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Outside the 2009 Armory Show



Pedro Jimenez, performing as part of Kenny Scharf's "donut taxi" project at the Armory Show



Elmgreen & Dragset's work at Galleria Massimo de Carlo, at the Armory Show

## THE TWITTER ESTHETIC

### by Ben Davis

It's a weird thing, covering art fairs -- but the swarm of fairs that hits New York every March, like some kind of exceptionally chic locust plague, pushes this weirdness to the max.

On the one hand, these are important artistic events. People expect you to be an *art critic*, commenting on the esthetics of the objects on view. This means abstracting them from the reality of the fair, since its carnival-like atmosphere is very far from the contemplative spaces most artists have in mind for their work. On the other hand, the defining characteristic of fairs is that they are commercial events, which means that you are called upon to cover them as an *art reporter*. Sales and gossip are what's important, not esthetics. Nothing makes the art world seem "post-critical" quite so much as trying to cover a big fair.

Either way, what eludes you is the esthetic experience of the fair itself, which is, after all, a distinct thing. Certain gestures work at a fair that don't in a museum or gallery. The Armory Show, with its long aisles of booths along the Pier, always puts me in mind of Rem Koolhaas' book *Delirious New York*, an ode to the grid system of Manhattan, the modular monotony of which, so Koolhaas argues, actually makes it the ideal vehicle for freewheeling postmodernism, in that everything becomes its own separate island of experience. How to capture in words this delirious atmosphere of the fairs? The experience is one of colliding with people, having fragmentary conversations, being acutely aware that artworks are products in motion. Above all, it is an experience of registering fleeting esthetic impressions that jump out of the chaos and then melt back into it, like so many electrical signals shooting across your brain. . .

In other words, it sounds like a job for Twitter!

Twitter, for you old folks, is the micro-blogging craze which sees users post 140-character texts to their friends, recently the subject of chatter everywhere from the *Daily Show* to the *Financial Times*. I had started a feed last week for *Artnet Magazine* as a kind of makeshift newswire. Having tested the waters, however, I figured it would also be the ideal medium to capture the texture of Armory Show week. At the average character-length of a fair review -- 5,500 or so -- the equivalent would be something like 50 "Tweets." I ended up posting 100-plus over the first three days of the Armory week fairs. So hooray for micro-blogging, giving me more work to do.

I am pleased to report that, as much as such a hypothesis can be empirically "proven," my experience seemed to bear it out. Despite spending half of my time either slouched over my phone or thrusting it at things to take a picture, I have to say that I felt empowered to just inhabit the experience of being at the Armory week fairs in a way that I was not when I was trying to straddle being either a journalist or a critic at previous installations.

Entering Pier 94 for the Armory Show (via Kenny Scharf's mobile "donut cart" installation-cum-taxi), I stepped into the flow of traffic.



Mournir Fatmi installation at Lombard-Fried Projects, at the Armory Show



Fernando Mastrangelo's installation at Rhys/Mendes, at Volta NY



Viewers putting on 3D glasses to view Sebastian Denz photos at Sara Tecchia Roma New York, at Scope

The first work that popped out at me was a large, fractured marble tablet by jokesters Elmgreen and Dragset at Galleria Massimo de Carlo. "EVERYONE IS BROKE," it read. In its way, this work is itself an attempt to condense the omnipresent issue of the fairs -- the "Great Recession" that we find ourselves living through -- to a Tweet-sized art-bite. (Meanwhile, the most celebrated non-sale of the weekend was the black-and-white portrait of Bernie Madoff by Yan Pei-Ming at David Zwirner, indicating that the market's tolerance for self-loathing is limited.)

It is not true, as some have argued, that the art fair setting is totally hostile to provocative political gestures. At Lombard-Fried Projects, Moroccan artist Mournir Fatmi offered a seductive and spectacular installation, a dummy electric chair made of VHS tapes in a room with walls made of the same. This piece surely explores ideas of spectacle and torture. It is just that these are pomo politics, all surface affect and no depth, free-floating "issues" moving about like molecules in space, not seeming to connect to anything sustained or solid -- ideal for circulation via the institutionalized form of molecular, postmodern writing that is Twitter.

At Volta the next morning (by far the most pleasant fair, incidentally, with its uncluttered focus and pleasant line-up), I asked director Amanda Coulson what the standouts were for her. She escorted me to an installation oddly similar to Fatmi's, Fernando Mastrangelo's flashy *Felix*, a chalky, white, George Segal-esque sculpture of a coca farmer, bent over a large, fragmented floor of mirrors in the shape of Columbia, at the booth of Rhys/Mendes. Quickly legible and amusing in a cynical way, it's a project whose idea you can snort up all at once in a line of text.

When I asked the price, Coulson and Mastrangelo's dealer explained that it was quite expensive "because of the material." As I proceeded to fail completely to get what was going on, the pair went about insinuating in manifold ways that *Felix* was made of cocaine. When I belatedly caught on, Coulson paused, looked at me and asked, "Uh, when would this go up?," then requested that I hold off posting the innuendo (Is it really made of blow? My guess is no.) Despite this pretense of embargo, it seemed that everyone I talked to at Volta had passed this rumor around by the end of the hour -- an effect which is part of the phenomenology of such works and, once more, what makes it perfect Twitter art.

The "as-it-happens" effect of Twitter adds something to your perspective as a writer -- it's nice to give yourself license to cover artworks in their present, instead of squinting at them and abstracting them from the fair setting ("how would this look at the Whitney?") The novelty of watching visitors goof around with cheeseball red-and-blue glasses in front of Sebastian Denz's 3D photos of skateboarders at Sara Tecchia Roma New York at Scope is certainly part of the fun of such crowd-pleasing works. The sight of a mother trying to restrain her child from climbing up into Dietrich Wegner's mushroom-cloud-shaped clubhouse sculpture at Pulse's Carrie Secrist stand tells you more about where the conceptual center of the work is than reading a long text about its intended meaning (something about the relation of wonder to horror, according to the personable Wegner, who was working the booth).

Unsurprisingly, news of celebrity, the ultimate in easily traded information, does well at the fairs. Goth rocker Marilyn Manson's suite of fabulously hideous watercolors at Brigitte Schenk (at Volta), or the painting of two figures kissing by "Yu Ling" -- *Charlie's Angels* star Lucy Liu -- at Eli Klein Fine Arts (at Scope) may not win these galleries the respect of their peers. But you also have to admit that they represent a kind of secret truth of the fair experience: In contemporary art, half the time, it is a star-artist's brand, their name



Dealer Sara Tecchia, with a photo by Sebastian Denz



Child tries to crawl up into an installation by Dietrich Wegner at Carrie Secrist, at Pulse



Artist Dietrich Wegner

alone, that makes something valuable (or even legible). Artists come to the art fairs to become stars, so why not show stars as artists?

It would be wrong to imply that everything that can be translated quickly into an information capsule has nothing more going on. At Pulse, I was drawn to the work of Fahamu Pecou at Lyons Wier Ortt Contemporary Art. Pecou's paintings and photos play with media images of celebrity, depicting the artist himself on the cover of various magazines. Self-aggrandizing jokes and Pop-art flare hit notes that definitely work in the fair context. But not too far beneath the surface, there is more to Pecou's stuff -- the drippy, slightly distorted aspect of his large self-portraits broadcast vague alienation and longing, as well as a sneaky awareness of graffiti culture mingling with his almost nerdy realism. And Pecou's blending of imagery from specifically African-American lad mags with high-brow hipster fare like *Cabinet* explores fault lines in popular culture, how people inhabit multiple positions at once. I could go on, but I would probably exceed my character limit. . .

As I turn my own experience over in my head, however, the moment that stands out for me is my encounter with an installation by Eve Sussman at Winkleman gallery, just across the way from Lyons Wier Ortt. The work consisted of a sort of countertop display of overlapping photos and texts. It was unclear immediately what I was looking at, except that it represented some kind of elliptical storyline. Dealer Ed Winkleman later told me that the pieces are connected to Sussman's upcoming film, *White on White: A Film Noir*, an "experimental thriller" by Sussman tying Malevich's esthetics to the Russian space program.

A heady project by a celebrated artist -- that's really enough to produce some quick copy. But in the moment, confronted with the density of the actual object, I froze, trying to sum it up. And then I didn't, moving on in search of something more immediately Tweet-worthy.

All of which puts me in mind of something Roland Barthes said in *Writing Degree Zero*. Great literary works, Barthes argued, are defined paradoxically, by the fact that they are not fully integrated into the canon of greatness, that they elude full critical absorption in some way. Analogously, though in a vastly accelerated world, I'd almost say that the quality of really good art at an art fair is defined precisely by those works that sit uneasily in the context, that stand out from the flow of information. "Twitterability," it seems, represents both a measure of how at home something is in the atmosphere of an art fair, and the internal limit of the fair esthetic, since the quicker you can process something, the more disposable it is.

At the 2009 Armory Show, the spin people were putting out was that the slow-down of the high-end art market represented not so much a retreat as a return to a more deliberate, connoisseur-oriented, "European-paced" experience, as one dealer put it. As many have noted, perhaps this will also mean a return to a more serious kind of art ("It'll be about content again," Volta poobah Christian Viveros-Faune told me), one that makes more room for deeply felt sentiments.

Let's hope so! But at the same time, I'm only half joking when I say that it's a pity that the economy would have this effect on art fairs at the very moment that technology finds the form proper to capturing the experience.





Watercolor by Marilyn Manson at Brigitte Schenk gallery, at Volta NY

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Work by "Yu Ling" at Eli Klein Fine Arts, at Scope



Fahamu Pecou in front of one of his works, at Lyons Weir Ortt Contemporary



Photo work by Fahamu Pecou, at Lyons Wier Ortt Contemporary Art



Installation view of work by Eve Sussman, at Edward Winkleman gallery



**Eve Sussman & Rufus Corporation**  
*Yuri's Office*  
2008  
Courtesy Winkleman Gallery, New York