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Art

Alas, the Biennial Is ... Kinda Boring

The Whitney's biggest wingding is back. Our critic heads straight for museum restroom, examines fixtures. Are they art? Could be!

[Press Release]

A MIRROR FOR THE REFLECTIVE

From a press release issued last summer by the True Mirror Company in New York City. A 12"x12" True Mirror costs \$195.

The True Mirror Company has created a mirror that will revolutionize the way people view themselves. Constructed from two mirrors positioned at an exact 90 degree angle, the True Mirror reflects true images of its viewers; it does not reverse images the way all other mirrors do. When a person looks in an ordinary mirror and raises his right arm, what he sees is his image raising the arm on the left side. In a True Mirror, the reflection actually raises the right arm; the mirror thus provides a true picture of how he appears to others. This can result in key improvements in styles of hair and clothing, especially if the style is purposely asymmetrical. For example, wearing a beret at different angles produces entirely different looks. By using the True Mirror, a person can determine which look truly suits him the best.

For some, the True Mirror has an additional, much deeper effect: it reveals hidden aspects of their inner selves. Viewers notice that certain qualities appear in the True Mirror that they never saw before, especially what can be best described as their "inner spark" or "light." This is possibly a result of the split between the left brain and the right brain. Because the brain has two different parts, it sends different messages from each side; these messages appear on different sides of the face, where they merge to form personality. By reversing the two sides, a typical mirror presents a vision that is quite different from the real person; what one sees in the True Mirror is much more lifelike.

This feature of the True Mirror will help people understand why others react to them the way they do. It will show them who they actually are and what they really want out of life.

Somewhere there's an art history graduate student sitting in Starbucks, laptop and venti decaf latte on hand, writing a thesis on the Whitney Biennial. It's bound to be a history of arrant egos, frustrated reputations, political intrigue, curatorial missteps and temporary fame.



MARIO NAVES

Part of the narrative will be an inventory of reviews. Given the negative and sometimes vitriolic criticism the Biennial has engendered over the years, it should be an entertaining and maybe hilarious roundup. But then, any exhibition purporting to define the current state of American art is asking for it.

You've got to have some sympathy for the curators—to paraphrase R&B duo Sam and Dave, the Biennial can't stand up for falling down. Yet it's a perennial hit, and judging by the crush of media types that showed up for the press preview, the 2008 edition will be no exception. (The general public can expect to wait in a line trailing around the corner of Madison and 75th Street.)

The first thing I did upon entering the Whitney was race toward the second-floor restroom—not out of necessity, but out of curiosity. Would there be art displayed in there? It's happened before, and is a pretty sure gauge of the Biennial's free-for-all ethos. Sure enough, there was *something* above the hand dryer: A black metal box with an angled mirror inside.

I couldn't find an identifying label, but a security guard assured me it was a work of art. Another guard told me there was a similar black box in the ladies' room. The gracious press folks knew nothing about them. The Biennial image list doesn't include the black boxes, nor does the catalog. Were they a long-term installation, a work from the permanent collection or artful bathroom fixtures?

Probably the latter, but that's the confusion the contemporary scene poses: What *isn't* art? The Biennial doesn't answer the question because it hardly realizes the question exists. The art world elite and the culture at large take for granted that anything is fair game; artists have a liberty of means that was unimaginable 50 years ago. But the only thing heedless freedom has resulted in is avant-gardist novelty.