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WHITNEY BIENNIAL | DIAL #7 IF YOU FEEL YOU ALREADY KNOW THE ANSWER

BY OLIVIA NOVATO

Trinh T. Minh-ha. "What about China? (Still)" (2021). HD video, color, sound; 135 min. © Moongift Films. Courtesy the artist and Moongift Films.

Quiet as It's Kept: a secret uttered from the other end of the line. A secret not so surprising in one's ear. This hushed colloquialism informs the latest Whitney Biennial, on view from April 6th through September 5th, with select portions extending through October 23rd. Relegated to secrecy, the phrase is notable for its usage in the works of novelist Toni Morrison, Jazz drummer Max Roach, and artist David Hammons. Co-organized by curators David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards, the eightieth iteration of the Biennial brings together a host of artists, seasoned and on the rise, to occupy the museum's fifth and sixth floors. Cross cultural, cross generational, cross aesthetic.

"Deliberately intergenerational and interdisciplinary, the Biennial proposes that cultural, aesthetic, and political possibility begins with meaningful exchange and reciprocity," Breslin and Edwards note in the Biennial's press materials. "Rather than proposing a unified theme, we pursue a series of hunches throughout the exhibition: that abstraction demonstrates a tremendous capacity to create, share, and, sometimes withhold, meaning; that research-driven conceptual art can combine the lushness of ideas and materiality; that personal narratives sifted through political, literary, and pop cultures can address larger social frameworks; that artworks can complicate what 'American' means by addressing the country's physical and psychological boundaries; and that our 'now' can be reimagined by engaging with under-recognized artistic models and artists we've lost."

Organized before the catastrophe beginning in March of 2020 and the social upheavals of that summer, this Biennial feels particularly prescient—preemptive, perhaps. The 63 artists' works interact with one another, offering alinear, yet continuous conversation through the psyche and also the pits of our stomachs.

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Flaunt conversed with participating artists Trinh T. Minh-ha, Jacky Connolly, Rick Lowe, and Andrew Roberts to explore their works in this year's Biennial.

Trinh T. Minh-ha. "What about China? (Still)" (2021). HD video, color, sound; 135 min. © Moongift Films. Courtesy the artist and Moongift Films.

TRINH T. MINH-HA

BY MADELINE SCHULZ

Trinh T. Minh-ha approaches filmmaking as a process of speaking *nearby* (rather than *about*), in refusal to objectify that which, and those whom, she documents. Throughout her diverse body of work, the Hanoi-born filmmaker, writer, theorist, and composer plays with notions of inside-out and outside-in, always pointing towards the inevitable interplay between the two. In doing so, she rejects film genres and classifications, instead embracing a duality of movement: she lets the world come to her, and reaches out to the world from within.

Minh-ha's films have been the subject of over fifty retrospectives globally, from London to Rio to New York. She is currently a Professor in the Gender and Women Studies and Rhetoric departments at the University of California, Berkeley.

In her most recent film, *What About China?*—on view at the Biennial—Minh-ha takes viewers on a tour of sorts through ancient Chinese architecture and sprawling rural landscapes in a cinematic rendering of footage
from 1993-4. Throughout the film, she explores the concept of harmony and its deep roots in Chinese culture. Harmony plays a key role in quotidian Chinese life, connecting society, nature, oneself, and each other. A journey through rural Chinese hinterlands, the film interrogates the country's so-called Great Uprooting. This, too, is imbued with notions of harmony: Minh-ha hints at the ways political forces have co-opted the term in deferring to the maintenance of balance and, in turn, order. Through this multi-dimensional concept, Minh-ha opens up the possibility of bridging the gap between the ancient and the modern, and the potential for exploration therein.

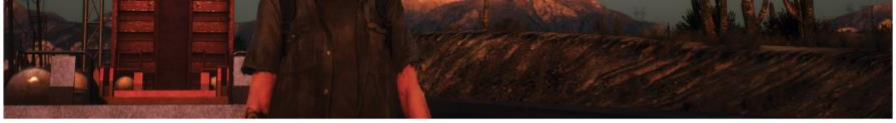
What do you feel the rest of the world can learn from a Chinese notion of harmony?
In my film *What About China?* (135 mins, 2021), harmony is a site of creative manifestation. It is not an abstract product of the mind, but an extensive practice of living, of spiritual and artistic endeavor across times, cultures, and politics. Highly valued as a virtue and a guiding criterion in ethics, harmony has played an important role in the lives of Chinese people since ancient times—harmony with society, harmony with nature, and harmony with oneself. In the film, harmony involves not only the way music fundamentally defines reality, or the way space structures daily life, but also the dynamic agents in the ongoing process of safeguarding the "roundness" of a world of social equity. Harmony is evoked and practiced in China and in the film is a double-edged sword. The way harmony unfolds between ancient and modern, across artistic, social, political, and spiritual practices is at the same time specific to Chinese arts, culture and politics (via architecture, music, painting, and current official rhetoric in ruling matter), to the way the film comes together (via the diverse elements of cinema and the relations woven between image, music, and text); and broadly applicable to social relations and political situations in other parts of the world, more particularly in the West. Looking at the wars unfolding today and the discordant, inharmonious world events suffices to tell us how in losing harmony, we are liable to extreme divisiveness in our society, and the US is here a dominant example. In other words, this is not a China problem.

You've said "there's no such thing as a documentary". Do you believe that that makes work any less "true" than documentary? Is truth inherently subjective?

No, on the contrary. Is what a person says less true than what
a machine reproduces? Truth is always mediated, whether it is through human eyes or through the camera eye. In other words, the finger pointing out at truth is also pointing back at itself. One can say that on the one hand, truth is produced, induced, and extended according to the regime in power; and on the other hand, truth lies in between all regimes of truth. Truth, even when "caught on the run," does not yield itself either in the name or the frame. This is why it is necessary to question the documentary establishment's claims to truth and information. Anyone working intimately with the reality and the materiality of film and video would feel at odds with categories that merely reflect the way society compartmentalizes knowledge into "expertise" for the purposes of control and consumption.
A work at odds with classifications such as documentary, fiction, or film art, explicitly explores the fluid relation to infinity within the finite. The film *What About China?* opens with questions
that return later—albeit differently—concerning: which China? whose China? China when? China how? What do we refer to when we evoke a reality like "China"? In the politics of representation, how does one approach "China"? And what about the

"China" within us? These are basic questions that allow us to depart from its demonized or romanticized media depiction as a threat, an economic rival, and a rising political power. China is in dire need of introspection, so are we who live in the US and in the West.

How does this work connect to the Biennial's colloquialism: *Quiet as It's Kept*? Is there a secret present in the work?
My work connects quite well with the colloquialism, mainly because of the way it works with invisibility within the visible, the indirect within the direct, the communal within the personal, and with the fact that its quality as an independent, underground film is particularly heightened by the circumstances during the pandemic. I have also long worked with silence, both the silence imposed and the silence chosen readily found among marginalized people. This is necessary since the situation raised with China is politically delicate for all the people involved. And this is what Toni Morrison referred to when she wrote about how Black writers were being "silent about many things" and how they "forgot" many others in writing about their own lives to expose the horrors of slavery.



Jacky Connolly. "Descent into Hell (Still)" (2021). Multichannel HD video, color, sound. Courtesy the artist.

JACKY CONNOLLY

BY VANESSA BLASI

Endless winding roads, twists and turns and obstacles, red lights and stop signs fill our minds, yet Jacky Connolly depicts our imaginations' exigent desire to run wild, our inclination to escape reality whenever and wherever we may be. Freedom in the mind exists much differently than freedom on the ground. Yet this Brooklyn-based artist designs an alternate reality, satisfying the adventurous and impulsive parts of us awaiting to break free. Connolly's animation, "Descent into Hell" draws inspiration from Doris Lessing's novel, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971). The artwork portrays a character as valiant, lost, and dangerous as our minds' can often aspire to be. Similar to Lessing's novel, this story transports viewers to an alternate timeline along the broken and dystopian city of Los Angeles in which anything is possible.

With degrees from Bard College at Simon's Rock, Connolly flipped her tassel in 2011 with a BFA in Photography, Art History, and Critical Studies. Taking her studies further, she also received her MFA in Digital Arts and an MSc in Library and Information Science from Pratt Institute in 2016. Undeniably, Connolly's brilliance in gaming technology and natural talent for artistic expression gained true recognition in recent years when she was featured in exhibitions such as the Whitney Museum of American Art; Interstate Projects, Brooklyn; Kimberly-Klark, Queens; Et al., San Francisco; Land and Sea, Oakland; and Bus Projects, Melbourne.

Illusive, harrowing, alluring, and liberating—"Descent into Hell" bridges the cavernous gap between knowledge and imagination. By depicting the epitome of a fantasy life, she minimizes the concept of existence to a pixelated screen, while more purposefully expanding the possibilities of a "happily ever after"... or not.

Where do you think this sense of a meandering, lost feeling comes from?

As the world has felt so alien and ungrounded for the past few years, I also became a bit of a wanderer for the duration of creating this work. I went from upstate New York, back to New York City, and now I'm living in Amsterdam (NL). I started "Descent into Hell" in the autumn of 2019. I was living in a small house in the Catskills for a few years, after a decade in the city. When I lived in New York, I found myself drawn to virtual settings (with *The Sims* games) that emulated the suburban-rural world of the Hudson Valley, where I grew up. Living in solitude upstate, I was drawn to the reverse; I found myself working in virtual environments that captured a feeling of urban alienation and dissonance.

Of course, 2020-2021 only heightened a feeling of separateness from society, as I spent the weeks virtually "roaming" a simulation of a world that suddenly had ceased to exist. I also found myself voyeuristically reading an online forum for "vagabonds"; people who live as modern hobos and drifters, hopping trains or living out of a van. Feeling so homebound during the pandemic definitely stimulated my pre-existing fascination with the people who disappear, or drop out, and live a totally different existence.
In the summer of 2020, we had a fire at our house in the Catskills and spent some time living in a hotel. It was the second house fire that I've been through in my life (the other was during my childhood); a lot of the elemental fire (and water) imagery in the videos came up through that experience. Simultaneously, the world has quite literally been on fire in parts of America, some of the worst forest fires in US history. So, in my virtual California, the world is on fire and the people are strange and disconnected from one another.

Do you think that video games, virtual reality, etc. is humanity achieving some sort of cross-universal travel?
I think that the experience of virtual teleportation does exist, in a sense. I have only ever spent a few weeks in Los Angeles—I did not know the city geographically through any real, lived experience. But the accuracy of *GTA*'s [*Grand Theft Auto V*] virtual LA map is striking. When I flew out there in the middle of creating this work, from the moment that I arrived at LAX,

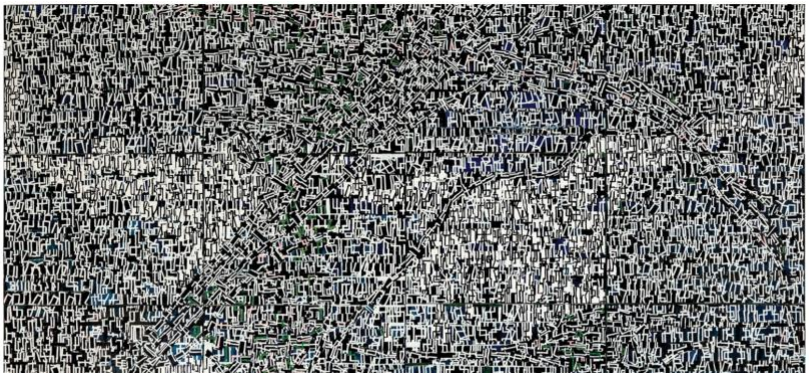
I recognized every detail of the roads, the placement of trees along the highway and the passing landmarks. Definitely an uncanny experience. I will say that virtual "travel" does have some sort of aura, especially the way that virtual light hits on certain surfaces can evoke a feeling of place for me. But I think that this sensation pales in comparison to lived experience—of actually feeling lost in a real, unfamiliar place. To me, game worlds cannot compare to real-world experiences of mystery and wonder.

Do you think that this idea of "reality shifting" is a coping mechanism or an addiction? Is it something we opt into or something we are fed?

I think that the Gen Z reality shifting trend is fascinating, but I also see a lot of darkness there. It's a form of fantasy or play, but then most of the realities that are popular to "shift" to are sort of fan fiction universes—Hogwarts, for instance. The message seems to be: hypnotize yourself into a sort of psycho- sis, and commune with these mass cultural artifacts in that "other" place. But maybe not any more psychically unhealthy than looking at social media every two hours, or playing *Animal Crossing* for 8 hours a day...

How does this work connect to the Biennial's colloquialism: *Quiet as It's Kept*? Is there a secret present in the work?

There are secrets, puzzles that lead nowhere, and mysterious events are left as loose ends, with no resolutions. The majority of my avatars always stand as silent vessels, witnesses looking over the film's wreckage without a voice. Though there is a moment when one character "breaks through" and finds a voice that I'm particularly happy about, but her vocalization is more of a guttural scream.



Rick Lowe. "Project Row Houses: If Artists Are Creative Why Can't They Create Solutions" (2021). Acrylic and paper collage on canvas, sixteen panels. 36" × 48" each, 144" × 192" overall. Collection of the artist; courtesy the artist and Gagosian, New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, and Hong Kong.

RICK LOWE

BY OLIVIA NOVATO

Tor painter and community organizer, rick lowe, art—despite its communal applications—isn't about creating for others' consumption. It's about moving outside of the bounds, rejecting the confines of formal art, about creating something larger than just a painting or a sketch. Why? Because art has power. Few are as aware of this power as Lowe.

Lowe was first introduced to art through landscape painting and went on to receive formal training at Columbus College. Quickly, he became more and more involved with the political side of art. Lowe, who is recognized for his community engagement and work with "social sculpture"—using creativity as a way to empower communities around him—is also one of the founders of Project Row Houses. Project Row Houses was started in 1993 by a group of visionary Black artists who saw potential in a row of derelict properties in Houston, converting them into art spaces for the celebration of both Black culture and creative expression.

For the Biennial, Lowe will present "Wall Street Journey Manifesto #1" (2021).

How would you describe the importance of learning through your community by means of osmosis, experience, or conversationally, rather than instruction?

Learning about and from communities that I work with is the most important aspect of my socially-engaged work. I'm a big proponent of multi-sensory listening for learning. It's important to listen with my ears, eyes, and heart—the best way to engage in experiences with the people of the community. I try to find informal ways of connecting. The less formal, the more likely it is to get a sense of what people are really thinking. In formal settings, people have a tendency to perform. They will tell you what they think you want or don't want to hear and not necessarily what they really feel or think. In informal situations, like playing games with people or casual conversations at cookouts, or things that you can participate in with them, people tend to relax and are more open and honest. In informal environments, I can listen to how people speak to each other. Sometimes, how things are said is more important than what is said. I get to see how people respond to things that are said or done. Listening in an engaged process excites me. I like the organic nature of the process. In the best case scenario, I would have engaged in the process of getting to know people before I ever bring up any aspect of the work that I might like to engage them in.

You speak of Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture. How do you go about manifesting and creating your own social sculpture that is led through a collective intention and experience?

Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture is about shaping the world we live in as a sculpture. It opens up the possibility of infusing creativity into every aspect of our social, political, and environmental lives. What's most important in his concept is that he proclaims that "everyone is an artist." If we are to shape the world as a sculpture, the creative sources needed have to go beyond the traditional artists. I hope this is a guiding principle when working on projects. This is important for me because I tend to try manifesting projects that can sustain themselves longer than the typical art project. With this in mind, it is critical to bring partners into the process as creative contributors. I try to establish a sense that everyone who engages in the process is an artist. Regardless if in their professional life they are considered a lawyer, historian, carpenter, etc., or even if they are just a community resident. In this kind of environment, the creative pool of ideas is expanded. Ownership of the work is expanded. When these elements are evident, the possibility of a project sustaining itself beyond my involvement increases exponentially. I guess it might be said that my role as an artist in the projects I work on is simply to identify the issues that are of interest to a community, and then to generate a framework for the community to bring forth their inherent creativity to the project. When I look back at the most successful projects I've worked on, the majority of the tactics used to bring meaning into the projects come from the creative minds of those in the community.

What was your process in finding painting as a more intrinsic space of reflection, especially with the notion that art is made to be consumed?

I started out as a studio practicing painter who was much more interested in the political impact of my paintings than aesthetic issues. I did this work until I was challenged to produce work that went beyond representation of political and social issues. My response to that challenge was to engage in social
sculpture. This took me away from the reflective space of the studio. The social sculpture work I engaged in required that I was present physically, mentally, and emotionally in the social fabric of the work. In general, the work I've engaged in has always been based in contexts of needs that demand so much physical, mental, and emotional presence that there is rarely space reflection. When my interest in the patterns of dominos fully developed into a drawing and painting practice, I found myself back in the studio. This time in the studio is very different than it was when I was making studio work 30 years ago. This time, the studio serves a different purpose. When I was making figurative political paintings, the studio was a place where I prepared ideas to go out and be active in the political world I was engaged with.

Now the studio is a refuge where I can reflect on the work that I've been doing that I see as a catalyst for the political and social change that I believe in. Because it is reflective and nourishing for me, it allows me space to also indulge in the aesthetics of painting and drawing as an object maker. Going back to a studio practice has provided balance to my practice that has been missing for years. It has provided me a space to reflect and own my personal identity to accompany the very public practice of social sculpture. I never thought much about the commercial aspects of art making. Even as my paintings are beginning to be a part of that world, my focus continues to be using my creativity to impact the social and political issues that have always been important to me.

How does this work connect to the Biennial's colloquialism: *Quiet as It's Kept*? Is there a secret present in the work?

[Laughs] Good question. I didn't know the title of this year's Whitney Biennial was *Quiet as It's Kept* when I made the work "Project Row Houses: If Artists Are Creative Why Can't They Create Solutions" that was selected for the exhibition. As it turns out, this piece is a kind of a reflective narrative of my contemplation of this question that was put before me as a challenge to make work that went beyond representation and symbolism. After a few years of painting and drawing domino patterns, I realized if I cut them up a particular way, they look like a kind of language. So for the piece, I cut and collaged the domino pattern drawings in a way that for me are my illegible attempt to answer the question. In the process of making the work, I decided if I could identify the letters that make up the question in the domino pattern drawings that I cut up. It took some time, but I found the letters and it is embedded in the painting. It is a quiet secret in that it is difficult to find. That is a specific secret, but beyond that, I think the bigger secret is embedded in who attempts to answer the question. The answer is illegible to everyone including me. But I know there is an answer. It's just a matter of uncovering the secret.

Andrew Roberts, "La Horda (The horde) (Detail)" (2020). Eight-channel video installation, color, sound; each channel approx. 3–4 min. Collection of Mauricio Galguera. Image courtesy the artist and Pequod Co., Mexico City. Photograph by Sergio López.

ANDREW ROBERTS

BY OLIVIA NOVATO

The 26-year-old multidisciplinary artist Andrew Roberts' jarring work—replete with imagery of mutilated body parts and zombie-fied caricatures of capitalism, or that matter that drives neoliberalism, depending who you ask—calls into question the role that images play in our society. Inspired by a childhood where violent video game graphics quickly materialized in the streets of his neighborhood, Andrew Roberts' art explores how structural violence forces itself into the lives of those whose bodies are often treated as disposable. As someone who identifies as Latino and queer, Roberts, who is based in Tijuana, MX, not only finds himself in the crossfire of geopolitical war, but in the intersections of his own identity—both of which undoubtedly manifest in his multidisciplinary work.

Roberts' art is not meant to be consumed lightly. A severed foot tattooed with the Nike logo. A bleeding figure glued to a VR headset. A grandparent's home engulfed in flames. None of it screams casual consumption—if anything, it's casualty consumption, but isn't that what art is all about? Making us feel the painful things, making us think the hard things? And this graphic, unsettling artistic style has proven successful for Roberts. Most recently, a solo show, *WWWizards*, opened in Barcelona at House Of Chappaz, and his inclusion in the upcoming Whitney Biennial makes him the youngest artist to be featured this year.

You speak of seeing "visual codes" as a child that shaped your sensibility—how they are reflected in your works and beyond. Have you created your own visual codes?

Often I think of my works as counter-images, made to reveal or dismantle certain visualities that operate within oppressive structures. I approach my practice through an image engineering process, in which it is important for me to understand what happens inside technological black boxes at the moment of image creation, and then learn how to use those same means of production for my own. Similarly, I look to pop culture elements to find and make visible the rhetoric embedded into them, be it racist, classist, or homophobic. Rather than creating my own visual codes, I'm drawn to take over those already established, and manifest to the eye what's been obscured but tries to shape our reality without us noticing at first.

How do you feel science fiction, horror, and video games become a vessel into a commentary on the terrors subjected by a colonial past, capitalism, and war?

Recently, my focus has been directed towards video games and their ability of world-making—not just digital characters and fictional narratives, but our bodies made of flesh and the physical world. As a gamer, I don't believe in video games as inherently violent tools, but as any entertainment media, they are subjected to the sensibility of their creators, sometimes shaped by colonial-structured ways of seeing the world, and others. For me, a monster theory rooted in science-fiction and horror serves to understand this otherness portrayed in video games. I find it urgent to be aware that movies, cartoons, and interactive media—mainly created by European and American studios—can act as soft power mechanisms in a present-day colonial process mobilized through cognitive capitalism.

How do your works help spur an awakening of the main labor force to amass a class consciousness?

There's a general and very superficial analysis of the zombie figure as an analog to capitalist consumerism. I wanted to deviate from that reading and approach the living dead with empathy. Rather than being the mindless eaters of capitalism's leftovers, they are the mere matter that fuels neoliberalism: death and precarity-made images and commodities.

In this sense, the characters in my work are not users, nor clients—they are workers and objects subdued by those able to pay for their bodies. The animations are installed like a character selection screen from a video game, where they act as surrogates for my own experiences, or avatars waiting to be chosen by those who relate to them.

How does this work connect to the Biennial's colloquialism: *Quiet as It's Kept*? Is there a secret present in the work?

On a visit Adrienne Edwards and David Breslin made to Tijuana, David told me something that stuck to me, that there's a sinister side to pop culture. I like to think of this work as something that helps navigate through the obscured parts of it and reveal what is not being said. The characters in the installation form an assembly of voices reading a series of poems I wrote during the lockdown, all dealing with personal first-hand experiences of violence and trauma. They do anything but keep quiet.

TAGS

Whitney Biennial Madeline Schulz Quiet As It's Kept Trinh T. Minh-Ha Jacky Connolly Rick Lowe Andrew Roberts Olivia Novato Vanessa Blasi