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One of a number of 20th century bronze casts of a 1788 original marble sculpture of George Washington by French artist Jean Antoine Houdon, taken off its base from its exterior position in front of the façade of the Chicago Art Institute, and re-installed by artist Michael Asher in the center of the Institute's Gallery 219, a gallery devoted to European painting, sculpture, and decorative arts of the same period. "73rd American Exhibition," Art Institute of Chicago, 1979.

Michael Asher: Context as Content

Anne Rorimer

The prodigious and protean production of Michael Asher has developed and continues to evolve in critical response to its own definition as art, which perforce is situated within a physical context as well as within an economic, social, political and historical one. During the last two decades Asher has sought ways to engage each work with the relevant aspects of its provided context. In so doing, he has succeeded in freeing his art from the conditions that, in each instance, he chooses to investigate.

Two seminal works of 1969 demonstrate Asher's early involvement with questions of context and his redefinition of established relationships between the object of art and its surroundings. Created for *Anti-illusion: Procedures/Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art and for *Spaces* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, these works assumed the form of environmental installations that relied on controlled perceptual conditions. The work of the Whitney exhibition consisted of an invisible plane of air, barely detectable to the touch, which, produced by an air blower concealed in the ceiling, was installed in the passageway between two of the exhibition rooms. It satisfied the theme of the exhibition by taking physical form without visibly intruding on the exhibition space. Similarly, the work for the Museum of Modern Art took its surroundings directly into account. In accordance with the exhibition's title, *Spaces*, Asher created a room to be entered and experienced acoustically and visually in relationship to the noise and light levels outside of its walls. As the walls were built especially to absorb sound, visitors' distance from the exit and entry doors proportionately regulated the degree of exterior sound heard inside. By thus defining the interior space of the work in accordance with its exterior, Asher

pointed to the fact that the piece, a hollow container, was not self-contained, but linked with the ambient sounds and lighting in the museum.¹

Two slightly later works, one of 1973 for the Toselli Gallery in Milan, the other of 1974 for the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles, abandoned the methods of sensory control and opened up the entire existing exhibition space as an area for consideration. In order to realize the Toselli piece, Asher requested that all of the many layers of white paint covering the walls and ceilings of the gallery be removed. Four days of sand blasting revealed a rich brown surface underneath many coats of paint, visually uniting the walls and ceiling with the raw surface of the concrete floor. By penetrating the superficial painted surface of the encompassing walls, Asher succeeded in putting the exhibition space itself on view as an object of study and the subject of the work. As Asher has written, “the withdrawal of the white paint, in this case, became the objectification of the work,”² with its content and its container becoming one and the same.

For his exhibition at the Claire Copley Gallery, Asher followed a similar procedure of objectification through removal when he took away the internal, free-standing partition of the gallery, which the owner had built to divide the exhibition space from its business area. During the course of the exhibition the owner at her desk and the gallery’s storage were in full view. Asher thus disclosed the inner “works” of the exhibition space by exposing its operations behind-the-scenes. Through the picture window separating the gallery from the street viewers could see the contents of the gallery as the content of the work. From inside the work/space they could observe the external reality outside.

Furthermore, because he exposed the day-to-day functions of the gallery in its commercial capacity, Asher simultaneously brought the normally unseen economic underpinnings of both the gallery *and* the work to the fore. “Just as the work served as a model of how the gallery operated,” the artist has pointed out, “it also served as a model for its own economic reproduction.”³ All subsequent works by Asher similarly have examined the factors that underlie their status as art. Asher’s one person exhibition at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, as a further example, likewise incorporated the interior spaces of the museum into the body of the work per se. For this exhibition, Asher utilized the rectangular, transparent glass ceiling panels above the gallery space of the museum to create a work that quite literally “took place,” like any exhibition generally, over a period of about a month.

Before the opening of the Eindhoven exhibition, fifteen rows of glass panels had been removed from their position in the ceiling above those galleries (comprising half of the museum) that were allotted to Asher for the display of his work. During the beginning of each weekday workmen proceeded to put the glass back in the ceiling. The closing date of the exhibition was not set in advance but, instead, was determined by the number of days required to reinstall all of the panels. The work, therefore, gradually unfolded as the completion of the task drew nearer to a close. The exhibition ended when the last had been repositioned and thus when the exhibition space – whose walls remained free of other works of art for the duration of Asher’s exhibition – was restored to its original condition.

The Eindhoven work presented the procedure of presenting exhibitions. If the Copley work specifically made manifest the marketing of art, the work at the Van Abbemuseum turned the exhibition itself into a temporal and spatial event requiring hired labor, which is normally

¹ For further information on works executed by Asher before 1980, see Michael Asher in collaboration with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979* (Halifax: The press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983).

² *Ibid.*, p.89.

³ *Ibid.*, p.100

provided by the institution but which is not part of the finished work itself. Having filled the exhibition space by emptying it while additionally having defined its own time frame based on actual necessity, Asher's work turned museum exhibition procedures around in order to simultaneously reveal and escape them.

Also in 1977 Asher participated in the group exhibition "Skulptur," organized by the Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster. Unlike the Van Abbemuseum work, which dealt with the nature of the museum exhibition from within the physical confines of the institution's interior space, the work for Münster confronted the question of producing an outdoor sculpture in relation to a site. For this purpose Asher hired an 11-foot trailer to be parked at nineteen locations during the nineteen-week period of the exhibition. Stationed one week at a time in a succession of different locations within the city of Münster and its suburbs, the trailer moved away from the museum during the first half of the exhibition and back toward it during the second half. In each of its positions, the trailer was juxtaposed and absorbed into a variety of environments, both rural and urban. The otherwise detached trailer, a seemingly self-contained but symbiotic unit linked itself with the community while the museum responsible for the exhibition provided it with its center of gravity. Figuratively anchored to the museum, the trailer delineated the boundaries of a work that encompassed the entire community.

The reconstruction of this work for another exhibition, "Skulptur Projekte in 1987 Münster" exactly a decade later, which was organized under the same auspices in the same location and which was based on the same theme of outdoor sculpture, reinforced its original meaning. The replacement of the same kind of trailer in the same series of locations as in the previous exhibition was designed to foreground changes or growth in the city. At the same time, the reinstallation of a former work (otherwise unprecedented in Asher's career) provided a contrast – even greater than ten years before – with other works of outdoor sculpture that, for the most part, clung to the nearby environs of the museum without venturing to question the traditional nature of a sculpture as a physically detached object in space. Like the works preceding it, the Münster piece of 1977, and again of 1987, integrated the material work with its support, and, furthermore, expanded the definition of its support to include not only the interior of the exhibition space, but also the institutional domain of the museum as part of, but distinct from, the non-art environment of the city at large.

Two works by Asher of 1979 coincidentally exhibited at separate museums in Chicago simultaneously – at the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Art Institute of Chicago⁴ – investigated relationships between sculpture and architecture, on the one hand, and between the work of art and its institutional support on the other hand. In each instance, Asher dealt with the work's container as this is to be both architecturally and institutionally understood in order to further question and redefine the nature of traditional sculpture.

The work for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, was realized in response to this institution's decision to remodel and expand its building and to form a permanent collection which it began to acquire after celebrating its 10th anniversary in 1977. The design of the current building is based on a five and one-half foot square module, which is expressed on the façade by brushed stainless steel panels that cover the concrete block structure to create a decorative grid pattern. These panels, applied to the flat face of the museum turn the east corner of the building. From an angle, one is able to observe how they encase and wrap partly around the façade and stop short of the underlying structure of the original edifice.

⁴ See also Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modernist Sculpture," in Chantal Pontbriand, ed., *Performance, Text(e)s & Documents* (Montreal: Parachute, 1980), pp. 55-65.

The original building, a bakery later converted to the offices for underlying Playboy magazine, was first remodeled by the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1966. The architects at this time transformed the front of the museum through the application of stucco to what was then a brick façade. When confronted with the problem of connecting the existing museum to an adjoining three-story brownstone house annexed in the following decade, the new architects, Booth, Nagle, and Hartray, added a structure in front of the two buildings, unifying them in a single façade that replaced the former building's more modest stucco exterior. The most prominent feature of this added façade was a new entrance and a second story, trussed gallery that "functions as a showcase so that the art is visible from the street," as Asher specifically noted.⁵

The two rows of glass windows of the trussed gallery carry through the five and one-half square-foot modules of the decorative grid pattern and line up with the two rows of stainless steel panels on either side of it. In the printed statement accompanying his work, Asher described the fact that he unhinged the two rows of panels that flank the showcase windows and reinstalled them on the wall of the interior exhibition area, known as the Bergman Gallery. As he pointed out, "The ten panels from the east side of the building and the eight from the west are arranged inside so that they correspond exactly to their previous positions outside."⁶ The double row of panels from the east side of the building, as a group, required 22 feet of wall space from the west and 24 3/4 feet from the east, allowing 30 feet of blank wall space for the work of other artists. When the metal panels from the building's exterior are not on view in the Bergman Gallery, the work is "in public storage"⁷ and, having once again become an inseparable part of the building, it disappears until its subsequent installation.⁸

When the work – visible in its entirety from the outdoors – is on view, the rectangular units of metal cladding, facing toward the street from within the Bergman Gallery, must be considered from their position inside the museum. Aligned on the wall as would be any museum display, the panels assume the characteristics of art. Thus hanging together, they present themselves in the form of an abstract, metallic relief whose repeated, serial components evoke the industrial and reductive qualities of Minimal sculpture as defined in the 1960s by artists such as Carl Andre, Donald Judd, or Sol Lewitt. While they are read from inside the museum, in light of their visual association with Minimal sculpture, the panels, in addition, underscore their decorative and non-structural function on the exterior of the building where they serve to cover up the materials of the original supporting structure beneath a sleek and shiny façade. With the power of the museum context being brought to bear on the content of the work as a whole, architectural decoration and the elements of sculptural form here become interchangeable.

The work for the Art Institute of Chicago – a large general museum, renowned for its collections ranging in date from ancient times to the present – represented Asher's participation, along with fifteen other artists in its "73rd American Exhibition." Over the years this biennial exhibition has provided the museum with the opportunity of regularly presenting current art. In parallel manner with the work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the work for the American Exhibition similarly used and expressed the underlying and unspoken role played by the museum context in organizing modes of aesthetic perception. And once again, the museum as an object of

⁵ Michael Asher, printed statement for the Museum of Contemporary Art, June 1979.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Asher, *Writings*, p. 197 (photo caption).

⁸ This work was acquired by the museum for its permanent collection and may be reinstalled at any time, although to date it has not been put on view again.

investigation provided, both physically and ideologically, the material for a work of art that resulted from the repositioning of actual elements belonging to the existing architectural reality.

For his work in the “73rd American Exhibition” Asher removed a life-size, green patinated, weathered bronze statue of George Washington from where it had stood at the main entrance of the Art Institute of Chicago for over half a century and repositioned it within the museum. The sculpture is one of a number of 20th century casts of the original marble of 1788 by the well-known 18th century French artist, Jean Antoine Houdon. Heretofore the bronze had served as a commemorative monument to the first president of the United States, dressed as a leader of the American Revolutionary War, and also a decorative object that had been firmly ensconced on its stone pedestal in front of the central arch of the Art Institute’s neo-Renaissance façade. The sculpture of Washington was taken off its base and installed by Asher in the center of Gallery 219. At this time Gallery 219 was devoted to European painting, sculpture, and decorative arts of the late 18th century, that is, to works of the same period as the sculpture by Houdon. Relatively small and nearly square, the room was painted a gray blue-green color and contained works of art that had been symmetrically placed around the gallery and on the walls from floor to ceiling in the attempt to evoke, however artificially, the sense of an original period setting.

In a short text for guiding visitors between the American Exhibition on the first floor and Gallery 219 on the second, Asher stated: “In this work I am interested in the way the sculpture [of George Washington] functions when it is viewed in its 18th-century context instead of in its prior relationship to the façade of the building... Once inside Gallery 219 the sculpture can be seen in connection with the ideas of other European works of the same period.” The relocation of *George Washington* from its centralized, exterior position in front of the building’s façade to its centralized position in Gallery 219 refined the sculpture’s meaning vis-à-vis the nature of its new context. Dismantled from its pedestal and divested of its imposing, outdoor monumentality and decorative function in relation to the Art Institute’s façade, the sculpture inside the museum had to be viewed in terms of the other works of art encompassing it. Although on historical, stylistic, and formal grounds the sculpture belongs in Gallery 219, it nonetheless subtly, and humorously as well, sounded a discordant note. The mediocre quality of the cast along with the weathered look of its patinated surface (coincidentally, however, nearly blending in with the blue/green color of the gallery walls) did not permit the sculpture of George Washington, the “Father of his Country,” to be completely and unquestionably absorbed into the domain of the gallery despite the statue’s period credentials. Although an outdoor sculpture of an American hero *par excellence* took its place stylistically amid European works of its own time, it injected a sign of discontinuity. Standing within the gallery *George Washington* served as a reminder of the selection, categorization, and contemporary repositioning that effect the way in which the past is re-created within the confines of the museum with respect to the nature and limits of its holdings.

For the construction of this work, Asher followed standard museum procedures of installing works of art – which have been extracted from the original conditions of their conception and placement – within designated areas of the museum in chronological sequence and/or geographical groupings to bring about a new environment. As a result, he succeeded in creating a work that could not in itself be subjected to ensuing relocations and contextual dislocations. Asher’s work thereby circumvented the institutional procedures upon which it, paradoxically, was founded and to which it critically drew attention.

The “73rd American Exhibition” constituted the immediate context of this work as Asher himself explained in the written handout: in the process of “locating the sculpture within its own time frame in Gallery 219, I am placing it in the framework of a contemporary exhibition, through my participation in that exhibition.” Thus, not only did Asher exempt his work from the consequences of historical uprooting and repositioning, but he also connected and integrated a

contemporary work of art – conceived for an exhibition aimed at presenting examples of the most recent artistic production – with the museum as a whole. As well, he was able to engender a work that was grounded in the past, which it literally embodied in a concrete, material form. Rather than merely quoting or borrowing from the past in a Post Modern fashion, Asher’s work, instead, radically departed from the previous forms of aesthetic practice. Bearing witness to the realities of its broader context within the museum and within history of art in general, the work for the “73rd American Exhibition” allied the production of art in the present with that of the past to achieve its own innovative ends.

Whereas the American Exhibition furnished the contextual framework for Asher’s work, the entirety of Gallery 219 with the sculpture of George Washington at its center defied the work as a material whole. During the installation of this work, however, Gallery 219 never ceased to serve the purpose of displaying 18th century objects of art. For this reason, the space of the work and the “real” space of the gallery coincided with each other. Asher, therefore, succeeded in erasing the traditional division between a material object and its physical setting. By extension, the paintings on the walls, necessarily retaining their status as art, also became elements of the existing reality by way of their incorporation into another work of art. Moreover, Asher’s work, quite astonishingly, inverted traditional perspective in that the paintings on the walls became reality-in-the-context-of-art as opposed to reality being transformed into art-in-the-context-of-reality. At the same time, the centralized figure of Washington, deprived of its former purpose as a monument, served simultaneously as the catalyst for another work of art and as a point of reference for, or a reminder of, the traditionally isolated a detached work of art that Asher had subverted.

Ensuing works by Asher have remained contingent on existing reality and the conditions of their presentation. A relatively recent work, for the “74th American Exhibition” at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1982, specifically expressed the vital function of the museum as an institution for exhibiting art. For this work – initially proposed for the Institute’s permanent collection – he engaged two groups of viewers to stand at a designated time (for practical purposes only) each day in front of two different paintings in the permanent collection galleries: specifically, *Nude Seated in a Bathtub*, 1910, by Marcel Duchamp and *Portrait of Kahnweiler*, 1910, by Pablo Picasso. Asher selected these two particular paintings because of the disparate degree to which they had been reproduced in books, on posters or on postcards, etc. – the Duchamp hardly at all and the Picasso extensively – and disseminated in the public domain as the second-hand images. Thus installed in front of two paintings in the same room, the “model” viewers, paradigmatic of museum visitors, demonstrated the point at which the museum’s role to present, and the visitor’s to perceive, intersect.

Paradoxically, the same institutions that make original works of art available to the public are also those that provide photographs and reproductions. Seeking to dismantle the barriers to direct perception engendered by reproduction, with its capacity to substitute for, and dull, the experience of the original, Asher’s work reproduced the process of viewing that takes place in a museum as a concrete actuality. Rather than being a work, however, that was physically and conceptually independent of its institutional context – yet nonetheless dependent on it for its display – it was a work that could not be detached from the existing situation it sought to acknowledge and consider. Having abandoned the convention of sculpture in the round, the work revolved around the viewing process by materially and thematically embodying it.

During the decade of the 1980s Asher has continued to create works that materialize in response to the physical, institutional, geographic, and/or historical circumstances that pertain to their own making. Complex works for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1981, the Walter Phillips Gallery of The Banff Centre School of Fine Arts, Canada, 1981, and the Hoshour

Gallery, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1984, to mention only several, have employed textual and photographic material while a work of 1988 for Artists Space, New York dealt directly with the given interior of the exhibition area.

For his work at Artist Space Asher vertically extended the partial walls of the encompassing space, which followed the outline of the original perimeter walls but which stopped 12 feet short of the ceiling. These walls, lining the interior spatial shell, had been recently constructed during a period of remodeling and, prior to Asher's extensions, had inserted their own physical, volumetric presence into the viewing space. Asher's extensions were not painted during the exhibition, but they nonetheless succeeded in "restoring" the space to a neutral state and in revealing the sculptural pretense of architecture that diverges from its self-effacing nature as a background for art. As sculpture, the work by Asher blended in with the exhibition space by being integrated with it and commented, moreover, on the impositional potential of architecture with its tendency to masquerade as art. At the close of the exhibition the mural extensions constituting the work were not dismantled, but, rather, were painted over to completely merge with and be absorbed into the exhibition space as a whole – a fitting conclusion to a work that involved the interface between use, value and aesthetic purpose. As in Asher's works for the Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld⁹ and for "Documenta 7," Kassel, both done in 1982, sculptural content was produced by the supporting walls of its own architectural context.

In each of his works to date Michael Asher has successfully endeavored to mend the division between form and function and between real and artificial space. Having redefined the traditional relationship between the material of the work and its spatial support, Asher has reinterpreted the conventional notion of sculpture as an autonomous, "free" standing object. To this end, he consistently has made works that manifest the desire to destroy illusion – including that of the work itself – through the removal of all obstacles hindering perception.

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⁹ See Ulrich Loock, "Dekonstruktionen eines Kunstwerks. Installationen in Meis van der Rhoes Kerfelder Villen," *Daidalos*, 26, 15 Dezember 1987, pp.40-45 and John Vinci, "Michael Asher: The Wall as Object, The Gallery as Framework," in *Michael Asher/ James Coleman* (New York: Artists Space, 1988), pp.14-19.