High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, March 24 - June 14, 1998

Beauty is a terrible and awful thing! It is terrible because it has not been fathomed, for a sets us ie but riddles. Here the boundaries meet and all contradictions exist side by side.

Feodor Mikhailovich Dostoevski The Brothers Karamazov, bk. Ill, ch.3

The centerpiece of Gaylen Gerber's installation for the High Museum of Art is an extra- ordinary sight: trees bearing fruit in the early spring. Indoor trees commonly soften corporate lobbies, enhance shopping malls, and humanize busy airport terminals, but they seldom appear in the galleries of an art museum. In this context, these trees seem both ordinary and unusual. The fruit they bear further distinguishes them from trees commonly encountered inside buildings. Conversely, this bounty works to integrate them into the museum setting by illuminating the way aesthetic values intersect with the concept of the natural and the paradoxes that arise from this linkage. Depictions of nature traditionally imply a lack of artifice and epitomize beauty. In common parlance, "to bear fruit" indicates achievement of a goal. Fruit thus represents the ultimate achievement of nature, its perfection. But fruit will eventually fall from the tree and decay. Could perfection be a temporary condition? Additionally, the curious appearance of trees bearing fruit out of season in this installation resulted from deliberate human intervention rather than a purely spontaneous process. Last fall, at Gerber's request, a nursery placed these trees in cold storage for several months, then moved them to a hot house, forcing the trees to bloom in the dead of winter. The grower hand-pollinated each blossom, inducing the fruit now on the trees. With that knowledge, can this fruit still be regarded as natural?

As interesting as the trees might be, most viewers, become distracted by their search for works of art. The neatly framed and deliberately spaced pictures within Gerber's installation most closely satisfy this expectation. In these modestly sized works, the artist presents views of various ordinary scenes. Gerber chooses prosaic subjects—a backyard, the facade of a café, a converted loft building—each somehow in transition or inaccessible. The artist finds these views of the everyday intriguing because of their ability "to suggest that there must be some sense that can be attached to the objects and actions because of their concrete nature."! The backgrounds of these photoworks, like the nearby fruit trees, associate the ordinary with perfection, Gerber has placed his everyday views on top of photographs of clear blue sky. He clouds the infinite expanse of blue with familiar scenes. In doing so, he acknowledges the aesthetic constructs that value art as timeless and eternal. Gerber points out that his layer of graphite dirties the transparency of the sky and allows us to place it in time."2 Without the artists markings the photographs might simply remain blue squares. Gerber's graphite representations give these bits of sky relevance because viewers can connect them to something specific, which provides a setting for narrative.

The largest object in Gerber's installation is also the most subtle, revealing itself only slowly. Most viewers will assume it is a long, unadorned wall until they notice a slight shimmer across its surface. In fact, it is an enormous canvas-fifteen feet high and forty-two feet long-painted with "interference blue," a transparent but refractive paint that shifts from

creamy white to silvery blue depending on the viewer's location. This large painting relates to a series of gray canvases Gerber produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These paintings, which initially appear to be the most conventional sort of minimal monochromes, actually bear extremely subtle images that become apparent only after prolonged looking. Through these works, the artist challenged viewers' expectations of the acts of viewing and interpretation. Gerber uses the large canvas in his installation at the High to similarly question viewers' perceptions. He has suspended the canvas more than a foot in front of the wall, effectively displacing it. Because viewers can verify the two are separate, the can-vas, initially seen as architecture, becomes a discrete object. With this shift in scale, the painting engulfs the viewer and pulls everything in the gallery into its field. As a result, the viewer becomes acutely aware of everything in the space. The large painting becomes a backdrop, a stage set, and the viewer's interaction with the exhibition becomes self-consciously participatory.

Gerber's engagement of the High's architecture also plays with the modernist belief in structural purity. Architect Richard Meier's reliance on orderly geometric shapes and his use of white as the building's predominant color demonstrate his allegiance to this ideal. By focusing his work on a wide range of simultaneous perceptions, Gerber instead subtly proposes the coexistence of an array of contrasting ideological interpretations. His photographs of the sky visually and conceptually echo the High's windows. Similarly, the trees in the installation connect the fourth floor gallery to the picturesque aspects of the grounds of the Woodruff Arts Center. By drawing these analogies, Gerber exposes the permeability of ideologic and aesthetic boundaries usually perceived as secured.

Gerber's work takes as its subject viewer involvement. The installation cannot be immediately assimilated because a viewer must move through it to see and interpret it in its entirety. Each movement reveals new information that changes the viewer's perceptions, causing constant re-evaluation of the whole experience. Interpretation depends on the viewer's activity relative to the art. Gerber has said that "significance can be brought to the work by the viewer and located there, and it remains 'legitimate' for as long as it has resonance within that viewer, but once that resonance is gone from the viewer it is gone from the work as well."3 Ultimately, all positions may be recognized as correct, but none exclusively so. The distinction blurs between subject and object, perceiver and perceived, and the viewer becomes inseparable from that which is viewed.

Instead of viewing the world in polemically opposed terms-black or white, perfect or flawed, beautiful or ugly, nature or culture— Gerber proposes a continuum. Contradiction, then, does not necessarily imply conflict, but rather a conflation that recognizes in each position that which is excepted from it. The artist seeks "a middle ground where extremes cannot maintain an uncompromising position. In [my] work, it's a move towards a lack of differentiation and it is the perception of this in itself that may be an achievement." By advocating the simultaneous coexistence of contradictory points of view, Gerber challenges viewers to recognize differences but not necessarily to be limited by them.

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1 Gaylen Gerber in interview by Kathryn Hixson, "Gaylen Gerber, In Neutral," Flash Art, Summer 1991 (24 no. 159), p. 117.

2 Undated note from artist to author, in HMA files.

3 "Gaylen Gerber, In Neutral," p. 116. 4 "Gaylen Gerber, In Neutral," p. 116.