

THE POWER OF NO
Eva Díaz on the Whitney Biennial 2019



Protestors in the lobby of the Whitney Museum, New York, April 5, 2019

The current iteration of the Whitney Biennial has seen even more protest-related action than the 2017 version, which makes writing about it a perfect opportunity to consider the relationship between the institution, its board members, and the artists who have been collected under the roof of this flagship institution for American art. Now that many have withdrawn their works, what can be said about what is there, or what was there? Art historian and critic Eva Díaz weighs in on the controversy, context, and a few works of art, too.

The most racially and gender diverse biennial in the Whitney Museum's history is upon us. Now that we're living in the future (2019!), the multitude of perspectives it offers comes not a moment too soon ... as we find ourselves in a time of extreme, aggressive Trumpian nostalgia. Nostalgia is such a white patriarchal thing. No woman, person of color, or gay person in their right mind should be nostalgic, because, for example, there is no time in Western history that a half-white, half-Puerto Rican, impecunious woman like me would have been educated and could do what I'm

doing (or at least very rarely in recorded accounts) and not have been treated as chattel. Perhaps in some matriarchical village in Hopi culture or in the Iroquois nation or in Central America, but they were squashed by conquistadors and men from England with muskets.

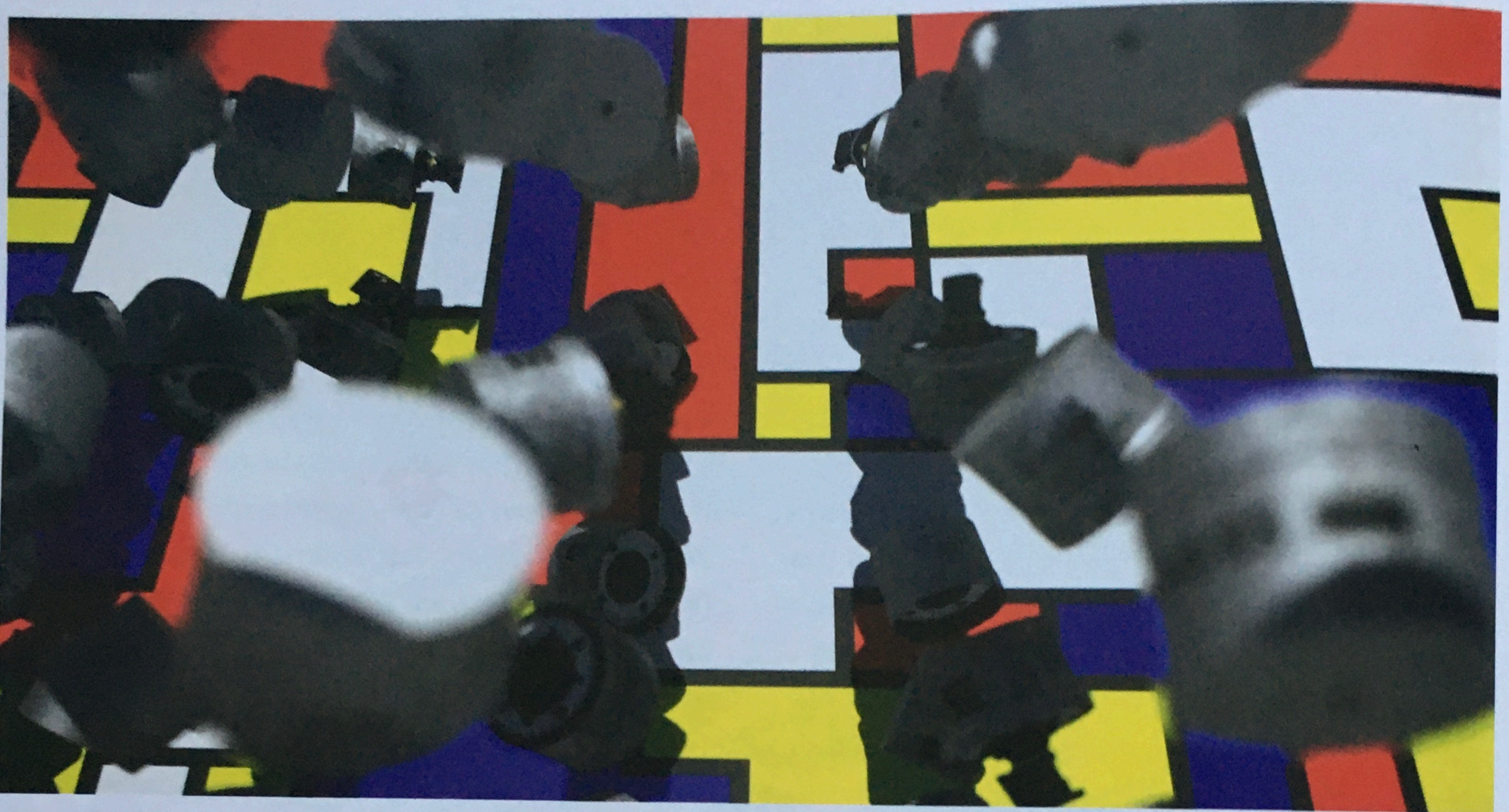
But in its explorations of identity, this biennial feels a little young, and it is marketed as such. The show's press release touts that, of the 75 artists selected, "seventy-five percent [...] are under forty and only five have previously appeared in a Whitney Biennial." This would have been 76 (artists, that is) if Michael Rakowitz, aged 45, hadn't dropped out. And the reason he gave for doing so had to do with what we might call a kind of maturity that being a practicing artist for decades can bring to the table.

Being able to say no, that is. No, I don't always need to have that last drink 'cause I'll feel hungover the next day; no, I don't need to get on a plane all the time; no, I don't need to say yes to everything; no, I don't need to support an institution whose trustees have blood on their hands. Marx once wrote that *all* capital comes into the world with blood on its hands, and following that logic one could say that the surplus value extracted from the working classes by capitalists is *always* about asymmetrical power relations and exploitation, wherever labor is extracted and survival the dangled carrot.

Yet some capitalists are closer to that blood than others. The Whitney Museum is embroiled in no small drama because of this fact. Protests – Rakowitz's, Decolonize This Place's, Within Our Lifetime's, Comité Boricua's, and those of many others – have been taking place for months against Whitney trustee (vice-chair, actually) Warren Kanders, who owns a company that

makes munitions and tear gas used by right-wing governments against undesirable populations and left-wing protestors, including in the US. These letters, demonstrations, museum occupations, etc. against the Whitney seek to unravel the Masters of the Universe ideology of our time: that very wealthy people who have absolutely no credentials to determine museum policy are in truth the governing agents for those very institutions.

Rakowitz may have been the only artist who backed out of participation in the biennial because of Kanders, but Forensic Architecture (FA), a group founded in 2010 by British-Israeli architect-activist-scholar Eyal Weizman, has produced a work of brazen disgust about the Whitney's dirty money that, to its credit, the Whitney is showing, albeit with a bunch of disclaimers tacked on. It's hard work being hypocritical, but museums need rich people's money to retain their bloated exhibition calendars, their frenzied acquisition plans, their billion-dollar capital campaigns to employ starchitects. Or they could just become more honest and modest and circumspect, with less funding and scrappier ideas, but hey, we live in the Era of Plutocratic Rule, which pretends there is no alternative to greed and inequality. FA's film *Triple-Chaser* (2019) is an eleven-minute near-psychedelic trip into the afterlives of the tear gas grenades Kanders's Safariland Group produces. FA trained an AI algorithm to search for images of these canisters all over the internet, and like drug baggies, these sometimes colorful canisters have all kinds of perversely cutsey branding plastered all over them. Narrated by the singer David Byrne, the film documents its own making: activists were asked to photograph the detritus of protests where piles of spent munitions remain after having been cannoned at the



Forensic Architecture, "Triple Chaser," 2019, film still

unarmed. The film culminates in a ravelike neon strobic montage of hundreds of images of the grenades pulsing before wild patterns, though it's all quite unravelike in its haunting soundtrack, which features a soaring operatic soprano.

Ellie Ga's filmic series *Gyres 1-3* (2019) likewise uses repetition and masses of things to unforgettable effect. In Ga's case, she uses her characteristic style of oral narration accompanied by a sequence of photographs shown using an overhead transparency projector to weave together – initially very innocently – tales of beachcombing and oceanographic currents. But suddenly the story becomes about what exactly washes up on beaches, mostly plastics spun out of the enormous gyres of human garbage floating around the oceans, as well as the jetsam possessions and dead bodies of migrants. Her images of beaches littered with life vests become yet

another imaging of disposable populations: an indictment to us, we who have the resources to feed, house, and clothe everyone on the planet, to live in a harmonic relationship to nature even in its catastrophes, and yet somehow we choose not to.

There are many other great works in the Bienial, producing essential images of our time, of and by those who are typically not represented in and by the dominant culture at large. Kota Ezawa's film and drawings of the NFL protests against police brutality; Jeannette Mundt's Muybridge-like paintings of (often black) gymnasts in motion; Wangechi Mutu's kinetic sculpture about African American oral traditions, made of cow horns tracing a silent poem on an upturned washtub; Pat Phillips's painting-sculpture hybrids of the fences that keep brown people out at the US border (or in, at Angola prison in Louisiana). Visually arresting feats of research all, archives and images



Wangechi Mutu, "Sentinel I," 2018

produced to answer questions no one, other than artists of great talent and searching ambition, chooses to ask. It may be that the forty-somethings stole the show (or upstaged it, perhaps, in the case of Rakowitz) by drilling the stakes of our time so forcefully, and yet there's so much stake left to be explored.

* After the writing of this piece, on July 19 eight artists, including Forensic Architecture, declared they were withdrawing their works from the biennial due to Kandera's continued presence on the Whitney's board of trustees. On July 25 it was announced that Kandera had resigned from the board.

"Whitney Biennial 2019," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, May 17–September 22, 2019.