

03/13/2017 6:09 P.M.

Good evening!

To skip past the thousands of dripping, putrescent bologna slices would be to bury the lede, as we say in the journalism biz, but inside a big Pope.L installation sure to be a standout at this year's Whitney Biennial is a priceless text. Peered at this morning, during a press preview held before the biennial opens to the public on Friday, the words had a big responsibility: to describe—or at least address—a room-size work whose walls are covered with oily meat, portraits in black and white, and other sundries (including an open bottle of Mad Dog 20/20).

Written and signed by Pope.L himself, the text took on the absurd duty of explicating a work—titled Claim (Whitney Version), 2017—that is, among other things, about absurdity itself. The slices of bologna (2,755, to be exact) are said to correspond to a ratio relating to the number of Jewish citizens living in New York, and all the rest follows from that, from a methodical portrait-taking system to an ostensibly hyper-organized arrangement of objects in a grid with pencil lines to keep everything straight.

Never mind that the math is all wrong, or that the premise involving percentages and Jewishness quickly turns to farce. “WHAT is this? What IS this? What is THIS?,” the text reads, in solidarity with a viewer wondering what might be going on. Elsewhere, the words let on a little more about the meaningless and arbitrariness that can attend matters of numbers, collective identity, and senses of mutual understanding suggested by big data. “When we quantify, we point with a wavering finger,” the text reads. “Like a child. Like a drunk or a dyslexic. Like a palsied person. Like a curator filled with helium. Like a venerable black artist filled with schism, we point with a wavering finger. And of course we insist, we insist, we insist we know where we are pointing---”

Tomorrow, my colleague Andrew Russeth will weigh in with a full review of the Whitney Biennial, a momentous exhibition to be sure. Until then, point on—and be mindful about the direction.

—Andy Battaglia, Senior Editor