

## UVC - ASSIGNMENT 4

# Michael Asher (1974) Claire Copley Gallery: A Paradox of Difference in Institution of Art

*Figure 1: Appropriated collage of Claire Copley Gallery (2017) (Schaffeld, 2017)*

### Assignment Task:

*Given the nature of difference-in-itself, or what we have referred to as theoretical difference, it would be an error to say that it appears in some works and not others. It would also be an error to think that difference was the only thing a work had to offer. However, with some caution and a little licence, we can show that some works invite a differential interpretation more than others. Such works will generally have a double aspect like the 'duck-rabbit' and other picture puzzles though this won't always be visual, it may be conceptual. Allegories and simulacra are also suggestive of difference.*

*Choose one of the works below and explore its possible interpretations in terms of difference. Think carefully about its potential and research the work before you begin.*

**Table of Contents**

**INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX OF DIFFERENCE.....3**

**DIFFERENCE IN PERCEPTION AS WORK OF ART .....4**

**DIFFERENCE IN ITSELF.....6**

**DIFFERENCE IN DISCOURSE .....8**

**CONCLUSION .....10**

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....11**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY.....11**

  

FIGURE 1: APPROPRIATED COLLAGE OF CLAIRE COPLEY GALLERY (2017) (SCHAFFELD, 2017)...1

FIGURE 2: WEST WALL (1967) (ANASTASI, 1967).....6

## **Introduction: The paradox of Difference**

“The creation of a concept always occurs as the function of a problem”  
- Deleuze (Smith, 2012:4)

The post-Modernist art world was characterised by an expansive discourse and self-consciousness to overcome a self-referential notion of art as a mystified object and to deconstruct a social universe of underlying belief structures in a historical and social context.

The 1960s marked an important secession in a world facing wars and revolts alongside an increasing interest in Marxists, post-structuralism and deconstructive thoughts. New forms of art conceptions challenged authorities and power structures. The necessity to make a difference in kind marked an attitude of radical resistance and contradictory opposition.

On this background, the gallery was a major concern as a representative of a capitalist system. Instead of opposing the art institution, Michael Asher developed differentiating spatial 'sculptures' and took the literal space of the gallery into account for an epistemological transformation.

This essay will show how Asher's work for the Claire Copley Gallery in 1974 can be interpreted in different ways. Either as an opposition to representational Modernist tradition, as critique for underlying institutional support structures, or as new identity forming consciousness. In fact, his work delivers a spatial experience of difference in itself leading towards an interpretation of institution of art as an integrated, non-opposing entity with the artist as free creator.

## **Difference in perception as work of art**

“Things no longer “simulate” anything, but rather “actualize” immanent Ideas that are themselves real, though virtual”  
– Deleuze, 1993 (Smith, 2012:26)

Entering the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles in 1974 would have been certainly a visual and phenomenological experience of difference. One would be stirred by the difference through its emptiness and openness of space (see Figure 1). The removal of the partition wall in a commercial gallery made the exhibition space an integrated space together with the normally hidden office area, quite different to what gallery goers would expect<sup>1</sup>. One could even ask ‘Where are the artworks?’, wandering around and reacting with irritating ‘affective responses’ as Pentomic described the difference in perception of this gallery (Peltomäki, 2007:38).

The viewer is placed inside the space, a spatial framework as artwork and with a different phenomenological experience. Somehow different to the aesthetic space of Minimal Art that act as a support frame for a Gestalt perception<sup>2</sup> of an object. And quite different to the ‘religious sanctuaries’ of traditional galleries (O’Doherty, 1999:10) with a spectator gazing from a distant observation point at the art objects on display in a mystifying space, estranged from society (O’Doherty, 1999:80). Through a sensual immanent psychological experience the viewer becomes aware of themselves as viewers. Alongside a similar awareness of acting by the gallery staff in the background, a social relationship is established<sup>3</sup>. Firstly, the spectator is the viewer and secondly, the one being observed and objectified, surveyed by the gallery staff as well as through the street front window by pedestrians<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Asher described his intention of the work as a proposal of ‘dismantling of the partition wall for the duration of the exhibition. The idea was to integrate the two areas, so that the office area and its activities could be viewed from the exhibition area, and the exhibition area opened to the gallery directors’ view.’ (Asher, 1983: 95)

<sup>2</sup> Asher’s work 1973 for the Toselli Gallery in Milano, Italy is showing more strongly the difference between his conceptual work and Minimalism (Asher, 1983: 92), the latter in which the artwork is not seen as an isolated object but as part of the ambient space.

<sup>3</sup> The opening of an interior space to act as an integrating social framework is similar to open-floor spaces in offices and open kitchen-living room designs at homes that nowadays seem so normal.

<sup>4</sup> Asher made sure that ‘a sign over the storefront window identified the gallery by name and served to frame the gallery’s operation for passersby.’ (Asher, 1983: 95)

In contrast to traditional galleries, the open space resembles a stage<sup>5</sup> that places the participant into a self-conscious, social and cultural relation with the institution as content, a visually experienced relationship of framing ‘reality in the context of art’<sup>6</sup>, as Rorimer described Asher’s contextual work of inverting perspectives (Rorimer, 2004:6). In view of this, the experience of space and architectural material structures of the gallery does destroy the illusion of simulated appearance and representations of institutional structures. One can see this as a demonstration of Deleuze’s conception of ‘differentiation’ as actualization of Asher’s idea through literally removing all ‘hindering obstacles’ (Rorimer, 2004:7).

What remains, besides the social relationships, are the white painted walls that keep the conception of a cultural institution. The white surface with its materiality intensifies the ‘psychologically generated response to the work’ (Peltomäki, 2007:47). A surface that either can act as an activating agent<sup>7</sup>. Or in contrast, a signifier of cultural commodification and emblem of modernist art institutions, the ‘White Cube’<sup>8</sup>.

In summary, Asher’s site-specific work as ‘the locus of authentic experience and a coherent sense of historical and personal identity’ (Kwon, 2013:47 - 48) relies on the immanent viewer’s psychological experience to ‘connect the sensory with the social sphere’ (Peltomäki, 2010:33) of the specific gallery space. Through the appropriation of space by removal of the partition wall, a mystifying estrangement is subverted, re-positioned and transformed. How site-specificity can be considered as difference in itself and how the transformation connects the present with history will be looked at next.

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<sup>5</sup> A notion similar to Minimal Sculpture that was criticized 1967 by Michael Fried as literal art and his expression that ‘theater and theatricality are at war today... with art as such’, (Fried, 1998)

<sup>6</sup> It could be noted here that the multisensory experience unfolds spaces as context in legacy of Minimal Art but also relates to Asher’s earlier works *Spaces* (1969) and *Pomona College* (1970) (Peltomäki, 2010: 28 - 38)

<sup>7</sup> Examples of the ‘white wall’ as activation agent can be seen in the works by the modernist abstract painters Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland (O’Doherty, 1999: 28 - 30). An example for the emblematic conception of the ‘White Cube’ was expressed 1958 by Yves Klein in his work *The Void* in the Iris Cert Gallery (Klein, 2007)

<sup>8</sup> The appearance of the ‘White Cube’ as emblem for Modernist galleries to display artworks different compared to earlier historical hangings is further explored by Cain (Cain, 2017).

## Difference in itself

"Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image."  
- Jean-Luc Godard, 1970 -

The artist's gesture as an interpretative act is removed from Asher's work. The ground gives rise to revised and inverted perspectives crossing boundaries between outside and inside. Traditional frameworks of representation are reversed, the gallery as space and institution is in itself presented.

The removal of discernible 'art'-objects opens a ground of architectural structures that turn the viewing subject into a picture-object. A 'spectatorial agency' of the subject positioned in space creates an uncomfortable experience with 'destabilizing complexity' (Peltomäki, 2010:39). Peltomäki argued that the continuity of surfaces and space destabilizes and disintegrates the phenomenological certainty (Peltomäki, 2010:46).

The white gallery wall as signifier relates to the emblem of the 'White Cube'. The gallery wall as an object in itself was e.g. objectified by William Anastasi (1967) *West Wall* (see Figure 2). Through a representation of the gallery surface by a screen-painted artwork and presentation through placement on that same wall, give way for other interpretations of 'ready-made mural' (O'Doherty, 1999:34). Asher extended the 'ready-made' object as an artistic affirmation in the sense of the white wall as undifferentiated ground and difference in itself<sup>9</sup>

Figure 2: *West Wall* (1967) (Anastasi, 1967).

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<sup>9</sup> In the work for the *Toselli gallery* (1973), Asher took a different viewpoint and appropriated the gallery wall by removal of all white paint and revealing the historical architectural structures of the gallery and thus relating this to the institutional history.

Deleuze considered the ‘difference not as negation but as an unrecognized and unrecognizable difference, a difference affirmative in itself.’ (Deleuze, 2017:135 - 136). The wall not merely as a referent but as the base of possibilities.

The choice between opposing cultural contradictions in the 1970s between ‘radical resistance and symbolic revolution’ (Fraser, 2005) or co-opting with institutions placed the artist in a master/ slave dialectic. Asher recognized the system through his different proposal of affirmation and appropriation and a self-conscious act of seeing<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore, Asher’s work can be seen as a work of difference in itself, acting through a self-reflective process as an epistemological transformation beyond traditional signification of institutions by asking what the viewer ‘already knew about art museums and about appropriate forms of conduct within shared spheres’ (Peltomäki, 2010:50).

The next chapter will look at discourse at large and how the contradiction of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic could be resolved.

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<sup>10</sup> It would be worth to mention other works e.g. Piet Mondrian (1926/1970) *Salon de Madame B. à Dresden* (removal of objects from the work in order to undifferentiated the wall from the work) or Daniel Buren (1968) *Gallery Apollinaire*, Milano (closing the gallery entry with his iconic stripes ‘banner’) that relate to a critique of the conventional function of the gallery for exhibition and presentation (Asher, 1983: 96), (O’Doherty, 1999: 84, 94).

## Difference in discourse

“Western culture depends on binary opposition and these are hierarchical”  
– Derrida, 1967 (Belsey, 2002:75)

“a continually renewed struggle over the definition of cultural meaning, ... the development of new strategies to counteract and develop resistance against the tendency of ideological apparatus of the cultural industry to occupy and to control all practices and all spaces of representation.”  
- Benjamin Buchloh, 1984 (Cottingham, 2005:23)

As discussed earlier, the conditions of art were conceived as contradictions between opposites and hierarchy as Derrida described. According to artists critiques e.g. Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke cultural reception of art was mediated through institutional space. The role of museums and galleries were conceived by their ‘aesthetic, economic and mystical role’ (Buren, 2011:102) and as representatives of ideology and power (Haacke, 2011:165). In other words, the role of the artist as master of creation<sup>11</sup> was contradicted by its subordinate role as ‘slave’ of institutional power structures, and constantly resisting, as Buchloh described the role of the avant-garde.

Instead of criticizing the institution from this marginalized outside perspective, Asher engaged ‘with the institutional ... mechanisms which position and define cultural production’ (Fraser, 2011:300). His work can be interpreted as a visual and affective disclosure of apparently ‘naturalized’ structures by placing the audience inside the cultural spatial structures. Through a deconstruction of the material base by removing the partition wall, Asher reframed underlying beliefs and exposed the gallery commercial operations behind the scenes. Additionally as potential and through the temporality of the work it acted as a ‘model for its own economic reproduction.’ (Asher, 1983:100).

Asher’s intention was realized through instructions<sup>12</sup> as appropriation of the cultural space of the gallery and as such also ‘engender that reproduction for itself’ (Asher, 1983:100). A notion that tends towards mutual recognition.

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<sup>11</sup> Barnett Newman expressed this notion in his essay ‘The first man was an artist’ as the ‘poetic gesture’ unmediated by discourse and social representations (Newman, 2003)

<sup>12</sup> Interesting aspect in understanding Asher as an artist of his time is his post-exhibition reflection on his work for the *Heiner Friedrich Gallery* (1973) where he instructed a full restoration of the gallery to the pre-exhibition display standards that were not followed completely by the gallery as lamented a ‘insolvable conflict between the artist’s intentions and the entrepreneur’s interests’. His viewpoint was that it ‘lends to being

Mutual recognition obtained through a double self-consciousness, awareness of one self-in itself and the other that overthrows the struggle of negation and subordination of the slave (Williams, 2001). This is Hegel's conception of the master/slave dialectic of contradictory opposites<sup>13</sup>. One can relate this to above artist-institution opposites and conclude with Hass' words with respect to the artist's role that 'losing oneself in order to find oneself. Negation is becoming. This is the artist's true calling'. (Hass, 2011:387). Fraser argued that Asher showed a wider context of institution, one that is being 'internalized and embodied in people ... in the conceptual models ..., and modes of perception' (Fraser, 2005). Additionally, Asher's epistemological model can be related to Pierre Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* (1992), the 'social made body' as the 'the pre-occupied, active presence in the world through which the world imposes its presence' and 'frees us from its own conditions of production' (Melançon, 2014).

In the final analysis of difference in Asher's work, it brought us back to the beginning with a spatial perceptual experience of the Claire Copley gallery. Through his work the representational structures are being presented, providing an epistemological transformation in understanding art institution in a wider context as an institution of art. Fraser described the institution as 'the irreducible condition of its existence as art' (Fraser, 2005). By walking inside, one obtains embodied information about the structural layers of the gallery as participant in the institution of art.

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manipulated' and the work could be 'perceived as anything ... but only if the artist were to define it as such'. (Asher, 1983: 84)

<sup>13</sup> Opposition is one the four aspects of Aristotle's conception of representation and leading towards a 'transcendental illusion of representation' through its 'subordination by the negative and resemblance' as Deleuze criticized representation as such (Deleuze, 2017: 349 - 353) (pp. 349-53)

## Conclusion

“Desire is itself power, a power to become and produce images.”  
– Gilles Deleuze (Colebrook, 2002:94)

Asher's conception of the gallery as an 'essential context for cultural reception' (Asher, 1983:100) opposes the traditional notion of the 'White Cube' as signifier for the 'estrangement of the artist from the society' (O'Doherty, 1999:80). This contradiction of a self-conscious struggle of the artist in context of conceptual art and critique of art institutions places the artist into a marginalized and Hegelian slave position.

This essay has shown how different interpretations of Asher's work for the Claire Copley Gallery can make this contradiction an act of perceptual and affective experience. Through the opening of the architectural space, interactive social relations between participants are visible and through its mediation enables a revised reception of the role of the artist, the audience and the institution.

Asher's work placed the spectator literally inside an integrated gallery space and metaphorically inside a cultural space of production, exhibition, distribution and consumption. Through the difference of seeing from inside rather than from outside an understanding of art as 'institution' is performed.

This essay concluded with Asher's own notion of an epistemological transformation and overcoming of the master/slave contradiction. The transformative experience can be related to Bourdieu's conception of habitus with the participants as internalized 'social bodies'.

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