Richard B. Woodward, 'Culture War Hold-out', *Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2014

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The art packed into "Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology" at the Hammer Museum looks older than it actually is. None of the nearly 125 installations, videos, paintings, sculptures and photographs is dated earlier than 1972, and several works were made as recently as last year.

But in its confrontational attitudes and bristling humor, focused on issues of race, gender and sexual orientation, the show maintains an embattled air, as if the outcome of the "culture wars" of the 1980s and '90s were undecided, Jesse Helms were still in the Senate, and Barack Obama had not been elected to a second term as the U.S. president.

According to the co-organizers, Johanna Burton, curator of education at the New Museum in New York, and Anne Ellegood, senior curator at the Hammer, this is the first time that these particular trends in contemporary art—appropriation (images or objects removed from various contexts and placed in new ones) and institutional critique (work that examines conventions that undergird museums and other cultural venues)—have been examined together in a historical survey.

To present in an art institution artworks that challenge the values of art institutions is a tricky feat. Conceptual artists in this mode can appear to be talking mainly to each other and down to everyone else.

Things get off to a bad start on the ground floor, where one can't avoid a sarcastic word piece by Barbara Kruger. "You are here to get cultured," the giant, enveloping letters proclaim. The hectoring tone of Ms. Kruger's art, as familiar by now to museum-goers as the billboard slogans it imitates, mainly serves to communicate her moral and aesthetic superiority. Her pieces advertise how wised up she is about art, money and status even if the rest of us are cowed consumers.

Much more pointed and wickedly funny are two videos, placed at either end of the show, by the performance artist and feminist Andrea Fraser. In "Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk" (1989), she is an unhinged docent who leads visitors on a capricious tour through the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Marching from galleries to restrooms to cafeteria to museum shop, she name-drops Kant and extolls the "formal economy" of a drinking fountain while also inadvertently bringing up topics such as corporate funding and labor costs. In "Official Welcome" (2001-2003), she plays 16 roles in a charade of avant-garde jargon and posturing at a museum award ceremony. First, she is the fawning presenter; then the egomaniacal artist who strips to her bikini underwear and tells the audience where to go; then the curator, who thanks the artist for her "difficult work" and congratulates her own institution for supporting it. (She notes proudly that "most of the art we collect is about sex and excrement.")

To trace the history of appropriation and institutional critique, the curators have commendably chosen work by some of the usual suspects—Mike Kelley, Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, David Wojnarowicz—as well as less-celebrated figures. Of the 37 artists, 17 are women. Several bold-face names—Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, David Salle—have been excluded to make room for work that isn't as widely circulated: by Judith Barry, Dara Birnbaum, Mark Dion, Renée Green, Mary Kelly, Sylvia Kolbowski, Zoe Leonard, Cady Noland, Stephen Prina and Fred Wilson.

In a show stuffed with what Ms. Fraser's fake curator would call "difficult work," one needs to choose wisely where to invest effort. How, why, or if a frame shapes our ideas about art and whether taxonomy is necessary for the understanding of it are themes that run throughout the rooms. Ms. Noland's "Frame Device" (1989)—a set of pipes arranged like a boxing ring, with aluminum walkers crowded into each corner—has formal and social associations with its neighbor, Haim Steinbach's "Backyard Story" (1997). Tucked against the back wall, this friezelike composition of gleaming Weber grills, stacked firewood, plastic jack-o'-lanterns and clothes hanging on a line carries references to hardware-store shelves and a museum's storage room. Ms. Noland and Mr. Steinbach have each distorted ideals of masculinity to rearrange our mental furniture.

The unyielding voice of Adrian Piper's "Cornered" (1988) has not lost its potency. The artist lectures us about her mixed-race identity on a video monitor barricaded behind a table with its legs pointed out. Stinging our consciences with its wounded stories, the monologue is also designed to prevent us from drawing too close.

Glenn Ligon's "Notes on the Margin of the 'Black Book'" (1991-93) has slowly acquired classic status since its debut at the 1993 Whitney Biennial. His response to Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs of black men—Mr. Ligon is black and gay—it consists of 91 offset prints from the Mapplethorpe book along with 78 carefully chosen quotes from gay, straight, black, white, famous and not-so-famous men and women. Occupying three walls here, it is as tortuously ambivalent as ever about objectification, lust, race, power, stereotypes and the perhaps worse danger of invisibility.

What the curators have not done well is to mitigate the prolixity of conceptual artists. It would probably take most of a day to study all the texts that accompany (or embody) the art here and to listen to everything in these videos. And that's not accounting for time needed with wall labels, required reading if one hopes to discern the artists' sometimes oblique intentions.

Can anyone be expected to stand in front of Jenny Holzer's "Inflammatory Essays" (1981) or Nayland Blake's "Scum" (1990) and ponder each phrase? Each of these pieces is made up of hundreds of lines of small, densely printed type taking up an entire wall. Will anyone sit and watch all 60 minutes of Mr. Blake's "Gorge" (1998), in which the artist is force-fed chocolate cake?

Nor have the curators addressed some basic legal issues. The catalog essays delve exhaustively into the theory and history of appropriation art—how it supposedly differs from Pop Art. But I could not find a word about intellectual-property rights. The timeline in the back of the book cites the trials of Martha Stewart and O.J. Simpson, but not the lawsuits filed against Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Messrs. Koons and Prince and Ms. Levine for copyright infringement. The question of what one artist can freely take from another has not been answered, despite what is assumed here.

To call a show "Take It or Leave It" is brash and risky. Presumably a reference to lyrics by Richard Hell and the Voidoids (or The Strokes), the title would have us believe that viewers must choose sides. For those already aligned with their politics and theory-based approach, the curators are preaching to the choir; while anyone tired of appropriation, or deaf to the aggrieved voices of tenured art professors, will be tempted to tune out.

The dichotomy needn't be that stark. Some of the art here is complex and fulfilling. But to pretend that the practices on display are still disreputable and have not been canonized by blue-chip galleries, powerful museums, influential critics, wealthy collectors and standard textbooks is

to misrepresent the past 30 years of contemporary art and thus to bamboozle the public. At least that's my "institutional critique."

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