

# Blowing Art-Theory Smoke

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Although the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial exhibition, a show designed to cover the latest developments in contemporary art (on view in New York through May 28), isn't as internationally prestigious as the Venice Biennale or the once-every-five-years Documenta in Germany, it has become the most prominent brand-name product the Whitney offers. Hordes of young Brooklyn rebels, old-fogey painters in paint-splattered jeans, and black-clad art fashionistas stroll side by side through the galleries. Most of the visitors, though, are regular middle-class folks from New York's five boroughs and vast suburbs. And like most people who go to art museums, Biennial visitors, no matter what category they fall into, probably don't think about the wall labels posted next to the works of art.

Usually confined to artist, title, date, medium, and (sometimes) a bit of provenance, museum labels occasionally have just a touch of didacticism. If done right, the label information helps people who know nothing learn a small something about the art they are looking at, thereby introducing a touch of egalitarianism into what are otherwise very elitist institutions. By design, the labels are without visual interest. They are supposed to have little effect

on the artwork itself, and, unless a viewer consciously decides to look at them, they can be ignored. Like baseboards, white walls, light switches, or frames on paintings and pedestals under sculpture, labels are both there and not there.

But in the 2006 edition of the Biennial, the labels — which run up to 200 words! — are anything but diffident. Consider this excerpt from the label outside the darkened chamber where *A Journey That Wasn't*, a nice-looking and mildly entertaining faux documentary about the search for an albino penguin, is playing: Pierre Huyghe's film creates a site of convergence between memory, interpretation, representation, and transformation."

Ordinary ticket-buying viewers — whom the labels are ostensibly there to help — will be understandably puzzled. "A site of convergence" is pretty meaningless except to those already steeped in contemporary art-world jargon. Those four big abstract nouns could mean damned near anything, especially when they "converge." And what Whitney editor, by the way, let slide that grammatical gaffe of using the word "between" to describe a relation among four entities? That small error actually reveals that the label writers (the Whitney's

Web site lists nine) don't really know what they're talking about. They're just blowing art-theory smoke. This makes a pretentious mountain out of, if not a molehill, a pretty small hillock.

Other labels commit other sins — for example, treating the least you'd expect from a work of art that's included in a museum exhibition as if it were a wonderful bonus: "Based in San Francisco, Lucas DeGiulio carefully pieces together his works from a vast repository of materials gathered as he moves through the city."

That label asserts what should go without saying: that an artist makes his work carefully (as opposed to carelessly). "Based in" is a recent rhetorical device, borrowed from press releases, that gives any artist an aura of globe-trotting renown. And "as he moves through the city" lends the mysteriousness of a Paul Auster novel to what is most likely simple scavenging.

Another label, for Reena Spaulings (a fictional artist made up of several collaborators), touts as successful the mere attempt at some dubiously attainable effects. The works are versions of those commercial street awnings ubiquitous in New York. The label says in part: "Physically sited at the entrance of the exhibition, [these faux awnings] blur the boundary between the gallery and the street. By occupying an institution normally dedicated to the exhibition of the products of individual authorship, the awnings also question the mythic status of artistic originality and challenge art's permanence."

Only very urban-challenged folks could be

genuinely confused about whether they're standing out on Madison Avenue or inside the Whitney Museum when looking at the awning on display. Nor would this work of art prompt anyone but graduate art students to think about the museum as a place "normally dedicated to products of individual authorship" or to ponder artistic originality or art's permanence. The work *is* pretty funny, but you wouldn't guess that from the utterly humorless label.

Even art that obviously forswears the Biennial's questioning, challengings, and convergences gets the intellectual gee-whiz treatment — for simply being, in a physical sense, normal: "Hannah Greely is one of a number of Los Angeles-based artists whose work involves the fabrication of discrete works as opposed to large-scale installations."

In other words, the artist makes sculptures.

The Whitney began mounting regular survey exhibitions of contemporary art in 1932, two years after its founding. For most of its history, the Biennial has consisted of painting and sculpture. In 1973, to acknowledge the many artists beginning to work in nontraditional media, the exhibition started including installation art, video, photography, and film. American artists with any art-world ambition have always wanted to be included in at least one Biennial during the course of their careers — preferably at an early, boostable stage. The task of selecting the artists falls to a different curator, or group of curators (sometimes on the Whitney staff, sometimes not), with each Biennial. Over the years, there have been no consistent criteria for inclusion, although being young, hip, and

hot have become increasingly valuable assets.

This year the curators are Chrissie Iles, the Whitney's curator of video and film, and Philippe Vergne, from the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis. They made this Biennial the first to have a title, "Day for Night," after François Truffaut's 1973 film, which took its title in turn from the Hollywood-invented technique of filming night scenes conveniently and with less mechanical difficulty during the day by using a special lens filter. According to the Biennial's official Web site, the title captures this Biennial's theme of contemporary art residing in a "twilight zone." Just as twilight is a time when we're not sure whether it's day or night, contemporary art is, according to the Whitney, an art about which we're not sure what to say when it comes to meaning. In his obligatory pronouncement on this year's Biennial, the Whitney's director, Adam D. Weinberg, writes, "Today's artistic situation is highly complex, contradictory, and confusing." Hard to argue with that; even the experts are more or less at a loss about where we are with contemporary art.

This situation is not new, however. Twenty-five years ago, the term "pluralism" was the most-employed word used to sum up the situation of contemporary art. Realistic and abstract painting, sculpture made from any and all materials, early installation works, and photography, video, and performance art all coexisted, if not happily, at least peaceably. The content of all that art ranged from the political to the personal, from issues of sexual identity to the deconstruction of abstract painting. Today art-

worlders prefer the word "ambiguity."

According to Iles and Vergne, even being an American is ambiguous. They argue that what constitutes identity as an American is in "dramatic flux." With art having gone global, Iles and Vergne conclude, owning an American passport is no longer a factor when curators decide which artists should be considered for what had been, until now, an exhibition of artists who were American citizens or permanent residents, or who at least maintained studios in the States. About a quarter of the 100-plus artists in this year's Biennial are not American in the old-fashioned sense, and by being chosen for the Biennial, all of the artists are considered "based in" America. They all are what Iles and Vergne call "international" — those who "are moving round the world with an ever-greater fluidity, often living or working between countries, traveling back and forth from New York, Los Angeles, Puerto Rico, and Chicago to Istanbul, Thailand, Zurich, Berlin, Milan, and London."

Imagine the character Morris Zapp in David Lodge's novel *Small World* as an artist instead of a professor, flying from exhibition to exhibition instead of from academic conference to academic conference, and you have some idea of the species. The gadabout activities of these international artists have engendered in the Biennial's curators "a particular urgency to make a bold curatorial statement about the current zeitgeist."

The Biennial's labels, however, go far beyond proffering a little help in understanding the "current zeitgeist," and too far into bludg-

eeoning the visitor into agreement that the show constitutes "a bold curatorial statement." They are filled with such art-world patois as "sexualized identity," "negotiate a shared experience," "expanded the boundaries of artistic disciplines," "activate a dialogue between presence and absence," "shifts responsibility for an answer from the artist to the viewer," and "investigating the systems that drive creative production."

These labels not only contain atrocious writing, made even worse by the fact that the reader has to stoop uncomfortably from a standing position to read them. They also reflect a pernicious attitude in contemporary art, one that holds the general public in contempt. It's the old "I'm Chevy Chase and you're not" attitude from *Saturday Night Live*, only this time assumed in earnest. It says, in effect,

"This art is so far beyond you plebeians that you're lucky we even let you in to see it."

Whatever one thinks of the art in the 2006 Biennial, its artists and viewers do not deserve to be subjected to this kind of academic smack.

One particularly poignant and revealing label reveals that the painter JP Munro prefers "to let viewers grapple with the mystery and uncertainty evoked by his paintings," rather than "resolving any potential narrative." If this year's Whitney Biennial curators and label writers had gotten on the same page as this artist, perhaps the rest of the artists in the exhibition would have had a better chance to be seen and not read.

*Laurie Fendrich, an abstract painter, is a professor of fine arts at Hofstra University.*