



Whitney Biennial 2008 and the concept of lessness

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left to right
Olaf Breuning, Home 2, 2007, detail, high-definition colour digital video, sound, 30 mins duration, collection of the artist, courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

Mika Rottenberg, Cheese, 2007, still, digital colour video, sound, approximately 12 mins duration, collection of the artist, courtesy the artist.

In Mika Rottenberg's *Cheese*, 2007, video monitors stowed in pockets of a Gehry-esque wooden barn show women with hair to the ground milking goats, as well as their own hair, to make cheese. The scenes are pastoral, the women's locks gleam in the sunlight, and the sound of milk squirting out of teats into tin pails filled the second floor of the Whitney. Somehow, it made perfect sense. This is partly because, as Rottenberg has explained, milk and hair are both products – bodily and commercially (the work references a group of long-tressed sisters living in the nineteenth century who sold a tonic ostensibly made from their hair). But it also made sense on an intuitive level that transcends Rottenberg's apparent focus on women's labour and the commercialisation of women's bodies. It called to mind something that a child would come up with while playing make-believe: nonsensical, but faithful to the imagination.

The most successful of the works in Whitney Biennial 2008 achieved this quiet, intuitive truth, but even those that did not seemed to aspire to it. The art is, overall, deliberately modest – no grand gestures here – and focuses, in the words of the curators, on 'lessness'. The concept is fitting for a country that, seemingly coming apart at the seams, can't afford arrogance. But the collateral damage was that some pieces simply didn't go far enough. You could almost imagine the artists, child-like, saying to themselves, 'What if I tried ... ?' This kind of experimentation led to some sublime hits, but where it failed, the work seemed not thoroughly developed or thought through. If the biennial is any indicator, American contemporary art is trying to figure out its direction.

Among the hits were Phoebe Washburn's enormous installation, *While enhancing a diminishing deep down thirst, the juice broke loose (the birth of a soda shop)*, 2008, in which narcissus bulbs grow out of golf-ball-filled aquariums while 'enhanced' Gatorade moves, via tubes, between buckets and glass tanks. It is part garden, part consumerist subversion, and part play factory. Washburn has said that she doesn't know what she will do with the final product: twenty-four bottles of enhanced Gatorade.



Uncertainty in direction was matched by ambivalence towards the museum as appropriate exhibition space, an unease that was reinforced by the show's spilling out into the nearby Park Avenue Armory. Indeed, some artists couldn't help but bring up the tired theme of museum experience; Stephen Prina blew up museum information plaques and made them part of his installation, and Matthew Brannon's gorgeous letterpress prints played coyly with the act of viewing art at – you guessed it – the Whitney.

More effective questioning of the museum space came from Mungo Thomson's 2008 installation, *Coat check chimes*, in which ordinary hangers at the coat check were replaced with chiming versions that rang out every time a coat was hung. Like his exquisite soundless video, *Silent film of a tree falling in the forest*, 2005–06, hidden away in a corner of the Armory, many visitors didn't notice it. Bert Rodriguez's *The end*, 2001–, which consisted of these words painted on the inside of the Whitney's elevator doors and music that sounded like the closing song of a film soundtrack, was another effective staging at the museum's edges.

Javier Téllez's *Letter on the blind for the use of those who see*, 2007, in the main Whitney space, questioned experience itself. In it, six blind people take turns feeling an elephant in Brooklyn's abandoned McCarren Park pool. It's a play on an ancient Indian parable in which six blind people understand an elephant to be only the part that they've touched. Téllez's film is sensitively shot and so aurally restrained as to be an almost purely visual experience. We see each person get up from his or her chair, feel the elephant, and talk about it, while the sound of the elephant's breathing comes through softly in the background. It is a glimpse into the world of the blind, into the complex layers of sensory perception, and into our own ignorance: The six chairs in the viewing room are the same as those in the film.

The work at the Armory annex offset the quiet 'lessness' of the show at the museum. In addition to the twenty-one artists' installations at the massive 1881 structure, twenty-five performances and events were also held here,

including a dance marathon, a slumber party, and a rock concert. The Armory, with its rich interiors of faded opulence and its messy excess of space, seemed to give artists the room to play that was lacking on 5th Avenue. The work here, while more accessible and, in some cases, less ambitious, was undeniably fun. In Rashawn Griffin's elegantly understated *Untitled (w, sw, ne) for L.D.*, 2008, speakers fed live sound from a field in his home state of Kansas. Listening in a dark room to the faint sounds of cars passing, people talking, and the wind blowing was a surprisingly poignant, almost wistful, experience.

Across the hall, red flannel strips on which visitors had written something they thought worth protecting were woven into a braid of artificial hair in M. K. Guth's interactive installation, *Ties of protection and safekeeping*, 2007–08. The ever-swelling braid was draped about the room, looking like a cross between decorative garland and prayer flags. The act of participating was apparently cathartic: visitors hung around long after they'd braided in their precious words.

Some of the show's few aesthetically pleasing works were here, as well. Marina Rosenfeld's installation *Teenage Lontano (16 channels)*, 2008, was a haunting sound work derived from teenagers singing György Ligeti's 1967 modernist composition *Lontano*. Olaf Breuning's *The army*, 2008, was another beauty. Thirty small creatures with Chinese teapots for bodies, satin Chinese slippers beneath them, and various lights – a lava lamp, a rotating, multicoloured disco ball, a lit orrery – for heads became endearing robotlike elves that lit up the room like a Lite-Brite. It was only on closer inspection that you realised that this was a confused, wayward, and out-of-synch regiment – a playful and disturbing metaphor for the state of a disorientated superpower, and for its contemporary art at a crossroads.

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