

The Politics of Display

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What role should curators play in shaping and guiding political discourse? This article examines the consequences of political activism in museum display by investigating the Whitney Museum of American Art's exhibition *America is Hard to See* (May 1 – September 27, 2015). The show asked visitors to reconsider American art as a reflection of a profoundly diverse nation, while effectively retelling the modern history of the country by use of juxtaposition and contextualization. The large-scale exhibition employed specific curatorial pronouncements that seemed to serve a political agenda, provoking a reconsideration of curatorial boundaries. This was most evident in the museum's politically charged placement of Elizabeth Peyton's portrait, *Barack and Michelle* (2008–13, fig. 1), which uncritically celebrated the 44th President of the United States and his wife. It is not the intention of the author to question the validity, importance, or artistic merit of Peyton's contribution. It is understood that the unique charge of an artist allows for and encourages subjective responses. Yet for this reason curators are confronted with a difficult task when faced with the installation of politically oriented art. Depending on the associated text and display tactics employed, an artwork's subjective appeal might preclude an extended consideration of relevant social issues. While it is generally standard practice for the art world to reflect Leftist ideals, this essay proposes a tempered approach in the curatorial treatment of political subjects. Such a method could foster a more nuanced and meaningful dialogue among museum patrons, as well result in greater inclusivity for the public.

America is Hard to See was particularly ambitious, serving not only as a reintroduction to the museum's holdings, but to American art and culture at large. The introductory wall text defined the Whitney's motivations, purporting to explicate "the themes, ideas, beliefs, and passions that have galvanized American artists in their struggle to work within and against established conventions, often directly engaging their political and social contexts."¹ The museum described its collection (from which the majority of the show was drawn) as "one that represents a range of individual, sometimes conflicting, attitudes toward what American art



Fig. 1. Elizabeth Peyton, *Barack and Michelle*, 2008-2013. Oil on canvas, 30.6 × 23.3 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Beth Swofford. Credit: Elizabeth Peyton.

might be or mean or do at any given moment.”² The exhibition was divided into twenty-three chapters, each offering a more specific framework within which to contemplate the accompanying works on view. Spread across five floors, the show made use of all available gallery space. Its grand scale and concept suggested a comprehensive and inclusive show. A pair of Marsden Hartley paintings were among the first works on view; one of them, *Painting, Number 5* (1914–15), memorializes the death of a German soldier in World War I. Thus from its outset, *America is Hard to See* challenged traditional notions of Americanness, ostensibly upholding its mission of “mining and questioning” America’s past.³ It was not until the latter portion of the show, one highlighting contemporary art, that the curatorial method shifted to a more overtly political style.

The fifth-floor elevator doors opened to reveal walls plastered floor to ceiling with reproductions of Donald Moffett’s *He Kills Me* (1987, fig. 2). The poster and accompanying wall text called attention to former President Ronald Reagan’s indifference toward the 1980s AIDS epidemic. The piece’s repetition allowed *He Kills Me* to appear not only in the “Love Letter from the War Front” chapter to which it belonged, but also in “Racing Thoughts,” a section dealing with hyper-commodification and the omnipresence of media. The latter chapter included Barbara Kruger’s *Untitled (We Don’t Need Another Hero)* (1987), highlighting the media’s reinforcement of prescribed gender roles. Surrounded by Reagan’s likeness, Kruger’s work took on another meaning: the incessant duplication of Moffett’s poster, traversing vast swathes of wall space, lent itself less to a consideration of governmental witlessness in times of crisis and more to a pointed implication of conservative dogmatism in all manner of social affairs. The usage of Reagan’s portrait to literally frame neighboring works of art, each containing its own sociocultural associations and unique subjects, acted as visual signifier; resultantly, the display associated conservatism with materialistic frivolity, homophobia, and sexism. When Moffett’s presentation is considered in relation to the display of Peyton’s work, a cogent partisan narrative is formed.

Barack and Michelle was featured in the concluding section of *America is Hard to See*. The chapter dealt with the most pressing social, political, and economic concerns of the recent past and present. Entitled “Course of Empire,” its wall text spoke of the discontent marking the social landscape of the United States in the twenty-first century, specifically referencing September 11, 2001, the stock market crash of 2008, and “the ravages of climate change as evidenced by Hurricane Katrina.”⁴ The text also referenced Peyton’s piece directly, conveying the impression that American society has been set on the path to redemption under the auspices of President Barack Obama:

Yet amid this anxiety and skepticism, hopeful glimmers emerge. The country’s first black president shares a tender moment with his wife in Elizabeth Peyton’s painting Barack and Michelle, and Glenn

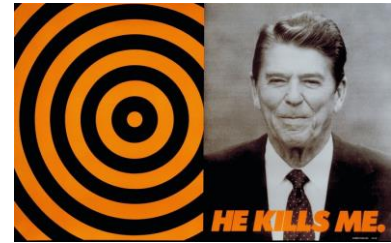


Fig. 2. Donald Moffett, *He Kills Me*, 1987, offset lithograph, 59.7 × 95.3 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of David W. Kiehl in memory of artists and artworkers who died of AIDS 2012. Credit: Donald Moffett.

*Ligon's neon relief summons a country that is, in his words, at once a "shining beacon" and a "dark star."*⁶

Peyton's portrait captures the couple at an intimate moment. Despite their celebrity and power, the Obamas are rendered as lovers and confidantes: shown in profile, Barack's lips graze Michelle's nose as they embrace in a tender display of affection. Their closed eyes suggest reassurance, confidence, even relief. They are dressed in formal attire and set against an abstracted background; the setting might be interpreted as the moment when then-candidate Obama accepted the Democratic nomination, or when the couple learned the results of the 2008 election. The figures take up the majority of the picture plane, even extending beyond its confines, in a closely cropped composition reminiscent of casual photographic snapshots. These traits converge in a double portrait that emphasizes the humanity and humility of the sitters, regardless of their political prominence. The title of the piece, a colloquial usage of the subjects' first names, further accentuates the couple's status as ordinary people rather than political elite. In this painting, Peyton is unconcerned with a consideration of the President's policies and influence, preferring to cast him in a fundamentally relatable light.

Barack and Michelle was hung alongside Wayne Gonzales's *So Long Suckers* (2008, fig. 3), an unflattering depiction of former Vice President Dick Cheney that serves as an indictment of the preceding Bush administration. Indeed, the very title of the chapter might be taken to reference President George W. Bush's interventionist foreign policy exploits, with "empire" connoting a propensity for imperialism and exploitation. In context, these examples speak to more than a protracted critique of Bush; rather, what emerges is a generalized anti-Republican/pro-Democrat narrative, woven throughout the show's latter portion. This appears problematic when one considers the selective historicizing employed to support such a conceit.

On the sixth floor, Andy Warhol's mocking portrait of then-presidential hopeful Richard Nixon (*Vote McGovern*, 1972) appeared in a chapter ("Raw War") that broadly portrayed tumultuous domestic fallout in the wake of United States military intervention in Vietnam. One floor below, the aforementioned condemnations of Reagan and Bush were presented. These works commonly elicit a questioning of authority, a reappraisal of status quo, and a criticism of government policy—all essential qualities that informed artists in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Yet the show was bereft of artwork that levied criticism at Democratic politicians (or positions currently associated with the Democratic Party), demonstrating that a generalized critique of governmental power structure was not the curatorial aim. The pro-Democrat message is problematized by the selective criteria used to support its claim: Warhol's *Vote McGovern* implies a condemnation of Nixon's position on Vietnam while tacitly avoiding criticism of former Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson, whose interventionist foreign policy escalated United States military



Fig. 3. Wayne Gonzales, *So Long Suckers*, 2008, screenprint, 50.8 × 62.9 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Yvonne Puffer and Sean Elwood in honor of Erin and Caitlin Elwood 2010. Credit: Wayne Gonzales.

involvement in Southeast Asia. Similarly, the Obama administration's interventionism in the Middle East—including the 2011 bombing of Libya, for example—reflects a broad continuation of the preceding (Bush) administration's procedures. Yet President Obama, affiliated with the Democratic Party, is proffered as the antidote to the American "Course of Empire"—a "hopeful glimmer," accentuated by Peyton's humanistic representation.

While *America is Hard to See* was an earnest survey of American art from the early twentieth century to the present, the display techniques employed for the works scrutinized here promoted a reductive rendering of the country's political parties. The art in question was categorically relevant to the exhibition's general concept; it is positioned as problematic only because its context served to cast political events through an ideological lens, rather than a reflective one. In light of this critique, the question arises: how might museums proceed in effectively displaying political art?

According to curator Robert Storr, the possibility of offering "a variety of perspectives" is the hallmark of a good exhibition, which goes in tandem with ensuring "a definite but not definitive point of view that invites serious analysis and critique."⁶ Art historian Terry Smith writes of a similar curatorial ideal: "Within the space of the exhibition itself, the curator's interpretation remains unstated, implicit."⁷ Such delicate treatment is encouraged, as museums tend to command authoritative positions in society. As secular institutions, museums are understood to denote an empirical and universal orientation.⁸ It follows that "to control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and some of its highest, most authoritative truths."⁹ The utilization of exhibition space to deliver polemical or partisan interpretations might be construed as a breach of an institution's inherent power, and a disservice to its visitors. It has been suggested that museum-goers are inclined to correlate their reasons for visiting an institution, as well as their experience within its walls, with conceptions of personal identity.¹⁰ It is important for the patron to identify with a particular narrative, one that informs their purpose for visiting and reinforces certain characteristics of self-image. Thus an institution runs the risk of becoming exclusionary when its exhibition content, buttressed by public expectations of empiricism and truth, is marked by political bias rather than Storr's "variety of perspectives."

Undoubtedly, public exhibitions possess the potential to direct conversations about world affairs. In an interview with *On Curating*, art historian Mary Anne Staniszewski describes the power of curators in this regard:

Curating has political potential in that it is one type of media that contributes to public discourses and the public domain. An exhibition—including those in smaller or alternative spaces—has the potential to seep, spread, influence, transform and change culture.

Therefore I feel that curators have a responsibility to engage with the critical issues of our time.¹¹

Staniszewski's belief in a curatorial responsibility to confront prevailing social concerns is shared by many in the art world, including some critics of the recent 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (June 4 – September 18, 2016). The curators of the biennial's 2016 iteration have come under scrutiny for "their ignorance of current events shaping Europe—like the refugee crisis, the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland party, Brexit, neoliberalism, austerity, and the privatization of art, culture, and education."¹² Staniszewski leveled a similar charge at the 2004 Whitney Biennial (March 11 – May 30, 2004), a show that also avoided overtly political content:

Despite the fact that we were in the so-called "age of terror," it was just a year after the US had invaded Iraq, the general character of the show seemed to be about escapism, fun and lightness—and it was not even ironic! The show exemplified the delusory denial that has been so prevalent in the US in the 2000s.¹³

Both biennials were criticized for their perceived failure to broach social concerns. Yet the Whitney's focus on escapism in the face of political turmoil, as well as the recent Berlin biennial's engagement with "the virtual as the real, nations as brands, people as data, culture as capital, wellness as politics, happiness as GDP," both speak directly to predominant sociopolitical events.¹⁴ It is evident that the exhibitions' critics would have preferred explicitly partisan appraisals of politics. One notes that the political issues allegedly ignored by the exhibitions—military intervention in the fight against terrorism, the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union, etc.—are causes commonly associated with the political Right. By taking the exhibitions to task, the critics express their desire for a pointed criticism of Rightist politics and an embrace of Leftist ideals, reinforcing the parochial view that has become institutionally embedded in some art institutions. Unlike the aforementioned shows, *America is Hard to See* approached contemporary politics from a Leftist orientation; coincidentally, the exhibition was considered favorably by the media.

America is Hard to See proved to be the most well-attended show in the museum's history, attracting nearly 750,000 visitors (over 5,300 per day).¹⁵ It was typically well-reviewed, and its partisanship went almost entirely unchallenged. Criticisms existed, to be sure: Christopher Knight pointed out that the exhibition focused primarily on the New York art world.¹⁶ Holland Cotter was content to base his criticisms on semantic matters, indicting the institution for its usage of the word "American" rather than "North American," which might be more appropriate given its exclusion of South and Central American artists.¹⁷ Though these critiques can be construed as "political," they ignore the partisan allegiance so evident in the presentation of Peyton's work, and serve as a further reflection of the art world's complicity with the promulgation of Leftist ideology.

The inherent bias and insular nature of the contemporary art scene is expressed in a recent review of the Jewish Museum's *Unorthodox* (November 6, 2015 – March 27, 2016), an exhibition that endeavored to show the work of unconventional and internationally disparate artists:

*What would appear truly unorthodox in a New York art museum would be a show of works expressing radically fundamentalist religious beliefs, whether by Christians, Muslims or Jews. Curators who really want to think out of the box might also look for artists espousing views of the American right wing's lunatic fringe. Would they discover good art? Maybe, maybe not. But it's possible that they'd find material considerably less orthodox by today's art world standards than what you see in Unorthodox.*¹⁸

Johnson suggests that *Unorthodox* read in many ways like a standard exhibition of contemporary art, employing its customary tropes and ultimately subscribing to its prevailing rhetoric. The show supported the unspoken "art world standards" even as it strove to shun them. Most tellingly, Johnson's review identifies the broader art world's obliviousness to topics that might be associated with the "right wing," and reveals his disdain for such matters by qualifying them as fringe.

But what is gained by a refusal to engage the political Right in the contemporary art museum? Moreover, could an honest assessment of the current political landscape in North America and Europe truly characterize the Right as "fringe," given the recent successes of its political causes? Paradoxically, the interests of inclusivity are regularly espoused by cultural organizations. The Museums Association of the United Kingdom proposes that museums "include more voices and experiences, to offer interpretations from multiple points of view."¹⁹ Yet there are limited efforts by museums to include points of view that do not immediately subscribe to Leftist ideals. In the United States, this observation is illuminated in a recent survey of Americans conducted by the Pew Research Center. The report reveals that, in contrast to political conservatives, three times as many "consistent liberals say it's important to them to live near art museums and theaters."²⁰ The statistic indicates the American Right's lack of engagement with cultural institutions, though it does not account for the potential causes of this phenomenon. The possibility arises that people do not feel welcome in institutions espousing ideological opposition to their deeply-held political beliefs: the same study reveals that "nearly two-thirds (63%) of consistent conservatives and about half (49%) of consistent liberals say most of their close friends share their political views."²¹ The desire to surround oneself with those who share a common political orientation, as expressed by partisan supporters on both ends of the political spectrum, is likely one source of the proliferation of Leftist ideals in contemporary art museums: in the absence of contention, groupthink is allowed to flourish. It should be noted that as recently as the early 1990s, a more robust dialogue regarding activist art exhibitions existed in the United States, one that stands in contrast with the lack of critical discourse

surrounding *America is Hard to See*. This observation presents the possibility that “consistent conservatives” have been effectively discouraged over time from visiting cultural institutions due to the perceived ideological disconnect between their personal beliefs and those encouraged by museums.

In 1991 the National Museum of American Art (Washington, DC) mounted an exhibition that sought to critique traditional conceptions of America’s westward expansion. *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier 1820–1920* (March 15 – July 28, 1991) sparked considerable controversy with its revisionist approach to American history. The show’s copious wall texts accompanied nineteenth-century American artwork that was purported to depict Native Americans as crude and savage, while simultaneously trumpeting the glories of European dominance. The exhibition was so provocative that it inspired two United States Senators to suggest that its Leftist bias was inappropriate for an institution funded primarily with taxpayer dollars.²²

Many of the show’s detractors pointed to one major piece, Emanuel Leutze’s large-scale history painting *The Storming of the Teocalli* (1848), as proof that the curators failed to honestly and accurately portray the content of the paintings and the social milieu in which they were envisioned. Leutze’s work depicts a decisive moment in Hernán Cortés’s campaign against the Aztecs in 1521, a battle scene between the Spanish and natives. A formal examination of the piece reveals that both the invading Spaniards and the Aztecs under attack are portrayed with equal gravity, each side engaged in a brutal and fierce struggle. Leutze shows a Spaniard in the process of tossing an Aztec infant from atop a temple—hardly a view sympathetic to the “civilizing” cause of the Europeans. Michael Kimmelman of *The New York Times* was critical of the show’s obvious agenda; whereas Leutze’s piece can be read ambiguously, he argues, the exhibition at large “does not allow for ambiguity.”²³ He continues:

Yet simply to look at the paintings is to see a different and more complex story. John Mix Stanley's "Barter for a Bride," of around 1860, representing peaceable Indians, was painted at least a decade after a work like Charles Deas's "Death Struggle," representing violent Indians. And at the same time that he was painting "Death Struggle," Deas also completed "The Voyageurs," an image of a white trapper, his Indian wife and their children paddling their canoe, which calls to mind Bingham's famous "Fur Traders Descending the Missouri" both in its composition and its serene mood. Only through interpretative contortions do the curators fit this work into their prescriptive formulas as a white fantasy of Indian assimilation.²⁴

Other scholars articulated the methodological issues associated with the show’s execution. “The problem with the

exhibit,” writes historian Thomas A. Woods, “was not that it championed a revisionist perspective about the past. Instead, the key issues are the exhibit’s academic curatorial style, methodology, and apparent lack of respect for its audience.”²⁵ The conceit of the show was not necessarily its issue; rather, the didactic methodology it employed made for a weak and intellectually dishonest argument. To help remedy the problems evident with this curatorial style, Woods advocates for a museology that is informed by an understanding of the needs of the public and a sensitivity to the ways in which visitors might be susceptible to taking on new conceptions of history.²⁶ The author’s critique of curatorial method could be applied to the approach favored in *America is Hard to See*; like *The West as America*, it relied on selective contextualization to emphasize political points. Both exhibitions employed wall texts that placed artworks into ideological frameworks, disregarding rather than unraveling oppositional arguments. To be sure, displaying political art does not necessitate advocating the cause of its creator; nor does the undertaking of an activist exhibition necessitate a disregard for nuance.

It is pertinent to note that *The West as America* took place in an era of American history that was typified by so-called “culture wars,” wherein conservative and liberal camps clashed over a plethora of issues, from abortion rights to the merits of multiculturalism. The culture wars of the 1990s notably impacted the arts, as Congress voted to substantially limit federal cultural funding in the 1995–96 session.²⁷ Although such terminology is generally not used to describe the recent political climate of the United States, organized and widespread efforts such as Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party, and Black Lives Matter seem to suggest that many of the prevailing political issues of the era have not yet been resolved. The culture wars signify a key era in the American Right’s subsequent withdrawal from the museum space. The public’s mixed reaction to *The West as America* suggests that, at the very least, some conservative-leaning people cared enough about museums to express their dismay with the show.²⁸ The lack of a similar critique concerning the popular Whitney exhibition in 2015 reveals how much public discourse has changed in the ensuing decades.

This article does not claim an exhaustive analysis of ideologically driven museum exhibitions, nor does it seek to disparage the often exemplary work of curators and our most cherished institutions. Rather, it solidifies what is already implicitly understood—that the art world reflects an inherently Leftist bias—and endeavors to create a dialogue regarding the potential problems arising from this ideological orientation. It appears axiomatic that polemical assertions in museum exhibitions could alienate those who sympathize with the views under scrutiny, particularly when political partisanship is embraced. While the Pew Center’s research indicates a lack of interest in museums among the American Right, this deduction should not be utilized to justify a Leftist ideological slant among cultural institutions, in the United States or elsewhere. What purposes do activist exhibitions

serve if they only reach those who sympathize with their cause? Exhibitions driven by ideology rather than Storr's emphasis on a "variety of perspectives" only serve to broaden the rift in understanding between both sides, while suppressing rather than encouraging dialogue. The twenty-first-century museum and art world increasingly stress pluralism and diversification; overtly polemical discourse subverts those very ideals. As curators, art historians, museum professionals, and writers, our chief aim should be to create a greater engagement with the arts in an increasingly polarized culture. It is the hope of the author that the art world at large begins to reflect honestly on its stated aims and missions, so that it might begin fostering truly inclusive institutions equipped to meet the demands of disparate and pluralistic communities.

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3. Ibid.
4. "Course of Empire" wall text, *America is Hard to See*.
5. Ibid.
6. Robert Storr, "Show and Tell," in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2006), 14.
7. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), Kindle location 452.
8. Carol Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1991), 90.
9. Ibid., 101–102.
10. John H. Falk, "Viewing Art Museum Visitors Through the Lens of Identity," *Visual Arts Research* 34, no. 2 (2008): 28.
11. "Interview with Mary Anne Staniszewski," *On Curating* 4 (May 2009): 3, http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/old%20Issues/ONCURATING_Issue4.pdf.
12. Dorian Batycka, "The 9th Berlin Biennale: A Vast Obsolescent Pageant of Irrelevance," *Hyperallergic.com*, June 24, 2016, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://hyperallergic.com/306932/the-9th-berlin-biennale-a-vast-obsolescent-pageant-of-irrelevance>. As a point of reference, a second critical review of the exhibition that expressed similar concerns is found in Jason Farago, "Welcome to the LOLhouse: how Berlin's Biennale became a slick, sarcastic joke," *The Guardian* online, June 13, 2016, accessed December 7, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/13/berlin-biennale-exhibition-review-new-york-fashion-collective-dis-art>.

13. "Interview with Mary Anne Staniszewski," 3.
14. DIS (Lauren Boyle, Solomon Chase, Marco Roso, David Toro), "The Present in Drag," *9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*, accessed December 8, 2016, <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/the-present-in-drag-2>.
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16. Christopher Knight, "At new Whitney site, a show is shrouded in parochialism," *Los Angeles Times* online, April 27, 2015, accessed August 16, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/museums/la-et-cm-knight-whitney-review-20150427-column.html>.
17. Holland Cotter, "New Whitney Museum's First Show, 'America is Hard to See,'" *The New York Times* online, April 23, 2015, accessed August 16, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/24/arts/design/review-new-whitney-museums-first-show-america-is-hard-to-see.html>.
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19. "'Museums Change Lives' Full Report," *MuseumsAssociation.org*, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=1001738>.
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22. Michael Kimmelman, "Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1991.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Thomas A. Woods, "Museums and the Public: Doing History Together," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (December 1995): 1114.
26. Ibid.
27. Timothy W. Luke, "Picturing Politics at the Exhibition: Art, History, and Cultural Identity in the American Culture Wars of the 1990s," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 15, no. 2 (December 1996): 3.
28. A selection of individual entries in the exhibition's guestbook are reprinted in "Vox Populi," *The New York Times* online, July 7, 1991, accessed December 9, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/07/arts/art-vox-populi.html>.