Beautiful Eccentrics

Pablo Helguera
Label Intolerance

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The white cube vs.
the interpretive text.

During the 1960s, the white cube aesthetic that had dominated art galleries for most of the twentieth century started to be put into question by emerging conceptual practices such as that of institutional critique. In 1976, art critic Brian O'Doherty assailed the notion of the white cube, or the "Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial" space "devoted to the technology of esthetics." In *Inside the white Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space,* he wrote:

"Through the fifties and sixties, we notice the codification of a new theme as it evolves into consciousness: How much space should a work of art have (as the phrase went) to 'breathe'? If paintings implicitly declare their own terms of occupancy, the somewhat aggrieved muttering between them becomes harder to ignore. What goes together, what doesn't? The esthetics of hanging evolves according to its own habits, which

become conventions, which become laws."

This criticism by O'Doherty and others was significant and influential; notwithstanding, the white cube aesthetic has refused to die entirely. The desire for modernist purity somehow remains.

For those of us who have worked professionally in the field of museum education, there is a particular aspect of

that white cube nostalgia that has proved especially difficult to shed (and that remains a pet peeve for many of us): the curatorial push to banish interpretive texts from exhibitions.

I first encountered this practice while working at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, where one of its senior curators decided not to have any extended labels whatsoever in an exhibition (this is, any text beyond an introductory

text at the beginning and the identifying labels, also known as tombstone labels). In the view of the curator, didactic texts and labels were unseemly and obstructed the visual experience. We were puzzled and frustrated, as we knew (and it was later confirmed) that museum visitors would be lost without this support, but the decision stood—placing additional stress on us, the educators, to find other ways to make up for this absence.

This practice, which might make sense from a purely design or aesthetic perspective, inevitably results in great confusion for the general public—most of which are not seasoned art professionals and often need help in understanding the larger context of the exhibition. Even in the case of art professionals, extended labels are key because no one is omniscient. Yet some museums persist in this practice. Notably the Menil

Collection in Houston continues a self-imposed tradition of having only barebones data in its labels, often leaving visitors to their own devices in making sense about what they are looking at.

I reached out to two former colleagues of mine who I respect the most in museum interpretation to share their thoughts on anti-label stances. Sara Bodinson, director of interpretation, research and

digital learning at New York's Museum of Modern Art, shared the following:

"I think historically even more than not wanting to interfere in the interpretation of the artworks, the main reason to have fewer labels at MoMA has been an embrace of the modern, minimal aesthetic in the galleries and not wanting labels to physically compete with artworks—especially small-scale artworks. But of

course, this is coming from people who know about the work and don't need that foothold or entry point into the content. But I think over the years, curators have come to understand that our visitors want to know about artists' inspiration, materials and process, the social historical context of the work at the time it was made and the relevance to visitors today. We are explicitly not trying to tell visitors what to think or how

to feel about the work. (Hence the problematic nature of the word interpretation.) We can communicate some of this through labels, and increasingly, personal connection and contemporary relevance of the work by inviting non-museum perspectives to speak on our audio guides."

Jenna Madison, also a former MoMA colleague and a museum educator and interpretive specialist based in Denver, told me:

"Many curators of contemporary art in particular make the argument that interpretive texts interfere with the aesthetic experience of the work. This is a fallacy. Years of visitor research has shown that when given interpretive points of entry into an artist's process,

inspiration, or interrogation, the appreciation for the work increases. Why would any curator not want to explain why the works on view should be contemplated or why a group of objects are placed together? […] Sometimes it's about precious wall space—"wall texts take up too much room"—sometimes is about the artist's intention, which is valid, but mostly I think it's just lazy. When curators cannot clearly articulate the

motivation or thinking behind a show, it's easier to "let the work speak for itself." But the lack of interpretive texts (or other interpretive media) is a disservice to both the viewer, who may or may not have any way of understanding what they are looking at, and to the art works and artist who created them. Why should the viewer care to engage with the art if the curator doesn't care enough to tell you why they think this work is important or

interesting or pertinent to the current moment?"

It is important to note the vital role that interpretive labels play in helping an art museum to live up to its public mission. Extended labels are not common in small alternative spaces or art galleries, but generally this is because, while technically public spaces, they cater to in-the-know audiences and are usually small enough so that face-to-face

conversations with a helpful gallery attendant or other staff are possible.

Certainly, label-writing practices are prone to abuse like any other, and sometimes we can see museums that either overcompensate by placing long texts that no one will read and/or using overly insider-y language. But whether one does a data dump on the printed texts or decides to leave the walls bare from

any useful information, both approaches show a lack of awareness of the true needs of regular viewers.

I asked Jenna about the alternative practice of using numbers next to paintings along with printed handouts or brochures, which is another way to "keep the walls clean." Speaking of an exhibition where she employed this practice, Jenna said:

"It was a disaster. Visitors were completely lost and we had to redo the brochure several times. […] Lots of museums have tried it over the years and it rarely works well in terms of way-finding. The biggest argument I have against that type of system is that it takes the viewer's eye and attention away from the objects, which is the opposite of what we want for engagement and close looking."

Label politics, like many other contentious practical matters in exhibition-making, are interesting to consider from the standpoint of conceptual works that directly engage with the topic—one of the great legacies, again, of institutional critique. We could have an entire exhibition on the subject of interpretive materials (and I hope one day someone curates it). For now, I asked Sara and Jenna to cite any examples of artists or

artists' projects where the use of descriptive text plays an important role.

Sara offers:

"Dario Robleto. His labels are not interpretive texts per se but the list of materials that he uses to make the artworks is so poetic and yet impossible to know if it's true. Probably not true but plausible."

And Jenna:

"Hank Willis Thomas's *Branded/Unbranded* series, a critique of advertising directed at African American consumers points to the ways in which the combination or juxtaposition of language and image "sells" more than product, but an identity or a lifestyle to the target audience. More interesting is what happens when Thomas removes the text and the images

stand alone. The meaning changes when the original context is omitted and one's perception of the images becomes altered and filtered through largely internal (if even unconscious) biases and stereotypes."

As for me, a work that comes to mind is *Photo Album* (2007) by Los Angeles-based artist Cody Trepte. Trepte "translated" family pictures of his own into a whole book

containing code: "Each book is a family snapshot translated into binary code with a formal description of the photograph on the cover." I asked Trepte about the genesis of this work.

His response:

"I made this work at a time when digital photography was starting to replace film cameras and I was thinking about how that changed the way we store and recall memories. I was also thinking about how family photo albums used to be cherished objects and now with digital photography are becoming lost in the shuffle of all our other digital data. I wanted to explore the threshold of legibility of an image as it relates to memory and pathos.

While Trepte's work is not "label-based," the description of the event in the photograph (which we don't get ever to see) with the adjacent code representation becomes an early version of alt-text, doubling as something akin to a prose poem—for example:

"Cami, Dad and I are in front of the fireplace preparing to build a fire. Dad is kneeling down with his back to the camera and placing a log into the fireplace.

Cami and I are standing on opposite sides of Dad and are staring into the camera."

Cody adds:

"If language feels closer to knowledge, images are more primary. They exist instantaneously and linger longer, and with their orbit around knowledge benefit from association, pattern and subjectivity in ways that feel more brittle with words."

Which made me think of one of the most well-known contemporary artwork series in this category which primarily employs labels, precisely using words to try to reconstruct an image that has been lost: Sophie Calle's *Last Seen* series at the Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, where she inquired with the guards, curators, and other museum staff to mentally reconstruct images of the paintings that were famously

stolen in the 1990 heist at that museum.

The piece shows how personal memories are inherently flawed and incomplete (with some descriptions of the work contradicting one another and some adding elements that are not in the original work). Which is another way of saying that words will always be insufficient, but since images can't always remain with us physically or

in reliable reproduction, it is words, ours and others, that often come to the rescue.

Footnotes & References

*1 https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ongoing-artist-as-philanthropist-report-tracks-the-rise-of-endowed-foundations-1463578
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Colophon

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Pablo Helguera
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www.kiosk.art

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