

Situation Aesthetics

The Work of Michael Asher

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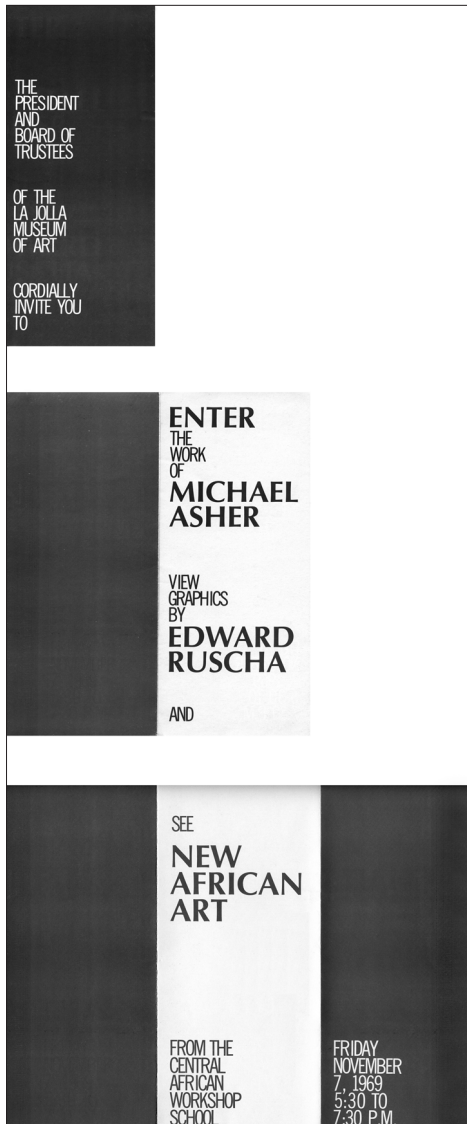
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Viewing Experiences

“The President and Board of Trustees of the La Jolla Museum of Art Cordially Invite You to Enter the Work of Michael Asher, View Graphics by Edward Ruscha, and See New African Art from the Central African Workshop School, Friday, November 7, 1969, 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.” (figure 1.1).¹ This invitation card to the opening reception of Asher’s one-person exhibition at the La Jolla Museum of Art—his first solo exhibition—firmly distinguishes Asher’s work from that of Ruscha and the Central African Workshop School by its description of the viewer’s encounter with the work. The call to “enter” the work marked the expected mode of reception for Asher’s installation from the outset. What does it mean to “enter” the work, rather than to “view” or “see” it? “Entering the work” implies crossing a threshold between two environments; it might even promise a passage to an altered state. In other words, “entering” signifies an experience.

Asher’s La Jolla installation was a room that had been systematically altered to provide a distinctive visual and auditory experience (figure 1.2).² Lighting in the space had been manipulated to be gradually diffused from the center of the room toward the periphery; gallery walls were painted white, the floor was overlaid with white shag carpet, and the ceiling was covered with sound-absorbing material. The natural soundscape that might have resulted from the visitor’s movements and other ambient noise was replaced by a single audio tone produced by sound generators and tuned to the shape of the room. The resulting acoustic pattern defined the room spatially by symmetrically canceling and increasing the sound waves that reflected off the room’s surfaces. The modification of the room’s sound qualities produced an environment in which audio levels were muffled in the center and corners of the room, and subtly increased in other parts of the gallery.³

Asher’s care regarding the viewer’s experience in his La Jolla work is typical of his broader emphasis on individuated reception. The entire installation, which viewers were requested to enter one at a time, was constructed for the sole purpose of facilitating a particular kind of viewing experience rather than explicitly



- 1.1 Invitation card for the opening reception of exhibitions by Michael Asher, Edward Ruscha, and the Central African Workshop School, La Jolla Museum of Art, La Jolla, California, 1969. From top to bottom: front of the invitation card, second fold, third fold. (Courtesy the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.)



1.2 La Jolla Museum of Art, La Jolla, 1969. (Photographer unknown; courtesy the artist.)

promoting the artist's worldview, subject matter, formal order, or visual aesthetics. By entering the installation, viewers would ostensibly learn more about themselves than about the artist; the process of artistic production was geared to serve its reception. A similar emphasis on constructing, manipulating, and channeling spectatorial situations reverberates in many of the artist's project notes and statements. Writing about another 1969 installation, this one for the "Spaces" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example, Asher noted, "experience is all."⁴

The experiential register that Asher's installations occupy has ranged from the intimately sensory to the elaborately conceptual. While his early installations, such as the La Jolla work, revolved around perceptual situations and severely constrained the optical, auditory, and sensory modes of stimulation available to the audience, his later projects have combined perceptual acuity with epistemologically precise references to institutional conventions and norms. In each instance, Asher's installations have engaged both individual and collective aspects of spectatorship, providing viewers pathways to self-reflective situations where they can become intensely aware of their own perceptual and cognitive processes in relation to their social setting as well as to themselves.

That "experience" is a socially as well as individually meaningful category is a notion advanced by Foucault, who sought in his late work to account for how historically particular modes of human experience come into being.⁵ For Foucault, experience is a sum of three areas of discourse: fields of knowledge, sets of rules (types of normativity), and the production of meaning (forms of subjectivity). Considered through what he calls "an analysis of 'practices,'" this experiential matrix connects preexisting institutional conditions with individuated encounters.⁶ Yet the individuation of experience in this context does not entail singularity or unrepeatability. In Foucault's schema, experience is bound to be a composite of structural and unique elements, what might be called an intersection of collective and individual factors. The museum visitor's experience within Asher's La Jolla installation, for example, might have filtered through structural elements such as the viewer's knowledge about the institution and understanding of the normative viewing conditions at the museum, but the visitor's conduct within the installation would also have been individuated within these epistemological and normative limits.

This chapter addresses the experiential reception of Asher's installations, ranging from the artist's late-1960s sensory installations to his subsequent

discursive mappings of institutional history. These visual extremes—from materially blank rooms to relocated statues and functional drinking fountains—are held together by his concerted efforts to address his viewers by presenting them with experientially open (although not unlimited) situations. Although his institutional critique—his investigation of art’s institutional framework—is more commonly associated with its epistemological and normative dimensions or with the collective sociopolitical aspects of the art institution, it also evokes distinct modes of subjectivity, what Foucault might call “subject[s] conscious of [themselves] and others,” through individuated modes of reception.⁷ Accordingly, narrative accounts by critics and other viewers of their experiences within Asher’s installations contain a spectrum of sensory, affective, emotional, and psychological registers. Yet even these individual responses need to be contextualized in the collective 1960s and 1970s epistemology of experientiality in the art world, in which minimalist artists and late modernist critics bestowed unprecedented centrality to the viewer’s response to the artwork.

The Experiential Turn: From Optical to Sensory Environments

The role of “experience” within the practice of reception, central to late modernist debates about the conditions of viewership in the 1960s and 1970s, was encapsulated by Tony Smith in his 1966 comment on his ride on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s: “There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.”⁸ Although Smith, a prominent New York minimalist sculptor, declined to frame his experience, other artists and critics sought to better articulate how spectators responded to the stimuli provided by artwork. Addressing these issues in relation to his sculptural work, Robert Morris set out to retheorize the viewing experience as a phenomenological relation between the viewer, the artwork, and the material properties of the viewing space in “Notes on Sculpture,” a 1966–1968 series of articles published in *Artforum*.⁹ For Morris, minimalist sculpture forced the spectator to account for the entire viewing situation, in which the artwork figured as part of ambient conditions rather than an isolated object. To provoke such expanded forms of spectatorship, Morris focused on the perceptual parameters of viewing practice, advocating sculpture composed of whole forms, or *gestalts*, in order to reduce the primacy of the art object in favor of a wider bodily field of vision.¹⁰ “Every internal relationship,”

he noted, “reduces the public, external quality of the object and tends to eliminate the viewer to the degree that these details pull him into an intimate relation with the work and out of the space in which the object exists.”¹¹ The viewing experience that Morris promoted posited physical correspondences between the viewer’s body and the art objects through the means of scale, gravity, direction (up/down), and the realm of possible actions that determined the relation between the viewer and art object. According to this phenomenological notion of experience, viewing (and making) art was a matter of a lived state of being, or a type of “co-presence,”¹² that in its immediacy preceded (and produced) the viewer’s knowledge of the art object and its contingent environment.

Morris’s influential theorization of spectatorial experience was prominently challenged by modernist art historian Michael Fried in his 1967 *Artforum* article, “Art and Objecthood.” Fried countered the minimalist argument (which for him represented the composite stances of Morris, Smith, and Judd) by unfavorably comparing it to the viewing of late modernist painting.¹³ Although Fried drew distinctions between the types of materiality that characterized modernist and minimalist (which he called “literalist”) works of art, his contestation of minimalist art ultimately hinged upon modalities of viewing experience. Unlike the modernist beholders who experienced “presentness” in front of art, viewers of minimalist art, according to Fried, were trapped within a theatrical situation that was devoid of the immediacy afforded by modernist art. Such theatricality placed spectators instead “*in a situation . . . that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder*” within a painfully pronounced space-time continuum.¹⁴ In contrast, he argued that modernist art was capable of providing unique spectatorial experiences precisely because it was absorbed in a self-sufficiency that did not address or involve spectators—what Pamela M. Lee, in her discussion of Fried’s “Art and Objecthood,” describes as “the modernist object’s profound antipathy to the beholder.”¹⁵ Morris’s viewers, on the other hand, would become extremely aware of the sensory variables of the artwork, the space, and their own bodily experience within that configuration. Major differences between Morris and Fried, then, revolve around the scope of the viewer’s experiential attention to the artwork and their surroundings.

Yet there were similarities between Morris’s and Fried’s accounts of beholding. Fried’s defense of spectatorial immediacy and Morris’s conceptualization of the phenomenological viewing encounter both attributed uniformity to the beholders’ response to the artwork. Fried and Morris were not interested

in the preexisting qualities of the spectator (who the spectators were before they entered the work) or how spectators differed from each other. Instead, both treated the beholder as a blank slate, without preexisting properties, knowledge, or expectations. The viewer's mode of temporality, accordingly, was centered upon the overpowering sense of the present within the spectatorial encounter, whether that encounter was characterized by immediacy (for Fried) or by duration within but not beyond the gallery space (as Morris argued). Consequently, neither Fried nor Morris considered the social conditioning that beholders brought into the viewing situation. Thomas Crow claims as much when he argues that "the experience of the [minimalist] work remained a matter of voluntary introspection and self-awareness on the part of the sensitive, well-prepared spectator . . . the philosophical terms of phenomenology simply replaced those of modernist metaphysics."¹⁶ In other words, the hypothetical minimalist spectators ignored the institutional framing of their viewing experiences as much as the modernist viewers did.

Asher's treatment of the perceptual aspect of viewing in his sensory spaces of the late 1960s and early 1970s was to some degree comparable to Morris's. In his Documenta 5 installation (1972), Asher optically sliced a specially constructed rectangular space into two halves along a vertical axis by painting one half of the walls, ceiling, and floor white, and the other half black (figure 1.3). The perceptual effects of these rooms evoked stark illusions that interfered with conventional modes of experiencing three-dimensional space. For his 1970 Pomona College installation, Asher reshaped the existing gallery with a new set of seamless interior walls that formed two triangular rooms, intersecting at their apex (figure 1.4). This reconfiguration of the gallery space might have made viewers aware of spatial relationships between the shape of the new space and the environmental conditions of natural light, temperature, and ambient sound, all of which filtered into the gallery directly from the street through the doorway that Asher opened by removing doors for around-the-clock access.¹⁷ Spatial modifications and perceptual effects likewise dominated his exhibitions in three European galleries in 1973. At Lisson in London, Asher cut a one-and-a-half-inch-deep groove into the bottom of the gallery walls where they met the floor, creating a separation that evoked a sensation of floating between the walls and the floor.¹⁸ At Heiner Friedrich in Cologne, he drew a correspondence between the upper and lower limits of the gallery environment by painting the ceiling the color of the floor.¹⁹ At Toselli in Milan, he sandblasted the accumulated layers



1.3 Documenta 5, Kassel, 1972. Viewing toward southeast corner. (Photograph by Karl-Heinz Krings; courtesy the artist.)



1.4 Gladys K. Montgomery Art Center, Pomona College, Claremont, California, 1970.
(Photograph by Frank J. Thomas; courtesy of the Frank J. Thomas Archives.)

of paint and plaster from the walls, floor, and ceiling in a gesture of “complete material withdrawal” to reveal the underlying material conditions of the physical space normally hidden underneath the white cube.²⁰

Asher’s installations at Pomona College, Documenta 5, and the Lisson, Heiner Friedrich, and Toselli galleries attended to the perceptual effects of the gallery space in ways that could be seen as aligning with Morris’s argument in “Notes on Sculpture.” These installations challenged viewers to measure themselves against the material preconditions of the gallery space, altering the viewing relations between the beholder and the physical environment of the gallery. They were based on the artist’s directing the viewer’s attention away from the artwork’s “internal” relations and toward the “external” viewing space, which was here conceptualized as a set of perceptually experienced relations. With the exception of the work at Heiner Friedrich, these installations were spatially autonomous, comprising an entire room or series of rooms that invited the viewer to coexist with the exhibition space. Asher differed from Morris, however, in what exactly he presented to his beholders within the art gallery or museum. Unlike Morris, whose mid-1960s self-described “phenomenological formalism”²¹ had been based on solid whole forms that evoked relational comparisons in terms of shared physical properties, Asher eliminated the object entirely from his installations, directing the beholder’s phenomenological attention solely to the surrounding space.²² Furthermore, he stretched the viewer’s scope of perception into the extremes of opticality or materiality. In this manner, the perceptual register of Asher’s early installations moved away from Morris’s middle ground of intelligible visuality, exemplified by regular geometric shapes inside generic white cubes: instead, Asher’s installations in the early 1970s ranged from immateriality (when the artist eliminated the discrete art object altogether) to experiential tangibility (in which the space produced physical effects in the spectator).

The importance given to the viewer’s phenomenological experience within cohesive physical environments is one Asher shared with his contemporaries in the Los Angeles light and space movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s.²³ This label was applied to a number of artists, including Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Larry Bell, Eric Orr, and Maria Nordman, whose work had gained national prominence as a West Coast variation of minimalism, albeit one that focused upon perceptual rather than conceptual experience.²⁴ These artists were known for constructing fine-tuned visual and spatial environments to induce

sensory experiences within the viewer.²⁵ Nordman's and Orr's enclosed installations invited viewers to immerse themselves in spaces with reduced light levels, surrounding them with the minimum amount of visual distractions.²⁶ Bell's glass cubes and large-scale glass sheet installations reoriented the viewer's reflection into their perception of the material forms themselves, while Turrell's projection experiments from 1966 onward eliminated all external visual stimuli in order to focus the process of viewing upon his light objects, that is, illusions of materially solid objects constructed with projected light. Irwin's paintings from 1962 onward explored deploying minimal visual means to activate the viewers' perceptual process and redirect their attention self-reflectively to their own processes of seeing. For Irwin, this meant wrenching his art away from the ideas and concepts that dominated Western art history.²⁷ In conversation with Lawrence Weschler in the late 1970s, Irwin described the process of experiencing his own work:

When you stop giving [my paintings] a literate or articulate read . . . and instead look at them perceptually, you find that your eye ends up suspended in midair, midspace, or midstride: time and space seem to blend in the continuum of your presence. You lose your bearings for a moment. You finally end up in a totally meditative state. The thing is you cease reading and you cease articulating and you fall into a state where nothing else is going on but the tactile, experiential process.²⁸

Irwin's description of the experientiality of his phenomenological paintings and installations represents an ideological move seeking to centralize the viewer rather than the artist. Other light and space artists shared this emphasis on the viewer's experience. Turrell's studio experiments, such as the 1969–1974 *Mendota Stoppages*, blocked out all external light and sound sources to create a neutral background for his works of art.²⁹ Such reduction of perceptual stimuli was taken to its extreme in Turrell and Irwin's collaboration with Dr. Edward Wortz, an experimental psychologist at the Garrett Aerospace Corporation, as part of the LACMA Art and Technology project.³⁰ Turrell and Irwin conducted a series of experiments on the perceptual limits of human experience within situations from which most sensory (in particular, auditory and visual) stimuli had been eliminated. Although Irwin and Turrell were not the only light and space

artists whose interests revolved around anechoic chambers (self-contained spaces from which all sound had been eliminated) and Ganzfelds (continuous visual fields without any discernible points of focus), their experiments within the Art and Technology project allowed them unparalleled access to laboratory conditions under which to test sensory limits, as well as some opportunities to evaluate how other people experienced these sensory conditions.³¹ “The works of previous artists have come from their own experiences or insights but haven’t given the experience itself,” Turrell argued. “They had set themselves up as a sort of interpreter to the layman.”³² Instead of centralizing the artist’s own experience, Irwin and Turrell set out to focalize the viewer’s sensory experience.³³ For Irwin, “In modern art the artist assumed the responsibilities for the definition of art, forcing an introspective questioning of the how and why of perception. By what he is doing now the artist is placing this *same* responsibility on the viewer.”³⁴ Rather than fabricate objects that would express their own worldviews or respond to art historical precedents, artists now worked to facilitate the beholder’s experience, Turrell and Irwin asserted.

Although Asher shared Irwin’s and Turrell’s interest in the experiential nature of art, he sought to differentiate his work from that of the light and space artists. There are several possible explanations for such a move. Despite their concern with ambient perceptual effects, light and space artists still isolated beholders from their material surroundings to such a degree that the gallery or museum space became at most a backdrop for the viewer’s experience. Turrell believed the viewer’s attention bypassed the gallery environment in favor of the discrete artwork. “I don’t care about ‘perfect’ walls, surfaces, and edges,” Turrell maintained, “I just don’t want them to be noticed.”³⁵ By seeking to eliminate the gallery environment, with its distinctive combination of material properties and institutional functions, from the spectatorial experience, Turrell and other light and space artists purposefully excluded the broader sociopsychological sphere from their situations.³⁶ Instead, light and space environments—what Orr called his “undifferentiated spaces”³⁷—veered toward sensory trips undertaken in isolation from the shared social world.

Asher’s 1974 comment that he “[was] not interested in manipulating perception” came at the end of his sensory installation period, and served to distinguish his work (which he defined as “situational”) from light and space “environments.”³⁸ The viewing experiences with which he wanted to associate his work now aimed to connect the sensory with the social sphere. Whereas Irwin

maintained that “[his own] pieces were never meant to be dealt with intellectually as ideas, but to be considered experientially,”³⁹ Asher’s work, even in its most sensory, perceptually focused mode, did not separate intellect from experience.

Asher’s differentiation of his practice from Irwin’s gained local resonance in the Los Angeles art world, where perceptual experiments were part of the critical mainstream in the late 1960s. In fact, Irwin had exhibited his disc paintings at the La Jolla Museum of Art immediately before Asher’s exhibition there in 1969. Besides distancing himself from Irwin’s perceptual realm, Asher critiqued the way in which Irwin set aside the social and institutional factors of art from its reception in favor of providing an exclusively perceptual experience. Writing about Irwin’s work in the context of his own La Jolla installation, he argued:

[Irwin’s] work’s presence as a highly finished object seemed to deny its interdependence on general external conditions. While being interdependent and pretending to be disconnected, it set up a ritualized event which could only be perceived from one position on a bench in front of the presentation, thereby making the presentation more important than the person viewing it. The symmetry of presentation and object were idealized and abstracted from the viewer’s perception.⁴⁰

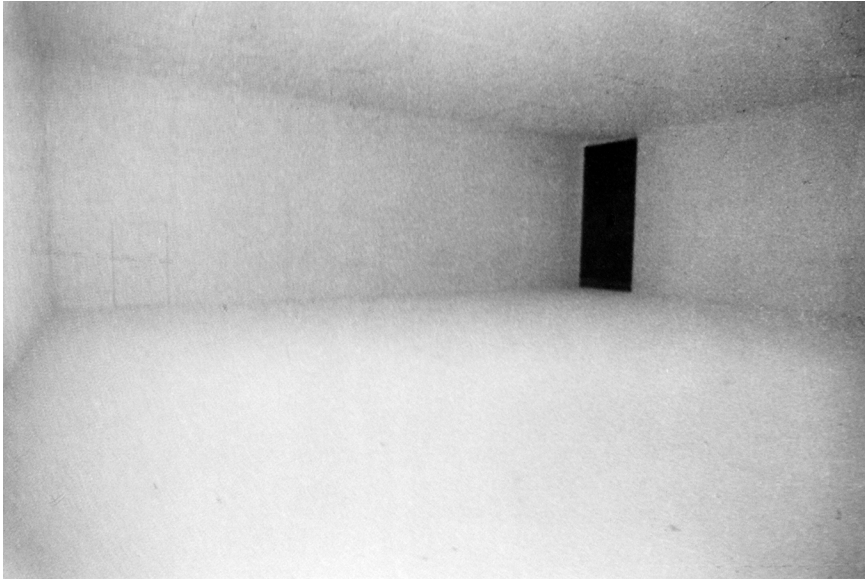
Although Asher rarely comments on another artist’s work, in this statement he implicitly (but no less forcefully) asserts the centrality of the viewer in his own project. If Irwin, in Asher’s view, “ma[de] the presentation more important than the person viewing it,” then Asher must have been promoting the opposite situation, in which the person viewing art was infinitely more important than any material object. Similarly, Asher distinguished his 1969 “Spaces” installation from artistic environments that “attempt to control the viewers’ perception . . . creating a hierarchy between the object and the viewers”⁴¹—another reference to light and space within the context of an exhibition that also featured an environment by Bell.

In a more general sense, Asher’s early project notes considered the kinds of effects his installations might have upon their viewers. Early on, he was focused upon the viewer’s experience in the present. In contrast with his approach in his later work, he initially thought of the viewer as an ideal figure who would focus

upon the installation without being aware of external influences.⁴² The reception of Asher's work, however, was never an exclusively optical or visual matter. Instead, the sensory matrix of his viewer spanned from vision to touch, hearing, and bodily sensation.⁴³ His enclosed room at the La Jolla Museum of Art, for example, addressed the viewer's sense of hearing through the spatial differentiation of sound levels and influenced the viewer's spatiotemporal, kinesthetic experience of moving within the space in order to detect varying levels of light and sound.

Asher's attention to multisensory experience also informed his contribution to the 1969–1970 MoMA exhibition "Spaces." This installation consisted of an enclosed, soundproofed white room with two open doorways and a drop ceiling at a height of less than eight feet (figure 1.5). The only light entering the space came from outside the room, from the corridors that connected Asher's installation with the rest of the museum. The majority of detectable sounds heard within the room emanated from outside because the walls, ceiling, and floor had been acoustically insulated to muffle any ambient sound within the space. This spatial and auditory configuration resulted in an environment within which viewers processed sensory information according to their spatial coordinates in the room. As viewers moved within the acoustically dampened room, with the low ceiling just above their heads, the levels of ambient sound and light would increase or decrease depending on their distance from the doorways. "One is reminded that we rely on senses other than sight for part of our intuition of spatial volume," Carter Ratcliff noted in his review of the work.⁴⁴ Asher's multisensory approach in "Spaces" integrated the auditory and visual effects into visitors' kinesthetic mapping of themselves in the spatiotemporal gallery environment. In this situation, the viewers' sense of themselves was produced as a multisensory, spatiotemporal experience.⁴⁵

Even before the La Jolla exhibition and "Spaces" opened in the fall of 1969, Asher had produced situations that literally enfolded the viewer within fields of nonvisual tactility. In two air flow works, which opened one week apart from each other in May 1969, Asher used industrial air blowers to set up "columns of air" that allowed the museum visitor to be immersed in the work in a highly tactile, yet discreet manner. The work for the exhibition "The Appearing/Disappearing Image/Object" at the Newport Harbor Art Museum included a rented Curtinaire air blower that was normally used at meat plants to keep out flies, mosquitoes, and



1.5 “Spaces,” Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1969. (Photograph © 2008 Claude Picasso; courtesy the artist.)

other insects. In this work, the air blower covered a doorway into the museum's main exhibition gallery with a wall of air that was at its most forceful near the ceiling and gradually spread and diminished in force toward the floor, to the point of being undetectable.⁴⁶ For "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Asher set up a similar doorway structure but reduced the amount of air flowing from the blower in the interest of "strengthen[ing the] conceptual dimension" of his work within the exhibition's premise of "anti-illusion."⁴⁷ The invisibility of his air curtain challenged the museum visitor's accustomed means of viewing artwork, since Asher's work did not include any visible elements. Instead of seeing art, the viewers were asked to *feel* the faint breeze against their skin. Appropriately, "Anti-Illusion" co-curator James Monte placed Asher's piece in the context of late-1960s postminimalist investigations that were fundamentally experiential. Monte characterized Asher's field of air as a work in which "[f]eeling and therefore knowing replaces the cycle of seeing and hence knowing the sculptural presence."⁴⁸ In other words, "feeling" allowed for bodily relations between the museum visitor and the artwork.

The haptic intimacy of Asher's air curtains set up permeable relations between museum visitors and their environment. The air flow descending from the blower was experienced, as Monte noted, as caressing their skin. It further entered the viewers with every inhalation they took within the doorway, instigating a fluidity of boundaries between museum visitor and art object. Porosity, though perhaps in a less physiological sense, is a development that Rosalind Krauss has ascribed to the viewer's relations with minimalist art. Aiming to rescue minimalism's art historical interpretation from idealization and perceptual formalism, Krauss makes a case for the minimalist loosening of boundaries around the viewer and the work of art. She asserts that minimalism ultimately paved the way for the subsequent understanding of art's contextuality as a broad sociopolitical category:

Th[e] issue of contingency that Minimalism had forced into the open, the permeability of both subject and object to what goes on in the space in which both coexist, became the basis of a series of interpretive rewritings [by artists] in the decades that followed the 1960s. Since "what goes on in the space in which both coexist" could be . . . understood to include the institutional construction of that very "space": the legal and financial

“arrangements” that shape and control it, the discursive practices that make possible what can become visible within it.⁴⁹

For Krauss, this artistic “rewriting” of the minimalist legacy included practices such as Asher’s. My account above has focused upon the differences between Asher and the East Coast minimalists, on the one hand, and the Los Angeles light and space artists, on the other. I want to conclude this comparison, however, by calling attention to the connections between Asher and the kind of minimalism that was premised upon the contingency of experience that Krauss calls the “permeability” of the viewing subject. What “Anti-Illusion” co-curator Monte described as the “feeling” of Asher’s work was one manifestation of this permeability. In Asher’s case, it meant exposing museum visitors to multisensory experiences rather appealing primarily to their vision. These experiences were set up to challenge the distance between the viewer and the work. Asher’s viewers stepped into his installations only to become “engulfed” by the environment: they found no art object, no focal point to divert their attention onto or distance themselves from.⁵⁰ Asher’s description of his “Spaces” installation stated as much by comparing the process of viewing to an evenly disseminated field of experience, noting that the work “created a continuity with no singular point of perceptual objectification, unlike phenomenologically determined works which attempted to fabricate a highly controlled area of visual perception.”⁵¹ While Morris, who exhibited alongside Asher in “Anti-Illusion” and “Spaces,” critiqued modernist art for relying on the intimacy of viewing situations in which viewers were pushed into close contact with the internal relations of the artwork, Asher explored the intimacy implicit in a viewer’s contact with the work of art, which was not merely seen but felt—and could be felt even when it could not be seen.

Asher’s interpretation of intimacy in his installations of the late 1960s and early 1970s resulted in spaces that Italian critic Germano Celant described as “deprived.” Within these works, Celant maintained, “the visitor must take himself as the subject, enter his own body and make it an object with active and creative characteristics.”⁵² This description stresses the introspective relations that Asher’s perceptually constrained installations might have stimulated within their beholders. Although these installations straddled thresholds of perceptibility (to the degree that they might have been mistaken for spaces void of any

artistic intervention), many viewers experienced them as distinctly unsettling, sometimes unendurably so. Ratcliff described the experience of entering Asher's "Spaces" room as one "of benign oppressiveness."⁵³ The multisensory reduction in Asher's installation at La Jolla provoked even more extreme critical responses. "As the room neither 'showed' anything nor 'did' anything some spectators suffered an immediate esthetic collapse and left at once," wrote Thomas H. Garver. "Those who entered the room without being prepared to perform—even for themselves—were acutely embarrassed."⁵⁴

Such descriptions of "oppressiveness" and "embarrassment" may sound excessive when used in relation to Asher's subtle, almost imperceptible sensory installations. Yet psychologically intense reactions to his early work demonstrate the destabilizing complexity of these viewing experiences. Tactile and auditory elements joined visual stimuli in calling for multisensory modes of response, and the purposeful minimization of sensory elements caused beholders to become even painfully aware of their own modes of sensory reception. These viewing experiences were described by critics in emotionally and psychologically charged terms as intimate, deprived, uncomfortable, and embarrassing. These affective aspects would become more pronounced in Asher's work from 1973 onward, when the artist's multisensory approach expanded to deploying "normal" or conventional social situations.

Affective Viewing Experiences: On the Threshold of Normalcy

In the early 1970s the experiential matrix of Asher's installations shifted from multisensory environments to investigations of "normal" and even normative viewing experiences. This shift did not mean that he now ignored the bodily relations between the beholder and the space; rather, he sought to heighten the intensity of such relations by investigating the ways in which viewers were positioned against the phenomenological certainty of spatial givens. The porous, battered, sandblasted surfaces of Asher's 1973 Toselli work, for example, suggested correlations between the skin of the beholder and the skin of the space, which was rubbed raw of its protective layers of plaster and paint (figure 1.6). The destabilization of the external gallery space might then have become internalized if the beholder identified on a bodily level with the material givens of the gallery space. Although Asher described the effects of his Toselli installation as "[a]

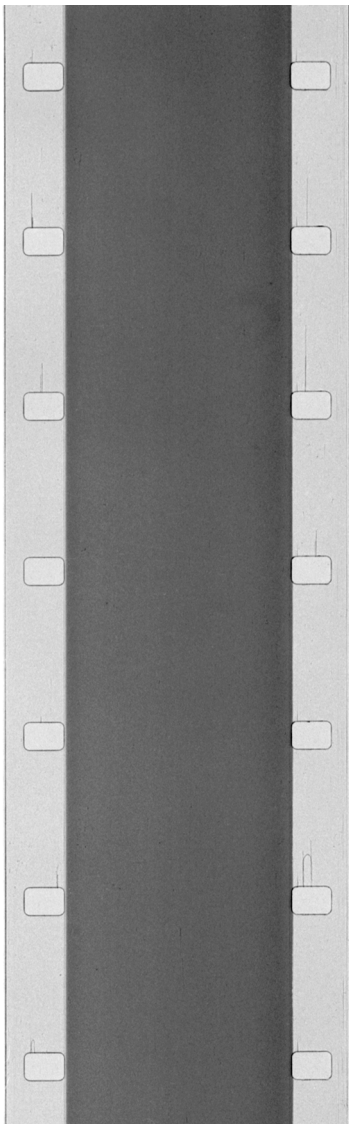


1.6 Galleria Toselli, Milan, 1973. Viewing west. (Photograph © Giorgio Colombo, Milano; courtesy the artist.)

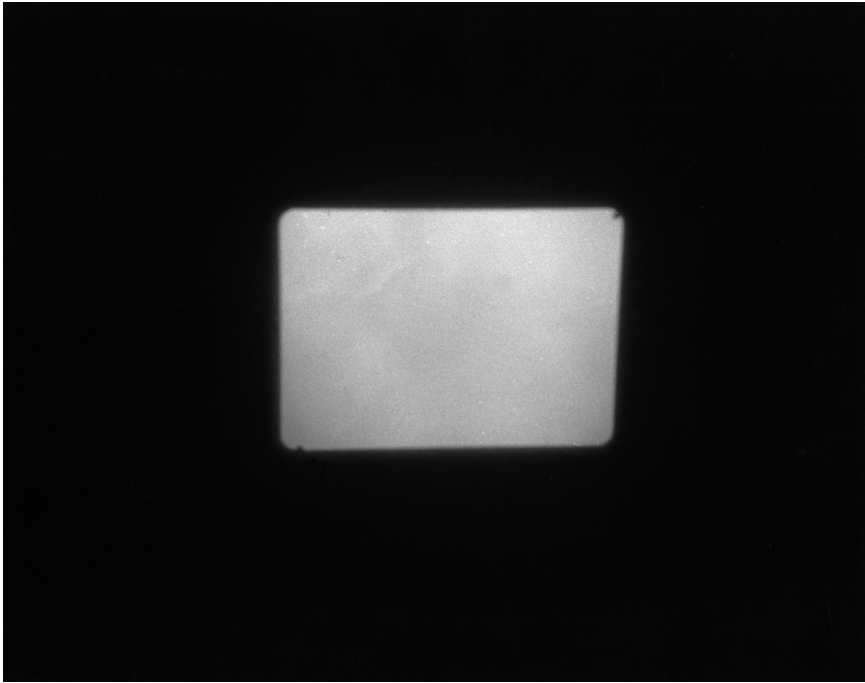
feeling of relief, resulting from the recognition of traditionally suppressed visual elements,”⁵⁵ I propose a different model for viewing this work: one in which proximity replaces distance, and intimate identification overtakes detached recognition. Sensation, which Asher described as “feeling,” undoubtedly was central in the reception of the Toselli work. But did the viewer’s awareness of self and viewing relations necessarily produce Brechtian distantiation, or cool reflection? Could the spectator’s heightened sense of the self within the installation instead have functioned to engender an intimate sense of panic, collapse, even “acute embarrassment,” to return to Garver’s description of Asher’s La Jolla exhibition, or other distinctly affective forms of response to this environment that challenged the normal configuration of gallery space?

Asher produced a particularly intense set of emotionally and psychologically resonating situations between 1973 and 1976 at locations ranging from American commercial galleries and alternative spaces to a television station in Portland, Oregon. His exploration of normalcy was evident even in projects—rare for Asher—that were based on moving images rather than three-dimensional spaces. In 1973, Asher produced a film for a screening at an alternative space called Project, Inc., in Boston.⁵⁶ This film was a gray monochrome that minimized perceptual variation to its extreme. The film stock was run through developing chemicals to produce a uniform medium gray, without prior exposure (figure 1.7). The projected version of the film had no discernible images, distinctive scratches, or other evidence of individuation (figure 1.8). For Asher, the purpose of this work was to turn the viewers’ awareness away from the projected image and onto themselves as well as the technological and material context of the screening.⁵⁷ He chose the medium gray tone of the image to avoid the spectacular and metaphoric connections easily made with degrees of light and dark, even in the absence of images or other identifiable visual markers.⁵⁸

Three years later, in January 1976, Asher explored the affective thresholds of normalcy by devising a television program that literally turned the camera back onto itself by filming the scene of production in the control room of the television station, and broadcasting the footage of the backstage activities to viewers at home (figure 1.9).⁵⁹ Produced with the support of the Portland Center for the Visual Arts in Portland, Oregon, as Asher’s contribution to the exhibition “Via Los Angeles,” the program aired as an episode in the regularly scheduled arts program *Eight Lively Arts* on KCW-TV at one o’clock on a Sunday afternoon. “Andy Warhol should have been in Portland Sunday,” declared the local newspaper *The*



- 1.7 Fragment of filmstrip produced for Michael Asher's screening at Project, Inc., Boston, 1973. (Photograph courtesy the artist.)



1.8 Project, Inc., Boston, during film screening, 1973. (Photograph by Paul McMahon; courtesy the artist.)



- 1.9 "Via Los Angeles," Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, Oregon, 1976.
Documentation of the live feed of the control room at KGW (radio and television).
(Photograph courtesy the artist.)

Oregonian on its front page the following day. “He would have appreciated the Michael Asher ‘visual art’ presentation on KGW-TV. Numerous viewers didn’t. They thought it was ‘an accident.’”⁶⁰ During the Asher broadcast, the station’s telephone feedback line received around 140 phone calls about the program. Some of the callers, disturbed by the situation, wished to alert the station to the fact that there were technical problems with the broadcast.⁶¹ “[O]ne call came from a television technician . . . who, thinking there was a faulty transmission, called the station to let us know that there was a camera in the master-control area,” Asher recounted. “A number of other callers . . . also communicated the same observation, some of them noticeably upset.”⁶² Although the act of calling KGW-TV to notify it of a perceived problem might have been an altruistic deed resulting in no immediate personal gain, it might also have been prompted by a more acute psychological need. The tone of the calls underscored the viewers’ urge to protect the television station from error—as they perceived Asher’s backstage view to be—and their desire to prompt the station into restoring normalcy to the broadcast.⁶³ Ultimately, this impulse might have been linked to the caller’s own identity, to the degree that the caller’s sense of normalcy was affirmed by recognizable television content.

Although it would be easy to stereotype the Portland callers as cultural dupes who were naive or ill-informed because they missed the point of Asher’s project, such a reading would miss the power of personal response that Asher’s program unleashed within the callers.⁶⁴ The callers were perfectly aware of the normative boundary that the project unseated when it crossed over the lines of conventional broadcasting. Immediate feelings of anxiety became more than ambient affective states when these reactions turned into acts of calling the station. The perceived irregularity of Asher’s program moved these television viewers into attempts to correct the situation and restore normalcy to what they considered normatively irregular television content. Their experience of the project was based upon particular forms of cultural knowledge, assumptions, and rules, but these collective aspects were modulated by individual response. The experience of the work mobilized in these viewers what Foucault might call relations to self and others, relations that were articulated in the emotional and practical care these viewers demonstrated in attempting to remedy the situation.

While Asher was developing his Portland project, he was also investigating the emotional threshold between experientially normal and unusual viewing conditions in an installation for the Clocktower Gallery in New York City. This

project was conceived before the work at the Portland television station but was exhibited shortly after, in March and April of 1976.⁶⁵ The Clocktower was an alternative space run by the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, situated on the top three floors that had been added during the early twentieth century to a nineteenth-century building. As an exhibition venue, the Clocktower was clearly not the typical white cube. The gallery rooms were dotted with windows positioned high on the walls and punctuated by doors, columns, and staircases. Asher chose to address the material perforation of this space in his site-specific installation by eliminating the material boundary between the inside and outside; accordingly, he ordered all windows and doors to be removed from the three gallery spaces (figure 1.10).

The effects of Asher's window and door removal were distinctly sensory. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer stepped into a series of materially bare rooms that lacked any discernible art objects. There were no strong, reassuring, or recognizable gestalts or discrete forms for the viewer to apprehend and absorb—yet visiting the space provided unmistakably bodily experiences. Analogous with the 1969 air curtain works at the Newport Harbor Art Museum and the Whitney, in which viewers were enveloped by Asher's work, the physicality of outdoor air flooded the Clocktower rooms. In late March and early April, when the Clocktower exhibition took place, New York weather presented viewers with a forceful discrepancy between indoor and outdoor ambient climates. Fracturing the boundary between inside and outside, architecture and nature, climate control and climate, the situation worked the threshold of visibility to disintegrate one's phenomenological certainty about the stability of a gallery visit.

However commanding, Asher's gesture seems understated when compared with another 1976 intervention in a New York alternative space involving a superficially similar act of letting air into the gallery space: Gordon Matta-Clark's *Window Blowout* for the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies. Instead of executing his characteristic cutting-out of neat sections of dividing sheetrock wall (the proposal that the exhibition organizers had approved), Matta-Clark made it a project of shooting through each of the windows lining the gallery space.⁶⁶ As a result, outside air entered the gallery through shattered glass. In this respect, Matta-Clark's *Window Blowout* was analogous to Asher's Clocktower installation: the sheltered interior was exposed to the natural conditions of the outside world. Yet the artists' gestures were diametrically opposite in other ways. In Asher's case, the meticulously organized and commissioned removal of the windows erased



1.10 The Clocktower, New York, 1976. Thirteenth floor, viewing south. (Photograph courtesy the artist.)

the visible marks of the artist's gesture, and the material fact that the window-panes were absent seems less important than facilitating a subtle sensory experience for the gallery visitor. In Matta-Clark's installation, the visible traces of the artist's act would more likely have suppressed the subtly experiential atmospheric effects that signaled the erasure of the inside/outside boundary, and the violent connotations of the act of shooting might have overpowered his desire to draw an analogy between the hermetic windows of the rarefied Institute and the perpetually broken windows of the Bronx.⁶⁷ Whereas Matta-Clark's broken windows remained two-dimensional surfaces, however unconventional, that viewers might have encountered had the work remained open to the public, Asher's Clocktower work enveloped the viewer as a multidimensional environment to be experienced gradually.⁶⁸

Nancy Foote's *Artforum* review of Asher's Clocktower exhibition described one such self-reflective viewing experience. The physical environment of the gallery was the first aspect of Asher's installation that Foote noticed. She remarked on her acute awareness of the attention she paid to the conventionally established boundaries of the space, observing that she immediately wanted to cross them: "My first inclination was to go out and walk around the balcony."⁶⁹ Next she noted how the immaterial yet forceful outdoor elements flooded the space: "Coming back in, I noticed the sun streaming in through the paneless window, felt the breeze and heard the sound of the traffic below."⁷⁰ Rather than a distanced survey through which the critic analytically weighed the success of an artwork, Foote's viewing experience became a self-reflective account of spectatorial conditions, her scrutiny of the material division between the gallery's inside and outside becoming reconfigured into a dialogue between the physical environment and one's psychological relation to it.

Foote's viewing experience at the Clocktower was framed by her anticipation of Asher's alteration of the gallery space: she knew beforehand what kind of art Asher made. This a priori acknowledgment of Asher's oeuvre granted agency to the installation before Foote ever entered the gallery. Foote commented on this agency when she noted, "Viewers don't like to feel they're being reviewed by art; it's a presumptuous switch in roles that gets under the skin." She thus associated her "irritation" at being under observation by the artwork with a sense of anxiety concerning the adequacy of her performance as a viewer. She found herself thinking about "how one ought to be reacting, and . . . if one is really 'getting it.'" Although Foote's sense of being observed seemed to disappear during

the course of viewing the installation, it was replaced by an urgent need to view and interpret the work (to “get” it), along with a nagging desire to be assured of the adequacy of her interpretation. Asher’s installation compelled the critic to reflect on her own process of viewing, interpreting, and “getting” the work, and to consider how the artwork was constructed to facilitate such reflection:

The art is pushing you around, sending you scrambling for its subliminal effects without having the courtesy to provide adequate cues. Once you make the outside/inside connection, you think you’ve got it. Then it dawns on you that the work is also about the process of making that connection. It comments on awareness itself by forcing you to think about how it ought to affect you.⁷¹

The psychological effort Foote directed toward viewing Asher’s Clocktower installation thus turned back on itself to become self-reflection.⁷² Affective or emotional responses, such as irritation, annoyance, frustration, and even a sense of being manipulated, inflect Foote’s review.⁷³ Such responses might affect the ways in which viewers perceive themselves in relation to the world. This interpretation would be in line with Asher’s statement that ideally his practice “demands the receiver to take a critical position within the material world.”⁷⁴ To take a critical position on something requires knowledge of existing conditions and the use of judgment regarding them. It requires understanding the cultural rules and norms that govern the situation at hand. And it requires a subject who, like Foote, responds to the artwork. In that sense, Asher’s spectatorship aligns with Foucault’s characterization of experience as a combination of “understandings of a certain type, . . . rules of a certain form, . . . certain modes of consciousness of oneself and of others.”⁷⁵ Within Asher’s situations, beholders know what gallery spaces usually look like as well as how they should behave in them. Foote’s irritation and the alarm demonstrated by Portland television viewers did not spring from thin air: they were influenced by specific formations of knowledge (how indoor spaces are separated from the outdoors) and cultural norms (what television broadcasts should contain). Of equal importance to the normative limits, however, is the multiplicity of responses to Asher’s work. Foote’s account is hardly the only reaction to his Clocktower installation. And some of the Portland callers even “congratulated” (to use Asher’s word) the television station for this

innovative project.⁷⁶ Such individuation of viewer responses reflects the range of “critical positions” available to Asher’s viewers.

Almost as soon as Asher had established his multisensory paradigm in the late 1960s, his installations branched out to investigate perceptions of normalcy as well as the embedded cultural norms. When Portland television viewers were disturbed by his project to aim the camera backstage, for example, they perceived his broadcast as a technical malfunction because it deviated from the normative mode of transmission. Sensory and affective modes of experience nevertheless remained integral to these explorations. Asher’s installations of this period seemed to invite reflective relations between the viewer’s self, the environment, and other subjects within the situation. When Foote stalked the freshly aired space at the Clocktower, her experience became a relational encounter that turned her attention onto the environment, then back to herself. This particular viewer was not only acutely aware of but emotionally and intellectually implicated in, and individuated by, Asher’s situation. In the course of the 1970s, his work invited such reflective viewing experiences by asking viewers what they already “knew” about art museums and about appropriate forms of conduct within shared social spheres.

Subject and Knowledge in the Art Institution

Since the late 1970s, Asher’s works have attended to formations of knowledge within art institutions. The viewing of the artist’s situations is to some degree influenced by the viewer’s knowledge of institutional practices. While much of this knowledge preceded and informed the viewer’s engagement with the work, Asher’s spectatorship also produced experiential knowledge of the museum site and the individual’s relation to the broader social world.

Take, for example, the museum visitors who entered Asher’s work for the “73rd American Exhibition” at the Art Institute of Chicago (1979). In this well-known act of displacement, Asher had moved a weathered statue of George Washington from its traditional perch in the middle of the Art Institute’s facade to a period room that contained eighteenth-century European fine and decorative arts (figure 1.11).⁷⁷ As these museum visitors approached the Art Institute, they might or might not have noticed the absence of the *George Washington* at the museum’s exterior.⁷⁸ In the Morton Wing galleries housing the “73rd American



1.11 “73rd American Exhibition,” Art Institute of Chicago, 1979. *George Washington* in Gallery 219. (Photograph courtesy the artist.)

Exhibition,” these visitors might have glanced at an information sheet on the wall that indicated that Asher’s work was located in Gallery 219, another part of the Art Institute. The passage through a number of other European period rooms on their way to Gallery 219 might have informed the way in which these visitors looked for evidence of Asher’s project, possibly leading them to reflect on the epistemological and normative relations that Asher’s relocation of the George Washington statue evoked. These relations ranged from the historical (contemporary exhibition/eighteenth-century museum context) to the national (American/French), museological (decorative object/conserved sculpture), art historical (a cast reproduction of the original marble statue/original paintings on the gallery walls), and the aesthetic (covered in patina/color matching the gallery walls).

This narrative of spectatorship is, of course, only one possible viewing scenario. For many Art Institute visitors, Asher’s work no doubt slipped by unnoticed. The unobtrusive placement of *George Washington* in the period room made it entirely possible to completely bypass the project, since nothing in Asher’s approach forced the viewer to confront the artist’s message. For those who knew that the statue’s placement was Asher’s project, however, his work stood out from the normal fabric of the museum, at the same time as the experience of the statue’s relocation drew from the discursive field of knowledge that the Art Institute of Chicago articulated. These viewers already knew that *George Washington* was, in Crow’s description, “an impostor” in the period room of Gallery 219.⁷⁹ Their viewing experience was produced by and productive of knowledge: it was affected by preexisting assumptions, rules, and social conventions that were then extrapolated by individual museum visitors into experiential situations. These viewer preconceptions were then tested against the perceivable difference that Asher made to the exhibition site. A statue normally present outside the museum was now absent. The same statue on display in an unusual location (the period room) was coded against its normative placement in the museum’s exterior. Connections that were not obvious were made visible and even necessary through metonymical relations between discursive elements (such as the museum facade and the period room). All this specialized information was now displayed to a wider public. The viewer here could not be innocent, a blank slate, likely to believe anything he or she saw. Instead, viewers were presented with a situation that drew from what they already knew. Asher’s viewing situation, then, allowed for spectatorial agency by subtly demanding a response, while the viewer’s moves,

options, and modes of interpretation were constrained by the range of specific material, textual, and intentional elements for reception.

Within this experiential matrix, Asher's recreation in 2005 of the 1979 Art Institute project called attention to changes in the art and museum worlds (figure 1.12).⁸⁰ In 1979, he had brought in the weathered *George Washington* from outside the Art Institute, keeping the work's context within the art museum. But in 2005, the same "George" (as the project staff referred to the statue) arrived at the Art Institute from the Chicago mayor's office, where it had resided since 1984. The expansion of the sociopolitical context of *George Washington* is clearly outside the artist's sphere of influence, and thus could not be returned to the artist's intention. Precisely for this reason, Asher's situation in 2005 called attention to the ways in which twenty-first-century museums participate in the broader public sphere.

The type of knowledge production engaged by Asher's relocation of *George Washington* at the Art Institute had also changed between 1979 and 2005. His 1979 exhibition statement discussed the functionality of sculpture in different contexts within the art institution.⁸¹ In that statement, the statue was coded as a readymade, an object that acquires meaning from authorized placement within an institutional context. In 2005, Asher accompanied the statue's presentation with a separate archival display in the Art Institute's Ryerson Library reading room, featuring an extensive collection of original documents on the statue's history within the Art Institute (figure 1.13). In this instance, an archival discourse had replaced the primacy of the readymade, replacing the epistemology of modernist avant-garde with the epistemology of the museum.

Arrangements of institutionally specialized knowledge were prominently featured in Asher's practice following the "73rd American Exhibition." His 1990 exhibition at the Renaissance Society, for example, highlighted two kinds of relation to early-twentieth-century industrialization: the writings of social scientists on the mechanization of labor, and the patent numbers of industrially produced architectural fixtures of the exhibition space (a window pull chain, sash lock, and radiator cover).⁸² All of the quoted academics had been affiliated with the University of Chicago, the institutional crux of the exhibition, which operates the Renaissance Society. In his exhibition, Asher displayed the writings of these academics (silk-screened on the walls) along with stenciled patent numbers of the architectural fixtures. The discourse of individual fulfillment through arts and crafts was thus juxtaposed with standardized mass production. Asher's exhibition at the Palais



1.12 "Focus: Michael Asher," Art Institute of Chicago, 2005. *George Washington* in Gallery 220. (Photograph by Michael Tropea, Chicago; Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.)

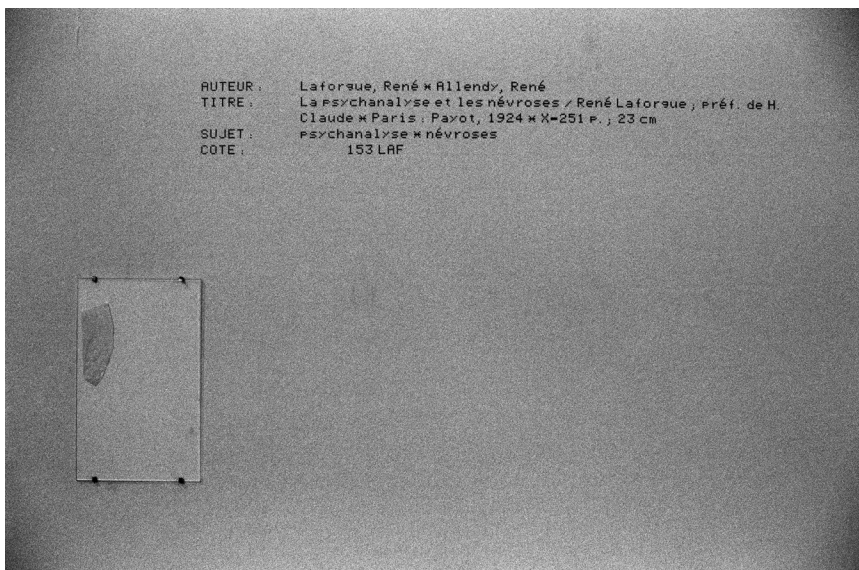


1.13 “Focus: Michael Asher,” Art Institute of Chicago, 2005. View of the reading room of the Ryerson Library. (Photograph by Michael Tropea, Chicago; Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.)

des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1992 was another example of his use of institutionally specific knowledge.⁸³ This exhibition centered on two historical figures, the art nouveau architect Victor Horta, who designed the building in which the exhibition took place, and the Los Angeles water baron William Mulholland. For this exhibition, Asher researched and displayed exhaustive amounts of information about Horta and Mulholland, tracing historically possible connections between the two figures. Both the Renaissance Society and the Palais des Beaux-Arts exhibitions relied on information that pertained to the exhibition site, making the viewing experience a function of knowing as well as looking.

In his 1991 archival project for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Asher further individuated the institutionally informed practice of spectatorship. In preparation for this exhibition, he removed all the paper fragments that he found lodged within the books in the psychoanalysis section of the Centre Pompidou's Bibliothèque publique d'information, or Public Reference Library. He then mapped the location of these paper fragments on the pages of these books, and exhibited the fragments under glass along with each book's bibliographic entry, silkscreened on the wall. The size of the glass, and the placement of the paper fragment under it, corresponded with the size of the book in which that particular fragment was found by Asher (figure 1.14).⁸⁴ These place markers ranged from random scraps of paper to advertisements for professional counseling. In Asher's exhibition, they functioned as traces of the reader-subject's involvement with the library (the act of reading and leaving a marker in a library book), representing a material trace of the reader's literal insertion into the discursive order of the library. Asher presented these individual reading practices and the library's classificatory system as visually and epistemologically parallel systems. The material objects—the paper fragments—in Asher's exhibition functioned primarily to point to the discourses they were embedded in.

Asher's procedure in his Pompidou Center exhibition drew out two sets of subjects in relation to the discourse of psychoanalysis: the library users who had left the paper fragments in the books, and the exhibition viewers. The viewing might then have proceeded by relating the practices of individual marking and collective classification to one another, effecting, Birgit Pelzer has argued, "comic surprise" through the juxtaposition of the mundane pieces of paper with the authority of the book.⁸⁵ The museum visitor's response to these individual reading and collective classificatory practices remained inseparable from the library's normative frame of reference. Asher wrote that his Pompidou Center



- 1.14 Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1991. Detail view of installation, one of sixty-seven paper fragments accompanied by the library citation for the book where the paper fragment was found. (Photograph courtesy the artist.)

exhibition addressed “the function of the museum and the viewing subject’s role within that institution.”⁸⁶ The artist’s juxtaposition of the knowledge contained in books, on the one hand, and the knowledge communicated by discarded scraps of paper, on the other, served as the overarching frame of reference that viewing subjects encountered in his exhibition against their preconceived understanding of museums, libraries, and practices of reading.

Asher’s 1991 project for the Stuart Collection further articulates relations between individuated modes of viewer behavior and their epistemological frames of reference. This work, one of Asher’s few permanently installed projects, joined the Stuart Collection arrangement of public sculptures placed throughout the campus of the University of California, San Diego. It consists of a fully functional drinking fountain, constructed from stainless steel and two types of granite (figure 1.15). Custom-manufactured after the design of the ubiquitous, industrially produced mid-twentieth-century water fountain, Asher’s work is located on an aisle of grass between two streets and their adjoining parking strips (figure 1.16). The placement emphasizes the symbolic value of two preexisting markers on the site, a functional flagpole and a monument constructed out of a natural boulder. The boulder, with its inscription label, commemorates the former function of the UCSD campus as a military training ground. Through its placement, Asher’s fountain evokes an implied axis between the flagpole and the boulder geographically (by mirroring the position of the boulder in relation to the flagpole) and metaphorically (monumentalizing the current educational use of the former military site).⁸⁷ Alternately nondescript and out of place, the drinking fountain in the midst of a walkway solicits further attention. Robert Storr, for example, notes that the fountain “stands out over time in inverse proportion to the degree that it begs to be overlooked on first inspection.”⁸⁸

Asher’s drinking fountain has rich metaphoric significance. On the one hand, it co-opts the classic form of a public monument: the grand water fountain. Formally, Asher’s fountain conforms to the monumental tradition of public sculpture: it is crafted of the same traditional sculpture materials and polished to a deep glow. Yet the fountain’s claim to conventional monumentality is counterbalanced by the fact that it is not strictly decorative but resolutely practical. Asher’s fountain also flirts with the art historical legacy of the readymade in terms of its relationship to its 1917 cousin, Duchamp’s *Fountain*. But these fountains differ in two respects. First, Asher’s fountain is custom-made, as opposed to Duchamp’s mass-produced object. Second, Asher’s fountain remains prosaically



1.15 Permanent work for the Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego, 1991. Detail view of granite basin and stainless steel water bubbler. (Photograph courtesy the artist.)



1.16 Permanent work for the Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego, 1991. (Photograph by Philipp Scholz Ritterman; courtesy the Stuart Collection.)

functional, producing its own filtered and treated water in a manner comparable to any drinking fountain placed in offices, schools, museums, or other public facilities.⁸⁹

The associative qualities of Asher's water fountain support the artist's objective of avoiding the "represent[ation of] abstract forms that would immediately individuate [his] work in public space."⁹⁰ In other words, upon encountering Asher's work, passersby might take notice of a drinking fountain rather than "an Asher," or a generic public sculpture. Such a challenge to the art object's individuation might sharpen the way in which viewers perceive an object in relation to its environment, allowing the object to function as connective tissue between viewer, situation, and the practices of everyday life. In this sense, the familiar form of Asher's water fountain individuates the site and the knowing subject instead of the object. This recognizability further reconfigures the act of viewing into as an experiential practice that engages the viewer's relation to self and others within a socially normative situation.

The media reception of Asher's fountain called to light one such set of social norms. Television news crews, covering the opening of Asher's work, treated the fountain as a joke.⁹¹ This mass-media interpretation presumed a recipient who agrees with this slant, which the network anchors then seem to channel rather than construct. Thus, the television coverage was aimed at a specified viewer whose agreement with the news anchor was assumed and enforced by the unquestionable clarity of the media's own viewpoint.⁹² In the media reception of Asher's fountain, the specified viewer was a statistic, an anonymous audience member. As if caught in a trance, this viewer might align with the view of the mainstream media, encountering the fountain and reenacting its preconceived interpretation of the work.

Through his insistence on the functionality of the fountain, and by inviting contact, Asher sought to challenge such specified modes of reception.⁹³ His fountain calls for viewers to engage with the work based on their *a priori* knowledge of this particular fountain and its properties. In fact, according to UCSD campus lore, students should drink the fountain's "smart water" before taking exams.⁹⁴ The very existence of this tradition underscores the quality of Asher's work as a special kind of fountain and its substance as special kind of water. Such individuated viewing experiences are produced in the intersection of Asher's situation and each viewer's decision to make use of it and to assign meaning to it, by interacting with the fountain. In addition to reconfiguring its site materially,

Asher's work recontextualizes and advocates epistemological practices for institutionally situated viewers: students, staff, faculty, and Asher aficionados. Their relation to the fountain is based on their interactions with it during the course of their everyday life; thus, the fountain reiterates the artist's intent for the work to "hav[e] the potential to bring together the viewing subject and the object for something other than transcendent renewal."⁹⁵ Although the fountain might resist immediate individuation as an art object, it becomes individuated through epistemological situations that specific viewers experience when they literally draw from the fountain in the context of their daily practice of living.

Conclusion: The Experiential Viewer

From deceptively empty rooms to reconfigured and recontextualized institutional situations, Asher's installations present their viewers with intellectually and emotionally nuanced experiential conditions. Even his early multisensory environments of the late 1960s and early 1970s were built upon defining and engaging an experiential matrix in which multiple epistemological and normative layers were embedded in viewing situations. In these projects, he summoned viewers to consider what they knew about a given institutional situation and what social and discursive norms applied to it. Such viewing situations are often described through their collective dimension, drawing from bodies of shared knowledge and rules. Yet the viewing conditions of his situations also become individuated through a combination of sensory, social, and psychological modes of reception. This experiential complexity stands out, for example, among the accounts Asher's viewers have given of their encounters with his installations.

The experiential tone of these viewer accounts was echoed once again in the reception of Asher's 2008 exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. His conceptual approach to this project will seem familiar: he reconstructed the wall studs of all forty-four exhibitions that had been held in this exhibition space over the past ten years, the length of time the museum had occupied its current location.⁹⁶ The outcome of this mapping operation comprised a dense maze of galvanized steel and wood studs (figure 1.17). In a small adjacent gallery, Asher displayed the key to the placement of the wall studs in the form of tear sheets that detailed the previous exhibitions and their configurations. Yet no matter how prominent the organizational armature, critics associated the physical structure



1.17 Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, 2008, detail view of installation.
(Photograph by Bruce Morr; courtesy the Santa Monica Museum of Art.)

also with experiential qualities.⁹⁷ Walead Beshty remarked that he experienced “a sequence of disquieting perceptual transformations” in Asher’s space.⁹⁸ Kirsten Swenson noted that “bodies interacting with this disorienting space . . . became the main event.”⁹⁹ Mark Godfrey’s description likewise attends extensively to the process of viewing the work:

You entered the space and signed a waiver, and then found yourself confronted by the armatures’ bars. You could move to left or go forward, but from there on in there was no obvious route to follow: it was a labyrinth without a centre. For the larger viewers it became quite uncomfortable to squeeze through the gaps and step over the ridges on the floor. Some walls were close by others, elsewhere space opened up unexpectedly; moving from end to end of the museum felt relentless. . . . Sometimes you thought about imprisonment; but most of all there was the illusion that you were walking through a hall of mirrors.¹⁰⁰

Godfrey’s description recounts his process of “entering” Asher’s Santa Monica installation as a combination of the bodily, social, and discursive facets of the viewing experience. Just as the La Jolla Museum of Art had invited viewers to “enter the work of Michael Asher” in 1969, the 2008 Santa Monica project required a threshold crossing with psychological and bodily effects that were “disquieting,” “disorienting,” and “uncomfortable.” The fact that the Santa Monica Museum of Art required visitors to sign a waiver before entering the space, for example, indicates that the museum was well aware of the potential effects Asher’s installation might have, and the museum elected to withhold bearing legal responsibility for those effects.

Of course, much had changed between 1969 and 2008. Most obviously, Asher’s concentration on sensory experience that was present in the La Jolla work had expanded to include an engagement with institutional discourses of art. The spectatorial experiences of the Santa Monica installation were analytical and affective. But both the La Jolla and Santa Monica exhibitions, spanning Asher’s career from the late 1960s to the twenty-first century, were realized as situations that used collective institutional conditions to provide for an individuated experience.

The position of the viewer in Asher's work is intrinsically extended to anyone. There are no preconditions for this spectatorship, nor are viewers threshed and gleaned into preconceived categories based on their identity—though the knowledge viewers bring with them to the institution (including their knowledge about his practice) certainly inflects the meanings garnered from his situations. Such equality, though now enclosed within a contractual structure, is also characteristic of the participatory projects that I consider in the following chapter. In these projects the artist asked specific individuals to execute particular tasks within his work. Unlike the general viewers, these participants—gallerists, museum staff, or students—were individuated even before they entered the work. Yet what Asher's participants will share with his viewers is the potential for experiential transformation through their encounter with the artist's work.