



The Bold Groups Tying Art History to Political History at the Whitney Biennial

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Occupy Museums' Debtfair at Art League Houston, 2015–16.COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Even before they enter the museum, visitors to the 2017 Whitney Biennial may spot, as they peer toward Renzo Piano's industrial edifice from Gansevoort Street, a monumental object perched on the terrace. It has the form of a large

melon, is inscribed with mystical markings, and sits at the center of a concrete circle like the statue in a traffic roundabout. A creation of the art collective GCC, it is inspired by an actual melon that appeared one day in the United Arab Emirates, where police destroyed it, documenting the process on social media, to neutralize its supposed occult force. Its reincarnation in one of the world's most prestigious exhibitions suggests that state power couldn't kill the magic.

There are three proper collectives — GCC, Postcommodity, and Occupy Museums — in this year's Biennial, and while their targets and styles differ, all scramble the signals of power and, in some way, liberate a terrain. While GCC, comprising eight Arab artists in scattered locations worldwide, takes on the Gulf states and their rituals of power, Postcommodity, whose three members have Native roots and work in the Southwest, addresses the U.S.-Mexico border and its politics. Their room-size video installation in the Biennial turns footage of a segment of the border, with its fencing and wires, into a sped-up, swirling experience.

At the same time, Occupy Museums — most of whose five members call New York home — dissects the art world itself, spotlighting its exploitative economics and institutional hypocrisies. Titled *Debtfair*, their installation in the Biennial follows a call they made to artists who face heavy debt (from student loans, credit cards, and so on) to share their experience of financial anxiety. Thirty works of the resulting "indebted art" are installed, literally, in the Whitney's walls, in a section where the plaster has been cut away, leaving the studs exposed. Nearby, a video projection shows some 500 other works from the open call in rotation, and kiosks invite visitors to contribute their own thoughts.

Art collectives, which began appearing in the Biennial in the 1980s, have a long history in contemporary art, one that resists generalization. Still, it's fair to say that they frequently stake out some kind of oppositional stance. To organize cooperatively is often itself a political decision. In interviews, for instance, members of each collective asked to be quoted under the group name, giving their project a single public voice.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



KAYA's Swarm Living Is for Bodybag Onion Braid, 2015. COURTESY THE ARTISTS.
PHOTOGRAPH BY ULI HOLZ

The Biennial's curators, Christopher Lew and Mia Locks, point out that the show includes other experiments in collaboration: KAYA, a project of Kerstin Brätsch and Debo Eilers, incorporates a woman named Kaya, a family friend; the adobe rotunda by Rafa Esparza exhibits works from other artists in his Los Angeles circle; Milwaukee-based John Riepenhoff's effigy-like "art handlers" each hold up another artist's work.

The collectives, however, speak directly to power and hierarchy, through their themes, the scale they achieve by operating as a group, and their often painstakingly deliberative

processes. “It’s not just the art that they make, but how they work and how they negotiate change,” says Locks. “It’s not only about content, it’s about method.”

GCC formed in 2013; its members are Nanu Al-Hamad, Abdullah Al-Mutairi, Aziz Al Qatami, Barrak Alzaid, Khalid al Gharaballi, Amal Khalaf, Fatima Al Qadiri, and Monira Al Qadiri. (Several are American citizens or work in the U.S., thus qualifying them for the Biennial.) “We didn’t mean to start the collective, it just happened,” the group says. “We found a kinship amongst ourselves and our ideas.”

Their approach quickly earned them a raft of exhibitions, including one at MoMA P.S.1 in 2014. Involving sculptural objects, video, decorated interiors, and performance, their installations spoof and scrutinize the rituals of power, such as summits, ribbon-cuttings, hotel lobbies, banquet halls, speeches, photo ops, and monuments. The name is sardonic; the better-known GCC is the Gulf Cooperation Council, the regional grouping of states. “Our first opening was not very busy, because some people believed it was an actual Gulf Cooperation Council event,” the collective says. “We found this flattering.”

Postcommodity, whose members are Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, and Kade L. Twist, places its 2007 founding in the tradition of community organizing; they cite as one mentor a Native organizer in Minnesota, Syd Beane, himself a disciple of Saul Alinsky. Another inspiration is the *acequias*, centuries-old, community-maintained irrigation ditches in Native and Mestizo communities in New Mexico. “The way we are as a collective reflects the ways we were raised,” says Postcommodity. “Sometimes things we do are super challenging, but there’s also something familiar about it.”



Postcommodity, still from *A Very Long Line*, 2016. COURTESY THE ARTISTS

In 2015, working with communities in Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, Postcommodity put up a spectacular land-art installation titled *Repellent Fence*. It consisted of 26 hot-air balloons tethered in a line that crossed the border and stretched

far off on either side. Each was yellow with a red-and-blue circle pattern — “medicine colors” of the Indigenous communities who pre-date the border and its politics. The Biennial video installation is a byproduct of this work. Its spinning fence and drone-like soundtrack are intentionally jarring. “That disorientation becomes a metaphor for how things can be at the U.S.-Mexico border,” Postcommodity says. “In the transborder system, politics and economy and culture and relationships can become very confusing.”

For Occupy Museums, the relationships to clarify are the ones that structure the art industry in a time of rampant inequality. “More than an art history, it’s a political history that drives us,” says the group, which includes Arthur Polendo, Imani Jacqueline Brown, Kenneth Pietrobono, Noah Fischer, and Tal Beery. They came together amid Occupy Wall Street, in 2011. “We see ourselves as a group that came directly out of Occupy,” they say. “That lays the groundwork for our decision-making and the basic ethics that underlie the group.”

Having begun with guerrilla actions, Occupy Museums lately has entered museums by invitation thanks to *Debtfair*. Each edition highlights specific creditor categories: The thirty artists with works here have debts with JPMorgan Chase (a Biennial sponsor), Puerto Rican banks, or student loan servicer Navient. The collective argues that art market speculation, the high cost of art school, and precarious daily life for the 99 percent are linked. “The rise of the art object as an asset class is connected to the rise of artist debt. The same person collecting your artwork is the person collecting your debt payments.”

As working artists with debt of their own, the Occupy Museums members say raising the issue helps reduce anxiety. “Debt makes people feel alone, stranded, and scared,” they say. “We’re trying to organize artists as debtors, then push back against banks and make the whole system fairer.” Behind all art lies labor, their installation reminds viewers, and labor today is precarious. “It’s not just that being an artist is difficult,” the collective says. “It’s that artists are embedded and entangled in a system that financializes their struggle.”

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