

*Michael Asher Interview*

GINGER WOLFE

Ginger Wolfe: In your years of art practice have you noticed over time an internal modification within institutions that have therefore changed the nature of your critical response?

Michael Asher: Museums are much more aware of my practice but this hasn't altered my approach. Since the onset, my response to an institution in developing a work is quite direct, the way an institution presents itself is something I take as a preexisting way of working, and this is what I respond to. So your question is have they changed? Have they gotten used to this way of working? They still remain very diverse, in other words some invite me because they feel obliged for me to participate when they feel I obviously belong but then become reticent with my proposal. On the other hand there are others that have followed me for years and know my work very well and are very open to anything I propose, even if they are critical of my proposal, which did happen recently. Though, they disagree with it, they are still interested in doing a project along those lines even if it's inimical to their interests.

GW: That feeds into my next question, which is in projects like the one you've constructed in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *Made in California: Now* exhibition, I wondered if you were engaging the role of the curator, which has significantly changed over the past thirty years?

MA: One important aspect of it is that it questions the role of the curator, in so far as perhaps the curator misses opportunities to install work in a way which is compelling, because they have their own way, a recognized way of installing...and telling a story, some sort of narrative of what they feel is important for the viewers to see, underscoring where they want the major reception to occur and how they want to build up to it. So, I was really hoping that the young people, the students, would perhaps come across something that would become a new convention for the curator, a new way of presentation, one they hadn't utilized and wouldn't have thought of utilizing. The students didn't have a background in art or art history. Their way of presentation and display is just totally different. They hit upon a way which today we might call relational display. It was not relational like some art practices today, but relational from a period between wars.

Well. Maybe I should discuss a little more about what this work was about. This work was very much about the process of ... museum education which ordinarily comes from the museum to bring significance to the most important parts of their collection. It's sort of a top down way of getting the public to know

the collection as well as support and legitimate that collection and get people involved with those aspects of it and the student project is more of an attempt to say that through some sort of bottom up process there's a great deal more that can be revealed this way. There might be learning and more education involved in it and there might be more benefit for everyone all the way around... So that's one of the places that this work begins to seek some sort of reflection that possibly non-professionals can come across ideas professional artists and curators could have missed about institutional display. There was another part that had to do with the city and a lack of funding, and the overcrowding of classes in our public schools. The work suggests that our public museums could substitute for that lack of funding and bring certain enrichment to students. It was very necessary to allow the students to figure things out on their own. I met with the students, but only for short periods of time, and actually this is another thing I'm interested in this work. There was a facilitator that was between the museum and me and everybody else and she was most important in carrying out my structure and the student's ideas. But this work would not have existed without the experimental foresight of LACMA Lab. Once the students informed themselves about the museum as their own responsibility then the museum couldn't go back and say you misunderstood about this, or made an assumption about that, because ultimately they didn't. Finally I wanted a work that would present to the museum and the school system, that students of a certain age have their own motivation and can motivate themselves. In the end it wasn't a response to the curators alone.

GW: I'm thinking much of your work including the untitled installation at Pomona College in 1970 and the installation at the Art Institute in '79 (George Washington Replica) subverted interior and exterior space in a formal way. I'm wondering if you could comment on the degree in which you were engaging social space rather than purely formal?

MA: I am using formal tools to engage social space. The work at Pomona was an installation where I was very interested in extra-visual experience. So I was interested in...airflow, in the subtlety of where air sort of died, where it moved quickly as well as acoustical variations in space. I built the two triangular spaces like an architectural wind instrument, and in the large chamber you could often here street sounds louder than in the street. The sounds would be amplified though the small triangular space. There is also an important part socially to it which is that this is open 24 hours a day. In this way the aesthetic experience is accessible at any given time. Both works led to an increasing use of having the formal animate social questions in these two works one can isolate the issue of access and see that begin to happen but in very different ways. For example the conflicts which are produced in the presentation of the Houdon open up questions about the conventions of display and at Pomona College where the two front doors remain off 24 hours a day so that people could see the installation after work.

GW: Were you engaging in a value exchange in these two works? I was thinking that the subversion of exterior and interior space, if you were thinking in terms of an exchange of value?

MA: Well, they are very different in that sense. The installation at the Art Institute in 1979 is meant to recontextualize the Houdon statue from outside the museum to its period room which means that, yes, the meaning had shifted. The first thing one can see is its monumentality is lost altogether once it's in its period room. Similarly I left the weathering on the statue thereby disrupting the idea that artwork on the interior ought to be viewed once they are well conserved. Then in terms of the inside outside question I hope this installation begins to broach upon the disparities which occur in sign value when they are not aligned conventionally. The installation at the art gallery at Pomona College in 1970 dealt with trying to integrate the interior with exterior phenomenon. In this case exterior sounds, light, and climate are not subverted but rather they are modified on the interior.

GW: I'm also thinking about another piece from 1989 for D & S Ausstellung, you mentioned a corollary you saw between the exhibition concept's reference to limitless meaning and the potential for limitless waste, both as agents for the colonization of space. I'm wondering if this fed into a sort of commodity and sign exchange referential to the restrictions between East and West Germany?

MA: Limitless meaning refers to a quality in an art work which initiates associations alone as its function. Its job is to consume an endless stream of thought rather than engaging the public in specific questions.

GW: Perhaps you could think a bit more generally about the work. I'm wondering if the transition of space, if those ideas fed into commodity, sign exchange, which in essence fed into your feelings between East and West Germany?

MA: Yeah, I know what you're asking. The dumping of garbage in the east was a very low cost way of occupying the east and it was also a way in which the west could get rid of what it didn't want. So it demonstrates in a sense the way the west saw the east in that particular case as just a dumpsite. Today the Germans can no longer afford to devalue the former East. They must bring it up to their own standards. But his work identifies a relationship which seems common between industrialized and developing nations.

GW: That sort of feeds into my next thought, which is in retrospect with the passing of time, the falling of the iron curtain and the unification of East and West Germany alters your perception of that work?

MA: Not Really. What was once a document of daily activities has now become more of a historical document due to the unification. One has to see it at the point at which it was done.

GW: Somewhat related there seems to be a direct relationship between your artworks and the catalogues, which are the only living objects. I'm wondering if now the desirability of these catalogues in anyway neutralizes a critical approach of commodity?

MA: I would hope that the record of the work within the catalogue would remind the reader why they might have reasons to remain aware of commodity practice. The catalogues circulate in such a way where there seems to be enough of them in most cases where the information isn't in anyone's hands. Are you asking me if it's something that gets fetishized?

GW: Yes. Absolutely. Particularly, because they are now so hard to come across. It's about the desirability...

MA: Yes. That's unfortunate, though they still document the work and make the installation public.

GW: So you're saying that the commodity aspect of the catalogues is deflected by the quantity? By the fact that they are in multiples?

MA: Well. Yes, and also its content, its price which can't approach that of the independent art object.

GW: Not anymore. The price has risen significantly.

MA: That is something. I heard that a book store put the Nova Scotia book at a price almost three times what it was sold for, and it's hard to believe, but I haven't heard the price of catalogues.

GW: I'm wondering if you position these catalogues as an artistic proposition or if it's purely documentation?

MA: Sometimes they are art objects but most aren't.

GW: Can you give some examples?

MA: Well the one at the exhibition *The Museum as Muse* at MOMA in 1999 which contained a list of the museums deaccessions was an art work and the one at The

Occidental College exhibition named *Extensions* in 1986 where I produced the paper for the catalogue was also an art object.

GW: But in the other catalogues, like for example the one at the Renn., the Renaissance Society-

MA: Those are very different from other exhibitions which for the most part are records of the exhibition along with historian's essays.

GW: Right. But the fact that they sort of become objects for the work, so when the work itself no longer exists they signify it, for you that doesn't necessarily indicate an artistic proposition?

MA: No. That was never my intention. They can't possibly substitute for the experience of the work. The reading experience is a completely different one than the aesthetic experience.

GW: It's by default. If at all?

MA: Yeah. Even today I wouldn't know how to avert that. Can I just say one other thing? I also have a lot of faith in the public and their capability. When they see someone who is trying to turn the catalogue into an art object I believe it could be understood that it doesn't change the art work or what is written inside.

GW: I understand. I'm seeing in researching the larger body of your work some things that seem pertinent. In Hal Foster's research, in his book *The Return of the Real*, he mentions that your work has brought about an analysis of the conditions of perception relative to institutions you have engaged. I'm wondering in what ways have these spaces reciprocally shaped the public perception of your work?

MA: It's quite difficult for the public's experience not to be shaped by the museum. In a number of works it is this shaping of the public that I hope to underscore. And in so doing I also hope the public recognizes this situation. I think one of the strategies is to use concrete elements of the museum and to use those elements in a way to often ideologically question the museum and its operations by the public.