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## **Whitney Biennials 2002-2014: New Building, Old Trends**

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At the opening of the new Whitney Museum, first lady Michelle Obama said:

“And with this inaugural exhibition, the Whitney is really sending the same message to young people and to people of every background across the country. You’re telling them that their story is part of the American story, and that they deserve to be seen.”<sup>1</sup>

But is this really true? Are American women and racial and ethnic minorities represented in sufficient numbers to have their stories told as an integral part of the American story?

A major area of critique of the Whitney Biennials has been directed at the characteristics of artists who were excluded. The first critique, and now famous review, was made in 1987 by the Guerrilla Girls.<sup>2</sup> They presented a portrait of the Whitney Biennial that exposed the underrepresentation of women and artists of color. This same critique has been made in almost every biennial year that followed, with the one exception of the 2010 Whitney Biennial that included more women than men.<sup>3</sup>

As we move away from the previous millennium and into the new millennium, have the Whitney Biennials progressed with the times in terms of diversity? To examine this question, this report presents cumulative data of each artist and collaboration/collective that participated in the following Whitney Biennials: 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014. Artists in the 2000 Whitney Biennial were excluded because this biennial represented artists who were selected prior to the start of the new millennium.

Very limited information on the characteristics of each artist could be found in the Whitney Biennial catalogues. Most of our information was gathered from internet sources. Approximately 3-5 researchers<sup>4</sup> coded data on each artist in each biennial on the following characteristics: gender, race/ethnicity, and nativity. Thereafter, this author reviewed information recorded on each artist to ensure its accuracy. In some cases, nothing could be found on a particular characteristic, and this was classified as “missing data.”

In addition, whenever a collaboration/collective was included in any given biennial, we made an effort to collect data on the other artists aside from the primary contributor.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles M. Blow, “Of Museums And Racial Relics,” *The New York Times*, OP. ED. section, Monday, May 11, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> *The Guerrilla Girls Review The Whitney* (New York: The Clocktower, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> *Whitney Biennial 2010* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> All reviewers were art students in Dr. George Rivera’s class entitled ARTH 3109: Art In Contemporary Society from 2002-2015.

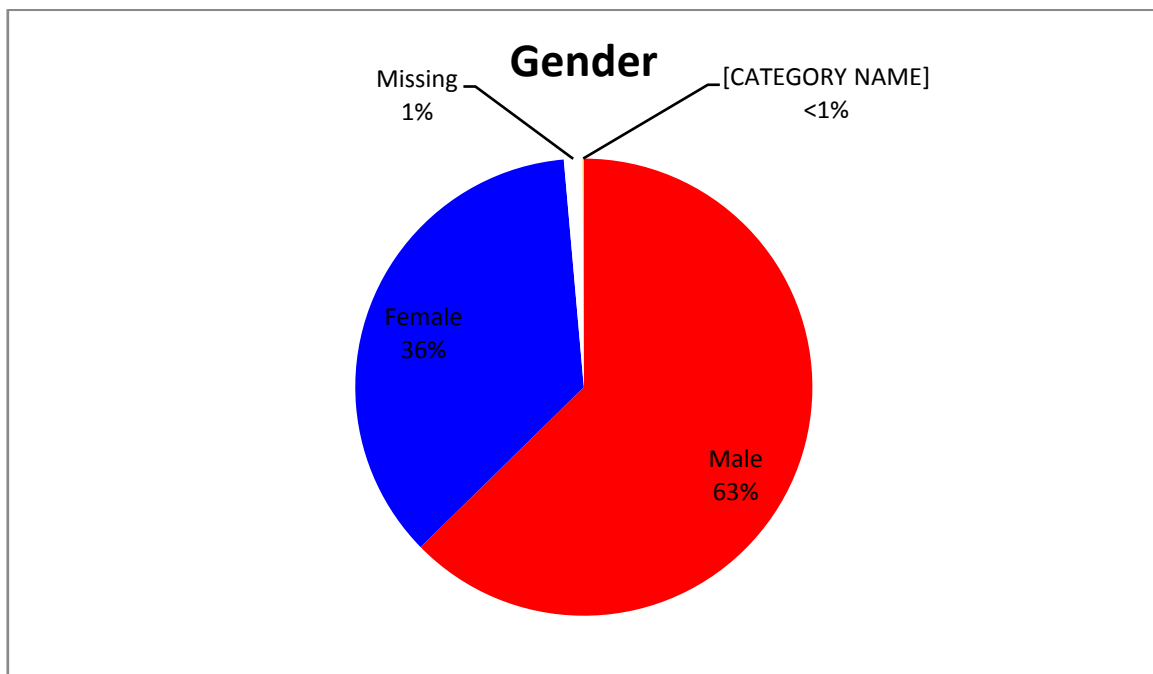
<sup>5</sup> We could not find the principle contributors of the following collectives and thus did not include any artist information in our data base from: Critical Practices, Deep Dish Television, Public Collectors, Salon de Fleurus, Semiotext(e), and Triple Canopy; in addition, we did not include any of the artists in HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINA AFRICAN because they withdrew from the biennial.

For the 2002-2014 Whitney Biennials, the total number of artists and/or collaborations/collectives was 623. We collected data on 673 Whitney Biennial participants because collaborators/collectives usually had more than one member.<sup>6</sup>

## GENDER

No other characteristic of artists has generated more controversy than gender in the Whitney Biennials. In 1987 the Guerrilla Girls revealed that only 24% of participants in that particular biennial were women.<sup>7</sup> Whitney Biennials that followed revealed similar trends. For example, 33.8% were women in 1991, 40.9% were women in 1993, 33.2% were women in 1995 and 32% were women in 2014.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Bodick also found that 25% of the artists in the 2002 biennial were women.<sup>9</sup>

Our data from 2002-2014 revealed that a little over one-third (36%) of these artists were women and 63% were men. When transgendered artists would self-identify, their numbers were less than one percent. Though there has been a slight improvement in gender inclusion in the New Millennial Whitney Biennials, there still remains a wide gap in representation of women to men.



## RACE/ETHNICITY

The Guerrilla Girls primarily advocated for the inclusion of women artists in the Whitney Biennials, but they also included people of color as being in a similar state of underrepresentation. They called the Whitney Biennial to task and accused them of “sexism” and racism.” The 1991 Whitney Biennial included 10.3% artists of color; in 1993 about one-third were artists of color; and in 1995 only 16.6% were artists of color.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Jillian Steinhauer, “The Depressing Stats of the 2014 Whitney Biennial -- Traditional Values And Quality Return To The Whitey Museum,” Hyperallergic, 2013 wherein she noted the fact that there were usually more participants than names in the Whitney Biennial.

<sup>7</sup> The Guerrilla Girls Review The Whitney, op. cit.

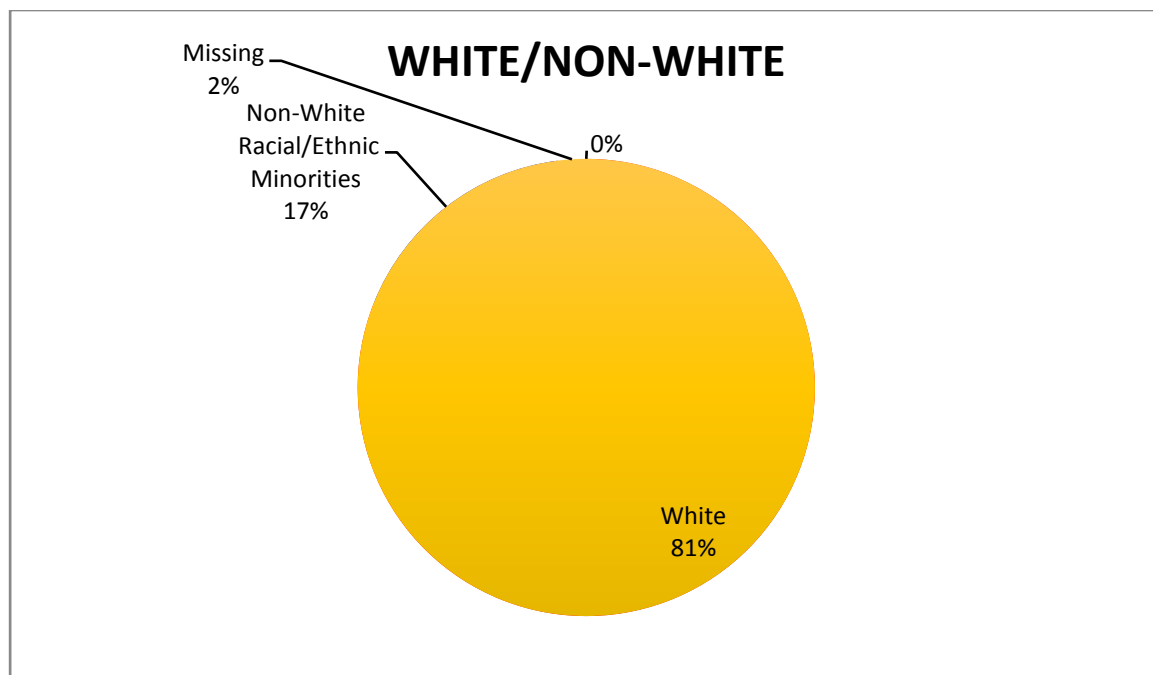
<sup>8</sup> Steinhauer, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Bodick, “A Brief History of the Whitney Biennial, America’s Most Controversial Art Show,” *Artspace*, March 4, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Steinhauer, op. cit.

The 1993 Whitney Biennial has been called the “Multicultural Biennial” because it included many more people of color than usual.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the 1993 Whitney Biennial received much criticism for its inclusion of artwork by people of color. After that date, the number of minority artists included in Whitney Biennials returned to its previous practice of underrepresenting minority artists in the United States.

In the Whitney Biennials from 2002 to 2014, the majority (81%) of the artists were White. Our data revealed that only 17% (N=117) could be classified as Non-White “racial/ethnic minorities.” This category (“racial and ethnic minorities”) includes artists who born in the United States (Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinx, and Native Americans), as well as foreign born artists who could also be classified as racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, i.e., those born in Africa, Asia, Central and South America, and the Middle East.



#### NATIVITY: U.S. Born or Foreign Born

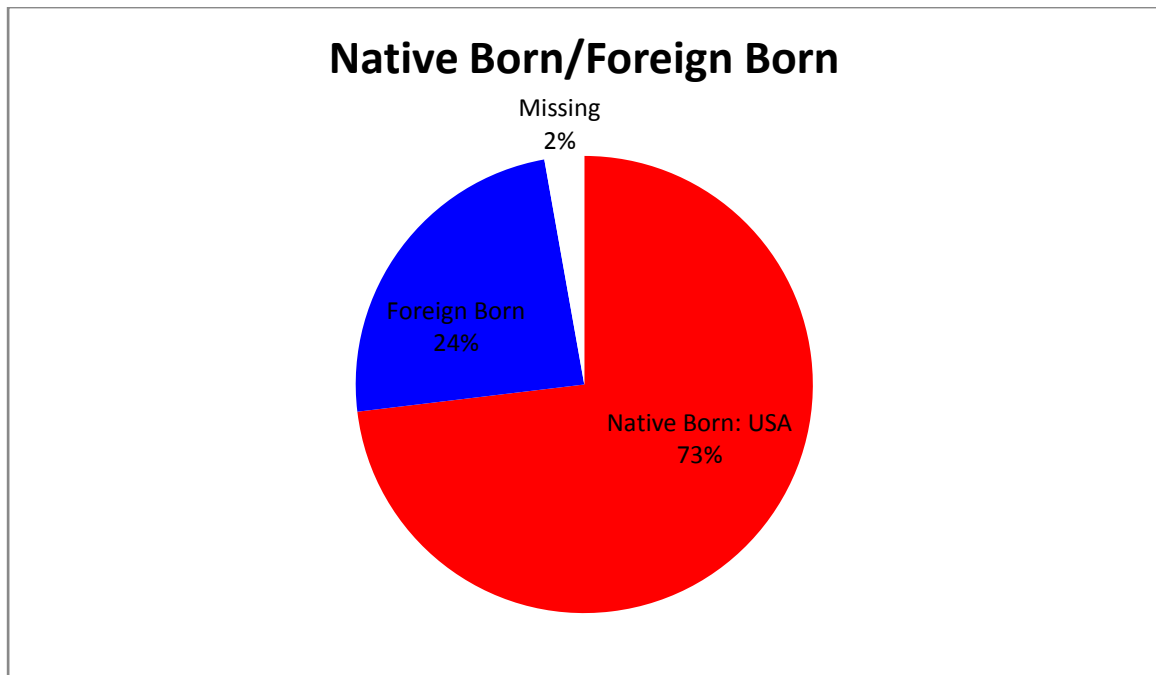
Art critics have noted that there are a significant number of foreign-born artists in the Whitney Biennials. Saltz reported that 15% of artists in the 2002 biennial were born outside of the United States.<sup>12</sup> Farago revealed that more than a quarter of the artists in the 2006 biennial were born outside of the United States.<sup>13</sup>

We found that about one-fourth (24%) of the artists of the artists in the Whitney Biennials from 2002 to 2014 were were foreignborn artists, and 73% nativebornAmerican artists.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Saltz, “Jerry Saltz on ’93 in Art,” *New York Art*, February 3, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Farago, “Whitney Biennial: What is American Art?” <http://www.bbc.com/culture/tags/contemporary-art>.



## CONCLUSION

Though the Whitney Biennials of the Twenty-First Century seek to represent the best of American art in each biennial year, an analysis of the 673 artists included from 2002 to 2014 reveals some troubling statistics. In the New Millennium, women still represent approximately one-third of those included in biennial exhibitions. Less than one-fifth of artists in the Whitney Biennials from 2002 to 2004 could be classified as racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>14</sup>

In 2015 the Whitney Museum of American Art acquired a new building. As American society moves forward in confronting inequities and old trends, shouldn't the Whitney Biennials in the United States strive to do the same in the New Millennium?

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<sup>14</sup> The category, "racial and ethnic minorities," obfuscates the actual percentage of racial and ethnic minorities who were born in the United States because it includes foreign born artists who also are considered racial and ethnic minorities in American society.