

## Michael Asher: Anything but Artist by Mira Dayal



Michael Asher, installation view, 2024. Photo: Carter Seddon. Courtesy Artists Space, New York, and the Michael Asher Foundation, Los Angeles

### **Over a fifty-year career, Asher became central to our understanding of ‘institutional critique’. A new retrospective at Artists Space, New York, questions the artist’s relationship to labour**

Fifty years after Michael Asher’s landmark exhibition at Claire Copley Gallery, for which he removed the back wall of the space to foreground the work of the gallerist at her desk, Artists Space has mounted a survey of the conceptualist’s work. Asher’s site-specific and durational projects, dating from the late 1960s to early 2010s and central to the canonical understanding of ‘institutional critique’, have not been recreated for this occasion. There are no removals or extensions of significant architectural features to emphasise otherwise unapparent activities; no labyrinth of drywall studs in the positions of all temporary walls previously installed in the space; no enactment of an unconventional commercial arrangement between the late artist and a presenting institution.

Instead, the items on view – many postcards, posters, plans, publications and prints – draw attention to the almost administrative and discreet aspects of Asher’s practice, as though the curators had removed a figurative wall behind his post-studio practice to show us his ‘desk’. What we find (and learn from an accompanying publication) is how Asher frequently shapeshifted into other kinds of workers: graphic designer, art handler, landscaper, advertiser, sign painter, social worker, development officer, catalogue printer, engineer... anything but *artist, maker of important objects*.

Archive photographs show that, invited to an exhibition at Occidental College in California in 1986, Asher chose to work with an existing papermaking class to produce just the paper on which the expected catalogue (also on view) would be printed. Nearby, issues of *Art in America* and *New Art Examiner* are open on the advertisements Asher designed in 1999 for Cal Arts, where he’d taught for nearly 30 years: one features a large block of running text listing the names and websites of prominent art schools, with Cal Arts merely bolded. In a smaller gallery, a boxed set and unfolded copies of maps set out Asher’s 2003 contribution to an outdoor exhibition in a rural German town: there, he obtained technical maps of local power, water and gas supply lines not visible in the landscape, asked the foundation’s staff to create a ‘key’ that located the exhibition within those networks and reproduced the documents as a publication.

Asher’s efforts deflect the expectations of the inviting art institution, curator or collector while referring us to the larger systems of advertising, infrastructure and exchange that art is entangled with. These gestures, labelled institutional critique, occasionally received pushback in their time: Asher’s 1999 catalogue of works deaccessioned between 1929 and 1998 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (a project that would still be timely if executed today) was produced for an exhibition at MoMA but printed with a last-minute disclaimer and sidelined to a rack on the end of a museum bench. But more than that push-and-pull with institutions, this survey operates as an inquiry into the artist’s work, his labour: these are tests of how far Asher could step outside of the studio, expand or exit the frame, while still participating as an artist in a given project.



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It's hard to visit this survey without thinking some version of an oft-repeated contemporary question: *what happened to institutional critique?* While the word 'critique' now appears in plenty of exhibition texts and artist statements, how artists do this (and what we say their work will do) has certainly shifted. Meanwhile the original movement has itself been institutionalised. So although Asher himself resisted that label, in revisiting his work I expected to see an enticing model or reassertion of that practice many of us seem to miss – something biting and difficult. Yet what I found was a practice that was ultimately more strange and deadpan, as evasive as it was invasive. Perhaps that was the power of Asher's version of institutional critique, and what might still push it forward today.



Postcard distributed as a component of Michael Asher's project for *Intentie en Rationele Vorm*, 1987, Vrij Genootschap Voor de Beeldende Kunst, Mol. Photo: Carter Seddon. Courtesy Artists Space, New York, and the Michael Asher Foundation, Los Angeles