

# THIS IS HOW NEW YORK WORKS

# CAPITAL

White Columns mounts its annual survey of the year in art, and curator Richard Birkett explains

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Many consider the White Columns Annual, which opens tonight, the city's most important year-in-review exhibition.

The alternative art space surveys a year of the sort of work that's often having a moment in nonprofit and artist-run venues, but which one might miss entirely with eyes fixed only on the commercial gallery scene. What that means is that at White Columns Annual you'll find artwork that's making an impact on artists, writers, curators, and the like.

This year's curator, Richard Birkett, is an obvious choice for White Columns. He's spent the past decade working with curatorially rigorous, artist-centric galleries, from founding his own Whitechapel Project Space in 2002 to curating at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. Since 2010, he's been co-curating at New York's Artists Space.

To judge by the exhibition list for this year's Annual, Birkett's show will present an international focus with a good mix of New York staples, alongside late artists whose work was celebrated this year. I spoke with him last night about some of those choices.

**How long have you been planning the show?**

Matthew Higgs, the director at White Columns, asked me to do it over a year ago now, so I have had a year to think about it. Obviously, the idea is that you're going through the year seeing exhibitions, making notes about what you're seeing, and thinking about what could be in the show.

**Was there anything that you saw this year and immediately knew you wanted?**

I guess it's a kind of slow process... There are lots of little points in the show of things that really made an impact on me when I saw them, and other things that were less immediate, but that, over a period of time, started to strike me as being interesting to put in this exhibition.

A lot of the work seems hard to classify, or experiential, particularly Yuji Agematsu's arrangements of found scraps (pictured below) or Zoe Leonard's work, like when she turned a gallery into a camera obscura.



I think that's something that's a thread: collecting, I suppose. Collecting in relationship to found material.... But also, something that's quite specific is that many people are showing work by other artists. Jason Simon, for instance, is showing his collection of Chris Marker material. And Julie Ault, we're showing some material related to Theodore Kaczynski [the Unabomber]. There's a thread going through the show of artists who have responded to something interesting in the world, I suppose, and have translated that into the process of collecting and representing. I guess that goes hand-in-hand with the idea of the White Columns Annual, which is essentially that you're representing things that you saw elsewhere. It's almost more a form of collecting than curating.

That seems to be true also of Nicolas Trembley's Fat Lava vases [Trembley, a curator, stumbled on a genre of funky '50s-'70s-era German ceramics and collected dozens of them over a few years; pictured below].



I think those ceramics are genuinely really interesting to look at in terms of a development in the 20th century. [They speak to] certain industrial techniques of producing pottery, and there's an interesting thread around a Modernist approach to ceramics towards industrial processes, which I think is kind of highlighted in the collection, although it's very aesthetic, in terms of bringing these things together that have such a distinctive look.... Again, it's almost like an anthropological interest in collecting that says something about a social moment as much as it is an aesthetic object. I'm in the gallery now, and in the first room you've got Jason Simon's collection of Chris Marker material, the [Fat Lava]

vases, and then these four photographs by [Kaucyila Brooke](#) [documenting] four items of Kathy Acker's clothing. Again, it's another process of relating to someone else's identity, their work, a particular social moment, and representing it in a way.

**Is there anything you see as distinctive about this moment in the New York art world?**

It's funny, because I think, speaking as an outsider—I've only been here two years—I think there's a lot of work that's distinctive to the nature of the New York art world, including work by people like Moyra Davey and Jason and Martin Beck and Julie Ault and Zoe Leonard. To me, when I came here, I was really interested in those artists, or projects like [Orchard](#) that were going on in New York before I arrived. I think there's something distinctly intergenerational in New York (that you don't get in London), where you have three generations of artists who are in dialogue with one another and almost collaborating in some senses. I think that's very particular to New York and very clear in the show. There's also some interest, I suppose, in galleries like 47 Canal and Real Fine Arts which are doing a really interesting job of showing a younger generation of artists and developing a different kind of commercial model around how to represent those artists. I guess it comes from an interest in [Reena Spaulings](#) and other younger artists looking up to people like Jon [Kelsey] and Emily [Sunblad] running galleries like that. I think that's something that's clearly going on with the younger generation in New York, it's coming from less artist-run spaces and more commercial spaces that might have been founded by artists themselves in certain instances, like Real Fine Arts and 47 Canal.

**Artists Space, where you work, would be another example.**

Yeah, but the funny thing about Artists Space is that it wasn't founded by artists, it was founded by [critic] Irving Sandler and [arts administrator] Trudie Grace. There's a myth around the space, it's called Artists Space so people think it was founded by artists, but it actually wasn't. It's definitely that alternative model space in the sense that there were lots of different forms of organizing together of artists and curators, so that definitely seems to be something that's still going on, but in different forms, perhaps dealing with the market a little bit more directly.



You've included in the show a number of artists who are no longer active, like Rockwell Kent, Alfred Palmer (both pictured at left), and [the feminist performance group] Disband. Are these people who got a second look through shows this year and you felt they deserved to be reevaluated in the long-term?

I think it was peculiar interests. Rockwell Kent [American illustrator and painter] is somebody I've known about through my partner's interest in his work. I've only come to know about him this year, and I think there's something interesting about him as a kind of anthropologist-cum-artist. And Alfred Palmer [who took photos for the U.S. government from the '30s to the '50s] was a real revelation this year, to see the collected photography of the New Deal show at Carriage Trade. His work in that show really stood out because it's such a distinctive photographic aesthetic.... So there are these little points of recovery, I suppose, that for me, this year, were very interesting to think about.

**Who do you hope New Yorkers will come to reevaluate through this show?**

I think for me, seeing Yuji Agematsu's show at Real Fine Arts was a really exciting moment, and we've given him a whole room in the exhibition here to do an installation. He's someone I certainly didn't know about prior to this year, but he's been making work in New York since the late '80s, so I think he definitely is someone who people should be looking at more.

*Images, from top: installation of Yuji Agematsu's 2012 solo show at Real Fine Arts, courtesy Real Fine Arts; Nicolas Trembley's Fat Lava vases, courtesy 'Sight Unseen'; 'Workers of the World Unite,' (1937), by Rockwell Kent, courtesy Carleton College; Photograph of a woman putting the finishing touches on a B-17F Navy bomber, 1942, by Alfred T. Palmer, courtesy Carriage Trade.*