

MORE REAL? ART IN THE AGE OF TRUTHINESS

Truthiness, Merriam-Webster's 2006 word of the year, was coined on Comedy Central's news-parody show *The Colbert Report*. Steven Colbert, the anchorman-handsome, faux-conservative, pundit charmer host, defined the *Report's* word of the day in October 2005 as "the reality that is intuitively known without regard to liberal ideals such as reason and logic." In other words, he who yells loudest—and broadcasts the most stridently—is right.

In these days of blatant media bias, we can no longer trust that our news is presented with anything other than a stab at factual accuracy. Context is gone; even such grande-dame institutions as *The New York Times*, long a bastion of objectivity in reporting, is suspect as it comes down on the side of style over journalism. Today, Colbert and his progenitor, Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show*, both of whom hold heady court on Comedy Central, serve to point out the blather of inconsistency and general knuckleheadedness in cable-television news programming. From Fox to MSNBC, punditry reigns. Objectivity is arguable, dependent upon which talking head's particular bias you happen to agree with. Journalism derives truth, such as it may be, from its audience.

In a parallel, post-minimal and/or postmodern art—call it what you will—sets aside the primacy of the object in favor of its meaning. The object, if indeed there is one, stands in for a sign, or signs, whose meaning wavers in and out of focus like a desert mirage. Real or not? That's up to you, the viewer. And since personal identity is as mutable as the ocean's surface on a stormy day, the meaning of a work of art is going to change from moment to moment, because it can never be viewed by the same person twice. Meaning in art, therefore, is as much a construct as individual identity with all its characteristics including gender, ethnicity, intelligence and emotional quotients, ancestry, class, and educational and career opportunities. Identity is, in a word, fluid. Therefore truth in art is equally pliable. Richard Locayo said it this way in his review of the exhibition in *Time* magazine's July 30 issue, "[Colbert's] *truthiness* turned out to offer a way to think about all kinds of things... a term as widely useful as *authenticity*." Through the ages, art has lied to us: For example, painting represents three-dimensional images on a two-dimensional surface. But we've gotten so used to that fact we no longer question it—except when we do, as in the case of trompe l'oeil paintings. What other lies does the visual language of popular culture get away with?

SITE Santa Fe's exhibition, *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness*, was curated by Elizabeth Armstrong of the Minnesota Institute of Arts. The show is commendable for its clarity of purpose, combining as it does notions of truthiness with one of the chief purposes of contemporary art—to question all that is universally accepted about art. Tautologically, art today is often most effective and pleasurable when it successfully embodies the infinity symbol of the snake eating itself, referencing an endless chain of meaning derived from that which is lent it by the viewer. As Marcel Duchamp had it, the viewer completes the work of art. *More Real?* is a pleasure to experience, starting off as it does with an architectural intervention by Gregg Lynn of pod-mod forms—the exterior of the building hasn't looked this good since Dave Hickey's 2001 biennial exhibition, *Beau Monde*. One of the first installations the viewer encounters is Mark Dion's delightfully exasperating *Waiting for the Extraordinary*. His mid-twentieth-century waiting room is a performance piece that perfectly caricatures being rudely put in one's place by a bored, gum-snapping, nail-filing receptionist—who does not break character—and her tools of the trade: a take-a-number machine, ancient magazines that exacerbate the crawl of time, and the symbolic language hinting at the occult

practice of the man behind the door whom we await. We find ourselves hoping that, like the Wizard of Oz, he'll give us courage, brains, and heart—we hope, succinctly, that the wait will be worth it. When the receptionist finally calls our number, we enter the inner sanctum, only to discover that no one is present. Cast items lie like ciphers of the Illuminati on a long, narrow table, glowing in the dark as if to suggest they hold impossibly lofty secrets. Unfortunately, as art and as symbols, they are anticlimactic and rather dreary. No wonder that receptionist looks so put upon.

Many other works of art deserve attention, but one must not be omitted from mention. Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's *Phantom Truck* is a stunner, in large part because it is so difficult to see. For one thing, the lighting in the gallery is dim at best; the murkiness suggests an evil sorcerer's dark mirror. For another, the content is difficult to discern by looking alone; the semitruck trailer is an innocent vessel for what the Bush administration longed for it to contain, weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Is the language of WMDs, as presented here, a sign of truth or flat-out lies, or—more likely in politics and art—the vocabulary of a position that can never be pinpointed exactly?

—KATHRYN M DAVIS

Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, *Phantom Truck*, mixed media, 393" x 98" x 156", 2007
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schulte. Photo: Wendy McEahern