

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

MICHAEL ASHER, MELANIA TRUMP, MATTHEW BARNEY AND ALEX KATZ

Seen & Read – by Isabelle Graw

“Michael Asher”



“Michael Asher,” Artists Space, New York, 2024

This exhibition represents a welcome exception. For while New York’s galleries – whether in Chelsea, Tribeca, the Lower East Side, or Uptown – are all currently showing paintings that largely ignore the Conceptual Turn of the 1960s and 1970s, visitors to Artists Space are given a demonstration of the epistemological potential of Michael Asher’s situative aesthetic. The show focuses primarily on Asher’s lesser-known works, aided by a sober-seeming installation dominated by a series of vitrines and publications laid out on wide plywood plinths. I particularly want to mention Asher’s only private commission (Grinstein Collection, 1979), which he produced for a collector couple in Los Angeles. From today’s perspective, the work can be read as a blueprint for the infrastructural critique of contemporary artists such as Cameron Rowland. With the help of a lengthy and laborious legal agreement, Asher coerced the Grinsteins into moving a publicly visible section of the boundary wall of their property in such a way that it increased their neighbor’s share of the land while reducing their own. The Grinsteins thus had to accept a small and therefore largely symbolic loss of their property in order to then be rewarded with a sculptural work by Asher in return. The exhibition features a large printed photo wallpaper of the wall and its classicist columns, pictured alongside the trees of the neighboring property. Not only did Asher touch upon the sacrosanct law of ownership with this project, but he also forced an interaction between the collector couple and their neighbors, since the latter had to agree that the wall could be moved. Here, as is often the case in Rowland’s work, a critique of property is combined with an authoritarian gesture that pushes the clients to do something against their own interests. Another work by Asher (Corps de Garde, 1979), now appears almost prophetic, seemingly having paved the way for the network imperative of today: the artist placed an advertisement in a Dutch daily newspaper, offering readers the opportunity to have their own

phone number printed on a T-shirt at a market stall in Groningen. The exhibition features one of these now yellowed T-shirts, with the six-digit telephone number of its wearer printed vertically on it in Futura Bold. The notion that fashion is an expression of individuality is simultaneously taken up and counteracted in this project. For while each T-shirt is individual to its wearer, the work also implies that entering into exchange with others reduces us to a number. This is even truer in the digital economy, of course, in which our sense of our own value is determined by the number of followers we have. A work composed of eight postcards with pictures of trucks, first shown by Asher at the Kunstverein in Hamburg in 1989, is also highly topical. For the New York show, the cards have been presented in plexiglass frames, as a sort of vertical mobile. The pictured trucks are transporting toxic waste from West Germany to East Germany – the GDR received a dividend for taking on the poisonous materials. With this work, Asher shows that every transaction has a winner and a loser. The motif of the lorries carrying their toxic loads also recalls the transactions of the art world, where goods are similarly transported across the world to the detriment of the environment.

A final word goes to Asher's magnificent checkerboard work (*Checkers*, 1965/66), which adopts the aesthetic of Minimalist art in order to simultaneously take aim at it. These serial and uniformly round checkers pieces display the qualities of Minimalist objects, which are also serially produced and are often based on geometric forms. They also underline the strategic purpose of Minimalist art, which was similarly interested in fortifying its position and beating the competition (such as Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art). Here, once again, Asher borrows from a movement's formal vocabulary while simultaneously demonstrating its seamier side.

Artists Space, New York, November 22, 2024–February 8, 2025.