016, is another new work by Jon Kessler after *Isolated Masses(For Peace)* and *The World is the Cuckoo's Clock*.

Through simple transmission and clay model, he has created a miniature small world, where there are soldiers, old people, children, each of whom carry luggage and march tirelessly in front of them. Their eyes were firm, their gods were calm, and they had a strong and beautiful desire for the distance. But as a bystander, or as a controller outside the "disk world", it is clear that all the statues are spinning and repeating around the huge screen in the middle during the endless parade and migration. And if you look closely, you'll see that the power of the whole device comes from a huge inflatable iceberg, the loss of animal habits, the rise in sea level, and the polar bears who ride bicycles to power the entire device. All are torturing our hearts.

Sadly, neither natural disasters nor the Syrian refugee crisis has raised awareness of the coming survival crisis. Even if the effects of the climate change have placed a burden on millions of people in low-lying areas, they still choose to build coastal entertainment palaces and close their eyes in pursuit of luxury and intoxication.

Jon Kessler expresses his criticism and torture of society and human nature with his usual humor. In Caesar's words, it was "Madness that happened when no one saw it, but it was truthfully recorded and preserved by the monitor next to it."



Mary Helena Clark (b. 1983), still from *Delphi Falls*, 2016.

color, sound; 20 min. Courtesy the artist

Clark's film explores fictional space and hyperrealistic landscapes, showing elusive glances at the intersection of individuals and history by manipulating light and darkness, contours and movements. In the first few minutes of the video, the photos, video clips and sounds are combined with yaks, forests and characters, showing many incredible images through gorgeous colors and high contrast black and white. The yak standing upright in the lens of great elevation is appearing in the picture with vigilance and aggression, giving a sense of awe to nature and life. Clark makes use of the limitations of the camera angle test and recognition, which makes the routine of the film more complicated. With the continuous transformation of multiple optic angles, visual languages and sceneries in the film, the relationship between the audience and the theme and narrative author has been cut off. Segmented sound and image fragments, like an inaccessible and inevitable clue, take us into the rich and psychedelic visual effects created by the author.

Clark's works bring together a series of film styles and film practice, from psychology, geography to accurate and abstract observation, exploring the real and imaginary space. Her loose, and free-floating editing style, focusing on the rhythm of daily illusions, cleverly subverts the history of classical narrative films and shows an invisible media capabilities that cannot be ignored.

5. Thoughts and prospects

The 2017 Whitney Biennale focuses on the uncertainty, pain and division of the country, with exhibitors facing turbulent societies from an extremely sensitive perspective, and refining, transforming, consolidating and respreading it with artistic techniques. This exhibition not only allows us to enjoy the visual impact, but also arouses deep thinking about the individual, society and art. Turbulent society, racial discrimination, the gap between the rich and the poor and other seemingly very dark hints, but in the works of art can see the future expectations. In such a complex environment, art can maintain the true nature, and play the real effect of art, which is really touching. The most direct and critical artistic language is used to express the problems of race, economy, politics and war in the exhibition works. In fact, it is the yearning and expectation of freedom, equality, democracy and harmony. It is hoped that the voices of art will attract enough attention and lead to the formation of a positive outlook on life and

values.

The 2017 Whitney Biennale reveals a free, conflicted, more basic and simple atmosphere, which is not only reflected in the exhibitors, but also integrated into a reasonable spatial layout and a strong visual impact. The two curators bring the focus back to art itself in their own way, interpreting the composition of self and personal space in turbulent societies in the language of art. The historical accumulation of many years has made the exhibition pay more attention to listening to the voices of the exhibitors, rather than act blindly. In the face of doubts, it can be revised in time, so that the exhibition can be more integrated into the social environment. The future biennial exhibition may pay more attention to the integrated display. The curatorial planning is not limited to the layout of the exhibition works, but also take into account the overall situation, reasonable choice, race, gender, human nature, social and other factors, to carry out the overall planning. From the choice of rejuvenation of the general policy exhibitors and independent curators, it is revealed that the exhibition needs to be integrated into more fresh blood, conform to the trend of the times, and lead the exhibition to a new era.

We may not know what the trend of art will be in the future, but it is certain that with the development of science and technology, the form of expression of art will not only be in the existing way, but will be new art forms combined with emerging technologies, expressing in multidimensional space. In recent years, artists in recent exhibitions tend to pay more and more attention to the direct or mediate response to social phenomena, using artistic techniques to express their inner feelings. However, with the rapid replacement of the wave of art, the ability of accepting and appreciating the exhibitors is also gradually improving. So the sensitive and sharp works are no longer just the criticism of taste, but also lead to the reflection after the visual shock of the works. The rapid development of social network has not only changed people's way of life, but also had the opportunity for some artists to recreate works through the network, so that artists' works can be more vivid and lively, and the public can also have more and more direct contact with art, as well as the artistic literacy of the masses can be improved.

Nowadays, the society is numerous and complex, and the artistic environment tends to be pluralistic. Artistic creation should follow its own development direction, focus on the art itself, look at historical events from the aesthetic point of view, and examine whether art can speak for the times in today's society, and even in today's epidemic situation spread all over the world. The social environment is gradually clear, which provides more creative space for artistic creation and brings new blood to art. Artists will use the method of artistic innovation, multi-dimensional artistic language to show the relaxed pleasure of people's current life and the yearning for a better life in the future, as well as the passion for artistic creation.

Reference

- [1] Qian Manchu. (2006). *The Historical Changes of American Liberalism*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- [2] James C. Scott. (2004). *A National Perspective* (Wang Xiaoyi, translator; Hu Bo, proofreader). Beijing: Social Science Academic Press.
- [3] Zhang Shengbing, Xu Xiangyu, Ma Shuhua. (2006). *Summary of World Cultural Industry*. Kunming: Yunnan University Press.
- [4] James Halbron, Charles M. Gray. (2007). *The Economics of Art and Culture*. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
- [5] Dong Xiaochuan. (2006). *Introduction to American Culture*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- [6] Chen Lin. (2005). Whitney Biennale and American New York Art in 1990 s. *Art observation*, (2).
- [7] Qian Zhijian. (2010). The 75th Whitney Biennale. *Art Literature*, (2).
- [8] Liu Xi, Zeng Jiujuan. (2017). Whitney Biennale □ A Feast of Contemporary Art in the United States.

Contemporary artists, (8).

- [9] Wang Nan. (2017). Whitney Biennale 2017: The Apocalypse and Artistic Probe into the Turbulent Situation. *Contemporary Art*, (6).
- [10] Daniel Buren, Charles Eshe, Paul O'Neill, Mick Wilson. (2012). *Curating and the Educational Turn*,(1). Open Editions/De Appel Arts Centre.
- [11] Terry Barrett. (2011). *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages.
- [12] David Joselit. (2003). *American Art since 1945*. Thames & Hudson.