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# A LETTER FROM OCCUPY WALL STREET TO THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL



Below is printed word-for-word the letter sent in late February [2012] from the OWS Arts & Labor committee to the Whitney Biennial, demanding an end to the exhibit. I re-publish it because they repeat many of the points I have made [in past papers](#), concerning the fact that artists are rarely the beneficiaries of the new art program, and are most often the victims. I would affix to their letter an addendum, broadening the point and the demand to all of modern art. It is not just the Whitney that acts as a fascist arm of the modern art market, it is every contemporary museum in the world, every contemporary art publication, every university art department, and every other institution in the arts, including the National Endowment for the Arts and [the National Gallery](#). As a point of logic, OWS should be calling for the end and closure of all these institutions. But even as it is, the letter is well-written and worth supporting. I encourage all realists to join OWS in calling for the end of the Whitney Biennial. Although we will have some disagreements with OWS Arts and Labor, I don't see how we can fail to ally ourselves to them on this issue.

That said, I am not sure that asking the Whitney to end itself is a rational course. It is not really the Whitney that this was written for. It is more an open letter, warning the Whitney of concerted opposition. This letter should be distributed and printed as widely as possible, sent not only to publications in New York City, but to any publications, institutions or individuals that might be allies against the current market. Just as I have reprinted it, it is up to you to copy it and send it anywhere that seems appropriate to you, either as a warning or as a call to alliance. Send it to your local paper, your local museum, your chamber of commerce, or your classical arts society (of any kind).

If you get nothing else from reading this letter, please notice that progressives and activists (of all colors and both sexes) are now active and vocal *against* contemporary art, calling it corrupt and controlled—an arm of the entrenched *status quo* and of the wealthy. What is sold as revolutionary and progressive is actually regressive and oppressive. What is sold as

relevant is utterly irrelevant and vacuous. What is sold as exciting and challenging is actually empty and false. What is sold as *avant* is really the worst sort of reactionary, right-wing propaganda imaginable, underwritten from the top down by super-wealthy private foundations and various cloaked government agencies. The art market, like all other high-dollar markets, has been taken over by whitewashed mobsters—in government and out—who are capable of controlling the media, and using your taxdollars to do it. All to continue to prop up a multi-billion dollar market for faux-artifacts of absolutely no value or worth.

Dear Whitney Museum of American Art,

We are Arts & Labor, a working group founded in conjunction with the New York General Assembly for OccupyWallStreet. We are artists and interns, writers and educators, art handlers and designers, administrators, curators, assistants, and students dedicated to exposing and rectifying economic inequalities and exploitative working conditions in our fields through direct action and educational initiatives. We are writing to call for an end to the Whitney Biennial in 2014.

Biennials were born in the nineteenth century, in an era when many nations were young and wished to showcase their greatest cultural products and achievements. The Whitney annuals grew out of this, championed by the patron and sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, in a period when American art had little critical or financial support.

Much has changed since the founding of the Whitney Studio in 1914 and the advent of the current biennial format in 1973. The absorption of contemporary art into museums, the rise of a speculative art market, and the need for artists to obtain advanced degrees to participate in the current system have changed how art is produced and exhibited.

We object to the biennial in its current form because it upholds a system that benefits collectors, trustees, and corporations at the expense of art workers. The biennial perpetuates the myth that art functions like other professional careers and that selection and participation in the exhibition, for which artists themselves are not compensated, will secure a sustainable vocation. This fallacy encourages many young artists to incur debt from which they will never be free and supports a culture industry and financial and cultural institutions that profit from their labors and financial servitude.

The Whitney Museum, with its system of wealthy trustees and ties to the real estate industry perpetuates a model in which culture enhances the city and benefits the 1% of our society while driving others into financial distress. This is embodied both in the biennial's sponsorship – represented most egregiously in its sponsorship by Sotheby's, which has locked out its unionized art handlers – and the museum's imminent move to the Meat Packing District, a neighborhood where artists once lived and worked which is now a gentrified tourist destination that serves the interests of the real estate industry.

We therefore call upon the Whitney in its centennial year to end the biennial and to support the interests of art workers over the capital interests of its trustees and corporate sponsors. As the Declaration of the Occupation of New York City states, “We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression

over equality, run our governments.” Art institutions have come to mirror that ethos. We therefore call upon the Whitney to terminate its collusion with this system of injustice and use its resources to imagine sustainable models of creativity and culture that are accessible not just to Americans but to people around the globe.

Sincerely,  
Arts & Labor