

A barometer of the American cultural zeitgeist: the Whitney Biennial 2006

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Whitney Biennial 2006: Day for Night, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, March 2 through May 28

Since its inception in 1932, the Whitney Museum of American Art's biennial exhibition has been considered a definitive roundup of the best and most significant American art of the day. However, its judgment has hardly been unerring. The Whitney biennial has often seemed fashionable rather than discerning in its choices and overblown (due to the globalization of the art world, it is no longer even definably "American," although the latter is by no means a negative).

These weaknesses detract from this year's *Biennial 2006: Day for Night*, but with a noticeable difference. Critics and visitors have been struck by the grim mood of a show that is usually regarded, at least in recent years, as a more of a carnival. "Red, White and Bleak" was how Blake Gopnik described it for the *Washington Post*.

The turn to serious and often explicitly political artwork is welcome. Michael Kimmelman, art critic for the *New York Times*, hoped it might recalibrate the image of the art world "as something other than youth-besotted and money-obsessed," but the change in mood goes beyond the art world. It reflects the growing revulsion with the war in Iraq and the US government felt not only by artists, but also by broad layers of the public. This objective process lays the basis for a new perspective amongst artists and viewers. Of course, inevitably, there are difficulties.

The exhibition is prefaced with a surprising disclaimer: "Today's artistic situation is highly complex, contradictory, and confusing. It is an environment few can make sense of ... the current state of affairs seems more complicated than ever given the sheer number of working artists and the morass of seemingly conflicting styles, conceptions, and directions." This rather fairly remarkable admission does not bode entirely well.

In any event, out of this "morass," curators Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne, were able to make a selection, and gave the biennial a subtitle for the first time, *Day for Night*. This is a double reference, to the 1973 François Truffaut film *La Nuit Américaine* (or *Day for Night* in English), and to the technique which gives the film its title: placing a blue filter in front of the camera lens and underexposing the film to make daytime look like night. The subtitle is a convenient rubric under which to gather several disparate themes.

On the one hand, it can be used to represent, according to the curators, "the swing of the barometer ... toward obfuscation, darkness, secrecy, and the irrational." (2006 *Biennial Catalogue*, p. 20) On the other, since Truffaut's *La Nuit Américaine* is a film about filmmaking, it justifies the inclusion of a lot of "art about art-making" which still predominates in the exhibition, despite the darker palette.

What stands out in the show, however, and has drawn the most attention is the antiwar attitude said to underlie even the non-political works. Even though it animates a minority of the actual pieces, it sets the tone and has significance. "The antiwar sentiment among artists has been very strong, it's what we felt everywhere, whether we were at an artist's studio doing abstract paintings or whatever. It's a general sense of anger that they feel,

this sense of things falling apart," Iles was quoted as saying by *Reuters*. This is no small matter.

This attitude of course did not spring up overnight. Nor do the same artists whose insouciant artwork dominated previous Whitney biennials necessarily feel it. Rather, the recognition of its presence in the 2006 biennial is part of a changed political situation, one in which the art world is less able to exclude or marginalize these powerful sentiments.

The political situation is acknowledged in the exhibition as follows: "At least a *passing reference* needs to be made in these introductory remarks [by Whitney director Adam Weinberg] regarding the political environment from which these artworks emerge. America today is engaged in a *tragic and distressing war* that has taken thousands of lives. Moreover, recent natural disasters in this country have upended the lives of many thousands.... *However, for many Americans such events exist more as the crackle of background static than as a palpable presence, seeing that much of this country lives simultaneously in a bubble of prosperity and security.* This schizophrenic situation gives rise to at least two realities that uncomfortably coexist: one of anxiety, exasperation, and despair; and another of exuberance, energy, and wishful thinking" (*Catalogue*, p. 16, emphasis added).

That the wealthy patrons, museum curators and a narrow stratum of artists who comprise the official art world live in a bubble of prosperity and security where the conditions affecting a majority of human beings exist merely as the "crackle of background static" is not news. But their admission that the static is loud enough to provoke anxiety is noteworthy, as is the recognition that there might be at least "two realities," not just their own.

Certainly two realities "discomfortably" coexist in the exhibition. A majority of the pieces in an excessively large show are a rehash of standard fare. The reaction of many of these artists to the distressing state of the world is hard to interpret, at best. Minimalist or elaborate, ambiguous or simply weird, the show's object/constructions, photographs and videos—plus a handful of two-dimensional paintings and drawings—are hardly any *more* obscure, secretive, cynical, anxious or irrational than usual. Each piece is accompanied by paragraphs of wall text "explaining" its meaning, and antiwar sentiment seems more like an afterthought in quite a few cases.

In a typical example, a few strips of cloth draped on a rack, a rolled up carpet, and other building remnants in the corner of one gallery is Gedi Sibony's allusive sculpture reflecting his removal of what had previously been one of the museum's video screening rooms. "The work, relying solely on the traces of the artist's earlier action, creates a strong charge out of almost nothing." Or so we are told.

For many of these pieces, the artists' process is of paramount importance in creating "meaning." This process can take on a bizarre, ritualistic quality. Tony Conrad has worked for the past 40 years primarily as a musician and filmmaker, and is considered to take a "political" stance when he claims, "the job of the artist is to discover laws to violate that

haven't been made yet." His work *Pickled Film* is just that—a window display of mason jars containing strips of film that the artist methodically “pickled” along with spices, vegetables, vinegar, and also recorded as a performance piece.

Despair and depression are presented as artists' primary response to the crisis. For example, the juxtaposition of Urs Fischer's *Intelligence of Flowers* (holes in the wall) and *Untitled* (hanging shapes) with Rudolf Stingel's black & white photorealistic self-portrait creates an impression of crushing despondency in the face of a wrecked world.

However, despair is only one of the options. An underlying principle common to most of these pieces is the idea that by transgressing notions of artistic propriety, art in itself attains an “oppositional” social and even political power, an attitude given particularly sharp expression by the anarchistic Dada movement of nearly a century ago, which continues to exert an influence on a certain portion of contemporary art.

The goal of “shocking the bourgeoisie” with conceptually challenging nontraditional art remained a touchstone for subsequent art movements of the twentieth century. But in the first decade of the twenty-first century when few, if any, of the traditional notions remain about art being “paintings on walls and statues on pedestals,” when no art object is required at all as long as there is convincing wall-text, how is genuinely oppositional and “shocking” art created? How is the anger of today's artists at things “falling apart” to be expressed?

In 1938, Trotsky noted that the crisis of bourgeois society had produced a situation in which “new tendencies take on a more and more violent character, alternating between hope and despair. The artistic schools of the last few decades—cubism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism—follow each other without reaching a complete development. Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society.”

The “arrested development” in the arts that Trotsky also noted has only intensified, and certain of these artistic schools seem to refashion themselves with a zombie-like relentlessness. This process was perhaps epitomized at the Whitney Biennial in the work of the artist Sturtevant. Her room installation Duchamp 1200 Coal Bags recreates Duchamp's essential works—the ready-made urinal entitled *Fountain* and signed R. Mutt, the *Mona Lisa* reproduction with a moustache, the bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, and others.

What made Duchamp's ready-mades shocking in 1917 was the endowment of mass-produced utilitarian objects with artistic and aesthetic stature. But Sturtevant's meticulous recreation of these objects, no doubt no longer “ready-made,” are instead sterile academic exercises by which she “deconstructs the mechanisms of art production and consumption, shifting the emphasis from objects to ideas and providing a space for critical reflection upon the various systems that convey meaning onto artworks.”

Other artists in the exhibition have reacted neither with despair nor formalist gestures, but instead have expressed a certain intellectual rejuvenation through the traditional forms of “protest art.” Most notable in this category are Richard Serra's *Stop Bush* and Mark Di Suvero and Rirkrit Tiravanija's collaborative *Peace Tower*.

Serra is known for creating large-scale sculptures and public installations over the past 30 years that have explored the uses of industrial materials, especially steel and lead. His *Torqued Ellipses* of the late 1990s were massive tilted and curved steel plates leaned into one another. They communicated a powerful, impersonal beauty—at once awe-inspiring but also claustrophobic, like being trapped in the bowels of a ship.

He has also engaged in forms of political activism over the course of his career. On view at the Whitney Biennial, his *Stop Bush* (2004) is a large lithocrayon drawing of the iconic image of the hooded prisoner from Abu

Ghraib. The black waxy texture of the crayon and the urgent simplicity of the shape add nuance to the now familiar photograph. Serra intended his drawing not simply as an artwork, but to be distributed over the Internet and copied, as “a way to get the message out.” Demonstrators at antiwar rallies have used it as a placard.

Similarly Di Suvero and Tiravanija's *Peace Tower* combines art with protest politics by a community of artists. Di Suvero originally created an *Artists Tower of Peace* in Los Angeles in 1966 to protest the war in Vietnam. In its current setting, the delicate 60-foot high steel frame rises like an erector-set out of the Whitney Museum's below-street level courtyard. Hung with 2-foot square artworks waving like banners by over 300 artists, some of them from among the original contributors, it is unfortunately hard to appreciate in its cramped setting.

Serra and Di Suvero come from the generation that no doubt remembers Vietnam; their art-as-activism is inevitably conditioned by that experience, and its sincerity is palpable and welcome. But its slightly bygone aspect serves as a reminder of its limitations as well.

However, the most encouraging indication of a changed perspective came from the work of a few relatively new artists whose work may not have been explicitly “antiwar,” but instead paid attention to some of the realities which confront those living outside the “bubble of prosperity and security.”

Monica Majoli's *Hanging Rubberman* series of large-scale watercolor and gouache paintings take on greater resonance by being exhibited in the same room as Serra's *Stop Bush*. While technically depicting a form of sado-masochism, the rubber-encased, feature-less forms hang in mute suspension, suggesting the sexual sadism of torture itself.

Dash Snow is among the younger artists (b. 1981); he is known so far for taking Polaroid photos of New York's Lower East Side. According to the catalogue, he “subjects the harsh realities of urban life to his eye for the disarmingly picturesque,” a potentially dubious approach. However it's impossible to judge his photographs, because the Whitney has chosen to show a series of Snow's newspaper collages instead. The fragile little pieces string out phrases such as “Christian official who ordered security forces to fire on protestors,” “the government that will bring paradise” or simply “tired of suffering.” Together they transcend mere tongue-in-cheek cynicism, and have a faintly lyrical quality, as though giving voice to the words between the lines. It will be worth seeing how this artist develops.

Finally two slide projections of photographs stood out. The first, by Billy Sullivan, is a simultaneous slide projection on three walls of images that the artist has assembled since the 1960s. In the center wall, a beguiling blond luxuriates in a rumpled hotel room, her expressions at once seductive and remote. On the two adjacent walls, a multitude of handsome young men, transvestites in backstage makeup, druggy people at parties (or in back alleys afterwards) are projected one after another. Most of these are casual photos of Sullivan's friends and associates from the art, fashion and celebrity world. Sometimes the juxtaposition of the slides creates a fleeting illusion of an interaction between the various people. Much of the time, however, they are absorbed in their own inner worlds, which like not knowing one's slip is showing, ironically exposes

their vulnerability. While Sullivan depicts a decadent world, it is not without insight and compassion.

Compassion also characterizes the photographs of Zoe Strauss, by far the most compelling work—at least to this reviewer—in the exhibition. Her digital photographs of primarily working class and poor people in her native Philadelphia, as well as of Biloxi, Mississippi, where she traveled after Hurricane Katrina, communicate far more than a “crackle of background static.” These people go un-“represented” and “unseen” in mainstream American life. They are forthright, even confrontational about tattoos, scars, crack habits—the entire physical and aesthetic impoverishment of their circumstances—as well as their attempts to achieve some semblance of intimacy and beauty in spite of them.

Strauss also has a knack for capturing ironic signs and graffiti in the parking lots, housing projects and strip malls of the American urban landscape. The images expose the threadbare official slogans (“We Will Win,” “Hope, not Dope,” “Neighborhood of Champions,” “Why Not Coal?”) that preside over this derelict environment. A formal regularity, or minimalist beauty is often contrasted with the “irregularity” that makes us human.

Strauss describes her work as seeking to communicate “the beauty and struggle of everyday life.” This has been, and will continue to be, the defining feature of the work of the most farsighted and thoughtful artists. It is not, in and of itself, revolutionary—for that a more conscious partisanship is required—but it is a start. And in the context of the *Whitney Biennial 2006*, it is very good to see.

Note: The exhibition catalogue for the Whitney Biennial contains many artworks that are not included in the exhibition, while many of the artworks that *are* in the exhibition are *not* in the catalogue. It is thus less of a catalogue than a semi-independent companion piece.

As part of the *Draw Me A Sheep* visual essay, the participating artists were, like the aviator in St. Exupery’s 1943 novel *The Little Prince*, asked to “draw a sheep,” i.e., to create one emblematic image that summed up the past two years. These pictures are included as foldout pages in the catalogue. There were also images of a more direct political nature that were compelling, but unexplained. These included Associated Press photographs of the bombing in Baghdad juxtaposed to a firestorm in New Orleans, a photo of a marble statue of a hooded prisoner by Iraqi artist Abdul-Kareem Khalil in a Baghdad gallery, and others. These latter images in particular could have received more attention in the context.

All images courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.



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