

INTRODUCTION

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In a panel discussion preceding the 2006 Biennial, curator Klaus Kertess, responsible for the show's 1995 iteration, noted: "The beauty of this exhibition is its impossibility." Indeed, the Whitney Biennial has historically been hated as fervently as it has been loved and has sustained its share of zealous criticism. Such controversy is a remarkable feat for this earliest showcase for contemporary American art, whose advocacy is rooted in a moment when work being made in this country received little critical attention and few cared about the art that Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney championed. The beauty of organizing the Biennial, as well as its "impossibility," springs from the fact that now people do care, often passionately.

If taking on the exhibition means shouldering that paradoxical premise, it is one that over the course of our research and myriad studio visits proved in various ways fortuitously resonant. In his foreword Adam D. Weinberg accurately points out that while the nature of a Biennial precludes its being able to encapsulate a uniform or exhaustive picture of contemporary art production, at this point in time that enterprise appears even more daunting. Art in the United States does not reinvent itself in two-year cycles; moreover, embedded in larger international networks of exhibition and artistic interaction, its spirit cannot be neatly compartmentalized by nationality. And yet, while American art is informed by worldwide events and trends, we are also witnessing an inverse and related interest in locally specific contexts, small areas of exchange, and contained arenas of activity, tendencies considered by Henriette Huldish in her discussion of "lessness" in this catalogue. Shamim M. Momin reflects on a set of similarly simultaneous relationships when locating contemporary art within an understanding of time that has fundamentally reframed contemporary culture: one recursive and coexistent rather than linear and successive, a mode of spatiotemporal thinking fundamentally resistant to a modernist notion of progression. Rebecca Solnit also contributes her take on the broader cultural moment and the shift in what it means to be political in this time, a turning toward smaller, localized gestures and dispersed, nonhegemonic networks.

Within the vast, variously differentiated field that we (perhaps absurdly) continue to yoke under the single term *contemporary art*, certain prevalent, often interrelated practices to us seem particularly germane to the moment. Many of the projects presented in the 2008 exhibition explore fluid communication structures and systems of exchange that index larger social, political, and economic contexts, often aiming to invert the more object-oriented, ends-driven operations of the art market. Recurring concerns involve a nuanced investigation of social, domestic, and public space and its translation into form—primarily sculptural, but also photographic, cinematic, and so forth—which in turn catalyzes social practices extending beyond the exhibition space. There is an evident trend toward creating work of an ephemeral, event-based character. (The front and back sections in this catalogue—a kind of extended endpapers that wrap the body of the book—include supplementary artist material related to these time-based, durational modes.) Such projects do not stand in opposition to the institution; rather, considering each of these multiple platforms equally important, artists show objects in the museum or gallery even as they seek ways to complicate and transcend its parameters.

For the 2008 Biennial, the Seventh Regiment Armory Building serves as a second venue. The Armory's array of period rooms and vast Drill Hall host an extensive program of events, organized by the Whitney and the Art Production Fund in association with the Park Avenue Armory and conceived in a spirit of fluid impermanence—music and other performance, movement workshops, radio broadcasts, publishing projects, community-based activities, film screenings, culinary gatherings, lectures, and more. In several instances these events are related to installations, moving-image works, or objects presented in the Museum's Marcel Breuer building; in some cases the product of a performance or its documentation will be integrated into the work exhibited at the Whitney. Also presented in the Armory are a number of installations that evolve through the duration of the Armory presentation, many created with the participation of various artistic or other communities. These works, like the performative projects, often address the building's architectural or military history.

Across media, much work in the exhibition reflects on a layered exploration of materiality or exploits material properties as a vehicle to articulate social content, for example a frequently manifested interest in questions of gender. Many artists reconcile rigorous formal and conceptual underpinnings with personal narratives or historical references. Numerous works demonstrate an explicit or implicit engagement with art history, particularly the legacy of modernism. Using humble or austere materials, employing calculated messiness or modes of deconstruction, other artists present works distinguished by their poetic sensibility, as they discover pockets of beauty in sometimes unexpected places. And in oblique or allegorical ways, much work reveals political inflections, often contemplating the politics of aesthetics parallel to the aesthetics of politics.

A desire to locate meaning threads through these many modes and practices in what feels like a transitional moment of history. Rather than positing a definitive answer or approach, however, these artists exhibit instead a passion for the search, positioned in the immediate reality of our uncertain sociopolitical times. Drawing Klaus Kertess's cogent recognition of the Biennial's potential in impossibility into a broader statement, we might borrow a favored slogan of the Situationists (whose influence, in turn, resonates throughout the exhibition) to describe this sensibility: "Be realistic. Demand the impossible." It's the least we can do.