

Whitney Biennial

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART,
NEW YORK

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IN AMY GRANAT AND DREW HEITZLER'S 2007 double-screen film, *T.S.O.Y.W.*, on view in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, a motorcyclist travels from Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, on the banks of the Great Salt Lake, to the Mojave Desert. But the primary sense of movement is in the back-and-forth between the two projections: Sometimes the images on the screens are just slightly off-register, as if Granat and Heitzler were shooting standing next to each other; sometimes they're completely divergent. The lateral dynamic cuts across and impedes the linear momentum of the journey, as does the intermittent interpolation of abstract imagery and the droning sound track. It's a long and mesmeric film, and at times it seems as if the motorcyclist is staying in one place while the arid hinterlands roll past on a backdrop. Eventually you get the feeling that this is not the American West but an off-the-map interzone, a place of stasis and suspension.

While the Whitney Biennial is a survey of contemporary American art, not of the contemporary American zeitgeist, it's impossible not to read some index of the national mood in its propositions. Back in 2006, the mood was dark, and Scorpio was rising at the Whitney,

where a Kenneth Anger installation set the glitter-and-doom tone of Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne's "Day for Night." Recently, things have downshifted. We are in a sort of posttraumatic interregnum, the half-lit, directionless purgatory of the waning Bush presidency. As if in accord, this year's Biennial dramatized uneasy quiescence, restless occupation of liminal spaces, oscillation on thresholds—what catalogue contributor Rebecca Solnit calls "radical diffidence."

Curators Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momin set themselves a daunting challenge: How can a Biennial whose leitmotif is underwhelmingness avoid being underwhelming itself? Their exhibition did not have a title, but the word *lessness* came to serve a quasi-titular function, invoked in all the reviews and acting as a polestar orienting critical response. In her catalogue essay, Huldish defines lessness as "a direction in which artists are working (in diverse modes) that points to constriction, sustainability, nonmonumentality, antispectacle, and ephemerality." What this meant in practice was a low-key, somewhat retiring show, with a downsized roster (eighty-one artists, as compared with 101 in 2006) spread over two venues (the museum and the nearby Park Avenue Armory) and with none of the flights of curatorial fancy that informed "Day for Night." One wonders if Huldish and Momin felt that a subversive approach was in order, that the only way to make this survey of contemporary American art truly contemporary was to make it less "American"—that the thing to do, in other words, was to organize a Biennial that was less overweening, less redolent of superpower self-assurance, less of a big deal.

The show's installation was thoughtful and not too cluttered, but to walk the galleries of the Whitney or the Armory was to experience the familiar atmosphere of any biennial: the murmur of competing video sound tracks and the visual profusion that speaks not of constriction

but of overabundance. For lessness to have been more, it may have needed to be, somehow, more emphatically *less*. To put it another way, the curators seem to have never fully reckoned with the implications of their concept vis-à-vis process—whether artistic or curatorial. In her essay, Huldish notes the increasing prevalence of "expanded practices" in which "artists consider both pursuing an auxiliary set of activities and making traditional objects for the gallery or museum to be equally important aspects of their output." This is indeed where lessness intersects with practice: The way of working acknowledged here is not a centripetal model with the studio at its core but a Brownian one in which artmaking is dispersed through a diffuse space of activity and in which nothing is auxiliary, but nothing is central either. Dexter Sinister (the duo Stuart Bailey and David Reinfert) offered one elegant enactment of this methodology: From a communications center in the Armory's Commander's Room, they disseminated gnomic "press releases" that took many forms—from an alternative audio guide to a hypertextual reflection on pragmatism—in a "parallel" PR campaign intended, as one release put it, to "slow down, complicate, or at least draw out the reception of the exhibition." But for the most part expansion, as a strategy, was not actually put into play in the exhibition; it was merely registered. Artists whose work generally matches this paradigm, e.g., Seth Price or Fia Backström, were represented by highly self-contained contributions, while the annexing of the Armory as a satellite space (one open only for the first three weeks of the show) simply reiterated the museum's status as mother ship.

Of course, critics have the luxury of imagining a truly "expanded" Biennial without worrying about logistical considerations. Such a Biennial will always remain a modest proposal, because it is a Biennial that does not



exist—that has dispersed itself right out of its own frame of reference. Nevertheless, this is the logical extreme toward which lessness gestures—the notion that a *really* contemporary Whitney Biennial is no Whitney Biennial at all. It is as if this Biennial's betwixt-and-between quality—the sense that the show was too diffident about diffidence—was the result of a turning away from possibilities offered by the initial premise. But you go to the Whitney with the premise you have, and if the exhibition stuck mainly to safer shoals of metaphorical or microscale explorations of “nonmonumentality, antispectacle, and ephemerality,” there were still rewards to be had there.

The task of articulating lessness fell largely to scattered installation and rickety sculpture in the idiom of assemblage. Work in the latter mode also filled the galleries in the New Museum's recent exhibition “Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century,” leading to many comparisons between the two shows. Unmonumental, non-monumental, let's call the whole thing off—the “whole thing” in this case being sculpture. Laura Hoptman (who cocurated the New Museum exhibition with Richard Flood and Massimiliano Gioni) has argued against reading this strain of contemporary production as “art about art,” and it's true that such a reading risks foregrounding what is least interesting about this work, namely, the degree to which it evokes or alludes to various twentieth-century precedents. Yet there's certainly some reflexive address of the status of the art object in the twenty-first century going on here, as the descriptors *unmonumental* and *nonmonumental* indicate. Whatever their prefix, the words access horizontality, abjection, *l'informe*; and the art they denote figures the now-canonical opposition of formlessness and hieratic monumentality as an anxious dialectic—peering over the abyss into the realm of threadwaste while striving to maintain a fragile, precisely calibrated formal integrity. Along another axis, such work establishes a similarly

tenuous balance between the here and now—the culture from which it gleans its found or readymade components, the physical space of the gallery where it meets its viewer at a typically anthropomorphic scale—and the hermeticism of its internal poetics. Some sculptures in the Biennial demonstrated how riveting this equipoise can be: for example, Charles Long's spindly biomorphic forms, made of papier-mâché and river sediment, which look like Giacomettis made of spitballs; or Patrick Hill's constructions of dingy concrete plinths and planar glass-and-steel shapes, which evince a lean-and-mean formalism disturbingly inflected by wads of mottled pink fabric.

Elsewhere, the here and now was subject to oneiric occlusion. In Amie Siegel's through-the-looking-glass excursion into the former East Germany, *JDCI/DDR*, 2008, and in Omer Fast's four-screen video *The Casting*, 2007, which revolves around the experiences of a soldier in Germany and Iraq, the documentary impulse is embroiled in Bergmanesque scenarios of shifting personae and narrative involution. When it came to “the social,” such indirection was the order of the day. Amid the bustle at the Whitney, Louise Lawler's three photographs of nearly empty galleries (installed separately on three floors) had a Buster Keaton-like muteness, inviting whatever comedies of reception might transpire before them. (“Another Jeff Wall imitator,” I heard a man say airily to his companion.) Elaborating this sly reticence was Fia Backström, whose diabolical installation-as-trade-show-booth combined Whitney-logo wallpaper, endearingly misbegotten little clay sculptures fashioned by museum staff, and the most depressingly banal stock photos imaginable. Meanwhile, a lively rotation of performances occasionally extended into relational territory but did not embrace

the overtly engaged, up-with-people aspects of the genre. Artist and environmental activist Fritz Haeg's workshop, for instance, in which participants were led through choreographed movements based on various forms of animal ambulation, was more Isadora Duncan than *Inconvenient Truth*.

Presiding over all of this like a phantom mascot, the *geist* of the *zeit*, was Samuel Beckett, who, as Huldish notes, is the source of the Biennial's key term—“Lessness” being the English title of one of his most radical experiments, a prose piece he wrote in French in 1969 (as “*Sans*”) and translated the following year. In this text, the irrational systems that Rosalind Krauss located in the “sucking-stones” passage of Beckett's novel *Molloy* (and brought to bear on her reading of Sol LeWitt) are not merely represented; they are the generative

principle. The author approached the composition of “*Sans*” as an exercise in random permutation, writing six ten-sentence “statement groups” and using arbitrary procedures to shuffle and arrange them, as he put it, “first in one disorder, then in another.” And at times, the disorder of language appeared to be the secret theme of the Biennial, the stealth vector of lessness along which the show arrayed itself. Many of the works that seemed most compelling traded in nonsense, gibberish, or hopelessly fragmented text and speech, or expressed profound skepticism about the ability of words to transmit meaning. In Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's video *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out*, 2006, a bloody-nosed woman in a Viking helmet delivers a disjointed soliloquy full of paranoid tongue twisters like “Blimps are sneaky. We're being followed by a sneaky fleet of blimps. A fleet of sneaky blimps.” Another video monologue, Julia Meltzer and David

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Opposite page, from left: View of the 2008 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Fritz Haeg, *Sundown Schoolhouse: Animal Lessons*, 2008. Performance view, Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photo: James Ewing. This page, below: Amy Granat and Drew Heitzler, *T.S.O.Y.W.*, 2007, still from a two-channel color film in 16 mm transferred to video, 200 minutes. Right: View of the 2008 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: Seth Price, *Untitled*, 2008; Patrick Hill, *Cutter*, 2007; and Patrick Hill, *Between, Beneath, Through, Against*, 2007.



Thorne's *not a matter of if but when . . .*, 2006, starts off with Syrian actor Rami Farah pronouncing words like *peace*, *victory*, and *friendship* and laughing incredulously, as if he can't believe how ridiculous they are. One could also cite the autohypnotic glossolalia of Matt Mullican; or Frances Stark's confessional PowerPoint presentation, in which the artist relates her ambivalence about writing and her longing to "think with [her] body"; or even the looping of Bush's immortal line "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job" in Spike Lee's 2006 Katrina documentary, *When the Levees Broke*—a lone stutter in the film's otherwise stately narrative progress.

Most telling in its unintelligibility, however, was Shannon Ebner's *STRIKE*, 2008—an enormous grid of small black-and-white photographs, each depicting a single capital letter composed from an arrangement of cement blocks. Together these form a cryptic text: NO/IT CAN/AS IT IS/IT IS A WAR/RAW AS IT IS/IT IS AN ACTION/NO/IT IS AN OPPOSITION. And so on, the "no"s functioning as syncopation, palindromes cropping up every few lines; you get the impression that there is a pattern here, but that it is too intricately recursive to discern. Next to *STRIKE* was *Involuntary Sculpture*, 2006, a wooden crate containing big cardboard letters (which the artist has photographed spelling out various words for her series "Dead Democracy Letters," 2002–2006, though these photos were not on view). Together, these two works look like an allegory: assemblage swallowing its own tail, converging with the linguistic operations that one of its primary proponents, the late curator William Seitz, saw at its origin. In the catalogue for his 1961 Museum of Modern Art exhibition "The Art of Assemblage"—an important reference point for the curators of "Unmonumental"—Seitz proposes that sculptural assemblage is a descendant of the poetry of Stephane Mallarmé

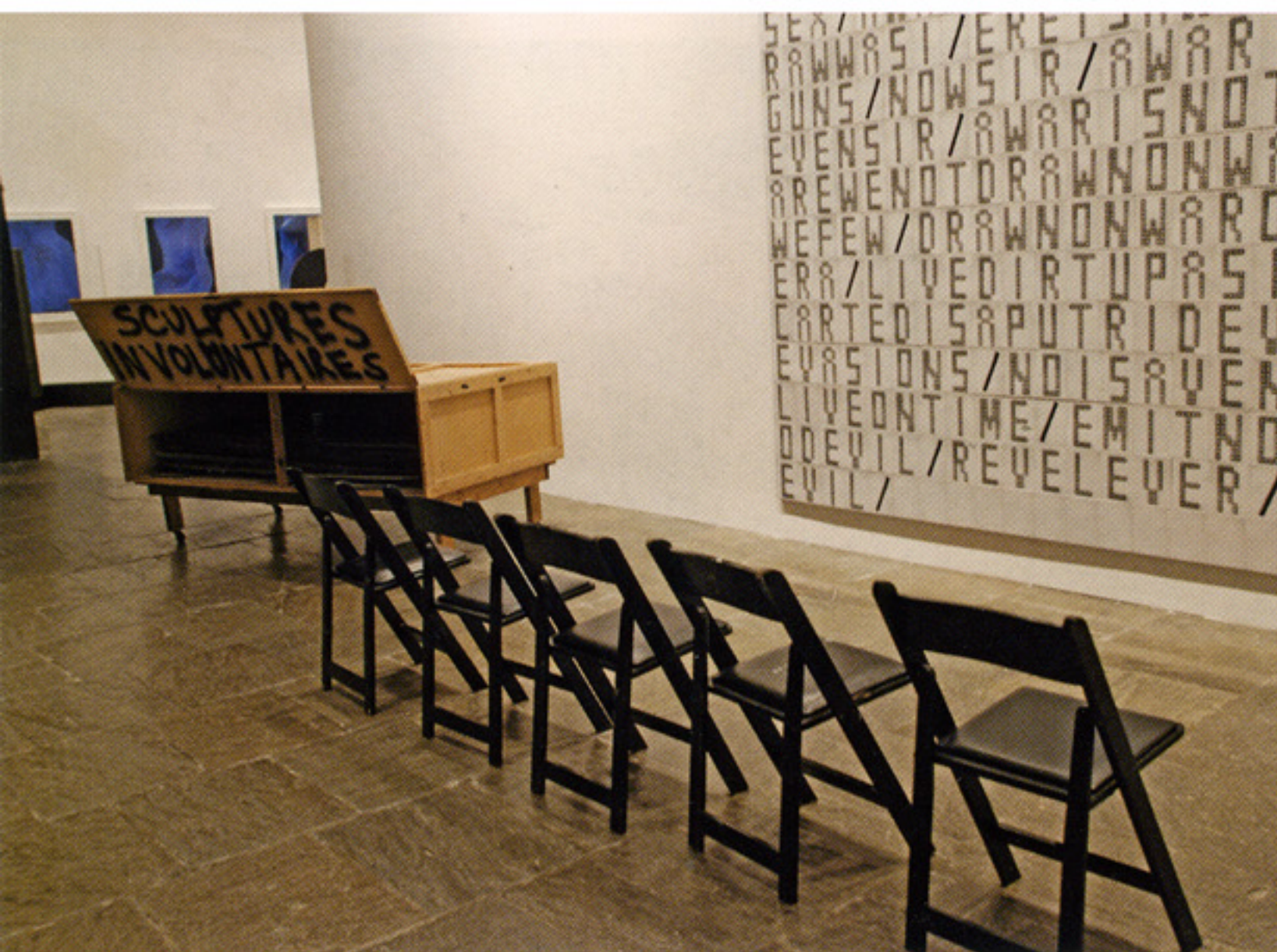
and Guillaume Apollinaire. It is a transposition, in other words, of their systematically disordered language to material form—an art in which found objects and bits of junk take up the logic of absurd recombination, becoming, you might say, so many sucking-stones. Seitz's argument, with its preternaturally tidy progression from *Un Coup de dés* to Rauschenberg's Combines, has been dismissed as hopelessly ahistorical. But his reading of assemblage through a poetics of disarticulation feels resonant now nonetheless.

Here, too, there's a temptation to speculate on a connection to some broader "American" condition, and maybe such a correspondence isn't too far-fetched. It doesn't seem much of a stretch to imagine that, along with civil liberties and our standing in the world, one of the things that has been degraded recently is language itself. The Bush administration has never been exactly totalitarian, but it has indulged in a classically totalitarian way of thinking about words, which is to view them not as a way of slanting or hiding facts (through spin and propaganda) but as a way of producing facticity. The unnamed White House official who notoriously sneered at the "reality-based community" subscribed to the belief that reality, quite literally, was whatever he and his cronies said it was. It has not been lost on observers that, in this respect, the past seven years appear to have borne out the old fear that the postmodern rejection of objectivity and master narratives might lead us down an Orwellian primrose path. In a vociferous 2003 lament called "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" Bruno Latour points out that while Ph.D. programs keep churning out scholars steeped in the belief that we are "always the prisoners of language," "dangerous extremists are using the very same arguments" to their own ends. "What has become of critique when there is a whole industry

denying that the Apollo program landed on the moon?" he asks. "Have I not read that somewhere in Michel Foucault? Has Knowledge-slash-Power been co-opted of late by the National Security Agency? Has *Discipline and Punish* become the bedside reading of [erstwhile Homeland Security chief Tom] Ridge?" What was meant to be a critique, in other words, has been appropriated and literalized as a tactic of power—a truly bizarre and perverse outcome. At the same time, it's worth noting the linguistic valence of the religious movements gaining political strength both overseas and domestically. As Terry Eagleton has observed, "Fundamentalism is a textual affair"—a belief in the "Word of words." Logocentrism and its critique start to converge paradoxically in authoritarianism.

In Dodge and Kahn's video, there is no explanation of what the title—*Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out*—refers to. Maybe it's not as bawdy as it sounds. Caught between fundamentalism's implacable "Word of words" and the two-plus-two-equals-five formulations of the current regime, language may indeed have become something that can't be swallowed and can't be spit out—something that just sticks in the cultural craw, too necessary to jettison, too grotesquely compromised to incorporate, effusing its confounding surpluses into art. "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job." The line is absurd, in the old-fashioned existentialist sense, which is to say meaningless. It has always strangely reminded me of another famous utterance, one that also veils the imperiousness of the authoritarian personality in a good-old-boy drawl, and that provides as apt a way as any to sum up the 2008 Whitney Biennial: What we've got here is a failure to communicate. □

Select floors of the 2008 Whitney Biennial remain on view through June 22. ELIZABETH SCHAMBELAN IS A SENIOR EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.



Left: View of the 2008 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: Shannon Ebner, *Involuntary Sculpture*, 2006; Shannon Ebner, *STRIKE*, 2008. Right: Amie Siegel, *AAA/DDR*, 2008, stills from a color film in 16 mm transferred to video.

