

The Best of the Biennial

By Robert Ayers

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NEW YORK—No two **Whitney Biennials** are the same, of course, but this time around the curators and organizers seem to have gone out of their way to bring change. This is most apparent in their annexation of the Park Avenue Armory (at least for the first few weeks of the Biennial, through March 23) as a location for performance and installation art of various sorts. Maybe it was this boundary-busting that made the Whitney feel at liberty to devote parts of its own Madison Avenue building to a frankly disappointing re-creation of spaces resembling small commercial gallery rooms, some of which are less successful than others. Still, as ever, this year's Biennial offers something for everyone, and here — to start a few arguments if nothing else — is a personal list of top five contributors.

Ellen Harvey

As intellectually curious as she is technically ambitious, Harvey is a young British artist (and lawyer) whose work is featured in both the Madison Avenue and Park Avenue halves of the Biennial. Her subject throughout appears to be the possibilities and shortcomings of intelligence, particularly as they relate to perception and the translation of perception into art. In the museum, her two-part *Museum of Failure: Collection of Impossible Subjects & Invisible Self-Portraits* (2007) is a hall of mirrors for the 21st-century aesthete, while over in the Armory she has a video piece called *Failed Renovation* and is performing *100 Biennial Visitors Immortalized*, in which she'll exchange a 15-minute effort at drawing you for your responses to a questionnaire criticizing her efforts.

Neighborhood Public Radio

NPR has colonized a storefront a few doors down Madison from the Whitney's front entrance. In this unlikely setting — it used to be a fancy shoe store and NPR has maintained a good deal of the fittings — the California-born iconoclastic group will help you start up your own radio show (or appear on someone else's), teach you how to build your own radio transmitter, or inculcate you into other aspects of their politically dissatisfied art. So-called guerrilla actions that depend on the hospitality of a large-scale arts organization can be tiresome, but NPR bucks the trend with their audacity, the directness of their strategies, and their utter lack of pretension.

Mika Rottenberg

Rottenberg presents a wonderful video installation in which the world depicted onscreen — part fairy-tale, part feminist demonstration — extends into the reality of the gallery space: To watch Rottenberg's video *Cheese* (2007), you have to crouch down and enter the weird rustic enclosure that she has constructed to contain it. It's as if someone just unloaded the corner of a barnyard and plopped it into a corner of the museum. Rottenberg delivers goats, women wringing milk from their improbably long hair, and medieval-looking mechanisms and structures, all set in some bucolic summer light — and achieves one of the most genuinely entrancing pieces of this year's Biennial.

Coco Fusco

Another artist you'll find both on Madison and in the museum, New Yorker Fusco is one of the most riveting performance artists I have ever encountered, and her video *Operation Atropos* (2006), on view at the museum, is one of the most unsettling pieces in the show. Film and video programs in art exhibitions always get a rough deal it seems to me, because people simply aren't willing to give them the time they deserve. Fusco's piece lasts an hour, and it's worth every minute you devote to it. Her starting point was seeing the women officers in those infamous Abu Ghraib photographs and wondering about their motivations. For the work, she engaged a team of former military interrogators to demonstrate and share the principles of extreme interrogation techniques, and — with six other women — subjected herself to their training. The results are harrowing.

Jason Rhoades

Some Biennial-goers may feel they've had more than enough of the late Jason Rhoades, but despite **David Zwirner's** efforts, and the fact that Rhoades made his Biennial debut way back in 1997, most probably know more about his infamy than his actual work. Here is the perfect opportunity to properly experience one of his environments: Virtually the first thing you see as you enter the show, *The Grand Machine/THEOREOLA* (2002) sprawls chaotically across the Whitney's first-floor gallery, scattering sexual, societal, and racial allusions in all directions, while simultaneously mocking intellectual pretension and celebrating the peculiar magic of art. Whitney director **Adam Weinberg** is of the opinion that it might take half a dozen visits to appreciate this Biennial properly. I'd set aside one of them just for this piece.