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Michael Asher by Sowon Kwon

In a posthumous exhibition spanning forty-five years of the LA-based artist's work, a welcoming expanse of socially provocative interventions.



Michael Asher, installation view. Courtesy Artists Space and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation. Photo: Carter Seddon.

Modest in scale but momentous in arrival, Artists Space's current exhibition features twenty projects by the enormously influential LA-based artist and educator Michael Asher (1943–2012) via "fragments" he designed for distribution and circulation: publications, ads, postcards, signage, maps, stationery, cast multiples, and clothing, along with artifacts from radio and television. Additional programming includes audio interviews and a film screening. Organized by Jay Sanders and Stella Cilman, the show, which spans 1965 to 2010, marks the first significant presentation of Asher's work in exhibition form since his passing over twelve years ago.



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What took so long is no doubt a function of the inherent challenges in Asher's practice, which is almost entirely impermanent and characterized by subtle yet pointed, exacting, in-situ and time-specific interventions that, per AS's announcement, "reveal the many ways art can critique and make visible the often unseen social, economic, and institutional structures that underpin the subjects it addresses." Some readers may recall images from his better-known projects: of Claire Copley Gallery, for example, after the removal of a partition wall such that the contiguity of the space of business and exhibition is made plain; or a gallery dedicated to eighteenth-century European paintings and decorative arts at the Art Institute of Chicago, after Asher's relocation therein of a bronze cast of Jean Antoine Houdon's life-size statue of George Washington from the museum's exterior entrance. Rigorously consistent, Asher's work, in his words, "*disclosed the existence of mediation devices as functioning elements in their own right*," leaving little trace, resisting redos and commodification, not to mention conventions celebrating originary authorship, such as the "retrospective." The high bar, the seeming impossibility of matching Asher's interrogational methodology, and potential side-eye from a protective cognoscenti notwithstanding, this show offers an inspired and welcome perspective on Asher's production into the twenty-first century.



Michael Asher, installation view. Courtesy Artists Space and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation. Photo: Carter Seddon. Pictured, foreground: *l'art conceptuel, une perspective*, 1989–90.

Technically a posthumous, archival show, it doesn't feel so, the overall impression being open and airy, with things to be touched and handled. *l'art conceptuel, une perspective* (1989–90), a centerpiece in the main gallery consisting of seven spreads in academic art history journals in which Asher placed ads for an exhibition historicizing conceptual art (as his contribution to said exhibition), has no protective glass. Historical interpretation is a discursive proposition to be activated, the curatorial choice concurs with Asher, not for siloed gatekeeping or dusty connoisseurship.



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The exhibition design also features enlarged photographs filling half-walls that were taken during Asher's research or process, such as his recasting of iron furnaces into distributable housewares for a working-class neighborhood in Lyon, France (1991); a snowy rural German landscape, the site for which he republished a set of infrastructural maps (2003); or the temporary naming of the Michael Asher Lobby at MOCA LA-to-be (1983-85). Replacing wall text and labels is an excellent companion guide, bound as a sewn signature without a cover, which calls up provisional forms of bookmaking and echoes other allusions to a "living" archive. Its chronological format and precise, descriptive prose are likely cued by Asher's *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*, cowritten with Benjamin Buchloh. (A copy is available in the "Hand Library," among other rarities.) With the checklist, the guide sets up a nice relay between quick perusal or reading on your own time with the physical experience of the show.



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Also signifying provisionality and perhaps a scrappy ingenuity/budget are MDF platforms, nondescript except for a thin incised line around their outer perimeter, as if underscoring their "platform-ness." Such a line would have occasioned hours of parsing, artist and former Asher student Blake Rayne told a group of us. (Marathon crits in Asher's post-studio seminars are legendary [see the artist's ads for CalArts, 2000-01]. His profound commitment to pedagogy as a structure to animate social change is also evidenced in his invitation to high school students to reinstall works at LACMA [*Student Reinstallations*, 2000-01, 2002-03].) On one "pedestal," *Vision* magazine (1975) is displayed open to Asher's site-specific insertion, wherein his two allotted pages are adhered. The double-ply leaf stands almost perpendicular, between a Doug Wheeler drawing and a Bruce Nauman poem. Remnants from two projects in the form of commemorative postcards are also nearby: a set of eight featuring garbage trucks that transported waste from West to East Berlin for the Kunstverein in Hamburg (1989) (the wall came down during the run of that show), and one lesser-known, of a former textile factory in Mol, Belgium, with historically resonant signage for *Intentie en Rationele Vorm* (1987).



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Asher's T-shirt design for *Corps de Garde* (1979) proposes the telephone number, "a sign which dealt with lines of communication rather than consumerism," as a form of individuation and adornment. On loan from artist Barbara Bloom, the S or XS tee on display is charming but also made me self-conscious; a safety issue came to mind. Even if worn back to front (Asher customized the collar toward that option), who can really feel invulnerable giving out their number, however streetwise and/or flat-chested they may be? The work is, of course, of a time, before phishing, and when the aesthetics of administration more readily presumed a universal subject.



Michael Asher, installation view. Courtesy Artists Space and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation. Photo: Carter Seddon. Pictured: *Corps de Garde*, 1979

A similar point could be raised for the short, self-promotional recitation of his address for radio broadcast in *Audio by Artists* (1983). Anonymity is pressing for some more than others, I thought, but didn't lock there as I heard something else. A folksy aplomb in Asher's delivery, funny and warm, however (because?) deadpan, and I was reminded of the checkers-not-chess of things, so to speak, and of anticipating the familiar "grain" in voicemails of departed loved ones, saved and treasured because there will be no more.



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For a good while, one of Asher's "permanent" installations was in the Grinstein Collection (1979), represented here by a six-page "Memorandum of Sale." For this private commission, Asher moved a section of concrete wall eleven inches deeper into the patron couple's property, ceding a small portion of land to their neighbors. In learning of the recent sale of their storied home by the Grinstein children and subsequent demolition of the wall by developers, along with the memo as an Asher "fragment," two other pieces of art-world correspondence became constellated for me. The first, Richard Serra's 1989 letter to the *New York Times* as *Tilted Arc* faced destruction, in his view, if moved from its site at Federal Plaza; and second, a promotional email from Dia Art Foundation for Cameron Rowland's new exhibition *Properties* asserting the sobering ramifications of private property in this country as "predicated on slavery." Asher's work in this grouping, neither monumental nor overwhelming, a consideration of property and permanence in lowercase, offers me a kind of respite between things, to be able to think big and small, between the ethics of reparative justice, say, and everyday inheritances between neighbors and kin. Or between modernity, the nonautonomous art object, and situational transactions in workaday lives. His work is that bit of breathing room to be able to hold a productive tension back and forth, and not one without the other.



Michael Asher, installation view. Courtesy Artists Space and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation. Photo: Carter Seddon. Pictured, foreground: *D&S Ausstellung*, Kunstverein in Hamburg, 1989. Eight postcards.

I am especially excited for young artists on the East Coast to discover an approach and disposition that never seems *anti-* but rather asks *why?* And *what will happen if?* Within existing parameters, Asher always carried the logic of a given set of operations through to the end. Maybe not forever, as we have seen with most all things (indeed, how permanent are permanent collections in museums, and *why?* Check Asher's publication cataloguing MOMA's deaccessions in *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, 1999). But for as long as possible, for as long as warranted. This capacity strikes me as remarkable, amounting to something rare in these days of self-congratulation and willful obfuscation: Integrity. A sure and sterling compass, giving us bearings.