

An Untitled Review of an Exhibition's Wall Texts

By Aria Dean

This was New York's latest big exhibition. It was a big show in every sense - big in that it was poised to make a splash, big in that it took up a lot of space in the institution that put it on, and big in that it included over forty artists. Everyone was meant to be very excited about it - everyone meaning myself and those presumed to be like me in the art world - aka those who are marginal by way of their identities, and also everyone who had taken it upon themselves - presumably - to be concerned with the fate of those at the margins.

Personally, I didn't care much for the show. First, I didn't particularly like a lot of the work - stale! - and second I disagreed with most of the curatorial decisions - so cluttered! But what really unsettled me were the wall texts. They were numerous and lengthy - "extended" - and they consistently drew my attention away from the artworks. Of course, extended wall texts are not to do this, drawing the viewers' attention away momentarily in order to lay a foundation before they really dig into the work. In fact, I often appreciate when institutions include extended texts for all the works in a show; it leaves the brain a little wrung out once you get to the gift shop, but I usually leave with the sense that it was worth it, a necessary evil toward elucidating what exactly these works are doing in front of me. Usually, though, wall texts draw our attention away in order to draw our attention toward. However, something in these texts drew my attention away and never placed me back in front of the work - and not just because of their sheer number or length. The Big Show's texts drained my attention rather than drew it. Where had it been siphoned off to?

The Big Show's wall texts, as a body of work, are curious literary objects in themselves. While seemingly aiming to contextualize their accompanying artwork, they often gloss over the particularities of the work or its artist's practice, instead succumbing to a mode of biography where the artists' identities are listed like ingredients rather than noted as elements in the apparatus that upholds the artwork. For example, in the most glaring instance of this phenomenon, in the first sentence of its wall text, a work by Gregg Bordowitz is said to "explore [the artist's] Jewish, gay, and bisexual identities." This is a similar formula to clickbait headlines that circulate online and herald things like, "These 6 Black Women Artists Are Showing That Black Lives Matter" or "Meet the Feminists Turning Food into Intersectional Politics." Like these headlines, the wall texts seemed to present proverbial word clouds masquerading as sentences about each artist and their work. My own memory of these didactics as lists is telling of my own artistic conditioning as someone born after 1990, whose reading of the world has almost never not been mediated by the internet, but it also signals something about the texts themselves, about the exhibition, curatorial intentions and presumed audience.

Revisiting the wall texts later, the identities-as-ingredients format was not as glaringly prevalent as I imagined in my frustrated haze as I left the exhibition. Instead, most of the texts are more adept and sinister when they weave these details together to roughly the same effect. It's like the difference between a recipe on food.com and a feature in Bon Appetit; Bon Appetit might write a recipe with more flair and finesse, but the reader still must be able to depart with a concrete knowledge of what is what and where it goes.

To this effect, many of the wall texts thread that same clickbaity, concretized, and identity-centric language throughout. In many cases, what looks like a discussion of the artist's conceptual concerns is actually an account of who they are, detailed in brief, recognizable terms. For example, in describing Christina Quarles' work, the text claims that her paintings "[evoke] the artist's complicated experience as a black woman who is often mistaken for white." Others take a less personal approach to the language, instead speaking of the conditions that afflict a generalized identity group, like Tschalabalala Self's work, which is described as "[attending] to the complexities of black identity." In both Quarles' and Self's wall text, the artist is a concrete identity, concrete in the sense that it is nameable, and categorizable across the texts. In other words, "black identity" and the "experience as a black woman" are tied to "black" as a concrete identifier. When the reader views the word black in other wall texts, we are to understand it as the same "black" unless otherwise specified. For instance, Diamond Stingily's "[evocation of] the innocence of a black childhood tinged with melancholy and precariousness," must be understood to stand in at least close relation, some sort of sameness, to Quarles' "black" and Self's.

A similar concretization happens with the word "queer" throughout the texts. Notions of queer communities, bodies, identities, and art histories are noted throughout in relationship to a wide variety of practices. Josh Fought "draw[s] on personal and archival materials to trace queer histories." Paul Mpagi Sepuya and his friends "illustrate otherwise invisible or intangible scenes of queer interracial community formation and the common search for pleasure." Chris E. Vargas' video work "parod[ies] current conversations in queer communities and families, [and] outline[s] the future of trans and queer bodies in relation to the criminal justice system." There are many more examples. Viewing the wall texts as a corpus of writing, a trend emerges, where "queer" is used as a concrete and indirect shorthand for a wide variety of experiences. In some instances, we can glean that queer signifies those who identify as not-heterosexual in their sexual preferences, like when the texts mention "queer communities" or "queer activism." In others, when "queer bodies" are mentioned, the meaning floats more freely, seemingly denoting non-normativity in a more expanded sense than "queer community." But whatever its nuanced meaning, "queer" becomes a homogenized relation between the communities, bodies, activism, etc.

Reading these texts for "queer" and "queerness" brings back the feeling that I had when I left the exhibition: that I'd just read a series of lists about people. "Ctrl+F: 'queer'" excavates a cohesive visual pattern of "queer" spotted paragraphs sprinkled across the forty or so entries. On one hand, I wanted to enumerate these instances because I think something is lost in the current usage of these terms. On the other, there must be something lost in the way that I, as the reader, am approaching the text.

Why is clickbait written the way that it is? Broadly speaking, its writing is aimed at search engine optimization, algorithms, and ease of categorization, but also for readers whose attention is split. "These 6 Black Women Artists are Showing that Black Lives Matter," is not titled that way because it is a brilliant and apt description of what the article says or what the artists are actually doing. Rather, it presents words as visual signifiers instead than vessels for meaning. Clickbait is for busy readers and machines for whom 'meaning' is a humanizing word for 'data.'

These wall texts and my experience of them as a reader, display a mode of writing intended to generate metadata. Their use of "queer," and "black", among other identifiers functions like connecting tags. These texts could easily be rewritten to include hashtag markers in front of

such keywords (#black, #queer) and would result in a robust database of artworks and artists. The frequency and uniformity of terms across the texts - which are, notably, by at least five distinct authors - only strengthens this sense. As a reader, I am trained to look out for these search terms; they show up in bold and everything else becomes fine print.

This observation cracks open what is so distressing about The Big Show —about the language which surrounds art, about what we determine as “good art” and why. First, returning to my initial examples - Quarles, Self, and Stingily - the metadata provided by The Big Show’s wall texts is identity-oriented, biographically-tinged information about the artist, positioned as information about the work. However, rather than presenting real substance - meaning? - texts like these present the veneer of information. And what results is a framework almost entirely reliant on who the artist is - or really what type they are (#black, #queer, #trans, and so on) - rather than what the artwork is in relationship to these supporting details. I’ve been privately calling this “the evidentiary turn,” where artists’ primary directive is to furnish evidence toward confirming their own existence. In the evidentiary turn, the artwork is relegated to serving a humble function - as material evidence toward making the artist and her assumed subject position more visible. The Big Show practices and crystallizes this shift.

The Big Show’s metadataistic approach also nullifies the exhibition’s own stated aim of “usher[ing] in more fluid and inclusive expressions of identity,” and exemplifies a larger problem growing out of contemporary art world identity politics where fluidity and inclusivity are stated goals but their manifestation serves to double-down on rigidity, normativity, and neoliberalism. These rigid identity formations that want so badly to call themselves fluid while still relying on existing labels feel like a warped Wendy Brown fan-fiction—like a worst-case scenario version of the theorist’s warnings about contemporary identity in her seminal essay “Wounded Attachments.” In it Brown writes:

“Contemporary politicized identity is also potentially reiterative of regulatory disciplinary society in its configuration of a disciplinary subject. It is produced by and potentially accelerates the production of that aspect of disciplinary society which ‘ceaselessly characterizes, classifies, and specializes...”

This was written in 1995. Now, in today’s disciplinary and technologized society, this acceleration has at least doubled. When you’re dealing in metadata, a “fluid identity” is an oxymoron.

This may sound like a call to abandon identity politics and identity overall in the process of making, circulating, and viewing artworks - to let the art speak for itself, or to stop allowing space for artists based on their representation of a demographic often barred from the art world. It is not. Rather, I am interested in the current state of identity in relationship to artists and their artworks, and in understanding how each operates in conversation with the other. The relation between these three things - identity, the artist, and the artwork - requires reconsideration in the face of an intensified regime of identity politics not based in personal experience but in user and consumer demographics. I suspect that it is worth considering the effect of this more protocological construction of identity in order to think through how we make and process artworks. All I want to do, really, is talk about the awkwardness of the particular and the universal, of making something that is part of but not only about yourself, and how to get outside of, and ahead of the disciplinary functions of identity in order to return some excitement and

heart to this game. I am considering this phenomenon because I want to renew the stakes in the Art being made by these artists—its value, its merit—as well as our institutions' responsibility, for the benefit of everyone involved, to start there: with a sincere consideration of the work being produced by these artists.

1Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," from *States of Injury*