

Whitney Biennial 2012

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 2012*, March 1–May 27, 2012, curated by Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders. They were assisted by Thomas Beard and Ed Halter, co-curators of the film and video program, and by Esme Watanabe, Biennial coordinator, Elisabeth Sherman, curatorial assistant, Sophie Cavoulacos, Biennial assistant, and Greta Hartenstein, performance assistant.

Copyright © 2012 by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Sponsored in part by



Deutsche Bank

Major support is provided by **Sotheby's**

Lighting and audio by

**BEN-
TLEY
MEE-
KER.**

Exclusive hotel partner :|S|U|R|R|E|Y

Generous support is provided by the Brown Foundation, the National Committee of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Trust.

Additional support is provided by the 2012 Biennial Committee, chaired by trustee Beth Rudin DeWoody and Renee Preisler Barasch: Philip Aarons and Shelley Fox Aarons, Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo, Rebecca and Marty Eisenberg, Marilyn and Larry Fields, Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman, Diane and Adam E. Max, Heather and Tony Podesta, Mari and Peter Shaw, Sharon and Howard Socol, John Studzinski, and an anonymous donor; The Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany; and the E. T. Harmax Foundation.

Funding for the 2012 Biennial is also provided by endowments created by Melva Bucksbaum, Emily Fisher Landau, and Leonard A. Lauder.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Whitney Biennial (2012 : New York, N.Y.)
Whitney Biennial 2012 / [edited by Elisabeth Sussman, Jay Sanders].
p. cm.

"This catalogue was produced on the occasion of the 2012 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 1–May 27, 2012."

ISBN 978-0-300-18036-7 (pbk.)

1. Art, American—21st century—Exhibitions. I. Sussman, Elisabeth, author, editor of compilation.
II. Sanders, Jay, author, editor of compilation. III. Whitney Museum of American Art. IV. Title.

N6512.7.W49 2012
709.73'0747471—dc23

2011046760

Printed and bound in the United States
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street, New York, NY 10021-2764, whitney.org

Distributed by

Yale

Yale University Press

302 Temple Street, P.O. Box 209040, New Haven, CT 06520-9040, yalebooks.com/art

CONTENTS

Artists in the Exhibition.....	6
On Biennials.....	8
<i>Adam D. Weinberg with Eric Banks</i>	
A Year in the Making... ..	14
<i>Jay Sanders and Elisabeth Sussman with Thomas Beard and Ed Halter</i>	
High Lines (for Sick Bees).....	26
<i>John Kelsey</i>	
There's no place like home.....	28
<i>Andrea Fraser</i>	
Painting Travesty.....	34
<i>David Joselit</i>	
Artist Pages	40
Works in the Exhibition.....	310
Acknowledgments.....	316

High Lines (for Sick Bees)

JOHN KELSEY

... but the artwork is no longer mute, it has learned how to speak itself, and by engaging networks is immediately referential, communicative, gossipy, and as fast and connected as any other information. And if art no longer needs a writer (all these recent symposiums on the decline of the critic), it can always *use* one, just as the writer uses art. We have seen how writing elaborates a parasitical relation to the expanding space of contemporary art. We have seen an explosion of blogs. And connected to these, an explosion of painting.*

Writers are like sick bees buzzing between artworks and shows, people and media, making trails in the hyper-productive air that is the space of the work today. And like bees, writers (especially critics) are now a little disoriented in this world, because

writing, too, is infected by the virus of communication. Writing really does get lost. It goes wherever, losing the sense of its own space, sometimes recovering it suddenly in the vanishing point of total communication, in the depths of an apparatus—on a blog or in a text message, wherever. Then again, writing has always been on the move, since its invention. In the beginning, it travelled down roads in the form of military commands, later as literature. Letters and money moved in the same channels.

I'm often struck by the fact that writers and artists share the same screens when they do what they do, negotiating their own territories or gestural possibilities within a cybernetic workspace where art and discourse become abstract and fast together. Writing and art have never moved so quickly in one channel, and you can see the panic in the eyes of young artists who know they will never reach the end of scanning and tracking each other's every move, producing a deluge of information by sharing and reblogging whatever they're following. This is the exponential panic of mobilization and of linkage, a sort of swarming-bee panic as art proceeds to leak itself everywhere in real time. Artists are both more numerous and smaller than they were a few years ago, so they get into collaboration: choreographed labor, social networks, and other ways of enhancing productivity (when you know you're no Picasso) in the cloud. And now the network literally overwhelms the works themselves, which we hardly have time or attention for. So we work on the network itself, where the space of the work becomes identical to that of gossip. Art leaks.

We could describe many contemporary artworks as network-things, objects and images already half-gone in discourse and communication. So how does a writer work in relation to artworks that already speak, announce, displace, and connect themselves? And why, if everything is operating so abstractly now, are kids suddenly so involved with making clunky, handmade, tangible things again? I would answer the first question by saying that writers are compelled to speak back to the speed and efficiency of communication, or to make it speak back differently to itself, in order to reclaim something like "literary" space. Because writing is not reducible to communication. Meanwhile, artists make these gestures of throwing up clunky, material roadblocks in the midst of nonstop communication, not so much to stop it as to make it visible and durable, while still exploiting its speed to produce value. Of course, there is a market for such things (any things), and if it's not on blogs, it's in art fairs that you can always find the things I'm talking about. While art, too, is irreducible to communication, I'd say that artists tend to be entirely complicit with the demand to expand the noncontext of cyber-capitalism, especially when they make rough- or careful-looking stuff that really wants to show that it's here, present, specific, even critical. You can tell by looking at it that it's already a jpeg, and knows it. It's jpeg stuff. Already gone, in a crate or online. This is the smart stuff we see everywhere today, and it's all good.

Sometimes it occurs to us how unassuming and even crappy most art looks these days, and that that's actually part of its strategy and charm. It doesn't want to stand up in a forceful or problematic way, claim its own space, or elaborate a counterspace in relation to this swarmingly productive one. It wants to blend in and move nicely. For example, there was an exhibition of new art from L.A. a few months ago, and to me it looked exactly like Berlin art, which looks more and more like London and New York art. Not so long ago, L.A. art inhabited a specific space and had a specific look; it was exotic. But now a sort of global emo style

is emerging in galleries and on screens. Michael Sanchez was saying this, too, recently, in regards to the function of blogs like Contemporary Art Daily. MFA grads are making cozy, nice, unassuming, slightly frazzled, handcrafted works that are designed to speed like bullets (but without hitting anything). Artworks are improvised in relation to all the information that flies through them. Like dream catchers. Flimsiness is strategic, a seduction performed in relation to screens and networks. And every writer is now a screenwriter.

But if contemporary art can't claim or command a viable, inhabitable counterspace within the spreading noncontext, it can still find ways of closing itself down for a moment. It can produce small breaks or gaps within the functional, semiotically saturated space-time of the metropolis. This may not be much, but it allows us to see in a way that's not pure scanning or streaming. Here, like a dropped call, you suddenly experience communication in its interruption. A sequence of small gaps begins to produce another rhythm or musical intermittence within and against the efficiency of communication, and this is how art *survives* today (see Pasolini's article on fireflies). This is also what allows us to elaborate a distance from the work we do and the work that we are, and to display and see our own abstraction in work. Art claims the possibility of rhythmically disconnecting us within the abstraction of connection.

The idea of the writer being useless (and also used by art), or anyhow less responsible for the work's functionality within a discourse network, can become a sort of position and define another approach to art. A literary approach can be a way of elaborating a distance in relation to the communication that art is so constantly involved with. If the writer engages art within the abstracting spaces of networks and communication (using the same screens as art), it's not just because here is where contemporary art is to be found (on blogs or whatever), but also because writing doesn't always want to agree that everything should operate so efficiently within these spaces. Writing can be a way of unworking the work these spaces constantly demand, maybe even reclaiming their abstraction as a poetic possibility. If writing can do anything here it's by countering the functional openness of the new productive formats with its own specific and "impossible" space, and many artists are already becoming writers for this reason. Artists are also blogging, perhaps in order to make art criticism die a little more on the screen, "like a stomach digesting itself," as Jay said the other day. Here, the work is gossip and the gossip is the message.

Lately I've been working pretty closely with the artist Stephen Willats, who likes to say that art is a "channel." Decades before laptops, he began a practice that diagrammed spaces of social communication. Already in the 1960s, his work was about what moved through it, as he superimposed his strange diagrams over shared everyday worlds in order to show how cities are also social and semiotic networks. Whereas relational aesthetics involved itself with making the city disappear into art (installations), Willats prefers to make art disappear in the city, straying outside both the gallery and the traditional boundaries of the work. The sprawling *DATA STREAM: A Portrait of New York* (Delancey Street/Fifth Avenue) that he produced in 2011, which consisted of nothing more than printouts of image and text files glued to a forty-two-foot-long wall of sheetrock, was a sort of diagrammatic High Line of information gathered locally in our streets, using a combination of primitive analogue tools (tape recorders, still cameras) and cheap digital ones (Flip cameras, digital voice re-

corders). The data stream captures the teaming nothingness of metropolitan space, but what's moving is how devoted it is to the pedestrian inhabitation of flows, at the level of the average, urban body. It reveals and displays the touristic conditions of our daily lives, whereas the High Line in Chelsea is pornographic architecture designed to produce more urban tourists. I mention Willats because something important survives and continues to rethink itself in his art: the possibility of reappropriating our own information in New York or wherever we are, which resonates in a timely way with the ideas and strategies currently being experimented with down by Wall Street and in other cities. Occupy the diagram! No one knows what this is. We defer its articulation while reclaiming spatial agency.

Not to exploit the theme of occupation to fill a few more inches of catalogue space, and certainly not to neutralize this political weapon by putting it to work for art, but let's recognize that we are no longer in the moment of Institutional Critique or Utopia Stations, and that the question of space and its uses is suddenly on the agenda again in New York. We talk about space now that we no longer have it. We realize that we can only produce it by taking it back, but that this involves both struggle and a massive, collective rethinking of how we inhabit our own worlds. Meanwhile, we've witnessed a mushrooming of new galleries on the Lower East Side, fast little spaces that function exactly like blogs or screens and are linked by a discourse/network/gallery map. Art has a way of neutralizing space by spreading abstraction. I felt this strongly at the Frieze fair just now, where I was stranded in the booth picking up text messages from what sounded like a riot in New York, feeling very disconnected from its energies. Now we see the media-pressurized Occupy-thing already threatening to reduce itself to a list of demands, to be read by a talking head on TV, which would end what we like best about this thing: that we don't know what it is or what it is capable of. What's been occupied is a mutant space that is both real and abstract, and for the past five weeks this has made the city way more exciting and up for grabs than it has been in a long while. It's a strange new topology of discourse networks and urban behavior. And none of this is necessarily separate from the world of art and artists.

We don't know what the Biennial is either, but it arrives at a particularly strange and energized moment when New Yorkers are starting to stray from their subjective bounds in order to test possibilities of acting, meeting, and thinking outside the usual productive formats. We've seen artists, writers, and curators emerging from their workspaces, sensing other possible ways of occupying the abstraction of New York. Sick bees, wandering from the hive as we go to work on our own mutation, wondering at what point the artist's life finally begins or ends in this city.

NYC, October 21, 2011

NOTE

* And last night at Michael Krebber's opening, an explosion of paintings of blogs. People standing around reading the paintings, reading anonymous trash talk about themselves. For example, a blog called C-A-N-V-A-S spread out across a series of canvases, naming names. A paranoid gossip girl effect. Painting with gossip, an abject image of an all-consuming discourse network, a nasty mirror. Tomorrow these paintings will probably show up on these same blogs, and on screen is where they will both complete and end themselves as paintings. Krebber painting the words and opinions of others, saying nothing himself, painting as reblogging (the dandy doesn't blog, he only reblogs). So many names, no authors, all signed Krebber.