

*Whitney Biennial*

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2010

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# 2010



Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London

This catalogue was produced on the occasion of the Whitney Biennial, 2010, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, February 25–May 30, 2010.

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## WHITNEY

Whitney Museum  
of American Art  
945 Madison Avenue  
New York, NY 10021  
whitney.org

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**2008–1932**



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**2008 – 1932**

A viewer of recent Whitney Biennials would be hard-pressed to recognize many similarities to the Biennials that were organized during the founding of the Museum in the early 1930s. Today, biennials tend toward the spectacle, receive international press, and are the subject of speculation by collectors and the art market. At their best, biennials capture the zeitgeist of a period, introduce the work of new artists, and acquaint us with familiar artists. It is generally understood that the Whitney Biennial is not intended to provide a survey of contemporary American art—a field that is now so complex and so diverse that to do so would be an impossibility. It is also understood that curators cannot be fully impartial; the selection of artists will be tempered by their curatorial background, exposure, tastes, and predilections. The curators of this Biennial, Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari, would be the first to admit the above. However, the way in which they have conceptualized and shaped the exhibition acknowledges the Biennial's founding tenets.

The Whitney's first Biennial was held in 1932. At the time, the field of American art was dominated by conservative and insular invitational and academic exhibitions, which catered to members of the host organizations and were dominated by juries whose purpose was to award prizes to outstanding works by their artists. In the spirit of democratic realism, the Whitney countered this tradition by founding an exhibition open to a cross-section of progressive American artists working in a wide range of figurative and abstract styles and

practicing in different regions of the United States. The Museum's battle cry was "no juries, no prizes." This unique approach did not mean the Whitney was averse to recognizing artistic merit but rather that exhibitions should be more than "beauty contests." As Juliana Force, the Whitney's first director, said, they should provide "a depot where the public may see fine examples of American artistic production, in other words a forum for the presentation and examination of the diversity of American art." The first Biennial, for example, had works by 358 artists, an astonishing number considering the modest scale of the Museum's double townhouse facility on Eighth Street. Among the artists included were practitioners who bore a wide variety of artistic labels: Modernists like Arthur Dove, Impressionists like Childe Hassam, Social Realists like Ben Shahn, Realists like Edward Hopper, Expressionists like Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, Regionalists like Grant Wood, and Magic Realists like Peter Blume. In short, the curators—who appropriately remained in the shadows and whose names were not specified—cast a wide net as if to capture an objective record of American art at a moment in time. And in many ways, they did. While a large percentage of the artists' names are recognizable today, many others—such as Fiske Boyd, A. S. Baylinson, Ross Moffett, and Stanley Wood—are not, except to the specialist. The young Whitney, as a sign of faith in the artist, allowed each selected Biennial artist the opportunity to choose his or her own work to display. The early Museum's utopian commitment to the *breadth* of American

art was so unshakable that a policy prohibiting one-person exhibitions by living artists was in place until 1986.

It would, of course, be impossible and undesirable to turn back the clock and attempt to organize a 1932-style Biennial in 2010. However, the thinking and approach of this year's curators reflects the roots of the Museum's seventy-four previous Biennials and Annuals. Recent Biennials have implicitly or explicitly acknowledged a thematic aspect. For example, the curators of the 2006 and 2008 Biennials were not searching for a theme or themes per se, but they emerged and were identified. This was tacitly recognized in 2006 by the title given to the exhibition, *Day for Night*, which caused some to question the difference between a thematic exhibition and a Biennial. The current Biennial is simply and unabashedly titled *2010*. To the curators' thinking, this title serves as a marker. The exhibition is a moment in time—no two years are the same. The Biennial is in effect an inexorable clock, providing a regular, systematic, arbitrary instrument to examine American art. The task of selecting has fallen to Bonami and Carrion-Murayari, but they are acting as agents in a particular time. As they write, "the year . . . defines the spirit of the show." The curators have called out the notion of the Biennial as a chapter in time by devoting a full floor of the Museum to art that addresses the history of the Biennial—works purchased from previous Biennials or created by artists included in them. The temporality of the Biennial is further emphasized in this catalogue, which lists every artist included in every Biennial and Annual

since the Museum's founding. The curators are well aware that 2010 is not an objective view but an acceptance of limitations—their own and those of the Biennial structure. Limitations are something every artist faces and often serve as parameters for potential success or failure. So, like the artists they have chosen, Bonami and Carrion-Murayari accept this risk. It is not only a risk well worth taking but a risk that is imposed by time—the two-year clock of the Biennial. Welcome to 2010.

My profound thanks to Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari for taking on the risks and pleasures of the Biennial odyssey. Their enthusiasm and passion inspired the entire staff, and their thoughtfulness and intellect are evident in the exhibition.

The generosity of our funders offers Museum visitors the opportunity to see some of the most exciting, challenging, engaging, and innovative work being created in the United States today. My gratitude goes to Deutsche Bank for their sponsorship of the Biennial and for continually championing American art. The Whitney also owes a great debt of thanks to Sotheby's and fashion sponsor Tommy Hilfiger for their major support of the exhibition. The contributions of the Wasserman Foundation, Donald R. Mullen Jr., the National Committee of the Whitney Museum of American Art in honor of Peter Dominick, the Brown Foundation, and Bear Flag Wine were essential to the exhibition. My appreciation also goes to the 2010 Friends, chaired by Beth Rudin DeWoody and including: Jill and Darius Bikoff Foundation, Stefan Edlis and

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Adam D. Weinberg  
Alice Pratt Brown Director



## Acknowledgments

2010 marks the seventy-fifth installment of the Biennials and Annuals at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Since the Museum's first Biennial in 1932, the exhibition has grown in scale and importance for the artists involved as well as the institution as a whole. Every Biennial is an enormous undertaking and requires the hard work of many people both inside and outside the Museum. Our foremost thanks go to the artists in the Biennial, and our appreciation extends to all the artists we visited during the research process. Every artist we saw gave us ideas to reflect upon while we were shaping the Biennial, and we are fortunate to have had the opportunity for a dialogue with so many individuals across the country. We are grateful to Adam D. Weinberg, Alice Pratt Brown Director, for inviting us to organize the Whitney's signature exhibition, and we benefitted from his ongoing support. We would also like to thank Donna De Salvo, chief curator and associate director for programs, for her invaluable input throughout the process.

The Biennial team deftly dealt with numerous aspects of making the exhibition a reality, but we also thank them for their exchange of ideas. Esme Watanabe, Biennial coordinator, managed all aspects of the installation process with patience and humor. Margot Norton, curatorial assistant, worked tirelessly from the beginning of the curatorial process, and her contributions can be felt in all aspects of the exhibition. Laura Phipps provided invaluable support, first as an intern and then as Biennial assistant. We would also like to thank Taylor Haunschild and the other Biennial interns.

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Philip-Lorca diCorcia  
(b. 1951) / *Mario*, 1978 /  
Chromogenic print, 20 × 24 in.  
(50.8 × 61 cm) / Courtesy of  
the artist and David Zwirner,  
New York

# The Fence and the Bridge, or Regeneration Through Art

*Francesco Bonami / Gary Carrion-Murayari*

Exhibitions, biennials more so than others, are defined by their time frame, which is why we gave this year's Whitney Biennial the simple and indisputable title *2010*. Time is what makes shows different from one another: the Whitney's 1993 Biennial differs from its 2006 Biennial not simply because different curators conceived it but because history changes our perspective on art. If the curators of the 1993 Biennial were called to curate the 2006 Biennial, they would have shaped a completely different exhibition than the one they curated thirteen years before. The year signals a given frame that defines the spirit of the show. It is inevitable that art produced since 2008 was affected—even if not visibly or directly—by the social, historical, and cultural mood of the past two years.

The Whitney Biennial is about art in America more than American art, so its identity heavily depends on the political, cultural, and social weather of the country. During the last two years the United States went through a huge atmospheric shift. After a period of political resistance came a kind of ecstasy. "Ecstatic resistance," a concept conceived by one of this year's Biennial artists, Emily Roysdon, is grounded in feminist theory and upends traditional forms of thinking and categorization in favor of innovative, plastic forms of communication and imaginative new relationships between the self and others. Not limited to one medium or discipline, ecstatic resistance shapes a form of personal protest that initially seems unintelligible or impossible. It is within this reimagination of the body politic that this exhibition falls.

With the election of Barack Obama, the clouds broke and the rain of renewal poured over the entire country. The presence of a reassuring and inspiring political figure allowed people to focus on their intimate concerns again. Traditional forms of protest and resistance were no longer needed as in the years before when it felt like the United States was losing its moral direction. The year 2010 marks a time when art seems to have gone back to certain basic aesthetic rules or what could be called a kind of self modernity or personal modernism—the need to rediscover the experimental nature of the artistic endeavor and politics within the self in order to understand our role in a larger social and cultural transformation.

A number of artists included in *2010* work within this kind of personal modernism by reconstructing the styles of earlier movements and bringing them into dialogue with traditions of craft and the handmade. These works, often paintings, are self-conscious about their relationship to history, interrogating its gaps and distortions while also reimagining personal images and memories. This strategy is both critical of Modernism and optimistic about the possibility of rejuvenating the social potential of abstraction. The abstract works produced by these artists are grounded in a careful consideration of process and a refined sense of skill, yet the finished works contain a sense of accident, ephemerality, or contingency. In addition, these works foreground the gesture of the artist even if it might seem arbitrary or mechanized. It is incorrect to view this type of abstraction—engaging the past while also relying on choreography

and chance—as an embrace of isolation or extreme individualism. Instead it suggests a primary reckoning with the body in relation to the world and an optimism in finding wonder in the most basic elements of the everyday. These improvised abstractions emerge out of the same political position as the open scores of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg—an embrace of the void as a model for an open society in which all actions and individuals affect one another.

Regeneration through art. It feels as though artists all across the United States are reaffirming the importance of the individual gesture in order to produce a collective change. To a large degree the past eighteen months of artistic production have centered around a reconsideration of the distinction between collective and individual action. The grassroots activism and political organization that defined the Democrats' political triumph in November of 2008 contrasted sharply with the reckless individualism that defined Wall Street and the attendant financial ruin it precipitated. This binary opposition remains active in the postelection debates about the merits of government intervention versus the loss of individual freedom. At first glance, a lot of the work in *2010* appears intensely personal and concerned with simple gestures and everyday actions—depictions of individual bodies and stories, which might seem at odds with a sense of community and social responsibility. More accurately, however, these artists are constructing models that can serve as

the foundations of lasting communities and sustained critique.

These models can also be seen as another potential collection—a collection of bodies, gestures, and strategies representative of a collective coming into being. In this year's Biennial there are numerous images of individuals and groups of bodies in video, drawing, and sculpture. These works form an appropriate catalogue of characters for a time of burgeoning hope within a world of extreme violence, aptly illustrating theologian Paul Tillich's proclamation that "every period has its peculiar image of man." This statement was made in response to the 1959 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *New Images of Man*, and like that seminal show, the bodies of 2010 shift from vivid clarity and beauty toward grotesque distortion, and they almost disappear in the spaces they occupy, pass through, and move between. To a large extent, the image of the body that 2010 presents is one that is shaped by physical, spiritual, or social violence. The individuals depicted in much of this work, whether real or imagined, bear the scars of war, discrimination, and hatred; they are attacked, controlled, and disfigured. Visualizing this attack on the body, however, is not cynical or hopeless but rather a new form of regeneration and hope, providing an entreaty to individual dignity. The disembodied parts in Tristan Tzara's Dada play *The Gas Heart* (1920) convey this message well:

Nose: You over there, man  
with starred scars, where are  
you running?

Ear: I'm running toward  
happiness.

The focus on individuality suggested in much of the work included in 2010 is countered by the country coming back together and reflects a sense of politics as being built through personal encounters and dialogue. Any idea of public speech and public action is often a myth. In response, artists have created space for performances and potential encounters among themselves and individuals from different communities. Any new collectivity begins with the act of one individual meeting another. These artists attempt to build collectivity in a new historical moment. If the goal for artists in 2010 is to find these new communities, they start from the position of one artist standing alone.

"Yes we can" is now "Yes I can." The "Yes I can" artist, like many we encountered in our search for this year's Biennial, is curiously revealing a resurgent interest in Herman Melville's 1851 masterpiece *Moby Dick*. These artists view their practice as a kind of personal undertaking to battle or conquer something bigger than life. And yet few of the artists we visited had an attitude that could be read as heroic. Most of them revealed a meditative spirit—a deep need to observe reality rather than act upon it. Repetitive tasks, absurd gestures, and the observation of the everyday are treated as both subject and strategy. Every action is a form of ritual and performance. As Aki Sasamoto, who is included in 2010, puts it, "the performer feeds energy into the objects every day, adding the boring and fascinating history between a person and her

environment." The domestic and the infinite can often be found in exactly the same place.

In a way 2010 is our *Moby Dick*. How do you bring home that ominous whale that every Biennial seems to be without going under? First we—an Ahab and an Ishmael—decided to look for the whale where it was supposed to be: the United States. But we were not simply looking for American artists; we were looking for artists whose practice was committed to a certain kind of American spirit. For us, the question of what it means to be American is obsolete. Instead we asked ourselves what a Biennial of American art means in an age of global understanding. We thought that geographic boundaries and limitations would help to build a more defined exhibition. We stopped at the Pacific Ocean, the Mexican border, the Atlantic coast, and the Canadian border. We looked to Hawaii, but without success; we did not feel too bad, though, since Hawaii is celebrated by having the coolest artist of all in the White House.

But the first step in the hunt did not start on the road but at home in the harbor. This exhibition began when the Museum's first Biennial was conceived seventy-eight years ago, and it presupposes that the history of the Whitney is based on a collection of Biennials and Annuals that exist today as a collection of images of dispersed objects and faded aesthetic propositions. What remains of these partial histories is imperfect, never accurately representing the historical moment from which they emerged. These regularly occurring exhibitions consistently fail to define a generation



of artists (and in spite of complaints from critics, its mission, stated or implied, has rarely been to do so). Instead the Biennial has historically gathered a shockingly disparate range of artistic positions, ones that often unexpectedly linger or reemerge in the contemporary consciousness years later.

Since 1966, the Whitney's Marcel Breuer-designed building has served as the site for innumerable potential encounters among artists, objects, and viewers. This year the Biennial extends to the Museum's fifth floor—a space typically devoted to works from the permanent collection—which contains an exhibition of artists and works specifically tied to the previous seventy-four Biennials and Annuals. Since the inception of these exhibitions in 1932, the Whitney has devoted funds to purchase work from them, acquiring pieces that sometimes become iconic and other times are rarely displayed again. Therefore, the creation of the collection has, in some ways, mirrored the process of evaluation and projection that is characteristic of the Biennials and Annuals themselves. We also considered the Museum's collection as another artist and a new territory to explore. Familiar and forgotten artists are brought together to demonstrate the influence of the past on 2010 and suggest other potential histories for the Whitney as both an institution and a collection.

We curated the collection as a Biennial and then applied this idea to the Biennial, curating it as a collection. Using the collection offers an opportunity to understand that this year's Biennial is both a fence and a bridge. A fence because a lot

of the art presented is challenging and, as a result, keeps the viewer at a distance; the fruition of the new is always more complex than the fruition of the established. A bridge because by looking at works drawn from the collection, the viewer will understand that some of the art now revered as classic probably faced some sort of resistance when it was shown in a Biennial or an Annual. Although this resistance brings us back to the time frame that defined the work, we see it without the fences of that moment. Now we can look at it closely, and time serves as another sort of bridge that leads to a better understanding—crossing the present and joining the past with the future.

The Whitney's collection was this bridge to the boat. Back in the harbor it became clear that the whale in the Museum, the Biennial, is only part of a bigger whale still out there. But knowing about the larger ocean of American art was extremely relevant for the building of the exhibition. People feel that the sole purpose of the Biennial is to include and exclude. The final list of artists is often perceived as the whole body of the show, but in reality it is just a big bone or one part. This bone also recalls the carcass that is emblematic of Santiago's intensely personal struggle with the marlin in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Looking at artists across the United States made us understand that this exhibition is not the result of inclusion or exclusion but of a series of encounters. Most of these encounters did not end in an invitation, but the exchanges brought something to the exhibition. We met a great number

of artists who, although not selected, gave us ideas, inspiration, and even suggestions on how to proceed. We are grateful to them as much as we are to those invited to the Biennial. Many helped us figure out what 2010 is about even though they did not match what we were looking for. What we were looking for? In fact we still do not know. We will only know what 2010 is about when the dialogue among different artists plays out in the exhibition for the viewer who has not been with us for the entire research and selection process. We cannot show the work we did not choose but that still meant something in the Biennial structure. We cannot share all the impressions and experiences we had during the months of traveling to different studios, but we did come to realize that not all art, even if it is good, should be shown in the Biennial. There is some art that exists in isolation—inside a protected environment—and would not gain anything from being excavated and brought to Madison Avenue. Artists are sometimes on an intimate, spiritual journey and do not need exposure. Jokingly we called these kinds of artists Una-artists—people who see the world and interpret it, luckily through art and not explosive parcels, from their own cabin and on their own terms. Their art coincides with life and does not gain anything through achieving visibility, recognition, or conventional notions of “success.” As curators we were slightly tempted to include the self-contained work of these types of artists as Biennial trophies. But we resisted the temptation, thinking it would have been unjust to break that kind of balance in an artist's life—an ecosystem that does not need the Biennial or any other