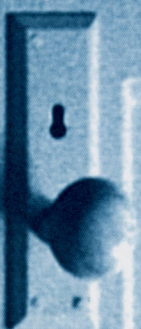


February 12 - March 31, 1993



Living Room



M.W. Burns
 Laurel Fredrickson
 Jo Hormuth
 Wendy Jacob
 David Schafer

Living Room is an exhibition of work by artists that anthropomorphizes the architecture of the gallery space and engages the viewer by establishing a corporeal relationship. As such, it is something of a cross between minimalist aesthetics and the disturbed fantasies of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In each of the five installations, anthropomorphization occurs, at least partially, by establishing a physical or corporeal relationship with the viewer of the work of art. The senses — sight, hearing, touch, and especially kinesthesia are engaged upon encountering this work. Kinesthesia is "the sensation of bodily position, presence, or movement resulting chiefly from stimulation of sensory nerve endings in muscles, tendons, and joints."² Much of the sculpture produced during the 1960s and early '70s movement called minimalism specifically targeted this aspect of human sensation. Sculptural objects were simplified and reduced in order to establish a "presence." Relationships between the object and the site and between the object and the viewer became of primary importance in experiencing the minimalist object. The importance of these relationships was criticized by Michael Fried in his seminal article "Art and Objecthood." Fried thought that this particular emphasis in the relationship between the object of art and its viewer relegated minimalist, or as he says — "literalist" sculpture to the category of theatre. And for Fried, theatre

This paper looks at me as if I had! There is a recurrent broken neck and two bulbous noses. I am positively angry with the expression. Up and down and down and up. Unblinking eyes are everywhere. The breaths didn't match, and the head was one a little higher than the body. The expression in an inanimate thing is a kind of expression they have! I am more entertainment and more of a nature than most children. I used to feel that what a kindly wink the king had, and there was one friend. I used to feel that I was a fierce I could always hope

- Charlotte Perkins Gilman

was the antithesis of modernism. He says, "Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. (Robert) Morris makes this explicit. Whereas in previous art "what is to be had from the work is located strictly within (it)," the experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation*—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*. "The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same

s if it *knew* what a vicious influence it
spot where the pattern lolls like a bro-
as eyes stare at you upside down. I get
the impertinence of it and the everlasting-
sideways they crawl, and those absurd,
ywhere. There is one place where two
d the eyes go all up and down the line,
the other. I never saw so much expres-
g before, and we all know how much
used to lie awake as a child and get
terror out of blank walls and plain fur-
n could find in a toy store. I remember
knobs of our big, old bureau used to
chair that always seemed like a strong
t if any of the other things looked too
o into that chair and be safe. ¹

Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context." ³ The artists in *Living Room* not only embrace this literalist aesthetic, they *extend* it by making the relationships with the viewer and the room *more* important than the object and by *personalizing* those relationships.

In *Model for Wild Harmony*, David Schafer invites the viewer into his work via a small ladder that leads to a platform. Once on this platform, the gallery visitor is very close to the ceiling and can see a round con-

cave mirror (the sort used in convenience stores for surveillance). It is unclear whether the goal of the climbing exercise is to see the mirror, the words that are etched into its surface, or, if positioned correctly, the painting of a squirrel that is reflected in the mirror. By setting a gymnastic course, the traditional relationship between a viewer and a work of art is skewed to the point of absurdity. Schafer manipulates his viewer into a position of vulnerability in which expectations, especially expectations about how art should look, are pointedly challenged. The image of a Hallmark-variety squirrel poised as the target of this elaborate viewing mechanism poses a humorous, though somewhat

sarcastic, question regarding popular aesthetics. The words "ding dong" etched into the mirror's surface further confuse the senses. We read what should be heard — a doorbell, which references the relationship between indoors and outdoors, or, the threshold.

Jo Hormuth's installation appears initially as a smaller white cube within the white

tral frosting of the glass. A symmetrical, mirror image of Fredrickson's furniture arrangement exists on the other side of the gallery wall, suggesting both the stability and instability of the mirror image. As in other Living Room pieces, the viewer's preconceptions about what might be seen are not met, and, in Fredrickson's piece, they are denied. Sitting at the table

Through an acquaintance I was told about born with six toes on Apparently by the ti

expanse of the Betty Rymer Gallery. When inside the brightly lit cube, one is surrounded by a crowd of staring eyes. In this piece Hormuth raises both formal and emotional issues. The "white cube," according to critic Brian O'Doherty, is the gallery space.⁴ Hormuth activates the space by causing the walls to return the viewer's stare, thereby questioning the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Hormuth also creates a highly emotional situation in which one becomes overwhelmingly conscious of enclosure. Scientists have studied the amount of space that animals and humans require before they begin to feel stress. They have also studied the distance that is required between animals or humans and have found that this distance varies according to species and culture. There is however, a specific distance that is considered "safe" and once crossed, humans and animals will either flee or attack. Hormuth highlights this internal distancing mechanism by creating a situation which challenges it.

Most often a room is experienced kinesthetically through its furniture. Laurel Fredrickson's *Shared Views* uses tables and chairs to heighten the viewer's kinesthetic sense. Invited to sit at Fredrickson's table, the viewer experiences a perceptual distortion when looking down the length of the table at a mirror positioned above and opposite. Although one would expect to see oneself in this mirror, the reflection is obscured by a cen-

encourages introspection — confused self-reflection and lack of identity come to mind when looking into the non-existent mirror image. *Shared Views* also suggests social interaction — the possibility of others at the table as well as the possibility of another at the table beyond the wall. But the social interactions invoked are awkward social situations in which communication is unclear and narcissism thwarts interaction. Consideration of the mirror is important to understanding this piece. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan proposed the mirror stage as a crucial aspect of child development. "Lacan's account of subjectivity was always developed with reference to the idea of fiction. Thus, in the 1930s he introduced the concept of the 'mirror-stage' (Ecrits, (1936)), which took the child's mirror image as the model and basis for its future identifications. This image is a fiction because it conceals, or freezes, the infant's lack of motor coordination and the fragmentation of its drives. But it is salutary for the child, since it gives it the first sense of a coherent identity in which it can recognize itself. For Lacan, however, this is already a fantasy—the very image which places the child divides its identity into two."⁵

1 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1973), p. 16.

2 *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Second College Edition. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), p. 702.

3 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968), p. 125.

4 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1976)

Like Fredrickson's piece, *Sphinx/ "PORES"* by M.W. Burns addresses issues of symmetry and asymmetry as related to the body. The gallery walls seem to speak as visitors listen to a recorded story about a woman who is born with six toes. The narrator tells this story in a halting, repetitive fashion that suggests uncertainty — he in fact, introduces

via our senses, then our identity is questioned. The viewer becomes the sphinx, an enigmatic being.

Perhaps the ultimate anthropomorphization is to endow an inanimate object with breath. Wendy Jacob conflates the ventilation system of the gallery with the body's respiratory system in her piece. By altering the ductwork, Jacob reveals to viewers a part of the building that is normally intended to be invisible. Ducts, in both buildings and bodies, are

this woman who was

on her right foot—six toes on her right foot.

When this woman was thirteen, her extra toe,

while not presenting any physical pain, had

The issue, no doubt, was one of symmetry

- M.W. Burns, *Sphinx/ "PORES"*

the story by saying that it was told to him by a friend, implying that he cannot verify its truth. Listening, we begin to question the veracity of this information and to consider distortions caused by the telling and retelling, as well as the limitations and possibilities of fiction. In the story (true or not) a woman reconstructs herself medically, initially to correct the defect of a sixth toe. Each surgery generates another condition and cure, suggesting that identity is constructed outside of oneself. By exploring different aural relationships within the space (both symmetrical and asymmetrical), Burns causes the viewer to consider how one hears and the relationships between hearing and space. We question not only the information that is presented but the location of its source and inevitably, our own senses. If we construct our identity through information received

points of entrance and therefore, vulnerability. Because breath is equated with life, Jacob's piece causes viewers to question their very existence and to reconsider systems that support life. To literally endow a building with life by giving it breath is to reveal its function of protection and to highlight the history of architecture in which the human body has served as the determining design element.

It is ironic that the work in Living Room conceptually returns to the heroic notion of the artist as giver-of-life. Much postmodern art and theory has attempted to undermine this long-held, romantic idea of the artist as creator. The postmodern appropriationists and conceptualists denied this attitude but escalated a sense of detachment and separation from the viewer. Rather than re-inventing omnipotence, the artists in Living Room have re-

5 Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction II" in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), p. 30.

6 Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, (Anchor Books, Doubleday: New York, 1966), p. 66.

embraced some of the tactics of earlier work in order to create a connection with the viewer; there is a strong desire to touch, to interact and relate to the viewer physically and emotionally. Viewers are asked to listen where they normally would not, to look at images on the gallery walls from places they normally would not, to see and touch where they normally would not. The viewer is not only uncomfortable because the acceptable viewing situation has been altered, he or she becomes more and more conscious of his or her own body and the senses that have unexpectedly been called into action. Rather than an intellectual aesthetic experience which is physically passive, the viewer is called upon to experience kinesthetically and to bring his or her body, in all of its

and become an issue.

corporeality, into the experience of consumption. The body, in fact, becomes an integral component of the work. These artists want to touch their audience, to create a relationship, to become engaged. As the anthropologist Edward T. Hall says, "A keystone in the arch of human understanding is the recognition that man at certain critical points synthesizes experience. Another way of stating this is that man learns while he sees and what he learns influences what he sees. This makes for great adaptability in man and enables him to exploit past experience. ... As he moves through space, man depends on the messages received from his body to stabilize his visual world. Without such body feedback, a great many people lose contact with reality and hallucinate." ⁶