

# Is the Art World Entering the Age of 'Anti-Woke' Backlash? Here's Why Today's Reaction Will Look Very Different From Decades' Past

How today's tech bro-powered vibe shift might represent a different kind of backlash than we saw in the 1990s.

**Ben Davis**, December 20, 2022



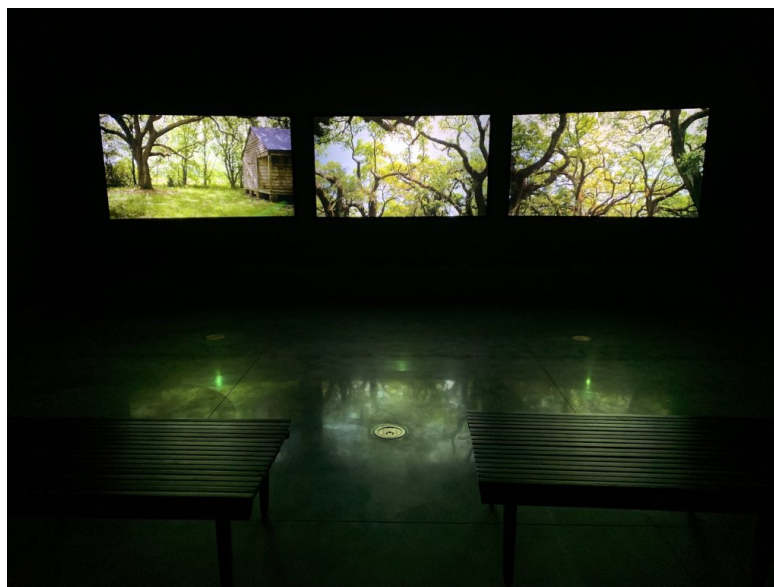
Annette Lemieux (b. 1957). *Left Right Left Right*, (1995). Thirty photolithographs and thirty pine poles, Dimensions variable. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 2001.176a dd

## The Burns Halperin Report

We are in a backlash period—or, at least, the early stages of it, with new consensus about the “excesses” of the social justice movements of the past few years percolating through the discourse. Whether this backlash will look like previous ones is what I have been asked to comment on in this article.

The nostalgia cycle is about 30 years—long enough for the past to feel fresh again as a new generation ages (hence: *That ‘90s Show*). There is also an edgier kind of political nostalgia cycle. Contemporary debates about representation in the museum are experienced as a repeat of debates over “multiculturalism” from the 1990s, themselves experienced as a return to the combative confrontations of the 1960s. Indeed, so much of the politics of the present feels like a kind of replay of the ‘90s—alt-right “culture wars” as an even darker reboot of Pat Buchanan’s classic ‘90s version; the debates over “wokeness” replaying early-‘90s panics over “political correctness,” etc.

The Trump administration touched off dramatic debates, changing the texture of the conversation within the U.S. art world. Blue-chip galleries added Black artists to their programs, important overlooked female artists have been rediscovered at a brisk clip, museums shook up their schedules, and biennials reversed polarities so that the once-dramatically overrepresented white Euro-American male demographic has been rendered a near non-presence in almost every such recent survey, from New York to New Orleans, and from Arkansas to Italy.



Video by Dawoud Bey at the Historic New Orleans Collection during Prospect New Orleans. Photo by Ben Davis.

Yet from the beginning, all this has been haunted by an awareness that backlash is incoming. For art observers looking at the intense focus on identity in recent biennials, the obvious reference is the 1993 Whitney Biennial, the so-called “identity politics biennial” (in fact, the recent 2022 Whitney Biennial self-consciously returned to many of the artists from 1993). This event remains a touchstone, having surfaced a large number of non-white, queer, and feminist voices. The '93 biennial caught the angry zeitgeist of a liberal art world at the end of 12 years of Reaganite rule, in the wake of the most intense period of the AIDS crisis and the '92 conflagration in L.A. (VHS footage of Rodney King being beaten by the LAPD was included in the show.)

It was a watershed. But it was also a high-water mark, signaling the inflection point after which backlash officially took the wheel.

The '93 biennial was panned by critics. Conceptual artist Daniel J. Martinez produced a series of pins given to Whitney visitors that read “I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White.” In Who We Be, Jeff Chang's history of the rise and cooption of multiculturalism, he quotes Martinez on what came next: “'93 was the last shot of the war. We lost right at the moment we thought we were winning.” Coco Fusco, another star of that show, remembered recently the shift that marked the second half of the decade: “In the art world of the late '90s and early '00s there was a shift away from the moral argument about empowerment and civil rights, which was widespread in the 1980s and early '90s, to an emphasis on visual talent and success.”



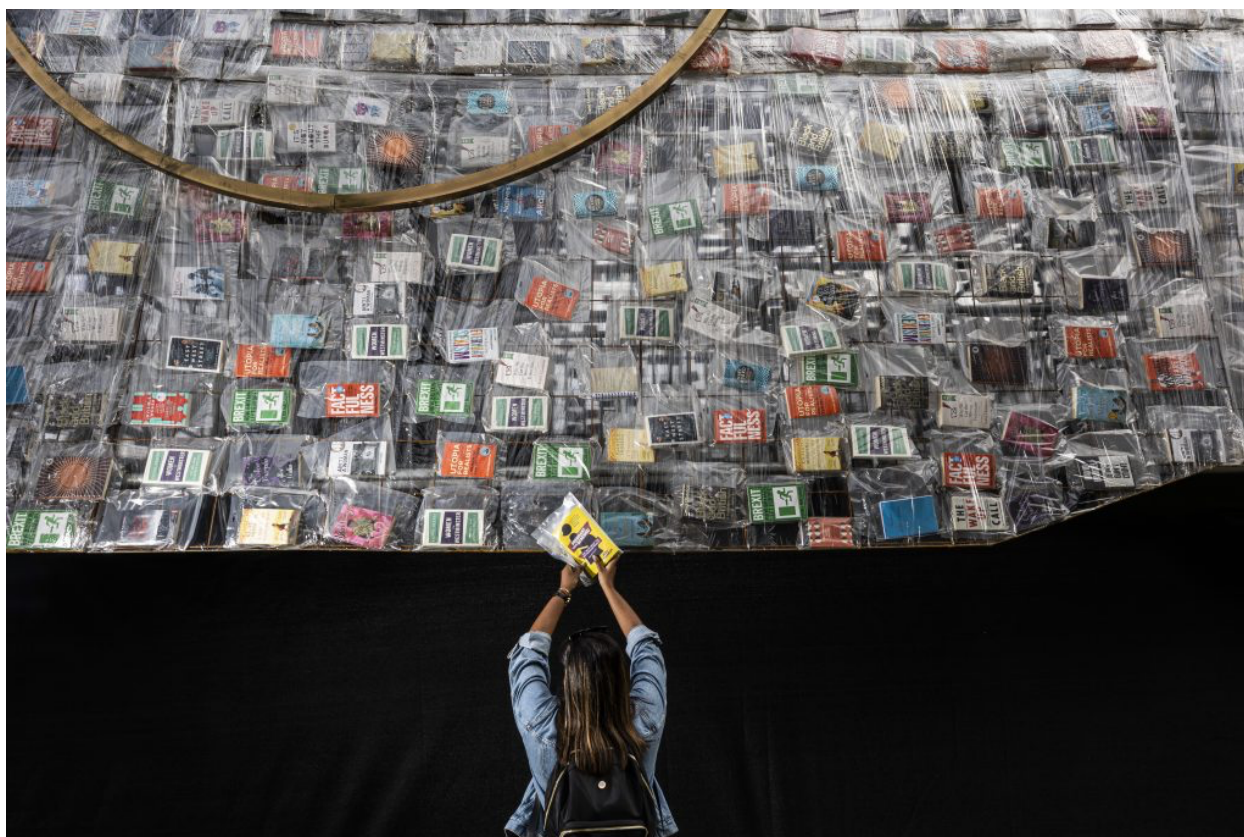
Daniel Joseph Martinez created these entry badges for the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1993 biennial exhibition. Photo courtesy the artist and Simon Preston Gallery, New York.

What can we learn from this moment? How is today different or the same?

An uncomfortable fact is that periods of advance tend to coincide with moments when the kinds of cultural liberals who make up the base of the art world feel that they are in crisis, politically. The spectacle of conservatives in power puts more pressure on culture, as rage at political disempowerment is channeled into gestures of cultural activism and symbolic atonement. The '90s wave came out of the anger with Reagan and Bush, just as the recent climate grew out of reaction to Trump's election. (There was some of this vibe under Bush II, but 9/11 and the Iraq War really defined the politics of that period in a different way.)

Conversely, while it flatters the liberal art world to focus on right-wing culture warriors as the driver of regression, it was actually Bill Clinton's ascent to power in 1992 that was the harbinger of the quietist turn in 1990s cultural discourse. He and the Democratic Leadership Council had made it their mission to represent the Democratic party as pro-business, distancing it from unions and social movements. Toni Morrison may have quipped that Clinton was "the first Black president" in the *New Yorker*, but during the campaign, Clinton staged his own version of the "culture wars" on Democratic party terrain, deliberately baiting Jesse Jackson into a battle over rapper Sister Souljah and making a big show of condemning "anti-white" rhetoric to prove that he was the safe hand for mainstream (read: white, pro-business, and business-as-usual) America.

As a parallel, more recent talk of a "vibe shift" in culture following the #Resistance moment coincides with the election of Joe Biden, who literally promised on the campaign trail that, were you to elect him, you wouldn't have to think about politics too much anymore. "The 2010s were such a politicized decade that I think the desire people have to be less constrained by political considerations makes a lot of sense," Sean Monahan, whose blog 8Ball touched off the "vibe shift" talk, told *New York Magazine*.



Claire Govender adds the 20,000th book to “Ben Ben Lying Down with Political Books” by Marta Minujin, Photo: Fabio De Paola/PA Wire.

The Burns Halperin Report shows just how vulnerable to rollback recent advances in representation may be. Permanent collections, they show, are not so deeply affected by the social justice zeitgeist—indeed, they are *little* affected (although contemporary museums seem to be making solid progress towards gender parity in collecting, at least). As one mechanism for this inertia, the report points to the fact that 60 percent of the objects that enter museum collections come from gifts or bequests; these, in turn, presumably form the basis of exhibition programs. Among other things, the blockage thereby represents the embedded malaise and biases of wealth, and its accumulated power (a point theorist Nizan Shaked also argues in her important treatise from this year, Museums and Wealth).

Researching the 1990s backlash, I found this quote from David Lang, the cofounder of the Bang on a Can festival: “If you’re giving an organization \$10,000, you can say, ‘In return to that we expect you to have a social face.’ If you’re cutting them from \$10,000 to \$1,000, you can’t say, ‘Oh by the way for this \$1,000 we’d like you to change your organization.’” Lang was speaking about how arts funding cuts took the wind out of the sails of diversification efforts in the mid-‘90s, but the line could also apply to the contemporary challenge of turning arts institutions around despite the considerable

reputational and commercial incentives to do so. Compared to the 1990s, even big museums today are actually much *more* crisis-ridden, symbolized by the last year of protests and strikes over barely livable conditions for ordinary staff.

Without money behind social justice demands, you are left with fleeting gestures and moralistic browbeating, ultimately preparing the ground for cynicism and backlash.

The United States is much less white than it was in 1990s, meaning there is more of a self-interested business case for institutions to change. But on the other hand, inequality is much worse than in the 1990s. Private wealth has today accumulated much more power and is thus even more arrogantly disconnected from the experiences of ordinary people and convinced of its own rightness. How these two dynamics interact is going to shape what the future of what museums look like. My feeling is that they point to an intensified fragmentation of the arts rather than a return to the ideological status quo.

The long-term movement towards a more diverse country is a fact. Even if you are very cynical, it is not impossible to think that bequest patterns will evolve, with a time lag to account for changing generational sensibilities. Since the huge Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, it does feel as if diverse cultural consumption has been firmly established as a virtue for high-status individuals (whether it is embedded remains to be seen).



The Sex and the City revival 'And Just Like That.' Courtesy of HBO Max.

Last year's strange, guilt-ridden *Sex in the City* reboot, *And Just Like That...*, had the merit of unintentionally underlining this newly mainstream mindset for premium cable consumers. Erstwhile gallery owner Charlotte proves her good ally status—and relieves the anxiety she and her husband Harry feel at a dinner where they are the only white people—when she explains to her friend's critical mom that the Black artists her daughter collects are truly investment quality (including “an early Derrick Adams!”)

Still, there is a very real limit to guilt-tripping patrons into “Doing Better” on voluntaristic moral grounds. It alienates as many would-be patrons as it moves.

Burns and Halperin write, “At the current rate of change, it may be a simpler task to build entirely new museums and market structures than to create the necessary change within the existing systems.” Melissa Smith has reported on one of the most intriguing developments of the past years: Black artists, experiencing an unprecedented market windfall, are putting funds into building up their own alternative institutions, from Titus Kaphar's NXTHVN to residencies from Derrick Adams and Mcarthur Binion.



Founder of NXTHVN and artist Titus Kaphar. Photo by John Dennis, courtesy of NXTHVN and Gagosian.

But alternative institution-building is also happening on a much bigger scale—and it is not necessarily progressive. As Georgina Adam writes in her recent book *The Rise and Rise of the Private Art Museum*, the major trend of the past decade around the world has been stagnation in public museums, and the parallel creation of new personal

founder-driven museums (the so-called “ego-seum”), born out of “a distrust of public institutions, and in some cases more problematic aims: self-aggrandizement, hyping the value of their collection, getting better access to desirable art and getting whopping tax breaks.”

Here’s a case study for the limits of the moral appeal to patrons in an age of runaway inequality. Back in 2008, billionaire Eli Broad first backed L.A. MOCA when it needed a bailout, prompting fears, from *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith, that he would merge “the museum’s exemplary collection of art with his own, more predictable, market-driven one.” That turned out not to be what happened at all. After debates over the museum’s direction, Broad simply *withdrew* from supporting L.A. MOCA to build his own glitzy Broad Museum across the street—with free admission and Jeff Koonsees galore.



Jeff Koons’s tulips sculpture at the Broad. Photo by Santi Visalli/Getty Images.

The new political demands on culture from one direction are likely to produce new cultural moves that are equally unprecedented in the other. Until very recently, you used to be able to assume that Silicon Valley was a lock for liberals. But the kinds of

new tech fortunes that the art industry has been unsuccessfully courting for over a decade—the bulk of new wealth creation, before the recent tech downturn—now seem to be flirting with reaction. In opposition to the Bernie Sanders-style social-democratic wave, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo, techie libertarianism seems to be mutating into a turbo-charged Nietzschean neo-monarchism, militantly hostile to traditional liberal institutions, creating a new political bloc with the alt-right trolls.

Contemporary cultural backlash may not look like a return to a cozy, oblivious cultural center. It may take its cues more from Elon Musk buying Twitter to “defeat the woke mind virus” or Peter Thiel funding an “anti-woke” downtown film festival out of his pocket change.

When art observers think of backlash in the 1990s, they often think of the 1995 Whitney Biennial. It is often considered a “return to beauty” biennial, where representation snapped back towards the historical norms after the aberration of ‘93. The Guerrilla Girls printed fliers and posters summing up the feeling, declaring ironically, “Traditional Values and Quality Return to the Whitey [sic] Museum.”



A translation of the Guerrilla Girls' banner. Photo: Courtesy Guerrilla Girls.

But the more relevant example of culture-wars backlash for today possibly came one year later: the 1996 founding of Fox News. Its boss Roger Ailes had served as a media guru to George H.W. Bush in the period of the infamous, race-baiting Willie Horton ad. He officially ejected himself from politics after Bush's defeat in the 1992 election. And

yet, all that reactionary political energy, instead of being neutralized, deflected into the cultural sphere. In Fox News, Ailes masterminded the creation of a free-standing ideological universe, one that openly challenged the idea that you could assume a mainstream “liberal media bias.” We know what its effects have been.

Given this potential shape of backlash and the structural flaws at the heart of the traditional art system, where to look for hope for real progress? I’ll give the last word to Cornell West. In his 1990 essay on “The New Cultural Politics of Difference.” West described the “double bind” of cultural producers within academia and museums, critical of institutions that they were nevertheless materially dependent on.

I think invoking it here is the opposite of nostalgia—it may be even more apt in the 2020s than it was in 1990s:

*Without social movement or political pressure from outside these institutions... transformation degenerates into mere accommodation or sheer stagnation, and the role of the “coopted progressive”—no matter how fervent one’s subversive rhetoric—is rendered more difficult. In this sense there can be no artistic breakthrough or social progress without some form of crisis in civilization—a crisis usually generated by organizations or collectivities that convince ordinary people to put their bodies and lives on the line. There is, of course, no guarantee that such pressure will yield the result one wants, but there is a guarantee that the status quo will remain or regress if no pressure is applied at all.*