



## Baltimore "BodySpace"

Baltimore Museum of Art

In tandem with a revived interest in participatory art, "BodySpace" expanded the scope of conventional viewer interaction with works by Robert Gober, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sowon Kwon, Claudio Matzko, Josiah McElheny, Ernesto Neto, Cady Noland, David Schafer, and Do-Ho Suh. Combining an astute analysis of Minimalism and phenomenological theory, curator Helen Molesworth explored how these artists endow everyday objects with meaning and how they further the interplay between art object and viewer.

At first glance, the works seemed to offer a disorienting number of approaches to the relationship between public/private, body/intellect, permanent/ephemeral, and design/high art. A few pieces appealed to the flesh-and-blood body and could be touched. Others spoke to the internalized body or mind alone. Yet the role of memory as it affects our response to objects and the amorphous nature of boundaries offered underlying currents. Moreover, a thoughtful installation created a physical and mental path linking the works into an ongoing dialogue with each other.

Kwon's *Jennifer's Convertible*, a 12-by-11-foot digitally manipulated photograph of two upright white leather sofas printed on a vinyl wall box, definitely overturned expectations. Beyond its size, it offered little visual stimulation and came off as a dehumanized mind game. More engaging was *Molding (Smoke Stain Rose)*, effectively placed as a portal between two galleries. Its serialization of a nipple and its morphing into a common architectural motif cleverly commented on the relationship of architecture and design to the body. In particular, its above-eye-level height raised the issues of unattainable desire and commodification of something as personal as a body part. The choice of a subtle pink that was both fleshy and cold further complicated the work's aura.

The most satisfying works achieved an idiosyncratic harmony or balance between body and mind. Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled*

(*Water*), a sparkling curtain of blue, white, and silver beads, was such an experience. The work humanized mass-produced materials and the grid composition so integral to the Minimalist idiom. Viewers' hands triggered rustling ripples as they passed through the curtain, enacting the notion of "giving way" to private pleasure in a public space.

Neto's womb-like *Sister Naves* (Portuguese for "vessels") formed the centerpiece of the show. This fantastic, stretchy diorama of Lycra, Styrofoam, sand, and gloves transferred the notion of private desire into a playful, public arena. Viewers could journey inside this creamy, translucent "fun-house" and explore its sounds and smells. As they carefully made their way and avoided puncturing the netting, others, awaiting a turn, could "spy" on their antics. The sewing and crocheting drew attention to the fragile nature and labor-intensive cost of Neto's visionary approach, and possibly by extension, to the harsh economics of his native Brazil.

Molesworth's selection of artists included some welcome surprises such as Matzko, Noland, and Schafer. Bearing the imprints of Matzko's hands, *Salt Walt* dealt with the invisible presence of the artist as agent, while transforming the Minimalist white grid into organic tiling. By the end of the show, the work had turned orange in areas from changes in temperature and humidity.

Noland's untitled work on aluminum cleverly elaborated on notions of filtering and boundaries, exploring violence and the loss of privacy associated with fame through the Patty Hearst story. In true Minimalist fashion, she underscored the objecthood of the artwork and its dehumanizing theme by placing the panel on its side and against the wall. As a further complication, she silk-screened text and mass-media images in four directions, forcing the viewer to bend down and turn. Viewers' own murky reflections in the panel heightened the sense of engagement, as they confronted the distorting function of memory and the public appetite for tabloid journalism.

Confounding language, design, and high art, Schafer wittily exposed the rules governing public space. *Stepped Density I and II* and *Decor Number One* featured a slick, bright turquoise. Like an unintelligible billboard, the subject of the latter's overlapping text in bold type satirized public space, while his quirky sculptures both exuded L.A. chic and critiqued it. Clearly inorganic yet suggesting sci-fi mushroom colonies, the two sets of stools distort ergonomics by hybridizing the standard height of a bar stool and outdoor seating. As inviting as they were, the seats could not be touched, let alone used. Equally clever was the title's play on words: "step density" refers to the amount of housing a land unit can support.

McElheny's *Untitled (White)*, a grouping of white blown glassware on white shelving came off as too antiseptic, too "don't touch," especially since the objects are meant to be handled in a domestic setting. McElheny re-contextualizes apparently mass-produced, domestic items onto a pure, see-through grid, recalling some of Sol LeWitt's sculpture. The resulting fictive narratives would feel at home in a fancy window boutique. It is ironic that many so-called craft artists struggle for recognition as artists, while McElheny is immediately accepted as an artist by stealthily appropriating aspects of craft.

At times cerebral to the point of taking itself too seriously or deadpan to the point of lacking humor, this multi-faceted exhibition had something for everyone. Even the restrained palette softened some of the more powerful juxtapositions. Molesworth succeeded in exposing the rich legacy of Minimalism by highlighting its divergent reinterpretations. By focusing on the crossing and blurring of boundaries and the dual nature of the body, she also stretched the rules of engagement in a museum context. Viewers responded to the mental and physical athletics the exhibition demanded with smiles on their faces.

—Sarah Tanguy

COURTESY OF BRENT SIKKEMA GALLERY