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Charlotte Posenenske at Artists Space

by Alice Gregory on June 29, 2010



Charlotte Posenenske. *Series D*. 1967, via [MoMA](#)

It's been almost a year now since Artists Space remodeled and reopened. Inspired by European kunsthallen, the gallery's new, open floorplan offers a pure viewing experience rare enough in the city and absolutely obsolete in SoHo. Artists Space is the best place in New York to view sculpture, if not art in general, a superlative only qualified because of the gallery's lack of walls. This isn't a place for painting. The expanse is vast, the ceilings are high, the windows are wide. There's no differentiation between the administrative offices and the gallery itself. It's been ten months and the novelty still hasn't worn off; it's still breathtaking each time I see it.

For this reason, Artists Space couldn't be a more (im)perfect place for the Charlotte Posenenske show, which opened on June 23rd and is up until August 15th. Posenenske, born in Germany in 1930, is

usually described as a minimalist, and though formally correct, this classification seems to obscure her larger, social concerns. The series on display here, *Series D Vierkantrohre [Square Tubes]*, executed in 1967 of galvanized steel, is the last she made before abandoning contemporary art to pursue a career in sociology.

Individually, the pieces are a plain and dull – intentionally so. But cumulatively, they are modular and imposing and futuristic. A series of publications, included in the exhibition in a glass display case, show photographs of the work in various spaces: in a beer garden, in an airplane factory, in a bank lobby. Posenenske intended the sculptures for non-art contexts, and, against the platonic perfection of Artists Space, its easy to see why. Hence the gallery bringing in three other artists throughout the summer (Ei Arakawa, Rirkrit Tiravaija, and a yet-to-be-announced third) to make the modifications demanded by Posenenske’s work and writing.

In her manifesto, published in *Art International* in May of 1968, Posenenske explains the straightforwardness of *Series D Vierkantrohre [Square Tubes]*:

“They approximate architectural dimensions and for this reason also differ increasingly from the former gallery objects. They are decreasingly recognizable as ‘artworks.’ The objects should have the objective character of industrial products. They are not intended to represent anything other than what they are.”

Seemingly readymade, these “square tubes,” were designed to Posenenske’s specifications and sold only for the cost of fabrication. By avoiding a gallery presentation and dispersing her unlimited, unsigned work for cost, Posenenske simultaneously refused and exaggerated her authority as an artist. Despite the simplicity of her forms, Posenenske’s career offers no precedent for the mass-produced, hyper-salable art of the past two-odd decades. Though her work is not at all dated, few vestiges of her artistic democracy persist today.

Posenenske is the opposite of many minimalist artists, like Sol Lewitt, whose work, though reproducible, is unique and prescribed. Perhaps Posenenske’s most notable antonym is Rita McBride, who adds value to ventilation ducts she fabricates out of copper and brass. The two seem similar steps in opposite directions: the artist who establishes an artificial price point and the artist who declares an industrial item art but refuses the increase in value that determination provides. Is artistic prerogative derived from recognition or action? From the idea or from its realization? Posenenske addresses these questions in the economics of her craft

Again, in her 1968 manifesto, Posenenske explains *Series D Vierkantrohre [Square Tubes]* as being

“components of a space, since they are like building elements, they can always be rearranged into new combinations or positions, thus, they alter the space. I leave this alteration to the consumer who thereby again and anew participates in the creation...”

To understand her causal logic (“...they can always be rearranged into new combinations or positions, thus, they alter the space...”) one must think radically and creatively about what these “new combinations and positions” might include. The permutations are infinite and potentially transgressive. This isn’t subtle rearranging she’s referring to, but rather the possibly to stacking the ducts in the window or piling them atop each other and locking the door. *Series D Vierkantrohre*

[Square Tubes] is not so much about space itself, but about how the space responds to the work once it's installed. Artists Space, sleek and with a multimillion-dollar-view, is implicated by the pieces, but isn't revealed by them. And maybe that was Posenenske's entire aim in avoiding galleries – to escape the responsibility of interpreting a setting divorced from lived experience. Posenenske's real success lies in her ability to expose, problematize, and elucidate whatever space her work occupies. She called her consumers "activists." But it's hard to be an activist on Greene Street today, and that's why Artists Space, strangely, and especially now, is such a perfect setting for this posthumous show.

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- He seemed to be doing this out of love, out of the need to tell the truth in a place where it seldom finds its way off the floor. Yep. Dread Scott was burning money in front of the Stock Exchange today. It was beautiful, confusing, and cathartic. He moved right through the green wall and took us with him, like a shepherd. Walking through the fool's fire of unfettered capitalism, he sang and burned his way into a ticket for disorderly conduct.