

Alvarado
Ancart
Arreola

Barker
Barrada
Belmore
Berger
Blake
Breslin

Edwards
Ellison
Everett

Farid
Fusco

Her
Hill
Hopkins

Jaar
Jackson
Johnson

Martinez
McKenzie
McMillian
Mira
Morales
Moved by the
Motion

Nance

Raven
Ray
Rhoades
Roberts
Rosales
Ryan

Salane
M. E. Smith
S. E. Smith
Sterling-Duprey

WangShui
Wesley
White

White Hawk
Williams

Whitney Biennial 2022
Quiet as It's Kept

Cassandra
Press
Cha
Chacon
Chambers-
Letson
Churchman
Cokes
Connolly
Connors

Da Corte
A. Dean
D. Dean
Dickson

Kwan Arce
and Tolentino

Gallagher
A Gathering of
the Tribes /
Steve Cannon
Gavin
Gordon
Green

Othello

Lemon
Lerner
Linklater
Little
Lowe

Pendleton
Pritchard

Tabet
Thomasos
Trinh

Venegas

Yoon

The Alchemy of Issues

Adrienne Edwards

1. The Overview Effect

A phenomenon exists called the overview effect in which astronauts experience a radical shift in consciousness upon traveling into space and glimpsing our minuscule world suspended in the abyss of total darkness.¹ This cognitive, emotional transformation is a recognition of the reality of earth—its profound fragility, its susceptibility to chance events, its smallness. These space travelers attain the insight that the things that divide us—nationality, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, sexuality—are as thin as the air up there. The big blue sky enveloping the earth, which nourishes and sustains us, is a mirage for the truth of the void in which we actually live, the all-encompassing blackness of the universe that our atmosphere veils. Such an awareness has had life-altering effects on some of the people who experience it; some become artists or poets, some enter ashrams and study meditation. Generally, they become deeply different people—and for the better, that is.

Since March 2020, I have found myself experiencing, as indeed many of us have, something approximate to the intense awe and sense of wonder

that is the overview effect, although mine has been accelerated by the crucible of fate. For me, there have been not one but a range of fundamental identity-shifting experiences occurring over the past eighteen months. The overwhelming instability of our times exceeds any notion of the typical challenges that we face in life; the sheer unwieldy scope, intensity, and magnitude of the accumulations of things that have and continue to unmoor us in our understanding of how we ought to be seems unrelenting. I find myself wanting to be oriented toward this uncontrollable morass as opposed to against it. Being toward this uncertainty is not a matter of hope or optimism. Rather, it concerns the necessity of finding a sweet spot for oneself in the midst of certain, unassailable chaos. From here, situated on this uneven, unstable ground, to experience the overview effect is to demand a mindfulness that knowingly navigates and examines such a terrain.

Exhibition making entails a kind of overview effect. For David and me, surveying the art of our times involved looking at works by an intergenerational group of artists, many with an interdisciplinary perspective. We wished to consider the most prescient art today, which in some cases may not have been made in the last couple of years. We wanted to do so in the context of the Whitney's history, knowing that each iteration of the Biennial was a kind of call and response. The most compelling of these



A protester in front of a burning building after the killing of George Floyd, Minneapolis, May 29, 2020

exhibitions achieved their success not just in juxtaposition to their immediate predecessors but also in relation to the *longue durée* of the Biennial; indeed, to the history of the Museum itself. What was at first an instinctive decision, guided by the sense of what we ourselves wanted to make as curators and see as art spectators, became essential after we began visiting artists, initially in person from November 2019 to mid-March 2020 and thereafter virtually, with a few exceptions. It was clear to us that there were latent connections to bring to the fore—surprising relations in sensibility, methods, and ideas that at times not even the artists themselves recognized.

Unlike many of the large-scale roundups of art today, the Biennial, now in its eightieth edition, is directional for the institution, informing future exhibitions and other programming as well as shaping the Museum's permanent collection. As a result, we assessed the institution's past artistic activities both within the Biennial construct and beyond it to inform the structure of our show. For instance, the 1962 Biennial featured a small solo show of Joseph Cornell's sculptures. With this inspiration, we have similarly organized deep presentations of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Ralph Lemon, and Steve Cannon's visionary apartment gallery in the East Village, *A Gathering of the Tribes*. The ways in which the always relevant 1993 Biennial was socially

mindful, indexing the inextricability of politics from art, has been a beacon for us. Likewise, the 2012 Biennial's distinct presentation of performance, giving it pride of place in the exhibition by dedicating an entire floor to it, informed our decision not to have a separate performance or video and film program. Rather, these forms are integrated into the exhibition itself, having equal and consistent presence in the galleries. The show also features marquee performances by *Moved by the Motion* and Terence Nance realized through a network of collaborators. The reciprocity involved in these partnerships and others, including EJ Hill's offsite project, best encapsulates the spirit of all these endeavors, drawing inspiration from what *A Gathering of the Tribes* symbolizes, a communal environment that fostered radical experimentation in poetry, visual art, music, and publishing.

We also committed to creating an exhibition that did not so much try to represent the range of events taking place during our time of organizing it; rather, it was vital to make something that felt like the context in which it evolved—drawing upon our sense of the overview effect—which is to say, precarious, improvised, and unstable. To manifest these conditions in the show, many artists' contributions to the Biennial are dynamic, changing over the course of its presentation, so that if you come to see the exhibition in April, you will see a



Medical workers moving a body at Brooklyn Hospital Center, April 9, 2020



San Francisco city skyline obscured by smoke and haze from the Bear Fire and other California wildfires, September 9, 2020

different show than if you return in a month, and yet a third by the end of its run in September. The show possesses a kind of metabolism. Some projects question its duration and pace, such as those by Nayland Blake, Tony Cokes, Alex Da Corte, Pao Houa Her, EJ Hill, Ivy Kwan Arce and Julie Tolentino, Ralph Lemon, *Moved by the Motion*, Jason Rhoades, Michael E. Smith, and Rayyane Tabet. They are dispersed, take place in varying iterations, or happen outside the Whitney's Gansevoort Street home; a select few occur before and beyond the show's official opening and closing dates. The near entirety of the exhibition takes place on the Museum's fifth and six floors, which form both pendants and counterpoints to one another—two distinct yet related experiences, one filled with light while the other revels in the light of darkness.

Our framework for the Biennial was animated, proliferated, and extended through a series of hunches. They served us less as themes than as thought experiments, leading us along instinctive lines of exploration and experimentation with ideas that David and I have long pondered in our curatorial and academic work, which conjoin around a constellation of shared commitments approached from our respective vantage points. Art historian Soyoung Yoon lent further context to our reasoning when, in a Zoom call, she characterized it precisely as possessing

“the imperative clarity of a hunch.” She drew this line from Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 science-fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a meaningful example of creativity amplified by an author's ethical positions, which in Le Guin's case intertwine feminism, nonviolence, ecological awareness, and an insistence on more complex depictions of race and gender. Not surprisingly, our hunches—which included inclinations toward the capacity of abstraction to illumine things in the world, a kind of lush conceptualism, auto-ethnographic methodology, language and narrative in visual art, and sinister pop—necessarily overlapped, intertwined, and folded in on one another.

2. Things Fall Apart

David and I were in the New Orleans airport the evening of March 12, 2020, when we learned the Museum would be closing the next day for what we thought would be a period of two weeks. Life as I knew it began to summarily unravel. The persistent screech of sirens was unrelenting; performing the most heretofore benign activity like getting the mail or groceries, riding in an elevator, seeing your loved ones and friends, or taking the subway was literally to risk your life. Three members of my family contracted serious cases of COVID-19. Death nestled up to us. A thread had been pulled in



Supporters listening to President Donald Trump speak at the Stop the Steal rally, Washington, DC, January 6, 2021

the already well-frayed sociality that had been compromised since the election of Donald J. Trump as president in 2016 and the lingering resentment, fear, and opportunism that led to his ascent and contributed to our collapse.

Then, on the evening of May 27, I watched as protesters descended on Minneapolis. By the 29th, cities across the nation were responding to the accumulating extrajudicial killings of Black people, particularly the egregious spectacle of extermination that was the murder of George Floyd, which arrived in the wake of the killings of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. What I knew that night was that I could neither write about the things I write about nor advocate for the artists to whom I am most committed without joining this movement—nor could I wish away the need to tell others that we matter.² To put it plainly, I couldn't *be*. The next day, I walked to Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn to march, and I did so again and again throughout that summer and fall. I will always remember the stunningly beautiful convocation that took place on a June day along Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn for the lives of Black trans people, Caribbean flags swelling and intermingling with those of the LGBTQIA+ movement. It was one of those rare moments in life when the stakes are real and you know it—the choice is singular and undeniable, which is to say it is not a choice at all but a vital necessity.

I returned to my office at the Museum in late March 2021, a year after I had left it, to prepare for Dave McKenzie's exhibition and performance. Now, depending on the day, as I make my way to work from the A train stop at Fourteenth Street to the gleaming edifice on the waterfront, I step on, across, or around a tag on the sidewalk that says, "It's OK to be Black." Why—which is to say, how could we—live in a society where something so basic as the fact that *my* life matters even need to be said? That necessity rocks me. Because it rocked me and others like me and those who are in solidarity with us, our institutions were made to feel it, too, during this seismic collective reckoning. We felt a simultaneous lack of expectations and insistence for change, its through *line* a strange amalgamation of feelings I want to call utopian pessimism as an outlook on a perpetual sense of, or at best fleeting deliverance from, things having indeed gone to pieces. The veneer that there ever was a center had collapsed, detonated from within.

Last summer, I started listening again to the Roots' album *Things Fall Apart*, released in 1999, just before the new millennium. I remember the album cover, designed by Kenny Gravillis, as both an omen and index crystallizing an ever-present sameness in its photograph of two Black young people running from white police officers in Bedford-Stuyvesant during the civil rights era. For my generation,



Homes flooded by Hurricane Ida, Lafitte, Louisiana, August 30, 2021

the iteration of the refrain that is the American disregard of Black life was Rodney King, set there betwixt, on the one hand, the two-part, self-selected version of Black Power that belonged to our parents' generation—that is, nonviolence or by any means necessary—and on the other, the movement of today, which is, remarkably, a broad cross section of us marching under the sway of the queer-women-founded Black Lives Matter.

The Roots got the title for *Things Fall Apart* from Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's first novel, which concerns the complexity of Igbo society before the arrival of Europeans (something that Woody De Othello's Biennial sculptural installation also explores). Achebe himself took the appellation from poet William Butler Yeats's tour de force "The Second Coming":

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,
and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

A decade later, writer Joan Didion would take inspiration from the poem's last lines, which follow a description of the Antichrist figure in the New Testament's Book of Revelation, for the title of her collection of essays published in that most violent of years, 1968, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*:

And what rough beast, its hour come round
at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Yeats published the poem in 1920, during that era's flu pandemic, which sickened his wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees, and their child. It is both prescriptive and prescient. And yet, Yeats was fascinated by nationalist and authoritarian movements, eugenics, and fascism.³ The undeniable continuing resonance of his poem likely has to do with its ability to speak to

the cycles of human life on earth—the accumulation of events that intensify in their return.

The antechamber, a space of reserve, is the lodestar of this Biennial. Within the American imaginary, this site of transition and suspension proliferates in the written narratives and histories of the enslaved en route to and in the United States. With the term "reserve," precisely by setting aside an area of contemplation, I mean to hold out for a reparatory potential that resonates even in the absence of proof of presence—just air, silence, and a dense void as abstract totems of that which has brought us here. To hold in reserve is an act of distancing, of retaining for oneself, neither taking responsibility for something it did not bring into fruition nor observing or squelching the unstinting desire to show itself as pained. Rather, reserve is a taking asunder, gathering the bits, fragments, shards and setting them aside as an absolute requisition against the repositories of history. In the Biennial, our antechamber contains three elements—a black monochromatic relic, an anonymous contribution to the exhibition; Raven Chacon's "silent" sound piece, an audio recording of a stand-off at Standing Rock in which we occasionally hear someone breathing; and a tube of Thomas Edison's breath collected by Henry Ford, a selection inspired by Elizabeth Alexander's 2015 meditation on grief, *The Light of the World*. The space centers questions of value and that ever-elusive, peculiarly American notion of freedom—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—that always somehow escapes us. They are worthy aspirations situated just on the other side of a possibility toward which we must always reach, even as we understand that an aspiration is nothing more than a mere hope, a feeling, a desire for something to be actualized. We must be aware of this setup. We must be willing to wager with it.

3. Don't Deny Me My Aftermath

If, as art historian Lucy Lippard observed in the late 1960s, Conceptual art is in part the dematerialization of the object, I want to suggest that for certain artists today, the act of dematerialization resides elsewhere and otherwise. Already the reorienting of Conceptualism was initiated in the 1990s by artists, some of whom are included in the Biennial, such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Tony Cokes, Coco Fusco, Renée Green, Alfredo Jaar, Ralph Lemon, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Charles Ray, Jason Rhoades, Veronica Ryan, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. They, along with later generations of artists, have evolved a distinctly lush conceptualism. Our Biennial features such work by Emily Barker, Jonathan Berger, Cassandra Press, Aria Dean, Danielle Dean, Alia Farid, Pao Houa Her, Dave McKenzie, Na Mira, Moved by the Motion, Adam Pendleton, Guadalupe Rosales, Rose Salane, Sable Elyse Smith, Rayyane Tabet, Eric Wesley, and Kandis Williams.



Aerial view of asylum seekers prevented from entering the United States at El Chaparral border crossing, Tijuana, Mexico, March 17, 2021

For these artists, the object of dematerialization does not reside in the work itself—quite the opposite, actually. They invert the usual understanding of Conceptualism while nevertheless centering ideas in art. In lush conceptualist works, the object is thick, dense, multivalent, and polyvocal rather than dematerialized. Such a move reflects the conceptual complexity of the context in which the artist exists and the works arise, particularly when it concerns questions of belonging, identity, history, and socio-political systems, while simultaneously expressing an ambivalence about maneuvering, circumnavigating, and reimagining them. These works are imbued with an emotional, affective resonance, giving them a more sensual aspect. Issues surrounding the commodity status of the object and a need to wage against it, so emblematic of historical conceptualism, are limited. For many of these artists, in fact, they're the least of their concerns, particularly since for the preponderance of them resistance to objecthood has nothing to do with art; rather, they are propositions on the very thing most people take as a given—being itself.⁴

Lush conceptualism acknowledges the lingering force of Conceptual art as the meta-aesthetic of our times while rejecting the tendency to preface work that emerges in its aftermath with a premature, hyphenated “post.” Instead, it foregrounds its current evolution as an entanglement, as a “moment of

repetition, a moment in which the past returns to the present in expanded form, a moment in which present time finds stored and accumulated within itself a nonsynchronous array of past times.”⁵ What is important in conceptualism this time around is the fact that only intensities matter, which can be extracted from the circulation of things, be they conditions of being or aesthetics.

Didion opens *The White Album* (1979), her collection of auto-ethnographic essays / journalist accounts of the turbulent times in California at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, with the simple but astute line, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”⁶ Auto-ethnography is a prevalent methodology in the lush conceptualist works in the Biennial, which mine personal and cultural references, particularly to history, mythologies, literature, fabrications, and pop-culture narratives, to create one's own system of reference that not only informs the research-driven process of realizing the work of art but also buttresses its structure.

The overwhelming xenophobic discourse in the United States and the reckless, abject treatment of human lives along its borders—particularly vehement with regard to Mexico since Trump's presidential campaign and manifested historically in the division of Indigenous tribal communities along arbitrary lines of demarcation—made these two geopolitical paradigms important to our program. Accordingly,



Sidewalk graffiti, West Village, New York, 2021

with the advisement of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art curator Jovanna Venegas, we invited artists from Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, including Mónica Arreola, Alejandro “Luperca” Morales, and Andrew Roberts, to present projects contemplating the dynamics of life in the region, as fascinating as they are vexing as they are banal. The contributions of Rebecca Belmore and Duane Linklater, meanwhile, consider the historical colonial violence toward and disregard for national boundaries for Indigenous communities along our northern border with Canada.

4. You Don't Give Me Everything

“Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity,” Frantz Fanon remarked in his reflection on national culture at the moment of African independence.⁷ But in the melee of our world-time, now as before, there persists a desire for clarity, certitude, and legibility in representing the conditions of our lives, who we are as individuals, and who we are as peoples. It is not by chance that such needs acutely manifest in moments of political, economic, and social upheaval. Demands for equality and recognition, which is to say for a tangible demonstration of our humanity, often take form in art as an authentic realism, which intentionally or not leans into closed circuits of signification that convey as-if-indelible universalisms about life experience. While I am sympathetic to the underlying aims, I want to hold out, even advocate, for the impossibility of ever achieving them in this way. In the last few years, art institutions have fostered and market forces have instigated a nearly singular concern for the authentic-real in art, especially when it concerns artists of color, women, and queer people, and the lives in which those identities intersect, as a spectacle of progressiveness that registers at a glance.

It is in this context that David and I became interested in foregrounding abstraction. Our leading question on the subject has been, How do we know what abstraction can do? Stated in other ways: Does it have the capacity to entangle history and

being and to undermine the systems that we maybe don't love so much? What are the valences through which it appears? How are we to judge the extent to which it compels us to feel what it aims to represent, its capacity as affective representation?

In meditating on abstraction, what registers as most important is the felicity of the works' aesthetics—the convincing ways in which they can make us *feel* the questions they are asking, and, crucially, without supplying answers. Tactile, these abstractions possess their own corporeality—a visceral, somatic presence. “Color in the absence of (a person) who has passed into color”:⁸ abstraction here is an imaging of the feeling toward a figure, toward the experience of its embodiment virtually—not type but force of chroma, facture, inscription, scale, texture, slickness, thickness. Resemblance forsaken for semblance foments in works by Lisa Alvarado, Yto Barrada, Leidy Churchman, Matt Connors, Ellen Gallagher, Rindon Johnson, James Little, Rick Lowe, Rodney McMillian, Adam Pendleton, N. H. Pritchard, Awilda Sterling-Duprey, Denyse Thomasos, WangShui, and Dyani White Hawk. These works and others remind us of the impossibility of order in the world and ask us to get right with that uncertainty.

In turning away from the current tendency toward maxims, we ask how abstraction as an aesthetic counterpoint can provide an experience in which to feel-think about how we have arrived at this moment and with this insight consider where we might go. Historically, the Whitney has had signal exhibitions in which questions of identity and representation have unfolded in powerful, lasting ways, in particular the suite of shows of abstract art by Black artists in the 1970s, whose number included Frank Bowling, Al Loving, and Alma Thomas. The questioning of representation was a mark of distinction for the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which showed artists who unraveled typical expectations for addressing such concerns—Coco Fusco, Renée Green, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Byron Kim, Glenn Ligon, and Lorna Simpson, among others. The complex sensibility these artists brought to the matter of representation seems almost forgotten and is worth reasserting amid a pressing request for stable, coherent identities instead of an openness to difference, to difference within difference—a difference that may necessarily remain unresolved, nuanced, withheld even while foregrounded, possibly even errant. Why, you may ask? Because that's the nature of identity, as always, and of the times in which we live. At our best, we creators make the conditions of our very lives, which makes this prevailing desire for certainty simultaneously unquestionable and an impossibility.

Abstraction offers in a durational fashion everything representation obscures—the fact of our destabilization, the hard edge of our precarity. Our aim in turning in its direction is to contribute to the discourse of representation by creating an

openness that fosters a range of responses and interpretations, if only to contemplate the question, What can this thing do in the world because of its lack of resolution? Abstraction is an extreme in a time of extremes, an object of analysis in a time of rigidity, an experiment and an imagining of what else is possible in its midst.

5. A Kinder Witness

DB (aka BI),

I went to a movie theater for the first time on Sunday afternoon. It was the New York Film Festival's screening of a new restoration of Wendell B. Harris Jr.'s cult classic *Chameleon Street* (1990). It's a film about a guy who masquerades (hustles) as a surgeon, a lawyer, a reporter, and in other roles to make money. His antics are at times disturbing, at other times hilarious, and often both simultaneously. You would love it. What strikes me are not so much his doings but rather what others are doing around him in response to his presence. It made me wonder how our perceptions of one another in the world may have changed over these past three years, being the opposites that we are and observing how others take a measure of us together.

The surprise on Sunday was a showing of Sedat Pakay's short film *James Baldwin: From Another Country* (1970). Did you know that Baldwin spent ten years living, and more importantly, *working* in Turkey? From 1961 to 1971, his more stirring books about the United States were written there, including *Another Country* (1962) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963). He says in the film, "I can't breathe, I have to look from the outside." There's the breath thing again. Like the ghosts, it keeps coming up. Being in this country as a Black queer man, a literary and philosophical giant, was simply too difficult, too much to ask. "One sees it better from the outside," he said.

Almost all of our ghosts spoke from the position of the outsider inside—Pritchard and Thomasos; Cha did, too. Thomasos, whom we lost too soon, showed how abstraction could hold the unspeakable, the very things Baldwin was trying to save himself from. Pritchard, who was lost into oblivion, straddled two worlds at great cost, I think—the avant-garde of international concrete poetry and the radical political project demanded of Black aesthetics. He was far too abstract for both. I feel we have tried to hold space for them and others like them, which is to say for ourselves. We tried to make not simply an exhibition but a context on their behalf to be what Baldwin called a "kinder witness" to other ways of being and making. I shall ever be grateful to you for being my co-conspirator. I couldn't have asked for more.

— Brooklyn, Fire Island, Los Angeles
August and September 2021

Notes

The title of this essay comes from Joan Didion's explanation as to why she wanted to meet Huey P. Newton in jail in 1968 in the titular piece of *The White Album* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 27. The subtitle for section three is inspired by a line in Adam Pendleton's introduction to his *Past, Futures, and Aftermaths*, ed. Alec Mapes-Frances and Pendleton (New York and Köln: DABA and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther and Franz König, 2021). The subtitle for section four paraphrases something Isaac Leslie told his mother, Simone White, who is a friend, interlocutor, and contributor to this catalogue.

- 1 Frank Wright, *The Cosma Hypothesis: Implications of the Overview Effect* (New York: Morgan Brook Media), 2018. See also Deana L. Weibel, "The Overview Effect and the Ultraview Effect: How Extreme Experiences in/of Outer Space Influence Religious Beliefs in Astronauts" in *Religions* 11, no. 8 (August 2020).
- 2 Already in 2018, I had worked with Adam Pendleton on a tribute to Black Lives Matter in the form of a monumental flag placed on what was formerly called Negro Point on Randall's Island, as part of the ASSEMBLY section of that year's Frieze New York.
- 3 Scott Simon, "Opinion: Reading William Butler Yeats 100 Years Later," *Weekend Edition* (National Public Radio), <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/28/939561949/opinion-reading-william-butler-yeats-100-years-later>.
- 4 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 5 Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 29.
- 6 Joan Didion, "The White Album," in *The White Album* (1979; repr. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 11.
- 7 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 145.
- 8 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 181.