

## How Do You Survey an Artist Whose Work Was Temporary and Site-Specific?

Michael Asher's heady, incisive projects are getting the retrospective treatment at Artists Space.

It's one of the best shows in New York right now.

by Andrew Russeth



Installation view of "Michael Asher" at Artists Space in New York. Photo: Carter Seddon. Image Courtesy Artists Space, New York and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

Late one night in the spring of 2010, after a burger and beers with friends at J.G. Melon on Manhattan's Upper East Side, I had an all-time-great art experience. It was around 1 a.m. and unusually hot, as I recall, when we walked the few blocks over to the Whitney. The biennial was on view, and the museum was still open. Not many people were inside, but they all seemed to be having a great time—almost immediately, we were, too. At that hour, the show felt more intense than during the day, more vivid. Bruce High Quality Foundation's haunted hearse has stuck with me, and Charles Ray's luscious ink flowers, and Piotr Uklański's astonishing wall of textiles. It was dreamy.

The artist Michael Asher, then 66, was responsible for us being there. He had asked the Whitney to stay open, nonstop, for seven days. The museum said that it could afford three days, and that was that. This was prime Asher: an incisive proposal that tests the limits of its commissioner while paying pleasurable dividends to its audience. The project is not included in the richly researched Asher survey that Artists Space is hosting in New York through Saturday, but 20 similarly fertile ones are. If you are interested in what artists can do, how they can operate in our conservative industry, it is an essential stop. It is a rousing, unexpectedly funny, and improbable show.

I never thought someone would do it. A godhead of so-called institutional critique, Asher participated in all the grand affairs (Documenta, Skulptur Projekte Münster, Venice) and staged exhibitions at august institutions. But, when he died in 2012, at 69, he left behind little of what one could classify as art, strictly speaking. His efforts were site-specific, and they endure largely through photos, books, paperwork, and other ephemera. (Out of perverse curiosity, I searched Artnet's auction database and found that only three of his works have been resold publicly for more than \$700. His record is \$33,000, for a Minimal sculpture from the late-1960s. After that, he pretty much abandoned making traditional art objects.)

Asher devoted himself to getting to the core of matters—mediums, industry norms, art's efficacy—and highlighting what tends to go unseen. (He taught for more than 30 years at CalArts; crits in his "Post Studio Art" class were known to run deep into the night.) Invited to contribute to a star-studded 1975 magazine called *Vision*, he requested that two pages be glued together, a work that would "embody and represent the material conditions of its presentation," he said. A year later, for a show in Portland, Ore., he asked a local TV station to broadcast its control room for 30 minutes. "There is nothing to take seriously, no manipulation to obey or lifestyle to be bought," he wrote.



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When Asher was approached by a venturesome Los Angeles couple to conceive something for their home, he proposed a piece that was about, and that utilized, private property. Would they be willing to move a wall at one corner of their lot 11 inches toward their house, effectively giving up ground to a neighbor? They would. (A subsequent owner destroyed that intervention.)

Artists Space's show—which was curated by its director, Jay Sanders, and Stella Cilman, its assistant curator—narrates Asher's endeavors in an illuminating (and free!) catalogue. There are also large wall murals of documentary photos and all kinds of printed matter that accompanied various projects, like a legendary publication that Asher made in 1999 for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. It lists the more than 400 paintings and sculptures that the institution had deaccessioned since its founding in 1929. You are free to peruse many of these vintage materials—a welcoming gesture.

Some of Asher's work can sound like airtight art about art (a 1973 film presents only a blank, gray image), but give it a chance. He was intent on demonstrating a sometimes-elusive fact: In art, everything is up for negotiation, everything can be questioned.



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At least that's how it should be. His projects function almost like folktales, revealing what our society values and how it operates. ("Have you heard about the time that he declined to restage one of his old works for a museum survey about conceptual art and instead offered to design advertisements for the show?")

In one of my favorite pieces, from the mid-1980s, Asher secured the right to rename the lobby of a temporary location of the Museum of Contemporary in Los Angeles after himself: the Michael Asher Lobby. In an archival photo, a sign with that designation hangs in front of wall text for an exhibition by the Land Art king Michael Heizer (who had to get his name into the museum the old-fashioned way). It turns out that I did not know the full story. Asher actually bought the licensing rights to the lobby and then leased them back to the museum for \$200 a month. Those financial shenanigans (private equity professionals, eat your heart out) make me like the work even more.

A handful of artists have followed Asher's freethinking lead. Cameron Rowland, 37 this year, plumbs institutional histories with a gimlet eye and often creates site-specific works that concern property. There is also Maria Eichhorn, two decades younger than Asher, who in 2016 shuttered the Chisenhale gallery in London and gave its team a vacation. A more fraught example: You could argue that Merlin Carpenter was channeling Asher, in 2006, when he used a \$4,000 production fee from the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia to buy luxury goods, which he subsequently displayed.



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One can wish that more artists would take the Asher approach, while understanding why they don't. It's hard enough to make a living by selling attractive paintings. Getting by in the game of institutional critique? Forget about it. (One lesson of Asher's career, a tough one, is that it is OK for ambitious artists to have a day job. It might even be a good thing.)

Strolling through Artists Space's airy, witty show, I had the sense that each exhibit offered a portal into a completely different way of making or presenting art, and just maybe, of being in the world. Homeowners can choose to cede a bit of land for good (or even abstract) reasons. Museums can choose to be open late into the night, as a respite for people who work during the day, or who just don't want the evening to end after a few rounds at the bar.

Museums can also choose to be catalysts for unexpected, enlivening collaborations. In the early 2000s, Asher asked the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to allow local students to rehang one of its galleries of 19th-century European art. Over a few months, the kids were taught about curating and the collection, and were then given free rein to place the works, so long as no art or museum patrons were at risk of harm. One group installed orange, purple, and green lights and banished a Delacroix to a stairwell. Another brought in mirrors and a John Coltrane soundtrack. They wrote, "We hope that our efforts please you and that the unorthodox presentation of the art and utilization of three-dimensional space in no way frightens you."

When was the last time that you read such a candid, satisfying curatorial statement?