

FRIEZE

The Humour in Michael Asher's Institutional Critique by Marko Gluhaich



Installation view: *Michael Asher*, Artists Space, New York, 2024–25. Courtesy Artists Space, New York and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation. Photo: Carter Seddon.

Michael Asher: a comedian of the first order. His artworks – mostly discrete commissions – render their prompts ridiculous and expose their underlying ironies. They obviate post hoc commodification, eschewing authorship in their final presentation. Take his contribution to the September 1975 issue of *Vision* – on view in Asher's current survey at Artists Space, New York – which invited artists to 'show whatever they wanted to represent themselves'. Asher responded by asking that his name be included in the table of contents and that his allocated 'two facing pages' be glued together. The result: 'one leaf that differed in weight and thickness from all the other leaves in the magazine' (Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 1983). I noticed someone flipping through the issue on display, looking for the art; I smiled, in on the joke.



'Michael Asher', 2024–5, exhibition view. Courtesy: Artists Space, New York and the Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation; photograph: Carter Seddon

Organizing an exhibition of work by an artist whose practice revolved around architectural interventions, ephemeral objects and site-specificity is a fool's errand. Yet, thanks to more than 100 individuals involved in its planning, this show achieves an approximation of a survey. Key to its success is a booklet containing the only exhibition texts about each project on display. These evince how the organizers engaged with Asher's foundation – established following the artist's death in 2012 – attempting to exhibit his works with integrity and to re-enact some of their playful operations.

The decontextualized presentations are among the show's bigger successes, evoking the deauthored nature of many of his projects. A display of magazines – opened to advertisements for two group shows including Asher – appear here as ephemera. In 1989, when invited to remake a site-specific work for 'l'art conceptuel, une perspective' (Conceptual Art, A Perspective) at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Asher accepted the invitation but refused the terms, instead proposing that his contribution be unauthored advertisements placed in seven academic art journals. The result was a gestural critique of the contradictory nature of an exhibition whose institutional reinforcement of a historical movement ran counter to that movement's own critical and transitory ethos.



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While the presentation at Artists Space re-creates Asher's original intention in terms of critiquing modernist notions of institutional display and the centrality of artist as author, it highlights an impossible-to-avoid – and ironic – contradiction: the near-preciousness with which the ephemeral and uncommodifiable aspects of Asher's oeuvre are displayed. A 1985 commission by the Stuart Collection in La Jolla, California, led Asher to redesign their stationary, billing them for his time and the cost of materials. The work is an example of Asher's 'service' payment strategy, which, as Andrea Fraser noted in *Artforum* in 2008, acknowledges 'a form of labour that does not fix itself in a vendible commodity and can't be subject to further exchange'. Although not claimed by Asher as artwork, the papers and business cards displayed here on pedestals undermine the charge that directed Asher's resistance to the idea of artist as producer of commodities. A curious failure on the part of the organizers: would I rather that they provided a free pile of Stuart Collection letterhead?



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While such works could suggest a cynicism on Asher's part, this exhibition instead promotes a vision of a radically optimistic artist. Asher taught at the California Institute of the Arts from 1973 until 2008. In 2000, for the group exhibition 'Made in California: NOW' at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Asher collaborated with local high school students to reinstall a gallery of the museum's permanent collection. Their free rein filled the space with music, coloured lighting and presentations in the round. Here, I see a photo of a smiling Asher with these students, his gaze suggesting an affable teacher or a cunning farceur – I think both.