

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

“On Being an Exhibition”

ARTISTS SPACE

“On Being an Exhibition” took artist Michael Asher’s formulation of situational aesthetics as its point of departure. In focusing on the contribution made by contextual circumstances to the meaning of an artwork, Asher helped to establish institutional critique as a recognized artistic and curatorial strategy. “On Being an Exhibition,” which included work by artists including Laurel Woodcock, BGL, Isola and Norzi Conrad Bakker, and Valerie Hegarty, featured a number of objects that pointed to the gallery itself as ultimate referent but was arguably an oversimplification or dilution of Asher’s ideas, given that his original ambition was to dismantle the entire complex infrastructure of reception. The show positioned objects as props in a narrative *about a show* rather than as pointers toward an examination of exhibition *practices* themselves. Unfortunately, it also failed even to pay sufficient attention to how those objects might operate in and of themselves.

The thrust of “On Being” thus came from the reification of a curatorial idea, and the result reflected a present tendency to privilege curator (in this case Joseph del Pesco) over artist in the hope of introducing historical and theoretical material more effectively. The only work in the show to respond intelligently to institutional critique’s original agenda was Valerie Hegarty’s *Cracked Canyon (Poster)*, 2007, a poster of Yellowstone Park’s famous crack in the earth that is “site specific” in that it is pasted over a cracked wall in the gallery, recalling Robert Smithson’s statement that “if you look at a crack in the wall long enough, it looks like the Grand Canyon.” Hegarty’s work may, ultimately, struggle to mark the institution critically or ideologically, but it at least touches on the fact that the gallery is as naturalized as the landscape sublime, and as spectacular.

The literature accompanying “On Being” offers quotations from numerous groundbreaking artists, writers, critics, philosophers, and producers of culture, from Louise Lawler to Mario Merz, Paul Virilio

REVIEWS



Valerie Hegarty, *Cracked Canyon (Poster)*, 2007, poster, paper, paste, and paint, 12 x 12'. From “On Being an Exhibition.”

to Henri Lefebvre (and The Pet Shop Boys), but the works themselves were strewn across the floor in a surprisingly conventional manner—with a few exceptions. The collective BGL’s wooden *Elevator*, 2007, for example, is a same-size model of the actual elevator that opened onto the second-floor gallery, presenting viewers with a disorienting mirror image. But the work’s mimicry is literal; it neither mimics nor mourns the gallery in any critically effective way. Collaborative duo Isola and Norzi’s *Mama*, 2006, is more successful, fusing elements of feminist-aligned projects like Mierle Ukele’s examination of “woman’s work” with a picking apart of a behind-the-scenes task that references a broader notion of “maintenance.” In Isola and Norzi’s sculpture, a wooden shelf acts as the display device for a set of small figurines of mothers carved from the handles of a set of brooms that penetrate it.

Institutional critique is, by now, a historical category, but its component of aesthetic self-reflexivity—something established earlier still—retains a political potential insofar as it extends to a consideration of power relations that remain in place. With this in mind, it would have been interesting to see this show juxtaposed with a reconstruction of Marcel Broodthaers’s *Musée*, 1968–72, or even with a work of Asher’s own.

—Jaleh Mansoor