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Curator's statement at the Whitney Biennial 2006 (detail)



Anonymous
Ed Paschke
2006
Whitney Museum of American Art



Anonymous
Anne Collier

LABELING THE WHITNEY

by Ben Davis

Anxiety is in the air at the Whitney Biennial 2006. The zeitgeist is uneasy, and curators Philippe Vergne and Chrissie Iles are plugged into that -- "people are angry," Iles remarked at a curatorial roundtable last month, reflecting on her year-and-a-half-long research for the event. And indeed, the show has plenty of angry and disturbing work on view.

But jumbo-sized art spectaculars like the Whitney Biennial make for uneasiness in general, with their demands for so many divergent and competing modes of viewing. Each time someone asks, "What do you think?," it feels like a pop quiz.

It doesn't help that Iles and Vergne seem to have set out, curatorially, to stump the viewer. The show is a bonanza of fake artists (Reena Spaulings, et al.), off-the-wall collaborations (Dan Graham and Japanther, anyone?), jokes (a mini-exhibition by the Wrong Gallery) and puzzles (pictures hidden away in nooks and crannies), as well as curatorial bait-and-switches, like including paintings by musicians Miles Davis and Daniel Johnson. A considerable amount of homework is required in order to feel confidently on top of one's game here.

Of course, for viewers with performance anxiety, there's always the wall text. This year, the biennial's romance with explanatory text extends to its own title, "Day for Night" -- 2006 marks the first occasion that such a master signifier has been specifically provided to tie it all together (before, we simply had to content ourselves with calling it, "the back-to-painting one" or "that really bad biennial.")

In a nice demonstration of the slippery slope of explanatory texts, however, Vergne and Iles' title itself requires its own wall-length explanatory text at the exhibition. The name "Day for Night" comes from a beloved François Truffaut film. But it's the translated, English-language title. The film's original title, "La Nuit Américaine," is the French term for a Hollywood trick of shooting night scenes during the day, but could also reflect the dark tone of this particular exhibition of American art. A commentary on a reference to a translation of a reference -- are we having fun yet?

In 1976, Brian O'Doherty's *Artforum* essay, "Inside the White Cube" argued that the increasingly ubiquitous, pristine white gallery space was more indicative of the times than any specific artwork. O'Doherty traced the way that, as paintings became more and more expansive under the influence of Impressionism and then Abstract Expressionism, the space around them became more and more activated. Thirty years of chaotic evolution later, it is wall texts that have become the key artifact, as art's stewards attempt, a little frantically but with a good game face, to hold it all together.

At the biennial 2006, the wall-text format is pretty standardized. Taking an average, the word target for the anonymous author is 150. The mildly academic, ever enthusiastic but restrained voice is always at your side to offer indispensable context.

2006
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Jennie Smith
2006
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Anonymous
Troy Brauntuch
2006
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We are told, for instance, where exactly the paintings in the show by Ed Paschke fall within his career-long voyage through "cyclical modes of abstraction and representation," as well as about "the blend of pictorial precision and moody allusion that distinguish [sic] Paschke's work."

For Gedi Sibony's slight, fragile-seeming assemblages, we are delivered the essential fact that the work addresses "the architecture and prior use of this gallery," and reminded that the space was recently used for a Robert Smithson retrospective.

And when it comes to Anne Collier's deadpan photos of objects labeled with melancholy words, we are provided a helpful list of references, including the fact that she studied with structural film guru Morgan Fisher. We are told of Collier's "determination to continually test and subvert her own artistic practice." Sure, just like everyone.

Aside from containing a split infinitive, this last phrase is notable because it represents another key feature of these commentaries -- they tell you how to feel or experience the art. Amid the hubbub of competing works, there's clearly a fear that the viewer will not be able to stand still long enough to decipher any particular work.

A nearly abstract Jennie Smith pencil drawing of strange creatures "is explicit in its relation to themes of ecological awareness and social change" -- though apparently not so explicit that we don't need to be told about it. Beside Troy Brauntuch's ghostly conté crayon drawings on black cotton of everyday items, we are warned that "[s]ometimes it literally takes time to acclimate one's eyes to see them at all."

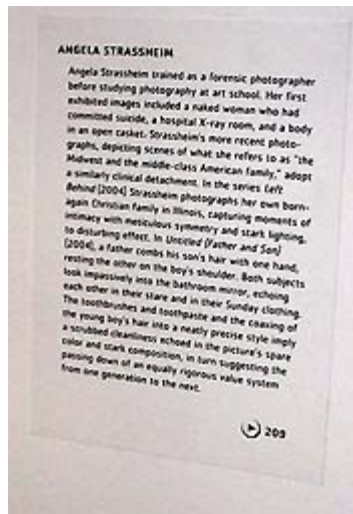
None of this is specific to the Whitney. In fact, the remarkable thing about such texts, what makes them the characteristic art objects of the day, is the incredible homogeneity of their tone and format across space -- at the same time that their very presence is a symptom of unwieldy heterogeneity.

But if such discourse is not particular to the Whitney, "Day for Night" does illustrate how the culture of the wall text has penetrated into the art itself. Painter Jutta Koether's plaque goes so far as to quote theorist Slavoj Žižek, a gesture replicated on the work itself, which includes graphs parroting his psychoanalytic jargon. This recourse is a short circuit, interpolating the viewer as intelligent, but without actually trusting the viewer's intelligence.

I'm not the only one who's picked up on all this. An enigmatic wall tag on the fourth floor is attributed to an artist known as "Coup d'Eclat [b. 1981]." It describes a work called *The Virgin Mary*, "THE MOST PUBLICITY FRIENDLY WORK OF ART EVER," incorporating "celebrity (Kate Moss), drug use (cocaine), religious controversy (the 'Virgin Mary' title), placed in the leading institution of contemporary culture (WHITNEY MUSEUM), co-option of a well-known image (Daily Mirror Kategate cover), directly referencing previous art prankster (Banksy), Duchampian elevation of an everyday object, artistic-looking white background with an edgy silkscreening application."

The piece is not an official part of the show, but an intervention by art world pranksters. It directs you to a "mysterious viral website" (bestliveyourlife.com) which, in turn, provides the number of a "Kate Moss Intervention hotline," where concerned folks can leave messages for the troubled supermodel. The best responses to date are posted as audio files on the site.

A mildly amusing elevation of the discourse about something to the thing itself, and a maze of quirky references that is all dead ends, this stunt could be the emblematic piece of the Biennial 2006.



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Anonymous
 Angela Strassheim
 2006
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Graph on a Jutta Koether sculpture at
 the Whitney Biennial 2006



Work by unknown pranksters at the
 Whitney Biennial 2006