Focus: Gaylen Gerber with Stephen Prina

Since the late 1980s, Gaylen Gerber has expanded the formal and conceptual possibilities of gray monochrome painting as a means of engaging a rigorous, expansive study of art and perception. Although he began his investigation with a series of identical 38 x 38-inch canvases, Gerber's recent, monumental works assume the qualities of architecture. Inserted seamlessly into the spaces of existing walls, his large-scale canvases simultaneously dominate and disappear. Always, these systems-specific installations challenge the spatial, temporal, and corporal relationships that exist between audience, author, and art object (as well as shared assumptions about these relationships). This project in particular sets a stage for viewers to engage in a series of performative actions that are both physical and intellectual.

Gerber's exhaustive exploration of the gray monochrome has led most recently to a series of works in which the paintings themselves become deceptively simple backdrops for other works of art. In a gesture that is at once generous and self-effacing, Gerber co-opts other artists as subversive, willing collaborators in the making of exhibitions. Since the mid-1990s, he has projected films and videos, hung photographs and paintings, and placed natural elements (e.g. dirt, trees) on or in front of his apparently neutral gray surfaces. As a result, his paintings function simultaneously as both object and ground; painting itself becomes a context for a range of other (aesthetic and non-aesthetic) activities. With these subtle but complex interactions, Gerber is interested in "turning what often seem like abstract, normative structures into framing devices for more temporal, individual expressions."[1] For this focus project at The Art Institute of Chicago, he has invited the noted, California-based conceptual artist Stephen Prina to provide a text—a detail of an earlier work—as both the reason for, and a foil to, Gerber's own painting.

For focus, Gerber, together with Prina, engineers an "interventionist" project in one of the museum's most paradigmatically modern architectural spaces: Gallery 135, a two-story expanse with double-height glass curtain walls on two sides, surrounding Alfred Shaw's curved, freestanding concrete stairway in the Morton Wing (1962). The space, which often but not always contains works of art, is less a conventional gallery destination than it is a transitional area between several collection galleries. As such, its dominant elements are usually directional signage, an information desk, storage bins for folding stools, and the like. Two distinctly different exterior views largely determine the space's character. Facing west, one sees the cultivated gardens of the south Stanley McCormick Memorial Court; the Beaux-Arts-style architecture of the 1893 main building; and a grand, historic section of Chicago's distinguished Michigan Avenue. The opposite, east-facing windows offer a contrasting prospect.

The Art Institute of Chicago—unlike any other museum of its size in the U.S.—spans an active railway line, the Illinois Central. Trains, tracks, and other industrial equipment can be seen in an open area bounded by the Morton Wing itself, Gunsaulus Hall (1916; bridging the tracks), and the Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Building (1988). Gallery 135 is thus a nexus from which to observe several variant uses of space, both interior and exterior.

Gerber and Prina share an interest in examining institutional structures and modes of fine-art exhibition. In this case, the Art Institute's architecture and design become the point of departure for a series of articulations staged both on and around the museum itself. Importantly, Gerber's project with Prina incorporates all four walls of Gallery 135: the two

parallel window walls and the two parallel masonry walls. A wooden support structure and stretched, painted canvas produced by Gerber in situ has been inserted immediately in front of the east-facing windows.[2] The piece has been built to the exact dimensions of the window wall and carefully positioned in place, as if it had always been there. This massive canvas inverts the conventional assignment of paintings on a wall by masquerading as a wall itself. As both object and obstacle, it also enters into a dialogue with the architectural setting, obscuring the view of the train tracks while emphasizing the view of the garden and street. Gerber's painting renders the once entirely transparent space partially opaque, literally creating a "gray area" where boundaries and meanings become indeterminate. Indeed the vocabulary of opacity and transparency that describes this physical scenario also serves metaphorically to characterize Gerber's practice generally.

GERBER'S USE OF PRINA'S TEXT SIMILARLY eludes ready categorization, playing with the perceptual dynamics of a particular space. The language, supported by Gerber's gray painting as well as by the museum's surrounding walls, is animated by different surfaces and materials: gray painted letters—distinguished from Gerber's gray by only a minute shift in value—effectively disappear when they cross the canvas, while gray vinyl characters come into sharp relief on the white walls and clear glass windows. The walls and windows also feature a shadow text, executed in a different (serif as opposed to sans serif) font and translucent yellow vinyl, which follows the rising arc of the stairway to the second floor. First realized in 1991 for an entirely different context, Prina's text reads: "We represent ourselves to the world." [3]

ON ONE LEVEL, THIS STATEMENT SETS forth the fundamental premises of art-making: the implied author, the translation of some sort from the real to the representational, and the expectation of an audience. On another level, the text announces a more ambitious desire to reveal the specific structures involved in presenting art to a contemporary public. In that sense, the installation raises issues that might be classified as self-referential, or museological. Prina's text pretends the museum is speaking in an active, collective voice—advertising its own purpose and enterprise. Gerber exploits the sentence's multiple meanings by pairing it with his own "backdrop" painting, slyly transforming Prina's aphoristic critique of art into simply another work of art—a museum piece, no less. But Gerber's installation ultimately undermines the notion that a work of art can signify as an individual object. Instead, he suggests, all identities shift in relation to a complex set of ever-contingent, overlapping expectations and experiences.

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NOTES:

1 Gaylen Gerber, in conversation with the author, August 2001.

2 Gerber is very much aware that the east-facing windows had been used as a metaphor for a painting frame in the recent past. Watch the Doors Please (1980–82), a work in situ and in motion by Daniel Buren, commissioned by curator Anne Rorimer on behalf of the Department of Twentieth-Century Painting and Sculpture (in collaboration with the Regional Transportation Authority, the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad, and the South Suburban Mass Transit District), deployed colorfully striped train cars throughout the city. Viewed from inside the museum, the project relied upon the east-facing windows both as a framing device and as a reference to the rectangular shape of a painted canvas.

3 Galerie Max Hetzler, Cologne, Germany, 1991. In this work, Prina assembled a complete photographic history documenting every exhibition that had taken place, at a number of different locations, under the operation of Galerie Max Hetzler. He hung these photographs directly over the large text “we represent ourselves to the world,” which he had painted on the gallery wall in a pale yellow color. Prina also installed architectural models showing the various configurations and incarnations of the gallery space, and his placement of the photographs on the wall was designed to recall (and reference) the architecture they depict.