

## Whitney Biennial

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART,  
NEW YORK  
Emily Apter

ON MY FIRST VISIT to this year's Whitney Biennial, I entered a gallery and found myself surrounded by materials documenting the history of the journal *Semiotext(e)* and the small press of the same name. I'd stumbled on what felt like an uncanny physical manifestation of my own past—specifically, a crucial and affectively charged component of my theoretical formation. Ephemera papered the walls, along with displays of books, while special issues of the journal—on Bataille, on Autonomia, on polysexuality—were lined up in a vitrine, doubles of my own personal effects. Part of curator Stuart Comer's third of this tripartite show—with Anthony Elms and Michelle Grabner helming the other floors—the installation, drawn from the archive of *Semiotext(e)* founder Sylvère Lotringer, points up a key if tacit theme of the Biennial. The exhibition is replete with printed matter, writing, texts of all sorts—in short, with words. Under the broad rubric of the lexical fall such works as David Foster Wallace's notebooks; Allan Sekula's text-heavy sketchbooks; Etel Adnan's *leporellos*, or fold books, conflating painting and poetry; David Diao's painting *40 Years of His Art*, 2013, which depicts an invitation to the artist's fictional MOMA retrospective; and Susan Howe's poetic microtexts, which,

even as they take words as their medium, challenge the dominion of lexicocentrism via their positioning between "writing and seeing, reading and looking," as Howe puts it.

In fact, by virtue of being on display in a museum, *all* of these works stake out that liminal space. And because archives amplify our sense of documents as physical things (as suggested by the fact that libraries indicate the scope of archival holdings in terms of "linear feet"), this tension between reading and looking is nowhere more apparent than in the show's powerful archival displays. Elms's section of the exhibition includes Joseph Grigely's reconstitution of art critic Gregory Battcock's hitherto scattered papers, and, in addition to the *Semiotext(e)* gallery, Comer's section features Julie Ault's installation *Afterlife: A Constellation*, 2014. Here, alongside handwritten papers by Martin Wong, is the Indian River citrus crate that artist David Wojnarowicz kept beneath his bed and used to store items—receipts, toys, postcards, figures made of newspaper—that would make their way into his work *Magic Box*.

The prevalence of such work resonates with an impulse currently animating several academic disciplines, namely, the rethinking of literature and the literary object in light of object-oriented ontology. OOO, as it's often called, is a philosophical tendency loosely connecting a diverse group of "speculative realists" (e.g., Jane Bennett, Graham Harman) who, whether or not they embrace that label, investigate the relation between persons and things while denying the hierarchical superiority of the human subject. Extrapolating from this discourse (which has informed the art world's own in recent years, notably influencing Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's Documenta 13 and its discussion in these pages), we might say that a textual object-orientation refers us to the text's status as matter, to its marks of material wear and of interaction with other objects and beings. To be sure, from the earliest iterations of hieroglyphics up through concrete poetry, typographic experimentalism, intermedial Conceptualism, and most recently thing theory, encounters with the physique of texts have been staged again and again. But in the context of object-oriented ontology, there is renewed attention to

literary content as grapheme, handwriting, embossed toile, mass of print, etc. The textual object is identified not by, say, genre or style but by what it does and what is done to or with it. Like Howe's microtexts, it becomes a *thing* to be looked at, touched, translated, technologically mediated. It is not the static predicate of a transitive verb, but a gerundive: A text *is being* curated, and so forth. It demands to be seen as a live, or "living," work, an interface of *bios* and *res*.

Bespeaking a strong engagement with the object turn as a textual form, the Biennial does not elide the fact that it's tricky to claim materiality within the realm of the literary, particularly when art itself is in many ways defined by a material engagement with the world. But the exhibition nevertheless makes a compelling case for the rewards to be had when words cast their lot with things, so to speak, and vice versa, while suggesting the affective networks linking active objects and human subjects. Wojnarowicz's *Magic Box* poignantly embodies such links as an archive within an archive, part *Wunderkammer*, part punk fetish

**The textual object demands to be seen as a live, or "living," work, an interface of *bios* and *res*.**

chamber, promiscuously intermingling words and things. Texts and representations, like people, are mortal to the extent that they are material, and certainly mortality is at the crux of this show, with its homages to such figures as semiforgotten artist Tony Greene (who died due to complications of AIDS in 1990 and was memorialized in an installation curated by Richard Hawkins and Catherine Opie) and activist Malachi Ritscher (who self-immolated in 2006 in protest against the Iraq war, and whose performance tapes and valises have been put on display by the group Public Collectors). Yet, Wojnarowicz's ensemble of detritus suggests, it is this mortality that underpins the sacred humility of objects on which artists bestow votive homage. □

*The Whitney Biennial is on view through May 25 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.*

EMILY APTER IS A PROFESSOR OF FRENCH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

The Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art requests the pleasure of your company at the opening of the exhibition

David Diao: 40 years of his art on Friday, August 7 from nine o'clock until midnight



From left: David Diao, *40 Years of His Art*, 2013, acrylic and vinyl on canvas, 40 x 60". *Semiotext(e)* publications, 2014. Photo: Chandra Glick. David Wojnarowicz, *Magic Box* (detail), n.d., wooden box, mixed media, 8 x 17 x 11½". From Julie Ault, *Afterlife: A Constellation*, 2014.

