

## **On Being An Exhibition**

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**ON BEING AN EXHIBITION**

A Book of Quotations

**ARTISTS SPACE**

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## Quotations

“Here we glimpse the function of Sieglaub’s organization of exhibitions that exist as publications alone, thereby eliminating the role of the gallery. Then there is the art that does not address the operation of the gallery as much as it finds its institutional legitimacy within the matrix. Indeed, in some cases, as with Kosuth’s Photostats, the gallery transforms materials that are not initially presented as works of art into art objects, and relatively esoteric ideas into commodity items.”

**ALEXANDER ALBERRO**, ‘At the Threshold of Art as Information’ in *Recording Conceptual Art*, Eds. Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001)

“I have joked about art being the intellectual’s Catholicism, that is, a wishful belief in an afterlife. Better than to live on in the hearts and minds of the public is to live on in one’s apartment, is how I put it.”

**WOODY ALLEN** on Ingmar Bergman

RM

“Politics (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power) is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities. In the mundane, day-to-day, small-scale exchanges of things in ordinary life, this fact is not visible, for exchange has the routine and conventionalized look of all customary behavior. But these many ordinary dealings would not be possible were it not for a broad set of agreements concerning what is desirable, what a reasonable “exchange of sacrifices” comprises, and who is permitted to exercise what kind of effective demand in what circumstances.” What is political about this process is not just the fact that it signifies and constitutes relations of privilege and social control. What is political about it is the constant tension between the existing frameworks (of price, bargaining, and so forth) and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks.”

**ARJUN APPADURAI**, ‘Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,’ in *The Social Life of Things*, Ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 57

CB

“I see myself as an author of situations, not of the elements involved in them.”

**MICHAEL ASHER**, quoted in Daniel Marzona, *Conceptual Art* (New York, NY: Taschen, 2005), p. 32

LW 2

“Things that we see as being different from each other, appear even more different when they emit sounds. They all sound different when they do this, but they are all silent in the same way. There are thousands of different sounds and voices, but the substance of silence appears one and the same for all. That is, at first hearing. Sound differentiates visible things, silence brings them closer to each other, recognizing each other’s shapes, and entering into relations with each other in a composition common to them all.

Silence, too, is an acoustic effect, but only where sounds can be heard. The presentation of silence is one of the most specific dramatic effects of the sound film.”

**BELA BALAZS**, ‘Theory of the Film’ (1945) in *Theory and Practice of Film Sound*, Eds. Elizabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985)

AW / CK

“During the exhibition the gallery will be closed.”

**ROBERT BARRY**, *Art and Projection Bulletin 17* (1969)

I&N

“We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more than they do, indeed even farther; but not because our sight is better than theirs or because we are taller than they. Our sight is enhanced because they raise us up and increase our stature by their enormous height”

**BERNARD OF CHARTRES**, Circa 1130

DS



“We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”

**BILL BROWN**, ‘Thing Theory,’ *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Things (Autumn, 2001), pp. 1-22

CB

“The repetition that interests us is that of a method and not a mannerism (or trick): it is a repetition with differences. One could even say that it is these differences that make the repetition, and that it is not a question of doing the same in order to say that it is identical to the previous—which is a tautology (redundancy)—but rather a repetition of differences with a view to a same (thing). [This repetition is an attempt to cover, little by little, all the avenues of inquiry. One might equally say that the work is an attempt to close off in order the better to disclose.]”

**DANIEL BUREN**, ‘Beware’ (1970)

CB

“The silence fell heavy and blue in mountain villages—  
Pulsing mineral silence as word dust falls from  
demagnetized patterns.”

**WILLIAM BOURROUGHS**, ‘Nova Express’ in Michael Taussig,  
*My Cocaine Museum* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago  
Press, 2004)

AW/CK

“One of the greatest blessings that the United States  
could receive in the near future would be to have her  
industries halted, her business discontinued, her people  
speechless, a great pause in her world affairs created,  
and finally to have everything stopped that runs, until  
everyone should hear the last wheel go around and  
the last echo fade away... then in that moment of  
complete intermission, of undisturbed calm, would be  
the hour most conducive to the birth of a Pan-American  
Conscience. Then we should be capable of answering the  
question, “What ought we to do?” For we should be  
hushed and silent, and we should have the opportunity  
to learn what other people think.”

**JOHN CAGE**, ‘Other People Think’—speech for the Southern  
Oratorical Contest (1927), in *Noise Water Meat A History of  
Sound in the Arts* by Douglas Kahn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,  
1999), pp. 176-177

AW/CK

“I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I’m at the spot where I find myself... then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put... He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar. And he invents spaces of which he is the convulsive possession.”

**ROGER CAILLOIS**, “Mimétisme et Psychasthénie Légendaire” (1935), in Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 34

AW/CK

“Over the past decade art and architecture have been transformed from producer of illusions into receptacles for illusions. They have ceased contemplative and representing the experienced and visible world, preferring to become themselves objects of admiration and portrayal.”

**GERMANO CELANT**, *Documenta 7*, Vol. 2. (1982)

I&N

“Quotation, then, is the ultimate weapon for making one believe. Because it plays upon what the other is assumed to believe, it is the means by which ‘reality’ is instituted.”

**MICHEL DE CERTEAU**, ‘The Jabbering of Social Life’ in Marshall Blonsky, *On Signs* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985)

LW 2

“Displacement and alterations removal at special points of stress, opening space to redistribute mass, the ambiguity of place versus object working with absence, the whole house work to receive an intrusion...”

**GORDON MATTA CLARK**, Art card No. 1388, Gordon Matta Clark archive, CCA

I&N

“Eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts.”

**GUY DEBORD**, ‘Rapport sur la construction des situations’ (1957), translated in the *Situationist International Anthology*, Ed. Kan Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006)

LW

“But it is equally true, that any authentic artist will avoid material that has previously been esthetically exploited to the full and will seek out material in which his capacity for individual vision and rendering can have free play. He leaves it to lesser men to go on saying with slight variations what has already been said.”

**JOHN DEWEY**, *Art As Experience* (1932), p. 92

LW

“Design is a process of negotiating incommensurability, literally so in the sense of establishing dialogues with those involved in the situation, and configuratively so in the sense that what, in the end, design creates is a configuration in which incommensurables are reconciled not passively or definitively but as a proposition (this resolution, in this way, responding to these circumstances).”

**CLIVE DILNOT**, *The Archerworks Papers*, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 31

CB

“It is also true that human beings, not least because they have language, are capable of objectifying their own existence in a way that tortoises presumably are not. We can speak of something called the ‘human condition’, whereas it is unlikely that tortoises brood under the shelter of their shells on the condition of being a tortoise... Language, in other words, allows us not only to get a fix on ourselves, but to conceive of a situation as a whole. Because we live by signs, which bring along with them the capacity for abstraction, we can distance ourselves from our immediate contexts, free ourselves from the imprisonment of our bodily senses, and speculate on the human situation as such. Like fire, however, the power of abstraction is an ambiguous gift, at once creative and destructive...”

**TERRY EAGLETON**, *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007)

JDP

“Every time we speak of the ‘institution’ as other than ‘us,’ we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions. We avoid responsibility for, or action against, the everyday complicities, compromises, and censorship—above all, self-censorship—which are driven by our own interests in the field and the benefits we drive from it. [...] It’s not a question of being against the institution: we are the institution. It’s a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to.”

**ANDREA FRASER**, ‘From Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,’ *Artforum* (September 2005)

LW 2

“In place of symbolic communication, I place all the emphasis on agency, intention, causation, result and transformation. I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.”

**ALFRED GELL**, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998)

CB

“You have to be very aware of you doing a movie, and not to be in a dream. So maybe that’s why I am always saying—even in a picture—this is a movie: This is not a dream.”

**JEAN-LUC GODARD**

RM

“I opted for quantity over quality because quality fades while quantity remains.”

**MICHEL GONDRY**, ‘Director’s Series Vol. 3: The Work of Michel Gondry,’ (Palm Pictures/UMVD, 2003)

DS



“The thing is what we make of the world rather than simply what we find in the world, the way we are able to manage and regulate it according to our needs and purposes. It is an outlined imposition we make on specific regions of the world so that these regions become comprehensible and facilitate our purposes and projects, even while limiting and localizing them. Things are our way of dealing with a world in which we are enmeshed rather than over which we have dominion.”

**ELIZABETH GROSZ**, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*  
(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005)

CB

“The more disposable the experience, the more crucial the memory.”

**J. HOBERMAN** on Wong Kar Wai

RM

“Even though what is presented to the audience is a tissue of lies, the magician must believe in the deceit in order for the illusion to work.”

**HARRY HOUDINI**, quoted in William Kalush and Larry Sloman, *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero* (New York: Atria Books, 2006)

VH

“The process of making, appreciating, and exhibiting art, particularly in the kind of institution we call museums, is itself an intensely political process. This is not necessarily a process which is learned time and again when people visit museums, but is in fact understood and appreciated in terms of the accumulated knowledge and received wisdom about what museums are, and what exhibits are, and what exhibits mean.”

**IVAN KARP & FRED WILSON**, ‘Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Museums’ in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Eds. R. Greenberg, B. Ferguson, S. Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 256

I&N

“The environment becomes equally as important as the object, if not more so, because the object breathes into the surrounding and also inhales the realities of the environment no matter in what space, close or wide apart, open air or indoor. As a matter of fact, the object itself can expand to a degree where it becomes its own environment.”

**FREDERICK KIESLER**, ‘Second Manifesto of Correalism’ (1965), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, Eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 511

VH

“...spatial experience, like the broken temporality of language, is discontinuous and creepily disembodied.”

**MIWON KWON**, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004)

LW 2

“My pictures present information about the ‘reception’ of artworks.”

**LOUISE LAWLER**, quoted in Daniel Marzona, *Conceptual Art* (New York, NY: Taschen, 2005), p. 74

LW 2

“Since the beginning of time, when compared to any gadget, innovation or invention, the dog has always been the choice of the child. When it comes to prefer the electronic, planet Earth will have ended its reign, (Einstein whispered to me).”

**FÉLIX LECLERC**, (1978)

BGL

“The tools are at an undifferentiated center of a circle that has no circumference, moving and yet not moving, in tension and yet relaxed, seeing everything happening and yet not at all anxious about its outcome, with nothing purposely designed, nothing consciously calculated, no anticipation, no expectation—in short, standing innocently like a baby and yet, with all the cunning, subterfuge and keen intelligence of a fully mature mind”

**BRUCE LEE**, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (Santa Clarita, CA: Black Belt Communications, 1975), p. 200

LW

“It is never easy to get back from the object (product or work) to the activity that produced and/or created it. It is the only way, however, to illuminate the object’s nature, or if you will, the object’s relationship to nature, and reconstitute the process of its genesis and the development of its meaning. All other ways of proceeding can succeed only in constructing an abstract object—a model. It is not sufficient, in any case, merely to bring out an objects structure and to understand that structure: we need to generate an object in its entirety—that is, to reproduce, by and in thought, that object’s forms, structures and functions.”

**HENRI LEFEBVRE**, *The Production of Space* (1974)

CB

“Martin Heidegger held that the essence of modernity was found in a certain technological orientation he called ‘enframing.’ This tendency encourages us to see the objects in our world only in terms of how they can serve us or be used by us. The task he identified was to find ways to re-situate ourselves vis-à-vis these ‘objects,’ so that we may see them as “things” pulled into relief against the ground of their functionality. Heidegger believed that art had the great potential to reveal the ‘thingness’ of objects.”

**JONATHAN LETHEM**, ‘The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism,’ in *Harper’s Magazine* (February 2007)

JDP

“There is a word from the discipline of anthropology that I find quite useful, insofar as it describes the double role of participant and observer in the field. The word is entanglement.”

**JAMES LINGWOOD**, ‘Public Lecture: ArtAngel,’ *Curating Now* 05

MJ

“I don’t believe there is such a thing as the “objective” apprehension of sonic reality. Regardless of whether or not we are recording, our minds conceptualize an ideal of sound. And not only do different people listen differently, but the very temporality of our presence in a place is a form of editing. The spatial, material and temporal transfigurations exist independently of phonography. Our idea of the sonic reality, even our fantasy about it, is the sonic reality each one of us possesses [...] What I’m defending here is the transcendental dimension of the sound matter itself. In my conception, sound recording does not document or represent a richer and more significant “real” world. Rather, it focuses on the inner world of sounds.”

**FRANCISCO LOPEZ**, ‘Profound Listening and Environmental Sound Matter,’ in *Audio Culture Readings in Modern Music*, Eds. Daniel Cox and Michael Warner (Continuum Publishing, 2006), p. 85

AW/CK

“A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.”

**KARL MARX**, *Das Kapital* (1867)

CB

“1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, ...

Is space curved or straight? The only possible sculpture is an authentic house from my claims I conclude that to me building a house is absurd, but it's fair to build a house in the simplest way, it would be silly to imitate fish but it's opportune to learn the use of conditioned freedom. Is space curved or straight? What does 1 + 1 mean a dance step or just a spiral storm? A snail bed.”

**MARIO MERZ**, *I Want to Write a Book Right Now* (Firenze, Italy: 1989)

I&N

“A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me.”

**VLADIMIR NABOKOV**, *Strong Opinions* (1973)

DS



“A good narrative needs a gap. It is not the linearity that makes us think. It’s the unexpected gap in between, like the silence between sounds. That’s what makes it all really interesting.”

**CARSTEN NICOLAI**, from Interview with Doug Aitken  
in *Broken Screen: Expanding the Image, Breaking the Narrative*  
(2005)

MJ

“This thing is the real thing—a thing among things. But wait, first things first. Before I can tell you about this thing, there is one thing you should know: this thing is many things. It is my thing and it is your thing and it is a thing-in-itself—it contains things and is contained by things. Too, this thing is made of other things. One might ask, ‘What’s this thing for?’ to which I cannot say a thing more than what is already known... The funny thing is I have very strong feelings for things. I am thinking about them all the time. You might say I have a thing for things and you would not be wrong. For while I may possess things I am sure they, in turn, possess me.”

**SCOTT OLIVER**, ‘Matter & Meaning: The Things People Make’  
(2005)

JDP

“We use our eyes for seeing. Our field of vision reveals a limited space, something vaguely circular, which ends very quickly to left and right, and doesn’t extend very far up or down. If we squint, we can manage to see the end of our nose; if we raise our eyes, we can see there’s an up, if we lower them, we can see there’s a down. If we turn our head in one direction, then another, we don’t even manage to see completely everything there is around us; we have to twist our bodies round to see properly what was behind us.”

**GEORGES PEREC**, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1997)

JDP

“Please forgive me for presenting, on such a great occasion, results which are still in the making. But the glaring sunlight of certain knowledge is dull and one feels most exhilarated by the twilight and expectancy of the dawn.”

**MAX PERUTZ**, Nobel Prize lecture, 11 December 1962

GK

“What have I done to deserve this?”

**PET SHOP BOYS**, (1987)

DS

“The fashion world has a readier understanding of what is happening. Fashion’s existence is dependent on reference and reinterpretation, season after season. You see a radically new look perhaps for once every ten years, usually accompanying real sociological change or technological development. The rest of the time, in between those major changes, everybody’s going through little changes just for entertainment.”

**PETER SAVILLE**, ‘In conversation with Rick Poynor,’ *Eye: The International Review of Graphic Design* #17 (Summer 1995)

DS

“The mind as well as the eye belongs to art. To talk constantly “about seeing” is a linguistic problem not a visual problem. All abstract concepts are *blind*, because they do not refer back to anything that has already been seen. The “visual” has its origin in the enigma of blind order—which is in a word, *language*. Art that depends only on the retina of the eye, is cut off from the reservoir or paradigm of memory. When art and memory combine, we become aware of the *syntax* of communication.”

**ROBERT SMITHSON**, ‘The Artist as Site-Seer: or, A Dintorphic Essay’ (1966-67)

MJ

“In the fifteenth century, European painters began to paint the blue of distance. Earlier artists had not been much concerned with the faraway in their art... Painters became more concerned with verisimilitude, with a rendition of the world as it appeared to the human eye, and in those days when the art of perspective was just arriving, they seized upon the blue of distance as another means of giving depth and dimension to their work... In his 1474 portrait of Ginevra de Benci, Leonardo painted just a narrow band of blue trees and blue horizon at the back, behind the brownish trees that frame the pale stern woman whose bodies laces up with a lace the same blue, but he loved atmospheric effects. He wrote that when painting buildings, “to make one appear more distant than another, you should represent the air as rather dense. Therefore make the first building... of its own color; the next most distant make less outlined and more blue; that which you wish to show at yet another distance, make bluer yet again; and that which is five times more distant make five times more blue.”

**REBECCA SOLNIT**, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Penguin Books, 2005), p. 33

AW/CK

“This empty space in the middle transforms the whole work of art into a geographical matter, an island, a sea.”

**SAUL STEINBERG**, “Steinberg at Louvre,” *Le Monde*,  
22 March 1979.

I&N

“It is color that turns language into word dust, patterns lose their ability to hold us in thrall, and silence falls—silence that is heavy, silence that is blue, the blue of waking dreams that come with yage, the hallucinogenic vine Burroughs came across in his travels in the southwest of Colombia (and which, on the Pacific Coast, is called pildé). Which takes us back to Goethe’s blue sky, where everything factual is already theory.

Goethe’s experiments with color make us aware of how the best experimental method is very like a language game too, leaving us with... well, just the experiments, just the colors, the fascination and the wonder. We see nature, then, all of it, in new ways. We see seeing, all of it, then, in new ways too.”

**MICHAEL TAUSSIG**, *My Cocaine Museum* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 27

AW/CK

“To investigate ‘intentionality’ and ‘experience’ is never sufficient, since these phenomena are always caught up in a social fabric, which Sartre calls the “field of practical inertia” (le pratico-inerte). In this field, my own actions will be caught up and deflected from me, they will become opaque, although this is neither due to the inherent resistance of matter nor to any direct opposition from the projects of others, but rather since my own projects are mediated through a matter whose inertia consists in the traces of the objectified intentionalities of others. One of Sartre’s chief examples is a house: when you are a tenant and become irritated because the water-tap is leaking, the window is draughty, you overhear your neighbors arguing, etc, you live your inhabitation and your irritation through a complex and polymorphous intentionality which is mediated through the whole social fabric: the underpaid construction worker, the supplier of materials, the contractor, the architect, the whole set of projects and compromises, errors and displacements, which have occurred, are materialized in each and every one of the objects which make up your world. The field of practical inertia is the both palpable and yet—to a naïve phenomenology of perception—invisible and ungraspable conditioning of the structure of everyday life.”

**SVEN OLAV WALLENSTEIN**, ‘On Everydayness—Notes for a Phenomenology of Architecture,’ *Form Follows Anything: Architecture, Power, Politics*—joint project between Arkitektur MAMA and Fargfabriken Center for Contemporary Art and Architecture

CB

“A landscape of time in which events suddenly take the place of relief, of vegetation; in which the past and the future loom up together in all their obvious simultaneity; a place where nothing follows on from anything else any more and yet nothing ever ends, the lack of duration of the perpetual present circumscribing the cycle of history and its repetitions.”

**PAUL VIRILIO**, *A Landscape of Events* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000)

BC

“People, buying my stuff, can take it wherever they go and can rebuild it if they choose. If they keep it in their heads, that’s fine too. They don’t have to buy it to have it – they can have it just by knowing it.”

**LAWRENCE WEINER**, quoted in *Conceptual Art*, Ed. Ursula Meyer (New York: Dutton, 1972), pp. 217-18

DS

“There is a lot of silver in the museum. I created one vitrine of repoussé silver with the label, “Metalwork 1793-1880.” But also made of metal, hidden deep in the storage rooms at the historical society, were slaves shackles. So I placed them together, because normally you have a museum of beautiful things and one museum for horrific things. Actually, they had a lot to do with one another; the production of the one was made possible by the subjugation enforced by the other. Quite possibly, both of these could have been made by the same hand. To my mind, how things are displayed in galleries and museums makes a huge difference in how one sees the world.”

**FRED WILSON**, “Art in Context: Rethinking the New World” Originally published in *Artpapers*, 17:3 (May–June 1993), pp. 2-9

I&N

“I don’t like to talk about ‘objects’, ‘shows’, ‘topical subjects’, or about not ‘topical’ subjects. I like to hear about fluid and elastic things, vital and mental things without formal and literary borders. An airplane, in order to take off and land, does need an airport, if a jet airplane lands down in a forest, its landing is called emergency landing; instead a bird can fly off from any place to any place, therefore bird’s flight is an invention. A word, absorbed by microphones and repeated many times by loudspeakers, loses its literal meaning and becomes an incomprehensible sound, but mentally and physically perceptible. A man sitting on a rock does not transform rock to an altar, does not become his consecrated myth, but the rock becomes a little bit man, the man a little bit rock, here are two kinds of energy; mental energy and physical energy. Sometimes I wish I were a thief, with oxyhydrogen flame opening a strongbox, not to steal the jewelry, but to steal some inner space. Sometimes I wish, but it may be a lie, I were traveling till the centre of the earth to see asbestos-covered birds flying in the lava. In my own work there is no birds, no lava, no planes, there is my own life...”

**GILBERTO ZORIO**, “Arte Povera”



**On Being An Exhibition**

Artists Space, October 12 – December 8, 2007

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**Essay / On Being An Exhibition**

Joseph del Pesco

The artists and organizers of every gallery exhibition offer a response to the questions “why does the gallery exist?” and “what is an exhibition good for?” Whether intended as a statement of critical self-reflexivity or a response implicit in the continued use of forms that have become the default, all institutional productions operate within an encapsulated history and logic. The hierarchy of an institutional bureaucracy, the raw materials of the physical architecture, and the modes of social exchange occurring within the boundaries of a gallery—and its child the exhibition—accumulate to form a language that is spoken by galleries around the world. While it is unclear how much of an effect a fluency in this language has on the production of artworks for public exhibition, it is apparent that a gallery can inflect the art it presents as much as the art determines the form of presentation in the gallery.

Through years of experimentation, agents of culture have repeatedly tested the conceptual and physical limits of the gallery through exhibition. As a result of this gallery-as-laboratory activity, the language of exhibition has been expanded to the very threshold of its capacity. Yet, despite the excesses of pluralism in art, the gallery and the exhibition have developed a set of stable signifiers: lighting track, white walls, a front desk, a gallery attendant, etc. While these fundamental structures of meaning differ slightly from gallery to gallery (and from gallery

to museum to alternative space), they can be said to accumulate as a set of expectations in the viewer/user. Once the particular dialect and idioms are identified in a given environment, this root language can be employed to construct context-contingent meaning and to support or undermine the expectations harbored by the audience.

Artist Michael Asher, who has become well known for employing this kind of context-contingent meaning, uses the term “Situational Aesthetics” to describe “an aesthetic system that juxtaposes predetermined elements occurring within the institutional framework. They are recognizable and identifiable to the public because they are drawn from the institutional context itself.” In other words, Asher acknowledges certain elements of the gallery or museum are known quantities despite their background/neutral status. Through combination, relocation, or removal, the value of these elements can change, making us aware of their capacity to hold meaning. Thus, context-contingent meaning arises out of a complex set of relationships between the gallery, its history, and the expectations of the viewer/user.

*On Being an Exhibition* borrows Michael Asher’s thinking as a point of departure toward the development of an exhibition that leverages the pre-conditioning of the viewer, the physical language of the gallery, and the packaging and promotion of its contents. While the exhibition does not seek to locate these practices in relation to a specific genre of art, it proposes a continued support of the infiltration of creative thinking into all corners of the institution and the re-identification

of these larger practices as not limited to the strategies of institutional critique and site specificity.

#### *Works in the Exhibition*

The first artwork in the exhibition appears before the viewer enters the gallery space. Derek Sullivan’s *Cold Open* (2007), an image of basketball player Steve Nash used to promote the event at Artists Space, suggests that the exhibition might include a series of portraits that survey the existential condition of celebrities or the idea of individual as spectacle. This potential meaning of the title establishes an a priori expectation that will later be undermined by the content of the work in the gallery. Sullivan’s two-part project leads to a column at Artists Space that will be temporarily transformed into a public forum. Visitors can add any material they like to the growing accumulation of gallery announcements received by Artists Space during the run of the exhibition.

From the street-level approach to 38 Greene Street in New York—the building whose third floor Artists Space occupies—Laurel Woodcock’s (*Untitled*), *Neon Quote* (2005), frames the gallery for the outside world with a pair of neon quotations that denote its contents as a set of statements provided by artists in the exhibition. Woodcock’s work appears again inside the gallery above the reception desk, shifting in meaning to suggest the words of a particular individual. Through their immediate context, these parameters implicate the fragments of lived experience, pulling them into the frame of language.

Two works in the exhibition are more subtle and pervasive. In *Room Tone* (2007), Anne Walsh and Chris Kubick mine the contents of sound effects libraries for the background audio recorded as the 'sound of silence' during field sessions to allow for the blending of disparate sections of a recording. Encompassing a wide range of recordings from sites as diverse as cathedrals and bathrooms, the infusion of each sample into the space shifts the psychological size of the gallery. Germaine Koh's *Fair-weather forces (sun:light)* (2005) hijacks control of the gallery's lighting tracks with the help of electronics designed by Gordon Hicks. Sensors situated on the windowsill of Artists Space measure the amount of sunlight in real time and adjust the indoor lighting in order to match it. This effectively defeats the purpose of artificial lighting in an interior space, inverting its logic as a quietly antagonist gesture.

Other works appear at the periphery of the gallery space. BGL's *Untitled* (2007) mirrors the interior of the elevator that travels up to the third floor entrance of the gallery. As an aberration in the sequence of events leading into the gallery, this strange antechamber with a secret door subverts the viewer's assumptions about what they will see when the metal door of the elevator slides open. In the nearby bathrooms, Beth Campbell's *Untitled* (2007) is the outcome of the artist's long-standing interest in the illusionistic potential of mirroring. Her installation will take shape in both of the unisex rooms.

In the gallery are two sculptures that transform utilitarian objects into props for a situational narrative,

drawing aspects of the organization's infrastructure to the foreground. Conrad Bakker's *Untitled Project: Projection [ARTISTS SPACE]* (2007) is a reconfiguration of an existing piece that relies on a low-tech illusion to suggest a video projector. This *mise en scène* is constructed from hand-carved, painted wood, that recreates several items specific to Artists Space. Nearby, the shelf sculpture *Mama* (2006) by the Italian duo Isola & Norzi combines a broom closet with a series of African mother sculptures, poetically implicating the maintenance of the gallery through a cut-away view of the services attached to the exhibition.

Also engaging the infrastructure of the gallery, Chadwick Rantanen's *Untitled* (2007) is a video animation made from drawn and painted documentation of the offices at Artists Space. Using a technique from early animation, Rantanen singles out objects in the landscape of administration, giving them a potential energy. Through Rantanen's video, a subconscious space behind the walls of the gallery is revealed. Across the gallery, a wall cracks and creases under the shifting weight of the building in Valerie Hegarty's *Cracked Canyon (Poster)* (2007). The subject of the poster appears to have invaded the gallery as a force of nature, defying the recent interior renovation at Artists Space.

Finally, one work in the exhibition has been almost completely dematerialized. Lee Walton's *Hillary Wiedemann: Living Record* (2007) involves a series of performances for an Artists Space employee. The work is transmitted to the viewer only through word-of-mouth

inside the gallery. As a memory that can be passed to gallery sitters, its life and fidelity is contingent on the memory of the original viewer and the storytelling chain that follows. The process nature of this artwork makes use of the gallery's existing mechanisms and collapses the practice of exhibition tours where an artwork is explained.

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