

# Whitney Biennial

Whitney Museum  
Through June 1



Mika Rottenberg, *Cheese*, 2007-8,  
mixed media, installation view.



MK Guth, *Ties of Protection and Safekeeping*, 2008,  
mixed-media installation with performance, installation view. Park Avenue Armory.

A bald eagle's nest by Fritz Haeg—big enough to hold a human being—perches outside on the Whitney's concrete awning, provocatively ecological and barely visible. Jason Rhoades's manic assembly line, *The Grand Machine/Theareola* (2002), sprawls through the lobby gallery, a fine homage to the artist as well as a comment on production, consumption, and instant gratification. In the elevator, Bert Rodriguez's *The End*, with vinyl lettering on the doors and speakers broadcasting the ultimate Hollywood Muzak, tips its hat to Ed Ruscha. "As time goes by," indeed.

But ultimately, this year's Whitney Biennial—with its barren Sheetrock and chain-link, its postindustrial strip-mall shells, faded bulletin-board photo walls, and glitter-edged broken cinder blocks—is a disappointment. It feels unfinished and incomplete. There's a void at its heart. In one way, this exhibition is a sequel to the New Museum's curatorial vision of art among the rubble, even including some of the same artists: Rachel Harrison, Carol Bove, Jedediah Caesar.

At the Whitney, however, much of the art isn't just "unmonumental," it's antispectacular: so insistently underwhelming, so deliberately inconsequential, so—as Trevor Smith puts it in his catalogue essay—"deskilled" and "desublimated" that the exhibition feels exhausted. These derelict works and their shattered narratives exude a sense of dread, a failure of communication, an inner desolation. They speak not only of the refusal of spectacle but also of the shrinking field, of twisted concepts (such as the relational esthetics of French theorist and curator Nicholas Bourriaud) played out to triteness. They take reductionism to the point of no return. It's as if almost everyone, including the curators, went to art school for far too long.

One could argue, as the curators do, that this biennial reflects the state of our society and the mood of the times, which it does. You could call it the wartime biennial, the recession biennial, the Facebook biennial, the Home Depot biennial, or, with its many black-box video rooms, the Whitney multiplex. Shamim Momin, a curator at the Whitney and cocurator of the biennial, dredges up Robert Smithson's notion of entropy to emphasize the temporal nature of recent art, and calls its strategies "fluid, fragmented, and unresolved." The title of cocurator Henriette Huldish's catalogue essay, "Lessness: Samuel Beckett in Echo Park or an Art of Smaller, Slower, and Less," speaks for itself. The focus of the biennial, by the way, is on Los Angeles, where process, it seems, has



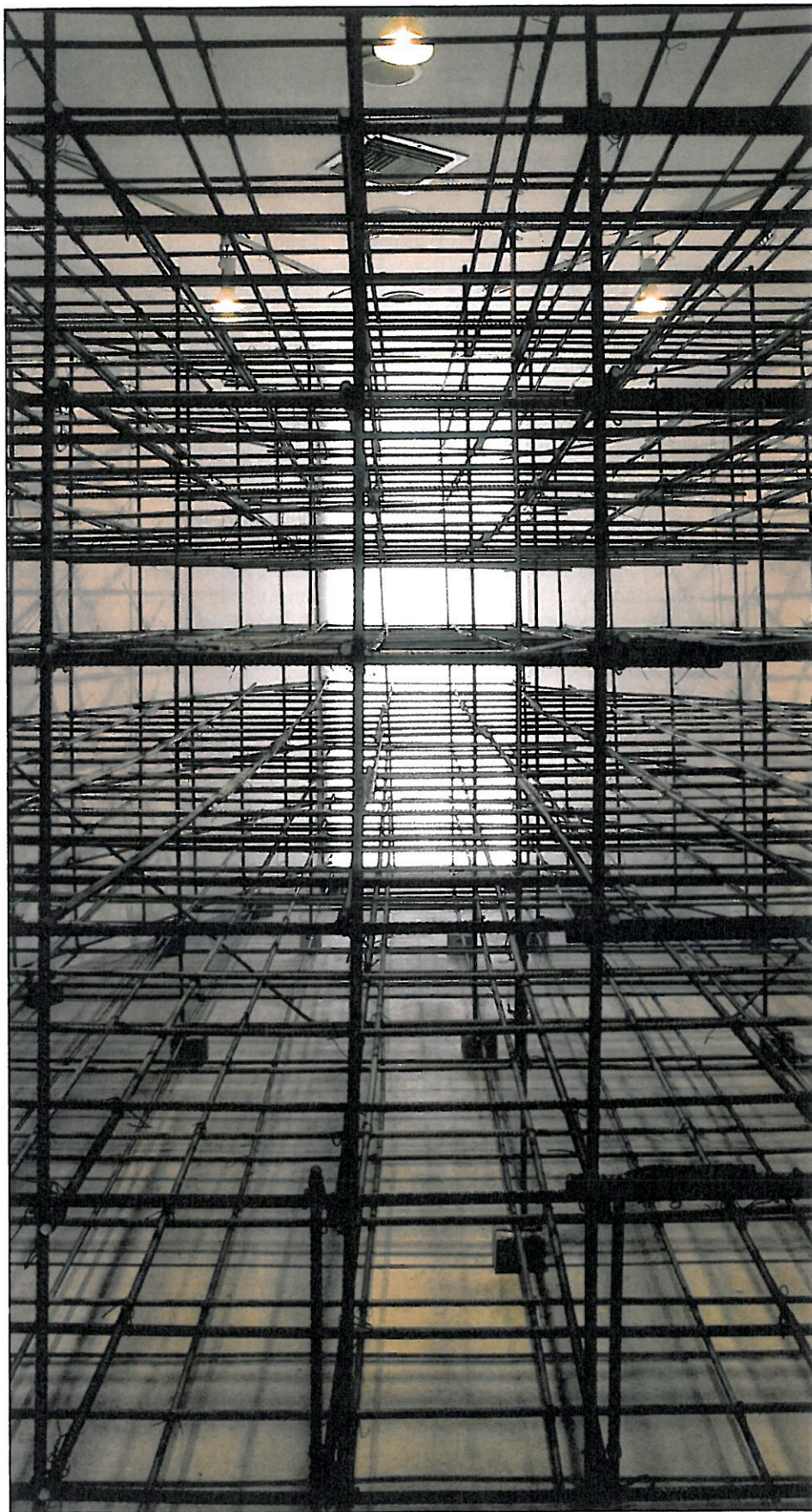
become part of the art object. There, as elsewhere, artists are sampling and remixing the final shreds of modernism. This tends to make the works opaque, diffuse, or incomprehensible, even when “tethered to social content” and especially when yoked to questions of perception and synesthesia.

The show does have some highspots among the 81 artists. Spike Lee’s documentary on New Orleans; Harry (Harriet) Dodge and Stanya Kahn’s *Can’t Swallow It, Can’t Spit It Out* (2008), which follows the wanderings of a disoriented Valkyrie; and Javier Téllez’s 2007 film about the blind men and the elephant are three terrific screened works. Coco Fusco’s *Operation Atropos* (2007), a harrowing video of women, including herself, subjected to capture and interrogation training, is both excruciating and spellbinding. Also in the realm of embedded politics, NPR’s do-it-yourself guerrilla radio project is brilliant, as are the 121 gold-flake panels of Daniel Joseph Martinez’s *Divine Violence* (2007), part of a continuing project to name all the groups in the world attempting to enforce their beliefs through violence.

Speaking of shattered narratives, Stephen Prina’s pale sound installation, 1979–2006, with music and words from a monograph on Felix Gonzalez-Torres, has a certain hypnotic art-world appeal. Mika Rottenberg’s *Cheese* (2007–8), a barnyard stockade containing a multichannel video fantasy involving goats and long-tressed milkmaids, is a fully realized winner. As for stylistic reductions, Caesar’s blocks of trash in resin aspic go a long way toward demolishing their Minimalist antecedents, while Charles Long turns heron excrement into Giacometti-ish sculpture. Ellen Harvey’s mirrored salon-style *Museum of Failure* (2008) wordlessly offers the perfect self-referential sardonic commentary.

Harvey also appeared live—the artist at her proverbial easel—at the Seventh Regiment Armory on Park Avenue, where the show continued, immortalizing 100 biennial visitors in 15-minute sketches (in exchange for their evaluation of the portrait’s success or failure). Rodriguez conducted therapy sessions inside a big white cube in the Colonel’s Room. In the Officers’ Room Marina Rosenfeld managed to make sound sculptural in her live sound piece, *Teenage Lontano*, sung by teen vocalists. And in the Silver Room MK Guth braided artificial blond hair and red fabric strips (scribbled with visitors’ comments about what they want to protect) into Rapunzel-like swags. The Armory itself, exposing its wood-paneled rooms and military decor to live performative art, may have been this biennial’s best surprise.

—Kim Levin



Ruben Ochoa, *If I had a rebar for every time someone tried to mold me*, 2007, rebar, annealed wire ties, and dobie blocks, 122" x 198" x 222".