



This category contains the following articles

- [Deutsche Bank Collection goes App](#)
- [Curator Joan Young on Gabriel Orozco's Commission for the Deutsche Guggenheim](#)
- [Everyone is a Performer: Roman Ondák's "do not walk outside this area" at the Deutsche Guggenheim](#)
- [Grammar of the Everyday: Notes on Roman Ondák](#)
- [Deutsche Bank Once Again Main Sponsor of ART HK](#)
- [No Place like Home - The 2012 Whitney Biennial](#)
- [Sober Beauty: The Photographs of Berenice Abbott](#)
- [Curtain up - The Premiere of Frieze New York](#)
- [Gate to the Present - Wilhelm Sasnal in the Haus der Kunst in Munich](#)
- ["Color in outer space is nonsense, in any case.": Tracing Thomas Ruff's Work](#)
- [An interview with Brendan Fernandes](#)

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No Place like Home The 2012 Whitney Biennial

Every two years, the Whitney Biennial in New York stirs up heated controversy. The exhibition, which Deutsche Bank has been sponsoring since 2006, takes stock of the latest on the American scene. Considered a barometer, the Biennial not only registers the latest movements in American art, but also social temperaments. John Reed reports on this year's results.



Thom Andersen . Still from "Get Out of the Car", 2010. 16mm film, color, sound; 34 min. © Thom Andersen; courtesy the artist



Mike Kelley. The Mobile Homestead in front of the abandoned Detroit Central Train Station, 2010. © Mike Kelley. Photograph by Corine Vermuelen



The 2012 [Whitney Biennial](#) presents a ranging meditation on home. The theme is fitting, in that the museum is in the midst of moving to a new home, the fourth in its history, a 200,000-square-foot newly constructed building in Chelsea. With thirty-three film, video, digital, performance, and installation artists, accounting for 30+ hours of watching time, the emphasis on the show is distinctly media. ([Thomas Beard](#) and [Ed Halter](#) contributed to the curatorial efforts of [Elisabeth Sussman](#), the museum's photography curator, and [Jay Sanders](#), an independent curator apprised of performance.) There's so little space left over that the remaining artists—ten sculptors, six painters, two photographers, two text artists, and one textile—are contained in a greatly reduced Whitney. The impression is of two distinct Biennials: a media, performance, and installation Biennial, which looks to the future of the Museum, and a "formal" Biennial, which stands the turf of historically held territories.

The late [Mike Kelley](#), in his film *Going East on Michigan Avenue from Westland to Downtown Detroit*, gives expression to the Biennial's central theme by recreating his childhood home and relocating it to Detroit, his first [project](#) in public space. His film documents the drive from the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in downtown Detroit to the actual house Kelley's parents lived in, in the suburb of Westland. The

white clapboard house stands for tens of thousands of suburban homes that were a dream-come-true for the workers of the automobile industry. Alternating with footage from the drive are interviews with a cross-section of Detroit natives ranging from strip-pers to church officials and Ford employees; the result is a variegated portrait of Kelley's home-town and the social conditions prevailing there today.

In her work, 'eyenter, "integr intra' impression, [Kate Levant](#), who also works out of the blue-collar American-lost-world of Detroit, suspends the retrieved wreckage of a burned-down house. Home, then, is illusory, but the pathos of change, one abode to the next, is something we've all felt, and we know that our origins are more than we care to understand. [Dawn Kasper](#), in her installation, *This Could Be Something If I Let It*, literally resides in the museum, an artist with-out a studio affording herself the space of a Biennial inclusion. Her room in the museum is simultaneously high art and junk—her old books and bed and art-chic detritus draw a stark con-trast between the artist's life and the art presented to the public. Questions of public v. private space are at the core of the exhibition, which relates not only to the Whitney's changing location and changing identity, but the economic challenges that the U.S. and the world are currently engaging. Privatization—of health care, of prisons, of the entire economy—proved an unwise directive that will not be easy to sort out. Kasper's trade—her whole identity in exchange for studio space—is a particular pathos, broadly descriptive of our contemporary moment.

[Werner Herzog](#), in his installation, *Hearsay of the Soul*, champions sixteenth-century Dutch artist [Hercules Segers](#). Herzog contends that Segers, innovative in his landscapes and printmaking techniques, is a progenitor of today's modernism. A second historical perspective comes from [Jutta Koether](#), who incorporates the Whitney's [Breuer](#) building in a variation on *The Four Seasons* by [Nicolas Poussin. Koether recreates the scene of paintings on screens by Doucein, placing paintings](#)

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LaToya Ruby Frazier (b. 1982), *Corporate Exploitation and Economic Inequality!*, 2011. Digital photograph. © LaToya Ruby Frazier; courtesy the artist. Photograph by Abigail DeVille



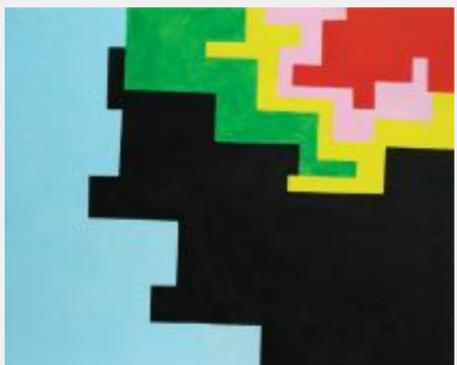
Dawn Kasper, Installation view of 2012 Whitney Biennial. Photo: Sheldan C. Collins



Charles Atlas. Still from "Turning (live mix)" with Antony and the Johnsons, 2004. Image courtesy the artist and Vilma Gold, London



Jutta Koether, Installation view of 2012 Whitney Biennial. Photo: Sheldan C. Collins



Andrew Masullo 5030, 2008–10. Collection of the artist. © Andrew Masullo; courtesy Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles



Koether recreates the series of paintings or seasons by Poussin, placing paintings of three seasons at the points of the compass, and allowing a window to stand in for North. The effect is one of architectural consciousness: a nostalgia for the Breuer building (soon to be relegated to the history of the Whitney) and the century of works shown in its modernist halls.

If "home" is a terminology too American apple pie to describe the 2012 Biennial, the politicized byword would be "Occupancy." As *Occupy Wall Street* makes its tremulous transition to Occupy Main Street, "occupancy" more accurately implies social criticism. The Whitney itself became a target of Occupy Wall Street. Activists demonstrated in solidarity with art movers and packers, who are protesting layoffs and demanding better work contracts from *Sotheby's*, while a deceptively fake Whitney website was launched announcing that the museum had severed ties to its two sponsors, *Sotheby's* and *Deutsche Bank*.

"Occupancy" also refers to the larger cultural reality; we no longer own; we rent. Even our identities are categories of an ephemeral nature: to remain constant, culture, fashion, the self must be continually reinvented, purchased seasonally. Two text essays (the art is the text) directly address the Occupy Movement, and an Occupy relation to the arts. In his *High Line (for Sick Bees)*, *John Kelsey* writes: "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." *Andrea Fraser*, in her essay, *There's no place like home*, is more focused on an art world that is itself occupied, compromised: "We have seen critical, social and political claims for what art is and does proliferate, becoming central to art's dominating legitimizing discourse."

The Whitney is not the first New York Museum to seek sustained curatorial freedom by expanding its purview, i.e., by diversifying. The *Guggenheim* and *MoMA* have already redefined themselves—they are cultural institutions, not art institutions—and the MoMA has been in a state of continual remodeling and expansion for the past two decades. The inclusion of text in the Biennial is in itself a landmark, recalling the Biennial's first inclusion of film in 1975. The web has given rise to a Renaissance in the essay, and the new Whitney, an umbrella that can be or do almost anything arts-related, is perhaps allowing for the inevitability of a more active web presence, which means not only video and image, but text. Like a visitor to a large website, a visitor to the current Biennial cannot know, or expect to interact with, everything (30 hours of viewing time). Rather, the Biennial is a series of interactions, incomplete in themselves, that indicate the whole. As if

to express this thought, *Lutz Bacher* distributes, throughout the exhibition, eighty-five framed offset printed book pages from *The Celestial Handbook*. The prints appear suddenly, assuring viewers that other prints in the series have crept by, unnoticed, and that a certainty of the incomplete, desire, is intrinsic to our experience of art.

The 2010 Biennial, a seventy-fifth anniversary, had a self-conscious sense of history. In *Collecting Biennials*, an outcropping of the 2010 Biennial, the museum selected a best hits and eclectic goldens of its own holdings, for instance its Edward Hopper paintings. 2012 also represents the occasional work in the collection, *Andy Warhol's Cyclist*, for example, serves in attendance of *Nick Mauss's* doorway installation based on a drawing by the French illustrator *Christian Bérard*, which invites us to cross over into tomorrow.

But the spirit of 2012 is not one of reflection, or of tradition. Overreach may well be the most common criticism of Biennials, but 2012's overreach is not apoplectic—it is, rather, the bristling of a museum that has outgrown itself, that is no longer physically capable of being true to its own personality. The Whitney wants musicians, like the *Red Krayola*, who perform in 2012 by live cast. The Whitney wants massive floor space for choreographers like Sarah Michelson, whose performances takes up most of 2012's fifth floor. The Whitney wants stages, screening rooms, and plastic technology and maybe even fashion shows (indicated, in toto, by *Georgia Sagri's* skyped pretentionista). The Whitney wants player pianos, as in the performance by *Lucy Raven*, and pipe organs, as in the installation by Lutz Bacher. Which, of course, it should have: the diversification process is well underway.

Whitney Biennial
March 1 through May 27, 2012
Whitney Museum, New York



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⊕ Nick Mauss, Material Studies, 2008-11 (detail). Digital photographs. Image courtesy the artist; 303 Gallery, New York; and Galerie Neu, Berlin



⊕ Kate Levant , hive.tangle.jpg, 2011. Stripped utility meter. © Kate Levant; courtesy the artist and Zach Feuer Gallery

