



*Michael Asher, installation view. November 22, 2024 – February 8, 2025, Artists Space. Photo: Carter Seddon. Image Courtesy Artists Space, New York and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.*

Something was missing from the recent Michael Asher exhibition at Artists Space. It's a feeling all the more strange given the show's expansive wealth of material. As a survey spanning 45 years of his career, from 1965 to 2010, the galleries hosted a wide range of mediums and materials: enlarged photographs decaled on walls, a T-shirt printed with a phone number, stills from an old television broadcast, two game boards populated with minimalist, metal pieces, and a number of plinths holding maps, magazines, cast metal, and other ephemera. The exhibition also expanded beyond the physical installation through hours of newly conducted interviews with the artist's previous collaborators hosted on the Artists Space website, an expansive booklet with texts and images providing valuable descriptions of all the works, and a film screening.

This extended exhibition universe only emphasized what was not there: an aesthetic encounter with the artwork itself. This should come as no surprise to those familiar with the artist. Best known for working within conceptual art and institutional critique, Asher produced art that was context-dependent and site-specific, eschewing the production of objects in favor of investigations into the systems that subtended the circumstances of each exhibition. Little of this work still exists, and as a result, much of what sits within Artists Space is not artwork — at least not in a typical form — but carefully collected documentation that gives a sense of what occurred.



*Postcards Michael Asher made for Kunstverein Hamburg in 1989 depicting garbage trucks transporting household waste, slag, and other materials from West Germany to East Germany. D&S Ausstellung, Kunstverein in Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany, 1989. Eight postcards by Michael Asher. Michael Asher. Photo: Carter Seddon. Image Courtesy Artists Space, New York and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.*





*In 2010, for the MAK Center for Art and Architecture's large-scale urban exhibition in Los Angeles, Asher reproduced a 1959 print advertisement designed by Doyle, Dane, and Bernbach for the marketing of Volkswagen in the United States featuring the tagline: "Think small." Michael Asher, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, West Hollywood, California, USA, How Many Billboards? Art in Stead, February 8–June 30, 2010. Billboard designed by Michael Asher, located on Glendale Boulevard. Courtesy of the MAK Center / Photograph by Gerard Smulevich. Michael Asher Archive, © Michael Asher Foundation.*

Take, for instance, Asher's untitled 1979 project for the Grinstein Collection, which is represented in the gallery through an enlarged photographic wallpaper of an unremarkable garden wall, architectural plans depicting said wall, and a copy of a contract between the artist and the collectors. It's an intriguing assemblage of imagery and materials — the plans indicate that a wall was demolished and reconstructed, and the contract details a transfer of rights from the artist to the collectors — but an incomplete one that can only gesture towards the vision of the work. To fully understand what happened requires further investigation. Asher's only private commission, the project consisted of demolishing a section of the wall surrounding the Los Angeles home of well-known art collectors Stanley and Elyse Grinstein, and then rebuilding an identical wall 11 inches further in from the property line. By pushing the barrier wall inward, it essentially turned the narrow strip of land on which the original wall had once stood into a type of terra nullius, simultaneously inaccessible to both the Grinsteins (since it lay behind the new wall) and their neighbors (since they did not own that sliver of property). In order to actually carry out the construction, the Grinsteins had to interact and cooperate with their neighbors, a process that Asher felt was crucial to the work. Only with this broader context is it possible to understand the implications of the work, which, though the wall displacement no longer physically exists, remains resonant through Asher's covert ideas about community, land ownership, value, and property.





*In 1979, for collectors Elyse and Stanley Grinstein, Asher demolished and rebuilt a section of the wall marking the property line of their Brentwood home eleven inches inward, making the narrow strip of land on which the original wall had stood inaccessible to the Grinsteins and their neighbors. The work also featured redwood logs by Richard Serra and yellow stripes by Daniel Buren. Michael Asher, work for the Grinstein Collection, Los Angeles, California, USA, 1979. Viewing southeast from the Grinstein driveway toward the reconstructed wall section between the preexisting columns. Photograph by Michael Asher. Michael Asher Archive, © Michael Asher Foundation.*



*Asher's checker set, acquired by Donald Judd and on loan from the Judd Foundation. Steel checkers plated with a chrome and black-oxide finish (left) and powder-coated aluminum checkers (right) are arranged on two store-bought checker boards. Michael Asher. Installation view, November 22, 2024 – February 8, 2025, Artists Space. Photo: Carter Seddon. Image Courtesy Artists Space, New York and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.*



*A T-shirt from Asher's contribution to a 1979 project at Corps de Garde, in which he sold T-shirts from a stand at the weekly farmers' market and heat-transferred each buyer's telephone number vertically down the shirt. Michael Asher. Installation view, November 22, 2024 – February 8, 2025, Artists Space. Photo: Carter Seddon. Image Courtesy Artists Space, New York and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.*



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



Similarly, Asher's contribution to the inaugural exhibition series at the Temporary Contemporary in Los Angeles, which ran from 1983–1985, is presented via ephemera and images. As limited as these materials may be, they are tantalizing — a surprising throughline of all the works is Asher's keen eye for branding and design — and it's rewarding to take the time to explore additional sources of information and understand exactly what happened. The Temporary Contemporary claimed to be an "artist's museum," but Asher called the institution's bluff, purchasing the licensing rights to the museum's lobby and then sublicensing them back to the museum for a monthly fee. Asher rendered this arrangement visible by installing a bright orange plaque announcing "The Michael Asher Lobby" in the museum's entry hall, and placing accompanying cards at the front desk describing the project. Both a cheeky ploy and an effective way of receiving compensation — Asher went on to use some of these payments to finance the publication of his seminal book *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979* — his focus on the complex intertwining of museums, cultural spaces, and the arts with finance, patronage, and private interest is still very much a concern today that's outlasted both the museum (which became MOCA) and the work itself.

In both of these cases, the sense of lack that dominates the gallery experience is an intrinsic element of the artwork, not a detriment. It indexes a shift in the aesthetic encounter away from a model of direct experience towards one of distributed experience. The traditional, and still commonplace, expectation when viewing artworks is that an art object (whether it be a painting, installation, or video) elicits an unmediated engagement with the viewer. This is, of course, something of a fantasy — as numerous thinkers and artists (including Asher) have helped demonstrate, the very idea of direct experience hides the reality of its conditions, masking the broader institutional, cultural, historical contexts that make the artwork possible. Instead, Asher sutures the connection between art and its material instantiation, devaluing the art object so as to bring its broader frame into view and locate it as part of a specific set of relations.



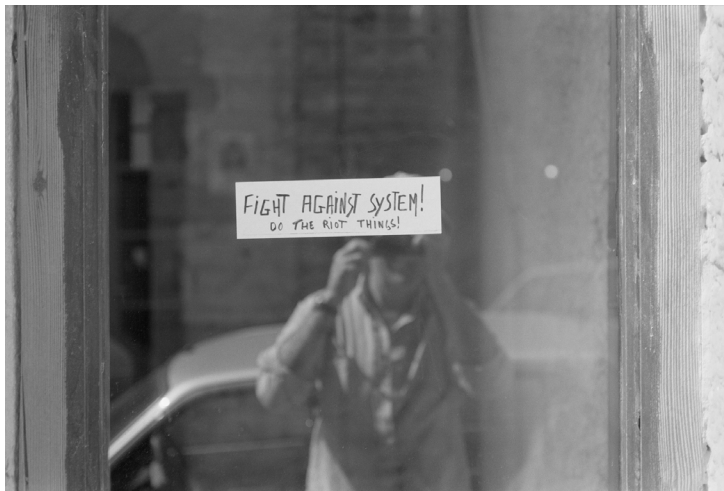
*Michael Asher, The Temporary Contemporary, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, USA, In Context, November 1983–July 1985. Sign with inscription "The Michael Asher Lobby" installed in the lobby of the museum. Photograph by Michael Asher. Michael Asher Archive, © Michael Asher Foundation.*



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It is a testament to the exhibition and its organizers that they highlight this element of Asher's thinking, but this method's limitations become difficult to surmount in such a large body of work. By devaluing the object and its encounter, art like Asher's lessens its immediate efficacy on a viewer. So, who exactly is the audience? It has less of an affective pull, and instead relies both on an individual's predisposed interest in Asher's preoccupations and on knowledge of the broader situation and context to understand its meaning. It remains rewarding and valuable, but speaks to a more insular community: the minor subset of people within and adjacent to the art world that are interested in (and likely already aware of) the history and stakes of critical, conceptual art practices like Asher's.

Thankfully, Asher also offers a way out of this predicament by refusing to choose one model of artistic experience over the other, opting instead for their combination. Many of his works that best illustrate this are, perhaps unsurprisingly, his most well-known, like his 1974 architectural renovation of Claire Copley Gallery, his 1992 HVAC reconfiguration of the Kunsthalle Bern, and his 2008 installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, in which he rebuilt the skeletons of all the temporary walls used in the previous decade of exhibitions. None of these are featured in the Artists Space survey, but the film screened on January 23rd certainly produced the same effect. Billed only as "a film by Michael Asher," little information was provided on what to expect and attendees were prohibited from taking pictures or video (though of course, rule breakers abound). Despite this dearth of description, it shouldn't be too hard to find out what happened, and just like the rest of the works in the show, the investigation's well worth the trouble.



*Research photograph taken in Lyon, France, July 1990, prior to the realization of Michael Asher's 1991 project for Le Nouveau Musée, Villeurbanne, France. Photograph by Michael Asher. Michael Asher Archive, © Michael Asher Foundation.*