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DE GUSTIBUS

The Lost Art of Writing About Art

By ERIC GIBSON
 April 18, 2008; Page W13

In certain circles, the Whitney Museum's Biennial exhibition of contemporary art is known as "the show everybody loves to hate." Usually the criticism comes in the form of negative reviews. But this year it's different, with the brickbats directed at the exhibition's accompanying commentary instead of the art itself. Texts written by the Whitney's curators and outside contributors are being widely (and accurately) dismissed as unalloyed gibberish.

What makes this complaint particularly significant is that it comes not from the public, whom the museum might privately dismiss as benighted philistines, but from insiders -- artists and critics who know their stuff and are generally well-disposed toward the museum and its efforts.

When the show opened last month, artist and critic Carol Diehl blogged about the "impenetrable prose from the Whitney Biennial." As examples, she offered "random quotes" about individual artists and their work taken from the exhibition's wall texts and catalog. Among the gems:

- "... invents puzzles out of nonsequiturs to seek congruence in seemingly incongruous situations, whether visual or spatial . . . inhabits those interstitial spaces between understanding and confusion."
- "Bove's 'settings' draw on the style, and substance, of certain time-specific materials to resuscitate their referential possibilities, to pull them out of historical stasis and return them to active symbolic duty, where new adjacencies might reactivate latent meanings."

Ms. Diehl's complaint was quickly taken up by others. Richard Lacayo, on a Time magazine blog, likened reading the show's introductory wall text ("Many of the projects . . . explore fluid communication structures and systems of exchange") to "being smacked in the face with a spitball." To combat such verbiage, he recommended banning five words long popular with critics that nonetheless say nothing: "interrogates," "problematicizes," "references" (as a verb), "transgressive" and "inverts."

On his Modern Art Notes blog, Tyler Green dismissed the Whitney prose as an "embarrassment" and suggested that every candidate for a contemporary-art curatorship be required to pass a writing test. And an art blogger known only as C-Monster pleaded simply for "smart writing that is precise and unmuddled," adding plaintively: "Making it enjoyable to read wouldn't hurt."

Once upon a time, art writing was all those things. Critics of an earlier age, such as John Ruskin, had no problem making themselves understood, and they are still read today. The same is true of the great art historians of the postwar era, such as Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich. Panofsky, among whose books was the definitive study of Albrecht Dürer, was a supremely elegant prose stylist. Gombrich's 1950 survey, "The Story of Art," has sold six million copies and been translated into 23 languages. By the way, English was the second language for both men. And Alfred Barr, founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, wrote catalogs on topics ranging from Matisse to



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Surrealism that made the mysteries of modern art accessible to the American public.

It was Marcel Duchamp who unwittingly launched art criticism on its current path of willful obscurantism. His "Readymade" art -- mass-produced commercial objects (most famously a urinal) that the artist removed from everyday utilitarian contexts and displayed in a museum -- almost required this development.

Until Duchamp, criticism was aesthetically based. The critic talked about a painting's subject, the way the artist handled color, drawing, composition and the like. With Readymades, the object's appearance and beauty were no longer the issue -- indeed, they were irrelevant. What mattered was the idea behind the work -- the point the artist was trying to make. So art criticism moved from the realm of visual experience to that of philosophy. The writer no longer had to base his critical observations on a close scrutiny of the work of art. He could simply riff.

Conceptual art like Duchamp's took a while to catch on, but by the 1980s it had become mainstream. Around that time, academics and critics drove another nail into the coffin of accessible writing. They turned to areas outside of art and aesthetics -- disciplines such as linguistics and ideologies such as Marxism and feminism -- to interpret art.

From the late 19th century to just after World War II, writing about modern art was clear. It had to be. Critics from Émile Zola to Clement Greenberg were trying to explain new and strange art forms to a public that was often hostile to the avant-garde. To have a hope of making their case, these writers couldn't afford to obfuscate. Today, when curators and critics can count on a large audience willing to embrace new art simply because it is new, they don't have to try as hard.

Still, there is no excuse for a museum letting nonsense of the sort quoted above out in the open, particularly an institution whose mission includes educating the public. If the Whitney continues to snub this public -- its core audience -- by "explaining" art with incomprehensible drivel, it shouldn't be surprised if people decide to return the favor and walk away.

Mr. Gibson is the Journal's Leisure & Arts features editor. Write to Eric Gibson at eric.gibson@wsj.com

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