

MICHAEL
ASHER

Michael Asher is organized by Artists Space, New York and curated by Jay Sanders, Executive Director & Chief Curator, and Stella Cilman, Assistant Curator. The Los Angeles presentation is organized by José Luis Blondet, Senior Curator, with Emilia Nicholson-Fajardo, Curatorial Assistant, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. It is on view at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles from March 1-August 2, 2026.

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Texts: Stella Cilman, Annie Ochmanek, Jay Sanders
Editorial: Jennifer Krasinski
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“The approach to my practice is contingent upon the given circumstances which frame each exhibition and its context as a place for aesthetic practice (be it anything from the exhibition concept to the physical location). The artwork most often takes the form of a model for aesthetic problems which derive from discrepancies that occur at the moment the preexisting situation is assumed to be, somehow, an appropriate structure to guarantee an uninterrupted flow of legitimacy upon the work of art. And this rubs up against my own hope to comprehend the framework’s purpose or how it operates, in a physical or historical sense, as a site which defines meaning if it were first of all immune to myth. This approach, alone, creates many questions, since all types of value are accorded the work of art due to the structure where it is presented.”¹

Michael Asher

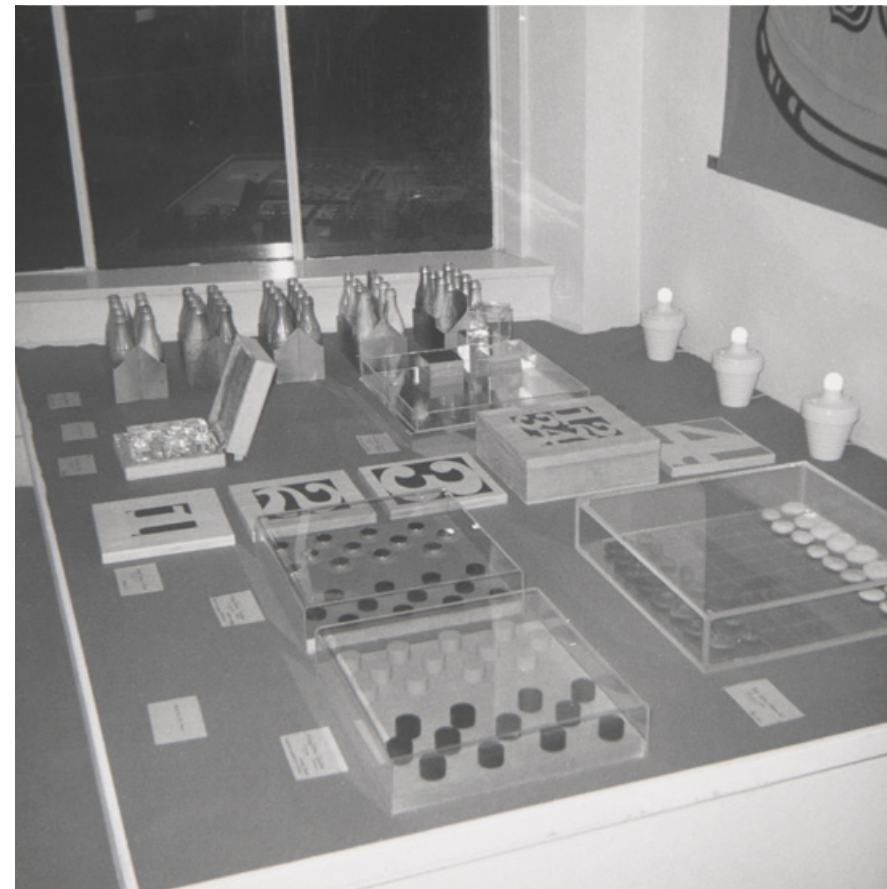
1. Michael Asher’s notes for lecture at Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques, Paris, 1992: “A Quick Description of My Work” (ca. 1992) in Kirsí Peltomäki, ed., *Public Knowledge: Selected Writings by Michael Asher* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 45.

No Title (Checkers), 1965–1966

Among Michael Asher's earliest artworks are several meticulously produced checkers sets, which he made when he was still a student at the University of California, Irvine. Each set was fabricated in anodized aluminum with varying color combinations (black and chrome, black and white, black and red, black and gray) and packaged in a translucent white plexiglass box of Asher's own design. The checkers were first exhibited in the fall of 1966 as part of a group exhibition titled *A Collection of Limited Editions by Contemporary Artists* at The Egg and the Eye, a gallery and café in Los Angeles. One set was purchased by Donald Judd, who signed the check he had received for a public lecture over to Asher as payment. Two more were either given to, or traded with, Asher's friends John Knight and Lawrence Weiner.

While clearly invoking the emerging tenets of minimalism—outsourced fabrication, geometric abstraction, and serial primary forms—the checkers sets house those stylistics within a prescribed and inherently social activity. If the sculptures of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Judd, and others were said to radically attenuate gallery-goers' experiences of the space around them, Asher's checkers scale down that claim, moving the work into the mundane realm of home life and the weighty, unspectacular tactility of everyday culture. As art assuming the ubiquitous form of a board game, they are early examples of Asher's career-long investigation into the possible location and function of artistic interventions. The otherwise participatory nature of his checkers was temporarily foreclosed when they were exhibited. Asher would come to fundamentally reverse this condition by turning exhibitions themselves into the temporal and material structuring device for his work.

In addition to the checkers, Asher's earliest artworks, made between 1965 and 1967, exceeded minimalism's precepts by directly addressing the relationship between objects and their display. Asher undertook a process of elimination, "chipping away at the materiality of the artwork, if for no better reason than to see how necessary the presence of each layer was."¹ In this spirit, he made graphite drawings, shaped canvases, tapered wall wedges, stainless steel and heat-formed plexiglass wall reliefs, and glass panels housed in aluminum frames that were designed to cleave to existing interior spaces.² These works increasingly dispensed with any autonomous or arbitrary frameworks and were instead literally determined (in size, shape, location, material, and color) by the architecture of Asher's apartment, spanning the lengths of his walls, for example, or fitting into the gap between a wall heater and the door trim.³ His critical examinations of the "natural" structure of a given space were foundational to his practice of *situational aesthetics* whereby his work would address context in the broadest sense: social, economic, infrastructural, historical, and cultural.



The Egg and The Eye, Los Angeles, California, USA, *A Collection of Limited Editions by Contemporary Artists*, October 4–November 7, 1966. Installation view. On table, in foreground and behind: two works with no title by Michael Asher; checker sets, 1965–1966.

1. *Public Knowledge*, 79.

2. "Many of the objects during this period dealt with the wall as if it were the picture plane, and the works I designed were figures on that ground." *Public Knowledge*, 83.

3. "I was challenging aesthetic conventions from a cottage-style, two-bedroom apartment with mint green interior except for the floors, which were brown linoleum covered in some places with a brown rug." *Public Knowledge*, 80.

August 18, 1973, Project Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts

October 30, 2005, Orchard, New York, New York

January 23, 2025, Artists Space, New York, New York

In the summer of 1973, a small group of people gathered in a vacant dormitory room at the Cambridge School in Weston, Massachusetts for what was intended to be a one-off screening of a film by Asher. Invited by artist Paul McMahon to produce a work for the nonprofit space Project Inc., Asher wanted to make a film with no perceivable content, which he achieved by producing a 16mm print that simply projected, in his own words, a “completely consistent medium-gray tone with a very fine, even texture” on the wall.¹ Within the room’s intimate domestic space, the monochrome projection on an otherwise empty wall illuminated the audience members and drew attention to everything outside of its uneventful frame. Lacking any discernible pictorial or narrative cues, viewers were left to participate in the unpredictable and potentially disordered activities occurring inside the room, and to become the active content in this experience of expanded cinema. The story structure, temporally bound by the leader at the start and end of the film, was therefore determined in real time by its audience.

Asher produced the film without a camera, instead using only chemical developer and darkroom equipment. His focus on the material process of filmmaking could be read as a comment on structural film. As Asher wrote, “I was questioning at the time ideas about making movies and electronic media in general.”² In a film lab, true middle gray is achieved only when the negative and positive film are identical. Therefore Asher eliminated any differentiation by which reversal film typically functions. The film expanded upon the more discrete sculptural forms of Asher’s earlier wall works, becoming a kind of object only when projected.

Defying the idea of film as a distributed media, Asher’s work was made to be viewed only once. A single run through the projector would generate visible deterioration. As Asher warned, “the medium gray would inevitably be fractured with scratches which would then be perceived as moving lines,” therefore undermining the participatory aspect of the work.³ Beyond disclosing each step of mediation—demystifying cinema, and with it, representation—the film was also an experiment in the live decomposition of an artwork. Its material self-destruction occurred as a result of it being viewed.

In 2005, members of Orchard gallery in New York City produced and screened a second print of the film with Asher’s participation, establishing a precedent for the work’s recreation. Organized by Rhea Anastas, Stephan Pascher, Jeff Preiss, and Karin Schneider, the presentation upheld the original concept of the 1972 work but adapted the film’s projection to Orchard’s architecture.

1. Michael Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, ed. (Halifax, NS: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and Los Angeles, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1983), 74.
2. Asher’s unpublished notes for Morgan Fisher’s class, “Film,” n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
3. *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 72.



Announcement for the Orchard screening of Michael Asher’s film, New York, New York, USA, 2005.
Photograph by Carter Seddon.

September 1975

Vision, Number 1

Edited by Tom Marioni, published by Kathan Brown, Crown Point Press
Oakland, California

In 1975, the artists Kathan Brown and Tom Marioni launched *Vision*, a publication "by and for artists . . . to make available information about idea-oriented art."¹ The first issue focused on artists working in California and included contributions by Asher as well as minimalist and post-minimalist artists Vito Acconci, Eleanor Antin, Larry Bell, Chris Burden, Bruce Conner, Terry Fox, Howard Fried, and Ed Ruscha, among others. The thin but substantial 14 × 8½ inch publication was printed in an edition of 1,000.

Invited artists were encouraged to present their work in whatever way they chose and to take up as many pages as their project required. As opposed to the other artists' text- and image-based documentations of their original works, Asher proposed a site-specific presentation of the publication's material form. As Asher writes in his proposal: "My contribution will be to permanently adhere the two facing pages of my presentation together in order to form one leaf."² Doing so, he found a way "to produce a work which, in the context of the magazine, would embody and represent the material conditions of its presentation."³

According to the publication's table of contents, Asher's work begins on page 42 and ends on 43, yet the numbers are cemented shut by glue.⁴ Bonding the two pages produced a physical thickness that disrupted the consistency of the magazine's sequenced pages. Unlike the other contributions to *Vision*, Asher's is experienced solely through the sensation of touch: one must handle the magazine to feel the work. As he noted: "Stabilized in this way, the two bonded pages did not easily fall to either side when the magazine was opened, but stood out from the seam. When leafing through the magazine, the increased tangibility . . . was distinctly noticeable."⁵

Sandwiched between a diagram by Douglas Wheeler and a poem by Bruce Nauman, Asher's work contrasts with all the other contributions, which rely on the systematic readability of image and language and are abstractions of original works made to fit the magazine's format. Produced for and within *Vision* itself, Asher's work draws attention to the publication as a construction of otherwise unrelated content.⁶ He writes, "the work seemed to deny its own status as representation and in doing so also questioned the representation of the other works (in terms of the magazine format)."⁷ Asher's perceived absence draws him into a three-way conversation with Wheeler and Nauman. No longer can their contributions be viewed in isolation.

1. *Vision* 1 (September 1975), 11.

2. *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 108.

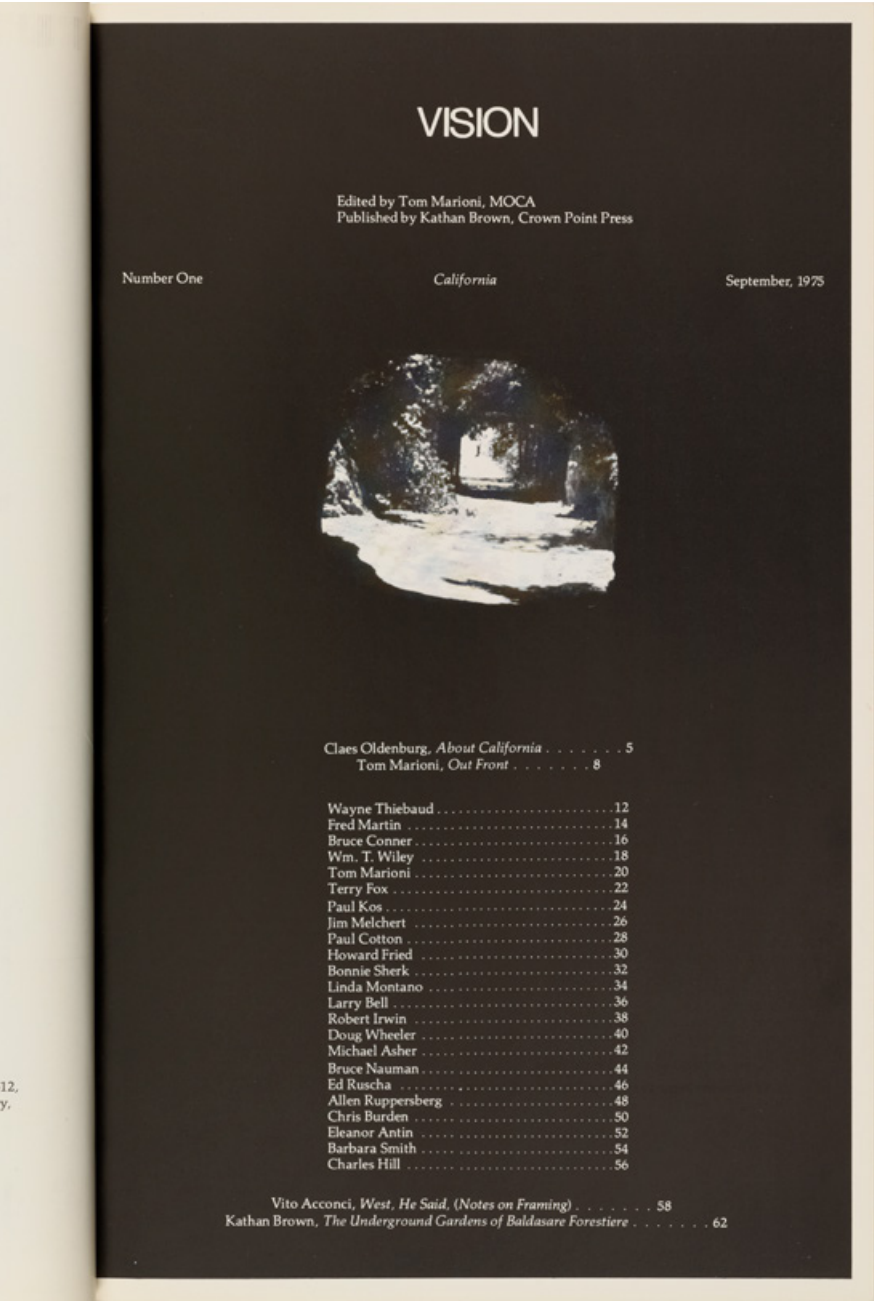
3. *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 108.

4. Asher instructed editor Tom Marioni to glue each issue of the 1,000 copies by hand. Marioni in conversation with the authors, July 17, 2024.

5. *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 108.

6. *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 109.

7. *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 109.



Number One	California	September, 1975
VISION		
Edited by Tom Marioni, MOCA Published by Kathan Brown, Crown Point Press		
Claes Oldenburg, <i>About California</i> 5		
Tom Marioni, <i>Out Front</i> 8		
Wayne Thiebaud 12		
Fred Martin 14		
Bruce Conner 16		
Wm. T. Wiley 18		
Tom Marioni 20		
Terry Fox 22		
Paul Kos 24		
Jim Melchert 26		
Paul Cotton 28		
Howard Fried 30		
Bonnie Sherk 32		
Linda Montano 34		
Larry Bell 36		
Robert Irwin 38		
Doug Wheeler 40		
Michael Asher 42		
Bruce Nauman 44		
Ed Ruscha 46		
Allen Ruppersberg 48		
Chris Burden 50		
Eleanor Antin 52		
Barbara Smith 54		
Charles Hill 56		
Vito Acconci, <i>West, He Said, (Notes on Framing)</i> 58		
Kathan Brown, <i>The Underground Gardens of Baldasare Forestiere</i> 62		

Table of Contents page, *Vision*, Number 1, 1975, Kathan Brown, Crown Point Press, Oakland, California, USA.
Photograph by Carter Seddon.

January 8–February 8, 1976
Via Los Angeles
Portland Center for the Visual Arts
Portland, Oregon

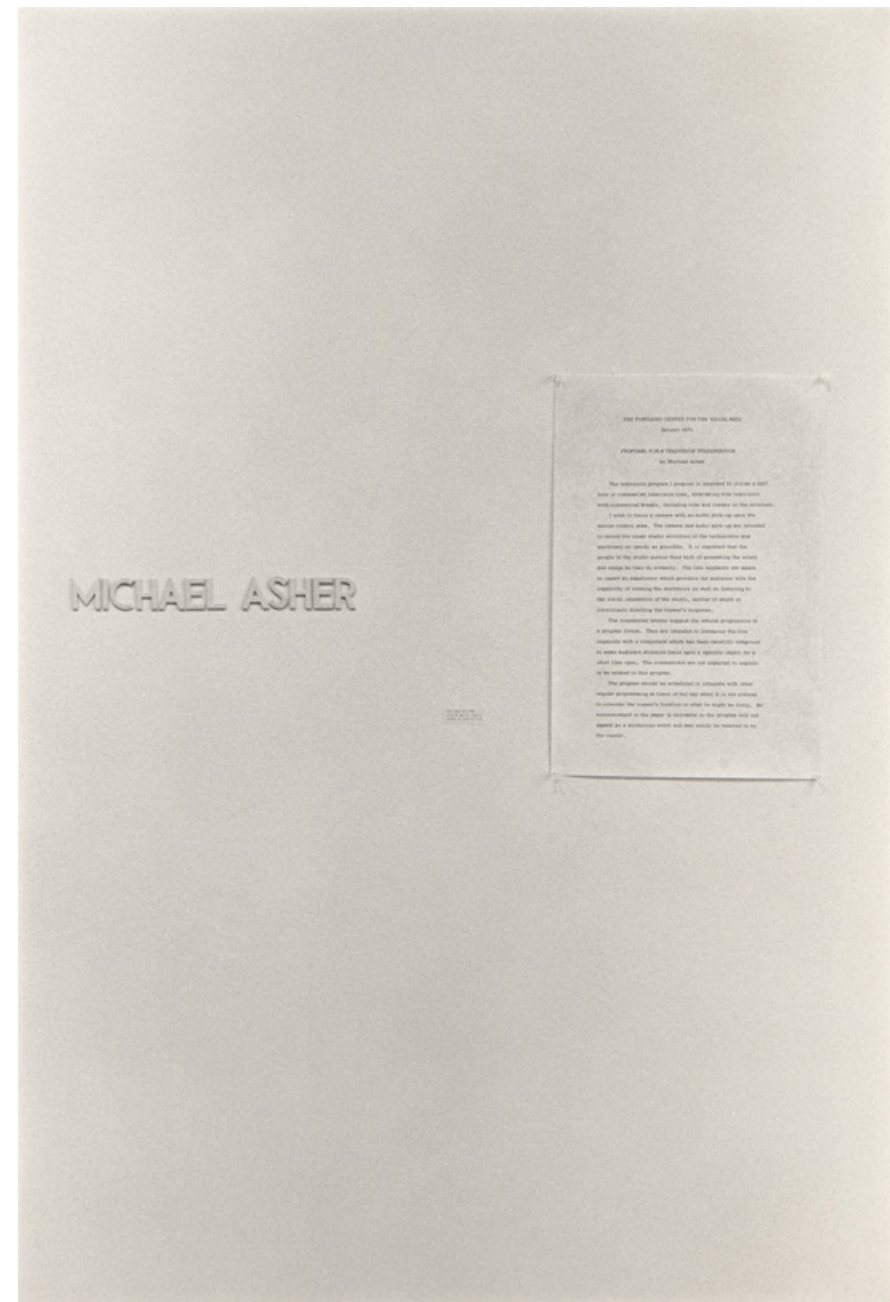
If you happened to flip to KGW-TV in Portland, Oregon, from 1 to 1:30 p.m. on January 18th, 1976, during Super Bowl X, you would have stumbled upon a 30-minute segment produced by Michael Asher. Broadcast as part of the station's weekly series, *Eight Lively Arts*, the project was conceived for the exhibition *Via Los Angeles* at the Portland Center for the Visual Arts, curated by Mel Katz and Mary L. Beebe.

For the program, Asher trained a television camera on the TV station's master control room, exposing the normal activities that make television possible while deploying the site of its production as his work's readymade subject and content. Filmed through a glass window, the single shot revealed a 65 × 30 foot portion of a windowless room housing tape decks, film islands, monitors, switching panels, and a storage area for videos of advertisements. Documenting the work of the technicians responsible for transmitting televisual images to a mass audience, the static shot showed personnel running a series of master control monitors and cueing up ads. Three monitors were visible in the frame of the broadcast image: one displaying color bars for registration; another, the prerecorded broadcast image; the third, the constant flow of network television. A microphone placed in the center of the room picked up a stream of barely audible background noises; banal workday conversations about activity occurring inside and outside the frame can be heard against the constant whirring of tape decks.¹

The broadcast's exclusion of even the most basic techniques used to construct television—fades, zooms, cutaways, and mastered audio tracks—precluded the possibility of drama or narrative. Asher writes, "There is nothing to take seriously, no manipulation to obey or lifestyle to be bought."² The single shot reveals the real and very uneventful space from which television comes, emphasizing both the inherent fiction of TV as well as its flattening effect: transmitting a two-dimensional picture made from light and color and delivered at a reduced scale. Asher hoped to show "through broadcast media how it was almost impossible to tell the difference between actual time and recorded time . . . the difference between actual time and representational time could not be verified and thereby could have been easily scripted."³

The program was intercut with six standard 30-second commercial breaks. Two were advertisements for KGW-TV, one was for a savings bank, and three were public service announcements promoting a travelogue of Oregon, a local boat show, and Portland's Head Start program. Assuming the normal function of TV—to sell a product or lifestyle—the ads fulfilled the audience's

1. Asher describes the technical and visual elements of the program in *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 113, and in his unpublished notes, "Portland—Small Spiral Notebook," January 1976, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
2. *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 113.
3. Asher's unpublished lecture notes on "PCVA 'Via Los Angeles,' January 8–February 8, 1976," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.



Michael Asher, Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, Oregon, USA, *Via Los Angeles*, January 8–February 8, 1976. Proposal for Michael Asher's project as displayed at the Portland Center for the Visual Arts.

expectations of “television reality” and became the active content of the program. The contrast between the televisual space and the control room made startlingly clear “the illusion created during taped shows,” underscoring the degree of mediation necessary in the making of television.⁴

Over the course of Asher’s broadcast, the station received over 140 calls from viewers who reported a range of experiences. Fielding the calls himself, Asher felt that, as a producer, “it was part of the work to address myself as much as possible to the viewers’ inquiries.”⁵ Some callers were curious while others were irate. Most were convinced the broadcast was an accident, or that something was wrong with their signal. After Asher cleared up their confusion, nearly all the callers were satisfied to learn that what they had seen was actually a work of art. The piece was memorialized in local newspapers, inspiring headlines such as “TV as Art?” and “Visual Art Presentation Confuses Viewers.” One article exclaimed, “Andy Warhol should have been in Portland Sunday. He would have appreciated the Michael Asher ‘visual art’ presentation.”⁶

Reflecting on the work, Asher noted that ultimately “the administration was more concerned with their TV rating and did as much as possible to hide the fact of the show.”⁷ The station consistently undercut Asher’s project, particularly in their reluctance to provide financial and logistical support, which affirmed corporate television’s main imperative: to derive material profit from ongoing viewer investment in its programming.

Documentation of Asher’s TV intervention was later created for the exhibition *Changing Channels: Art and Television 1963–1987* at the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK) in Vienna, Austria, in 2010. The exhibition’s curator, Matthias Michalka, with exhibition designers Martin Beck and Julie Ault, presented fourteen still images of the broadcast, which they exhibited in a grid. To produce the panels, MUMOK worked with Asher to take photographs every two minutes of the original recording on a CRT TV to capture both a range of activity and commercial breaks. Asher also suggested that these stills and others be published alongside writings by scholars on the project’s implications in order to “keep the formal object as only documentation and not an artwork” while giving the viewer a record of the original.⁸

SUNDAY		JANUARY 18TH	
KATU-2-ABC 233-2422 KOIN-6-CBS 228-3333 KGW-8-NBC 224-8620 KOAP-10 229-4892 KPTV-12 222-9921		* DENOTES COLOR PROGRAM	
6:00	6 FAITH FOR TODAY*	8:30	2 OPTIONS* 6 INTERNATIONAL ZONE* 8 8 LIVELY ARTS* 12 REX HUMBARO*
6:05	8 DOXOLOGY/NEWS DIGEST*	9:00	2 GENERATION III* 6 OUTDOORS WITH BUD 8 BEACHWOOD* 8 GETTING IT TOGETHER*
6:15	8 SOUND OF TRUMPETS*	9:30	2 REFLECTIONS* 6 PREGAME SUPER BOWL X* 8 GARDENING WITH ED HUME* 12 ORAL ROBERTS*
6:30	2 REV. CLEOPHUS ROBINSON* 6 THIS IS THE LIFE* 8 SIGNS OF LIFE*	10:00	2 URBAN FOCUS* 8 MEDIX* 12 DAY OF DISCOVERY*
6:45	8 DAVEY AND GOLIATH* 12 NEWS HILITES*	10:30	2 DEVLIN* 8 VIEWPOINT* 12 IT IS WRITTEN*
7:00	2 MUSIC & THE SPOKEN WORD* 6 IMPACT* 8 HOT DOG* 12 JERRY FALLWELL*	11:00	2 BUMPITY* 6 SUPER BOWL X* 8 MEET THE PRESS* 12 A NEW WAY TO LIVE*
7:30	2 AGRICULTURE, U.S.A.* 6 LAMP UNTO MY FEET* 8 VISION ON* 2 CHRISTOPHER CLOSEUP* 6 LOOK UP & LIVE* 8 VEGETABLE SOUP* 12 KATHRYN KUHLMAN*	11:10	3 JOT*
		11:15	3 DAVY & GOLIATH
		11:30	2 MAKE A WISH* 3 INSIGHT* 12 THE GOOD NEWS*
		AFTERNOON	
		12:00	2 ISSUES AND ANSWERS*
		3	MUSIC & THE SPOKEN WORD* 8 N.B.C. RELIGIOUS SPECIAL* 12 BRUNCH THEATER “The Buster Keaton Story” ... starring Donald O'Connor and Ann Blyth.
		12:30	2 DIRECTIONS* 3 REX HUMBARO*
		1:00	2 THE ROCK* 8 8 LIVELY ARTS*
		1:30	2 JACK IN THE BEANSTALK* 3 GRACE CATHEDRAL*
		1:45	12 KIPLINGER LETTER*
		2:00	8 THE LANGE CUP* The world's best pros compete for ski-racing's top prize down Sun Valley's famous Baldy Mountain. 10 LEONARD BERNSTEIN AT HARVARD* 12 SUNDAY MATINEE “Who Killed the Mysterious Mr. Foster?” starring Ernest Borgnine, Will Geer, J.D. Cannon.
		2:30	2 MONSTER MOVIE 3 LIFELINE TO TRUTH* 8 HOGAN'S HEROES*
		3:00	2 PHOENIX OPEN GOLF*
TV SPORTS OF THE WEEK			
SUNDAY, JANUARY 18 Super Bowl X: Ch. 6, 11 a.m. The Lange Cup: Ch. 8, 2 p.m. Phoenix Open Golf: Ch. 2, 3 p.m.		SATURDAY, JANUARY 24 NCAA Basketball: Ch. 8, 1 p.m. Boxing from Olympic: Ch. 2, 2 p.m. Bing Crosby National Pro-Am: Ch. 2, 3 p.m. NCAA Basketball: Ch. 8, 3 p.m. Pro Bowlers Tour: Ch. 2, 4 p.m. Sports Spectacular: Ch. 12, 4:30 p.m. Wide World of Sports: Ch. 2, 5:30 p.m. U. of O. Basketball: Ch. 12, 8 p.m. Portland Wrestling: Ch. 12, 10:30 p.m.	
THURSDAY, JANUARY 22 Wrestling from Grand Theater: Ch. 3, 10:30 p.m.			

Page from *TV PREVUE* for the week of Sunday, January 18–24, 1976, indicating the 1 p.m. time slot of Michael Asher’s television program/installation, Portland, Oregon, USA, 1976.

Overleaf: press clipping from *The Oregonian*, January 19, 1976, describing the reception of Michael Asher’s television program/installation for *Via Los Angeles*, Portland, Oregon, USA, 1976.

4. Connie Hofferber, “TV as Art?,” *The Sunday Oregonian* (February 1, 1976).
5. Asher’s unpublished notes, “Portland—Small Spiral Notebook,” January 1976, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
6. The strangeness of Asher’s intervention was noted in the press coverage of local outlets including *The Sunday Oregonian*.
7. Asher’s unpublished notes, “Portland—Small Spiral Notebook,” January 1976, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
8. Asher proposes this concept in two draft letters to Matthias Michalka, n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

ing political censorship.
Minister Yitzhak Rabin intro-
e law, apparently seeking to
s in his cabinet which led to
n of several recent messages
Israel and the United States.
w will take effect if and when
oved by the foreign affairs and
committee of parliament,
is scheduled for consideration
month.

s accepted by the cabinet with
dissenting voice, that of leftist
inister Victor Shemtov, who
move a form of political cen-
e abstained in the vote.

aw carries a 15-year prison
any person divulging messages
top secret," and seven years
ment for the journalist who
the leak.

ecast: Sunny,
, 50; low, 40;
ort on Page A 15

because it may help the theft problem.
"The slashes make them less attrac-
tive for wall hangings," she said.

Sleep is when if you don't get
enough to the night before you wake up
half a.

Visual art presentation confuses TV viewers

Andy Warhol should have been in
Portland Sunday. He would have appre-
ciated the Michael Asher "visual art"
presentation on KGW-TV. Numerous
viewers didn't. They thought it was "an
accident."

What happened was this: A TV cam-
era was "opened" on a KGW-TV studio
major control area and remained sta-
tionary, recording anything that was
going on in the room — people doing
their work, going in and out of the
room.

The activity was considered a "visu-
al presentation," an art work that was

supposed to impart "an experience" to
the viewer, according to the idea con-
ceived by Asher, a young California
artist showing at the Portland Center
for the Visual Arts.

But many viewers thought it was all
just a broadcasting accident.

A studio worker said the station
switchboard was "swamped with calls"
during the 1 p.m. show, part of the
"Eight Lively Arts" series.

"I'm not going to tell you what
those people said. I don't think the sta-
tion management would like me giving
out that kind of information," said a
Sunday crew member.

Grinstein Collection, 1979
441 N. Rockingham Avenue
Los Angeles, California

In 1978, Asher was commissioned by the prominent Los Angeles collectors Elyse and Stanley Grinstein to produce a work for their residence. It was his first and only private commission. Considering the site of a private home, he proposed a work that dealt specifically with “barriers and property lines.”¹ The Grinstein’s property was delineated by formidable concrete wall sections connected by stylized, evenly-spaced columns. Particularly interested in “the wall” as it defines private space, Asher chose to work with the section nearest to the street on the southeast side of their property. Asher demolished and then reconstructed the wall eleven inches deeper into the Grinstein’s property, his alteration effectively ceding a section of their land measuring 17 feet 10½ inches x 11 inches to their neighbors. The distance of the wall’s relocation was structurally determined by the thickness of the adjacent columns, so the new section could be sutured to the old without redesigning any additional architecture.² Materially identical to the original, the new offset wall was painted on both sides to seamlessly match each owner’s respective color palette. Asher also proposed that the trees and bushes on the Grinstein’s side be replanted along the wall’s perimeter to follow its altered contour, making the adjustment appear continuous.³ Taking on the role of contractor, Asher was on site to ensure that everything was executed according to the specifications outlined in a Memorandum of Sale written with his lawyer and signed by both parties.

The Grinsteins lived in a 1920s, Mediterranean-style villa located in the historic upper-class neighborhood of Brentwood. Its hilly, tree-lined streets, dotted with early twentieth- and mid-century architectural gems, denotes an air of taste and privacy. At the time of Asher’s intervention, the Grinstein’s home was a hub of artistic activity, and was a kind of living museum where artists would work and commune.⁴ Asher was no stranger to the world of art collecting. His mother Betty was not only a longtime friend of the Grinsteins but also a prominent dealer and collector herself, having purchased early works by Los Angeles artists Larry Bell, Ken Price, and Ed Ruscha. Growing up around pop and minimalist art, Asher was well-versed in the significance of the Grinstein’s collection, which included works by many of the same artists owned by his mother, and had cultivated a unique perspective on what it means to own and live with art.



Richard Serra overseeing the installation of redwood logs on the grounds of Elyse and Stanley Grinstein’s Brentwood, California, home, ca. early 1970s. Elyse and Stanley Grinstein Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

1. Asher’s unpublished notes titled “E & S Proposal for Divided Fence,” December 12, 1978, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
2. These architectural details can be found in diagrams included in the unpublished Grinstein commission “Memorandum of Sale,” December 1979, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
3. “Stanley and Elyse Grinstein, Proposal: Property Line,” n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
4. The Grinstein’s home and its surrounding grounds were filled with purchased and commissioned works by prominent artists. In their front yard, Richard Serra assembled a sculpture of stacked redwood logs. Inside the house, Daniel Buren painted yellow stripes over the entrance to a lanai, and Elyse Grinstein installed an edition of Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup Cans on the panels covering their washer and dryer. The patrons also co-founded Gemini G.E.L. (Graphic Editions Limited), an artists’ workshop and publisher of limited edition prints and sculptures, which became a destination for artists such as Jasper Johns, Vija Celmins, and Bruce Nauman.

The project's contract underscored its contingent nature: "In that the work was designed for this specific site, including all that which is visually surrounding the work, owner agrees not to alter any portion of the work or the wall visually connected with the work, except to remove the work entirely."⁵ The cooperation and approval of the neighbors was crucial to the work's realization, and they were engaged on the specifics of the wall's redesign throughout. Asher writes, "your neighbors are brought into your art activity and must deal with the excess space they have, even if they decide not to use it."⁶ This eccentric arrangement and its ensuing exchange trespasses a fundamental given of private property: that borders demarcate, claim, hold, and express ownership. In this reconstructed relationship, Asher's new border defies the invisible line of each party's legally allocated space. The Grinstein's commission of this artwork thereby resulted in both a gain and a loss, handing over tangible property while receiving sculptural mass through the artistic gesture of displacement.

After the Grinsteins died, their children sold their residence. In his notes on the project, Asher had addressed two possibilities for the work's unknowable future: "I feel this work should be sold with the house for its market value or replaced. Also, it can be replaced as property line any time you feel that it outlives its usefulness."⁷ As of October 2024, the wall intervention has been demolished by a developer and the Grinstein's historic residence replaced with a spec home.



Aerial view from July 2021 of the Grinstein property with Michael Asher's 1979 work for the Grinstein Collection visible on the upper left.

5. Unpublished Grinstein commission "Memorandum of Sale," December 1979, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

6. Asher's unpublished notes on the Grinstein commission, "E & S Proposal for Gap in Adjoining Property Walls," December 23, 1978, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

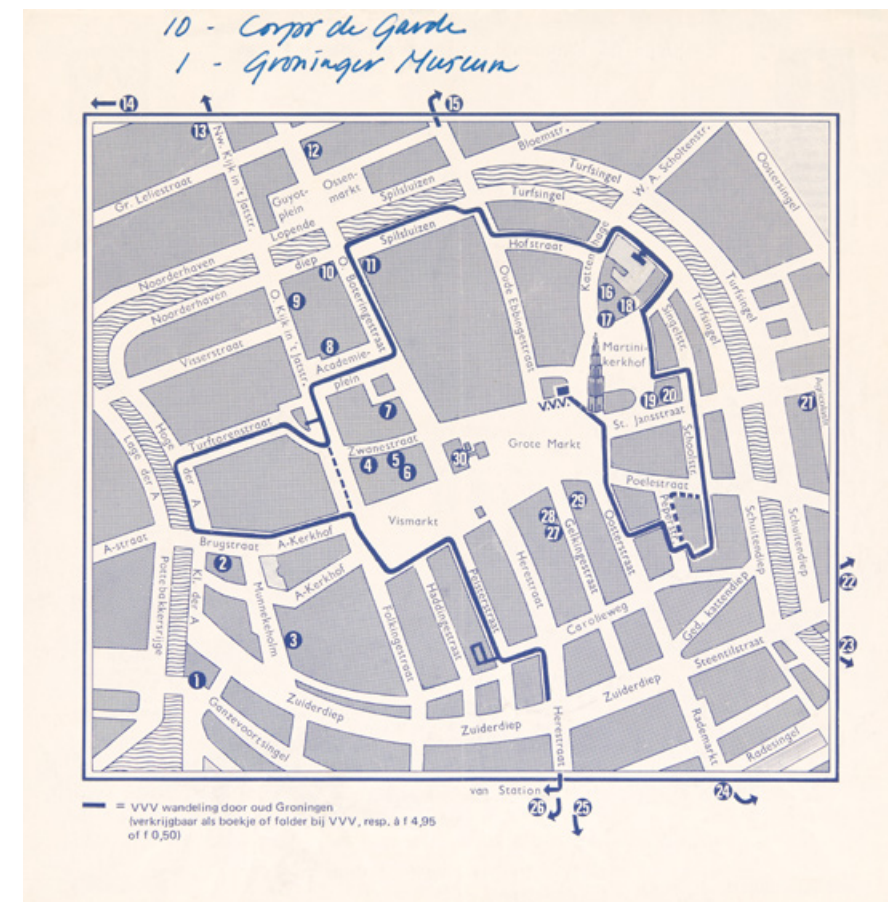
7. Asher's unpublished notes, "Note: to M.A.," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

August 30, 1979
Corps de Garde
Groningen, Netherlands

A succinct newspaper advertisement placed in the *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* announced the singular product on offer—JE EIGEN TELFOONNUMMER OP EEN T-SHIRT, GROTE MARKT, ZATERDAGEN (YOUR OWN TELEPHONE NUMBER ON A T-SHIRT, GROTE MART, SATURDAYS)—but gave no commercial or cultural attribution to its maker. Over the next several weekends, a particularly unassuming form of brandless marketing ensued. At the invitation of the nonprofit Corps de Garde to make a site-specific work, Asher created a stand in the town's outdoor farmers market from which the public could, for fifteen Dutch guilder, purchase a custom-designed white T-shirt with their own home phone number printed in simple black numbers down the center of one side. While the artist himself was not present, one of the stand's attendants wrote to him: "Dear Michael, we've been on the market the last three Saturdays and to date have sold thirty-seven T-shirts. The table setup is very beautiful—everything in black and white, uncluttered and precise."¹

Fashion is a primary means of constructing one's identity within the tangle of corporatized branding, the marketing of targeted trends, and bulk production. Asher's project upset the intrinsic balance between clothing, individuality, and signage. In a note he states, "If we assume that sometimes people get to know one another due to their identity which they choose to project, I wanted to find a sign which dealt with lines of communication rather than consumerism."² By expressing a person's individuality with the number they were assigned by a public utility—through which, in fact, they can be contacted—Asher's shirts defied the precept that personal adornment should only signal subjective affiliation and taste within the multitude of available commercial options.³

While offering one's own phone number was, at the time, most often a hand-written act, Asher formalized this exchange in the language of generic signage, doubling down on the T-shirt as a ubiquitous, available, public ad space. Having studied the fonts of various magazine advertisements, he chose the blankly authoritative Futura Bold and rendered the graphic layout of the phone numbers with exacting precision.⁴ Identifying a popular white cotton scoop neck T-shirt sold widely in Groningen, he designed and manufactured a custom version with a modified neckline, so that either side could be worn as the front. While Asher made several works comprising or encouraging interpersonal interactions,⁵ his project for Corps de Garde was uniquely located wholly within the consumer realm. Like any other product, simply owning it put its potentiality into play.



Annotated map of arts organizations showing the locations of the Groninger Museum and Corps de Garde in Groningen, Netherlands, ca. 1979.

Overleaf: research photograph showing the market where T-shirts were made and sold for Michael Asher's project for Corps de Garde, Groningen, Netherlands, 1979.

1. Letter to Michael Asher from Carol Bloom, September 24, 1979, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
2. Asher's unpublished lecture notes, "Corps de Garde, Groningen, August 30, 1979," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
3. Asher would also base his work for *Outlook* (2003) on revealing public utility systems.
4. Futura has been the iconic typeface of Nike, IKEA, Volkswagen, FedEx, Swissair, Calvin Klein, Louis Vuitton, Absolut, RAI, and later Supreme, as well as of transportation signage and instrument gauges. Closer to home, it has become ubiquitous with On Kawara's painting series *Today* and Barbara Kruger's works.
5. Michael Asher, *David Askevold, Richard Long*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (1977); *Los Angeles in the Seventies*, Fort Worth Art Museum (1977); *Radio by Artists* (1979–1980; aired 1983); *74th American Exhibition*, the Art Institute of Chicago (1982), among others.



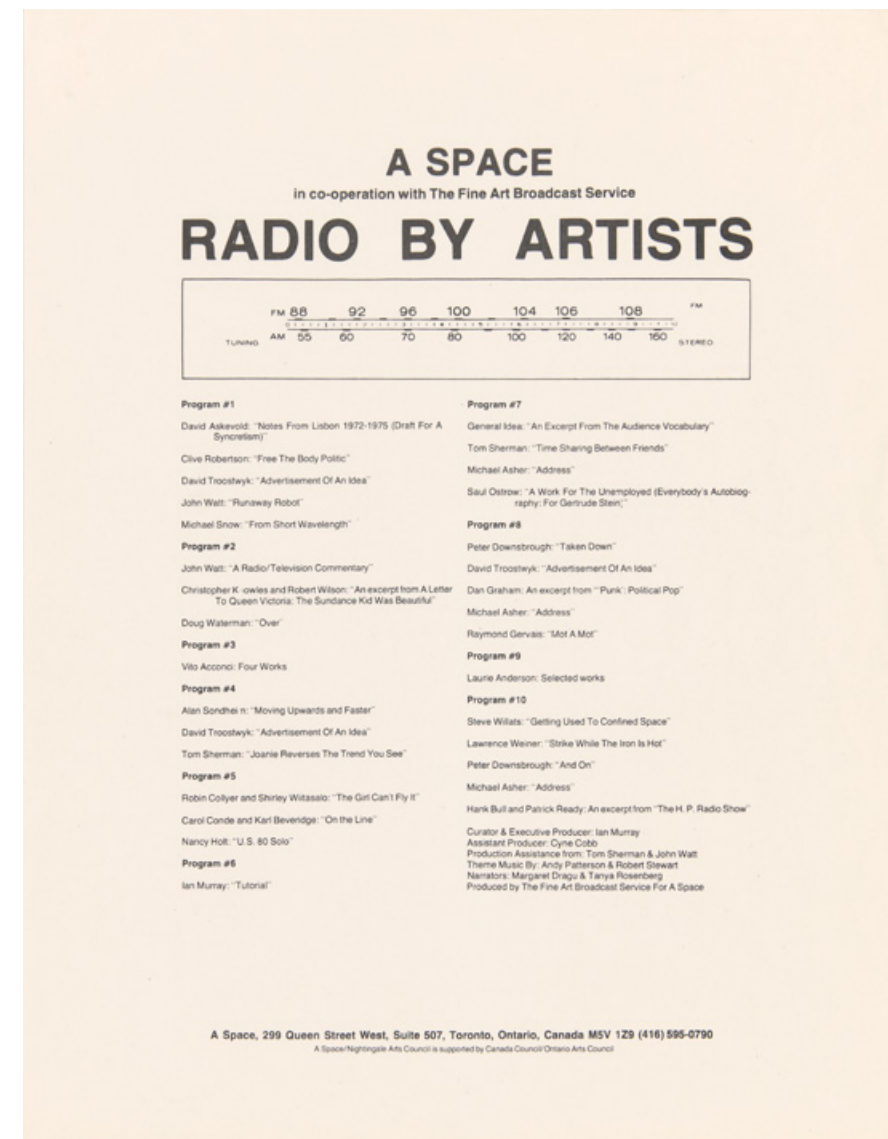
January 13–February 6, 1983
Audio by Artists
Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre
Alberta, Canada

Michael Asher's contribution to the series "Radio by Artists" was his second work for broadcast media and consisted of a tape recording of himself stating his mailing address: "Michael Asher, 1135 Amoroso Place, Venice, California, zip code 90291." The series was organized by Ian Murray on behalf of the artist-run gallery A Space in Toronto. It included twenty-six entries by artists and filmmakers that were curated into ten thirty-minute audio segments. They were first aired on Banff Cablevision Radio and Off Centre Centre's RADIO/RADIO in Alberta in 1983 as part of the exhibition "Audio by Artists" at the Banff Centre. Asher's contribution appeared in three of the ten segments. On two occasions, his piece was announced; on the third, it played without notice. The straight-forward tone with which he recites his mailing address, then presses stop on the tape recorder, is not that of a radio personality but something more akin to a voicemail greeting, or the way one might provide one's address over the phone to customer service.

For this work, Asher was thinking of the radio both as an opportunity to reach a mass audience and as a promotional medium. By stating his name and home address on air, he crossed an analog means of communication with the instantaneous airwaves of broadcast media, and used the radio's networking powers to publicize himself as an artist, alerting listeners to the location where he could be reached, by mail or in person. Asher wrote in his notes that the tradition of electronic media was "an opportunity to form my production, as well as bring me closer to the people interested in my work." He continued: "For them, and possibly for others in the future, I will insert my address into the radio media. If you have a pencil and paper handy, you can write it down for future use."¹ It was important to Asher that his gesture was functional; he asked for the work to be updated when he moved to a new address.

As he did for his 1979 project in Groningen, here Asher presents personal contact information as a kind of public-facing form of identification. By stripping down the content of this artwork, Asher also emphasized the promotional role of an artist's name, which can take on a life of its own and even overdetermine a work's value. In this way, Asher's radio project was perhaps also a continuation of his 1975 exhibition at the Otis Art Institute in which he equated the artwork and artist in the most literal sense by first emptying and locking up the school's gallery, then posting a statement that read IN THE PRESENT EXHIBITION I AM THE ART outside its door.² This line of thinking would later be inverted in the print ad campaigns that Asher circulated without acknowledging an author.

1. Asher's unpublished notes for *Radio by Artists* project, n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
2. Kirsi Peltomäki, *Situation Aesthetics: The Work of Michael Asher* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 122. About his Otis show, Asher wrote, "This statement has to do with the notion of separation between the artist and the art. It's saying that there is no separation . . . By saying that I am both the art and the artist of the art, with no separation, what I think I'm saying is that the creation is in the artist's thoughts, his and no other's thoughts." *Public Knowledge*, 123.



Program for *Radio by Artists* broadcast series organized by A Space, Toronto, Canada, 1980. Michael Asher's contribution is described as "Address."

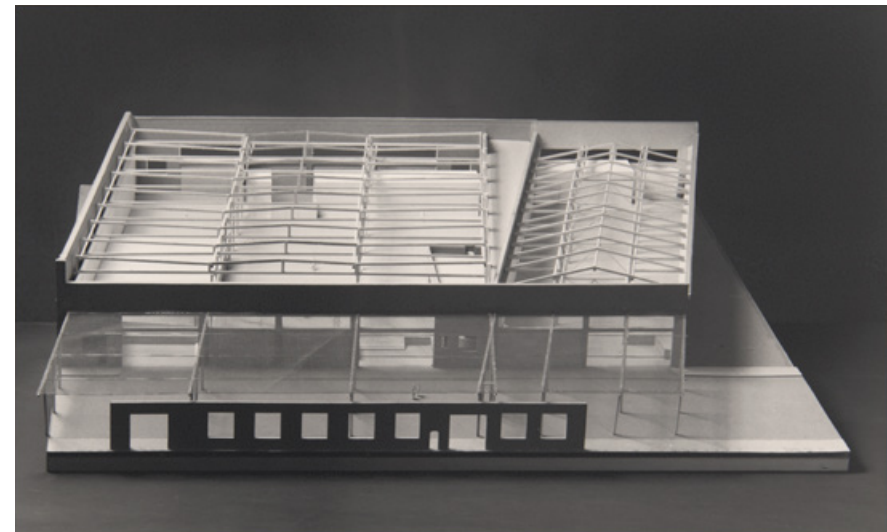
November 1983–July 1985

In Context

**The Temporary Contemporary, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, California**

In November 1983, the Temporary Contemporary (now the Geffen Contemporary) opened in the Little Tokyo district of Los Angeles. The TC was a placeholder for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) while its permanent home was being planned in nearby Bunker Hill. Inhabiting two warehouses leased to MOCA by the city at one dollar per year and renovated by architect Frank Gehry, the TC had an open, flexible layout said to invoke the creative spirit and “under-construction” feeling of an artist’s studio.¹ This architecture underscored MOCA’s founding as an “artist’s museum,” reinforced by the institution’s creation of advisory positions and board seats for artists. The repurposed spaces also signaled change in downtown L.A. As heavy industry left the area, Little Tokyo’s disused buildings were flipped as chic live-work lofts. Meanwhile in Bunker Hill, an ongoing municipal campaign, of which the founding of MOCA was one facet, had displaced low-income residents in order to remake the area into a financial center.²

Thus the opening of the Temporary Contemporary marked a handshake between art and private interests. Asher’s project for its inaugural season played on this relation while taking literally MOCA’s self-declaration as “the artist’s museum.” Asher purchased licensing rights to the TC’s lobby then sublicensed them back to the museum for two hundred dollars per month, paid to him for a term of two years.³ His proprietorship was made visible in the form of a plaque that read THE MICHAEL ASHER LOBBY, fabricated to match the institution’s standard signage and hung on a central column near the entrance. In addition, the artist left small cards at the front desk explaining the project. A floorplan of MOCA’s building indicating the location of The Michael Asher Lobby also appeared on the inside of the dust jacket of 500 copies of Asher’s book, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, co-published by MOCA and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.⁴ Asher intentionally sited his intervention in the liminal area of the museum usually offered to donors as a “naming opportunity” to incentivize their patronage. By placing the artist’s name in this context, Asher pointed to the general class distinctions between artists (whose works fill the museum) and patrons (wealthy philanthropists, who own artworks, finance the institution, and bank on the high returns of their investments). The Michael Asher Lobby performed an inversion of roles, proposing an artwork that held actual legal and material claim over the space in which it was shown, rather than the other way around.



Research photograph showing the model of The Temporary Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, as designed by Frank Gehry. Photograph by Tom Vinetz.

1. Susanna Newbury, *The Speculative City: Art, Real Estate, and the Making of Global Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). Wouter Davidts, “Art Factories: Museums of Contemporary Art and the Promise of Artistic Production, from Centre Pompidou to Tate Modern,” *Fabrications* 16, no. 1 (2006): 23–42. Asher met with Gehry to consult on the renovation of the Temporary Contemporary. *Situation Aesthetics*, 202, n. 52.
2. On the “remaking” of downtown Los Angeles, the role of MOCA, and of Eli Broad, see *The Speculative City*. On the use of redlining and eminent domain to demolish homes of the residents in Bunker Hill and the longer history of such racialized forms of oppression, see Cameron Rowland, “D37,” 2018, https://www.moca.org/storage/app/media/CameronRowland_D37_Pamphlet.pdf.
3. *Situation Aesthetics*, 136.
4. Asher used exhibition funds from MOCA to help cover the cost of publishing this book, which had been edited by Buchloh in collaboration with Asher several years prior and initially proposed by Kasper König at the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Buchloh in conversation with the authors, May 31, 2024.

Stationery, 1985
The Stuart Collection, University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, California

Since its inception in 1981, the Stuart Collection has commissioned and maintained site-specific public sculptures throughout the University of California, San Diego. Asher was invited to propose a permanent work for the campus in 1984 by the Stuart's director Mary L. Beebe, who had previously worked with him on *Via Los Angeles* while at the Portland Center for the Visual Arts. Asher soon began making numerous visits to La Jolla to contemplate the formidable scale of the 1,200-acre campus, and an initial area of interest was the university's mishmash of wayfinding and signage.

According to Beebe, "I remember that he thought that the campus signage was less than par, we talked about his doing it all. Turned out, of course, to be very complicated and bureaucratic. So we went for the stationery."¹ By late 1984, Asher had proposed redesigning the Stuart Collection's identity, not as his commission but as an opportunity for institutional improvement. Asher tried numerous typographical approaches and according to correspondence with Beebe, he was receptive to her input on the final design.

Using Futura Bold in muted gray, Asher typeset the words "Stuart Collection" large in the top right corner of the letterhead. The University's name, address, and the Stuart Collection's phone number are superimposed in red, typeset much smaller, and aligned to the baseline. This single line of text spans almost the entire width of the page.² Asher designed letterhead, envelopes, 6 x 4 inch notepaper, and staff business cards using this identity, which visually tethered and distinguished the two interconnected institutions. Working with his assistant Sarah Pugh, who set the type and prepared the mechanicals needed for printing, Asher submitted a modest bill for her design hours as well as materials, asking the Stuart Collection to pay half the costs. Asher's redesign was used from 1985 to 1989. A modified version remained in circulation until recently.

This stationery is among a small number of design projects undertaken by the artist throughout his career.³ While not claimed by Asher as artworks, they reflect his active penetration as an artist into the identities of institutions' "voices" and systems of communication—finding corollaries among his works.⁴ Asher completed his permanent artwork for the Stuart Collection in 1991: a granite replica of an institutional drinking fountain that addressed the history of UC San Diego's campus as a former military training center. It is his only permanent or public work in the United States.

Opposite:
permanent work for
the Stuart Collection
at the University of
California, San Diego,
La Jolla, California,
USA, 1991. © Philipp
Scholz Rittermann;
© Michael Asher
Foundation.

1. Email from Mary L. Beebe to the authors, December 2, 2023.
2. Futura was used by Asher for his work at Corps de Garde (1979) and for an unrealized signage project for *Young Talent Awards: 1963–1983* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
3. Others include an unrealized poster for *Documenta 7* (1982), a poster for an exhibition with Martin Kippenberger at the Los Angeles gallery 1301PE (1999), and magazine advertisements for the CalArts MFA program (2000–2001).
4. Asher's licensing of MOCA's lobby for *In Context* saw him occupy the patron naming rights and the visual identity of donor signage (1983–1985). Additional projects in which Asher engaged design, signage, promotion, and institutional function include *MATRIX/BERKELEY 67* (1983), *Intentie en Rationele Vorm* (1987), *l'art conceptuel, une perspective* (1990), and *The Museum as Muse* (1999) among others.



November 2–December 5, 1986

Ex-tension

Weingart Center, Occidental College

Los Angeles, California

For Occidental College's centenary, art historian Stephen Eisenman and artist Linda Lyke asked Asher and three other artists to participate in the group exhibition *Ex-tension: Four Site-Specific Installations for the Weingart Center for the Liberal Arts*.¹ For the occasion, Asher decided to make site-specific paper. He worked with Lyke's papermaking class at Occidental to produce the material on which the show's small exhibition catalog would be printed. Redirecting on-site resources in this way essentially added nothing to the situation: a preexisting class took place, and the catalog was printed. Yet the project prompted an enhanced awareness, which the artist alluded to in the publication: "Most sources of raw materials are not made evident in exhibition production and reception; they are exempted as the producers of meaning."²

Asher stipulated that the paper he and the students made should minimize any auratic or nostalgic qualities of the handmade surface and instead look like store-bought and industrially-produced copy paper (a goal that Lyke notes eluded them in the end, despite their best efforts).³ Other than the production of the paper stock, Asher was not involved in the catalog's design. He planned to have the book printed using a press on campus but when that broke down, the students ran the pages through one of the school's copy machines, a detour that Asher was happy with. The paper was site-specific in that it had been made using the facilities on campus by Occidental's students. Yet the paper inevitably migrated off-site, either by mail or by hand when visitors took copies of the catalog home with them. As Asher reflected in his notes, "one of my primary objectives with this project was to take the ideas of a site-specific practice (which at the time some critics believed, perhaps, was the most thorough means of examining a problem) and take it to its logical extension, and having its logic determine each step of the way, thereby opening up a debate of how rational or irrational this practice really was."⁴

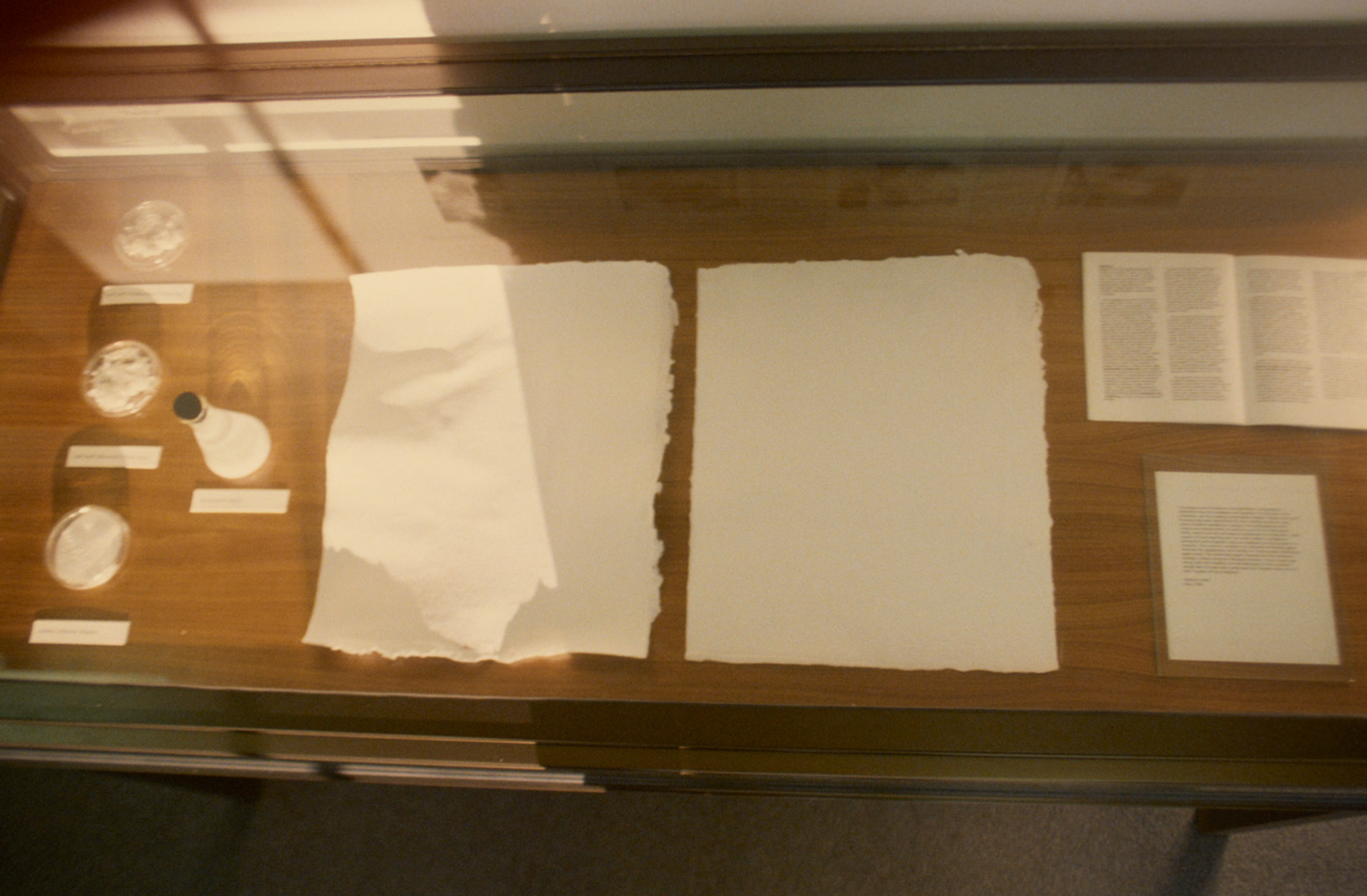
Asher also designed a vitrine display containing samples of the materials used to produce the work—cotton, the chemical binder, sheets of the raw paper made by the students, and copies of the finished publication. Black-and-white photographs documenting the process were hung on the wall above. This display provided an educational moment within the exhibition that laid bare the procedure of making paper. As such, the presentation was didactic in style, informative about process, but left viewers to deduce any broader meaning in relation to Asher's contribution. Asher planned to install the vitrine in the Weingart Center's gallery space, but Eisenman moved it and the photographs into the building's foyer and arranged them in a manner not approved by the artist. Ironically, in excising it from the gallery, Eisenman appeared to take the display's anti-aesthetic dimension at face value.

1. The three other artists included in the exhibition were Kim Abeles, Louise Lawler, and Michelle Stuart.
2. From Asher's statement on his work, May 1986, in Stephen Eisenman, ed., *Ex-tension: Four Site-Specific Installations for the Weingart Center for the Liberal Arts* (Los Angeles: Occidental College, 1986).
3. Email from Linda Lyke to the authors, August 20, 2024.
4. Asher's unpublished lecture notes, "Occidental, November 2–December 5, 1986," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.



Michael Asher, Occidental College, Los Angeles, California, USA, *Ex-tension*, November 2–December 5, 1986. Photographs documenting the production of the handmade paper. Installation photograph by Michael Asher.

Overleaf: detail of vitrine displaying raw materials, paper, and finished catalog. Photograph by Michael Asher.



September 19–November 2, 1987

Intentie en Rationele Vorm

Vrij Genootschap Voor de Beeldende Kunst

Mol, Belgium

Asher's work for the group exhibition *Intentie en Rationele Vorm* addressed the common practice of adapting historic industrial buildings into contemporary cultural institutions, an area of interest he would revisit in 1991 at Le Nouveau Musée, Lyon. The Mol exhibition took place just before an old textile factory was to be renovated for use as a new art space, and Asher's work deployed a complex reanimation of the building's exterior signage as a means of explicitly addressing this transition. Instead of disregarding the building's history, his signage invoked the past, the present, and the future across its facade. Per Asher's description, which was distributed during the exhibition:

"The installation for the exhibition *Intentie en Rationele Vorm* deals with the reuse of a building which originally housed the Louis Van Dooren Textile Factory to a structure which will soon house the Cultural Center of Mol. It was constructed in 1919–1921 at Molenstraat Nr. 14. The artwork I propose is a model for the transformation of this idle building so as not to deny the history, which it embodies materially, and the placement it occupies abstractly within the community of Mol.

There are three basic elements of this artwork: 1) the title of the exhibition, *Intentie en Rationele Vorm*, painted across the facade in a space once occupied by the name of the factory; 2) a brass plate next to the front doorbell with the name of the organizers, Vrij genootschap voor de beeldende kunst, engraved into its surface; and 3) a postcard with an image of the facade after the exhibition name has been painted and the brass plate with the organizer's name has been fixed to the wall. These postcards will be distributed to stores who handle the sales of souvenir postcards in Mol.

The colors and letterforms of the painted exhibition sign have been determined by the original design from the early 1920s. It has been suggested that the yellow and red of this sign has been selected since they represent the town colors while the blue represents the [Belgian] Liberal Party's colors. The Van Doorens were one of the first Liberal Party families in Mol. The official red and yellow for Mol comprise earth tones but the color values originally selected for the factory sign are very close to the red, yellow, and blue utilized for patterning in their textile production. Since the sign was designed in the early 1920s, the De Stijl project may have also influenced the original color selection. The letterforms mirror the square grid used to develop pattern design for the Louis Van Dooren Factory. Formal aspects of the letterforms—cap size, weight, letter spacing, and word spacing—for the exhibition sign are all reproduced from the original factory sign. At one time there was a rectangular object on the facade near the doorbell which identified the factory. Without knowing its precise material conditions, I am using the traditional brass plate as a marker for the public identifying the exhibition organizers and to locate a point where circulation can begin. Finally, the postcard of the new facade documents one more stage of development and transformation of the factory building. This part of the installation produces a popular souvenir for the public which later can be archived by the city as



Michael Asher, Vrij Genootschap Voor de Beeldende Kunst, Mol, Belgium, *Intentie en Rationele Vorm*, September 19–November 2, 1987. Facade of the building showing the brass plaque engraved with the name of the exhibition organizers installed next to the entrance. Photograph by Michael Asher.

Overleaf: detail of Michael Asher, Vrij Genootschap Voor de Beeldende Kunst, Mol, Belgium, *Intentie en Rationele Vorm*, September 19–November 2, 1987. Facade of the building with signage and the brass plaque by the entrance, as designed by Asher.



an addition to all other memorabilia, which will eventually form a fragmented narrative for Molenstraat Nr. 14."¹

While Asher's work was initially symbolic in nature, it proved to have real ramifications on the future of the building project. An architect had been hired and a plan already approved to rotate the entire building by forty-five degrees and cover its facade with glazed tiles. According to curator and art historian Frederik Leen, who organized the exhibition, "Asher's work emphasized the architectural qualities of the existing building and its ideological connotation of labor and exploitation . . . The architect's proposition was revealed as ideological manipulation that (ab) used the remembrance of the workers' exploitation as an alibi for cultural nostalgia and a cover up of the past."² As the architect had governmental affiliations, there was soon criticism of the exhibition and pressure was applied to the counselor of culture to address it. A year later, after an election changed local party leadership, the project was halted, the architect removed, and the cultural center never came to fruition at Molenstraat Nr. 14.

1. Exhibition handout with Asher's project description, "Michael Asher/Installation Mol, 19.09.87–02.11.87," 1987, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

2. Frederik Leen, "Asher's Model of Mimetic Rationality / Rational Mimesis," in *Michael Asher* (Villeurbanne: Le Nouveau Musée, 1991), 38.

December 2, 1986–January 17, 1987

A Southern California Collection

Cirrus Gallery

Los Angeles, California

Cirrus Gallery presented the group exhibition *A Southern California Collection* to coincide with the arrival of the city's first large-scale art fair, ICAF LA86 (International Contemporary Art Fair, Los Angeles). To introduce out-of-towners to the history of L.A. art, gallery founder Jean Milant invented a fictitious erudite art collecting couple ("The McCoys"), staging the gallery as their art-filled home. Across rooms appointed with furniture and decor, the show featured the real art of nearly 170 Southern California artists from the 1960s, when the fictional couple ostensibly moved to L.A., to the present.¹

When asked to participate, Asher proposed an artwork that served as an active information and fundraising hub for F.A.R., the Foundation for Art Resources (1977–2017). Conceived by L.A. gallerists Morgan Thomas, Constance Lewallen, and Claire Copley as a nonprofit organization operating outside the gallery structure, F.A.R. presented and funded hundreds of artists' works across myriad forms including films, videos, books, lectures, performances, and site-specific installations. In 1980, at the initiation of artists Dorit Cypis and Christina Ritchie, it adopted a radical leadership model of working artist volunteers who fulfilled both board and staff responsibilities for three-year terms. At the time of the Cirrus exhibition, the board included artists (and Asher's students) Cindy Bernard and Liz Larner with Asher serving on the Board of Advisors.

His work was a wall display with the slogan INFLUENCE YOUR CULTURE. DONATE TO F.A.R. painted above a plywood shelf on which information was presented about the organization's history and planning, board of directors, and revenues and expenditures. Asher designed return envelopes, printed with F.A.R.'s mailing address and stuffed with a two-page "history and purpose" solicitation letter, which were available from a wall-mounted plexiglass box. The letter begins, "F.A.R. was founded in 1977 to curate and produce work that was unconventional either in its ideas, its format, or its presentation, and that was not funded by traditional arts organizations. From public lectures and new music performances to site specific artists' installations, the widely varying activities that constitute F.A.R.'s programming have provided Los Angeles with its primary source of alternative forums for intellectual discourse and innovative art production."²

Asher's work proposed a stark counter-model to the conceit of the Cirrus Gallery's exhibition, which celebrated the private collector as both a bastion of cultural history and an agent of artistic support. Against the backdrop of a commercial gallery trafficking in private art sales as the accrual of fiscal and cultural capital, Asher's promotional solicitation advocated for a fundamentally different form of patronage and investment: the direct philanthropic support of F.A.R. Leveraging

the potential of an individual creative act, Asher's artwork generated publicity for an important L.A. cultural entity that served many artists and supported speculative and non-commercial artforms outside the gallery system. Asher's work was intended to reach beyond the gallery. According to his notes, "The letters were made as part of the installation so the viewer could take it home and consider the problem."³



Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles, California, USA, *A Southern California Collection*, December 2, 1986–January 17, 1987. Installation view. Courtesy Cirrus Gallery.

1. Milant in conversation with the authors, March 7, 2024.

2. Asher's distributed handout for F.A.R., 1987, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

3. Asher's unpublished notes on *A Southern California Collection*, "1987, Cirrus," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

October 13–November 26, 1989

D&S Ausstellung

Kunstverein in Hamburg

Hamburg, Germany

"Hamburg takes much of its trash to East Germany. Get the figures on this."¹

So reads one note Asher made on a trip to Hamburg in advance of the group exhibition *D&S Ausstellung*.² If circulation is at the heart of many of Asher's works, in this case it was the circulation of trash that took on significance. For this project, he produced a series of eight postcards, each featuring a different waste-hauling truck as it waited at the border outside Hamburg that divided West and East Germany. The images, taken for Asher by photographer André Lützen, capture the individual trucks from a similar, flattering angle, so the vehicles fill most of the frame. Details regarding the make of each truck, its destination, and the location and date of the photograph were listed on the reverse of each card. They were exhibited and also available for sale in the postcard carousels of several local bookstores and in the Kunstverein's gift shop for the duration of the show. The postcards' serial repetition of the trucks' rectilinear metal hulls evoke 1980s minimalist sculptures such as Donald Judd's "multicolored works," that he produced in Switzerland during this time, and Haim Steinbach's arrangements of common objects meant as critiques of commodity fetishism. Asher's piece deploys similarly minimal forms, but his are literally freighted with the decomposing leftovers of capitalist production. Choosing the ephemeral format of the postcard as the work's means of circulation, Asher seems to implicate artistic production itself as part of the global trafficking of waste across borders.

The piece documents the transfer of garbage, yet this was also a financially incentivized transaction. The more toxic the waste, the more money the GDR was paid to receive it. Asher noted that the landfill sites for which much of this industrial waste from the West was destined had been generated by the East's own extraction of natural resources for export. Midway through the exhibition, the Berlin Wall fell, initiating Germany's reunification. Asher's photographs highlighted the fact that the two were already united through their economic interdependence. Communism on one side of the iron curtain was still subjugated to the global dominance of capitalism. Artist Allan Sekula later reflected on this project in light of other works by Asher that help us to see matter in motion: "The preoccupation with the flows of waste, with plumbing and heating—with what, in American parlance, are termed utilities—is central to Michael Asher's work. The realm of culture is always shadowed by the realm of utility, in an often very funny enactment of the old-fashioned Marxist hierarchy of base and superstructure, grafted onto an appreciation of the specific Duchampian origins of the readymade."³



Michael Asher, Kunstverein Hamburg, Hamburg, West Germany, *D&S Ausstellung*, October 13–November 26, 1989. Facades of retail stores where postcards were for sale.

1. Asher's unpublished notes on the *D&S Ausstellung* project, n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
2. Curated by Frank Barth, Jürgen Schweinebraden Frhr. v. Wichmann Eichhorn, and Thomas Wulffen, the exhibition was based on an unclear premise that referenced the postmodern simulacrum, Marshall McLuhan, and electronic media. "D&S" was meant as a "camouflage of a brand name" for the show; the D stood for "Different" and the S stood for "Simulated." Press release for *D&S Ausstellung*, 1989, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
3. Allan Sekula, "Michael Asher - Down to Earth," in Markus Brüderlin, ed., *Michael Asher*, (Vienna: Kunstraum Wien, 1996), 33.

November 22, 1989–February 18, 1990

l'art conceptuel, une perspective

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

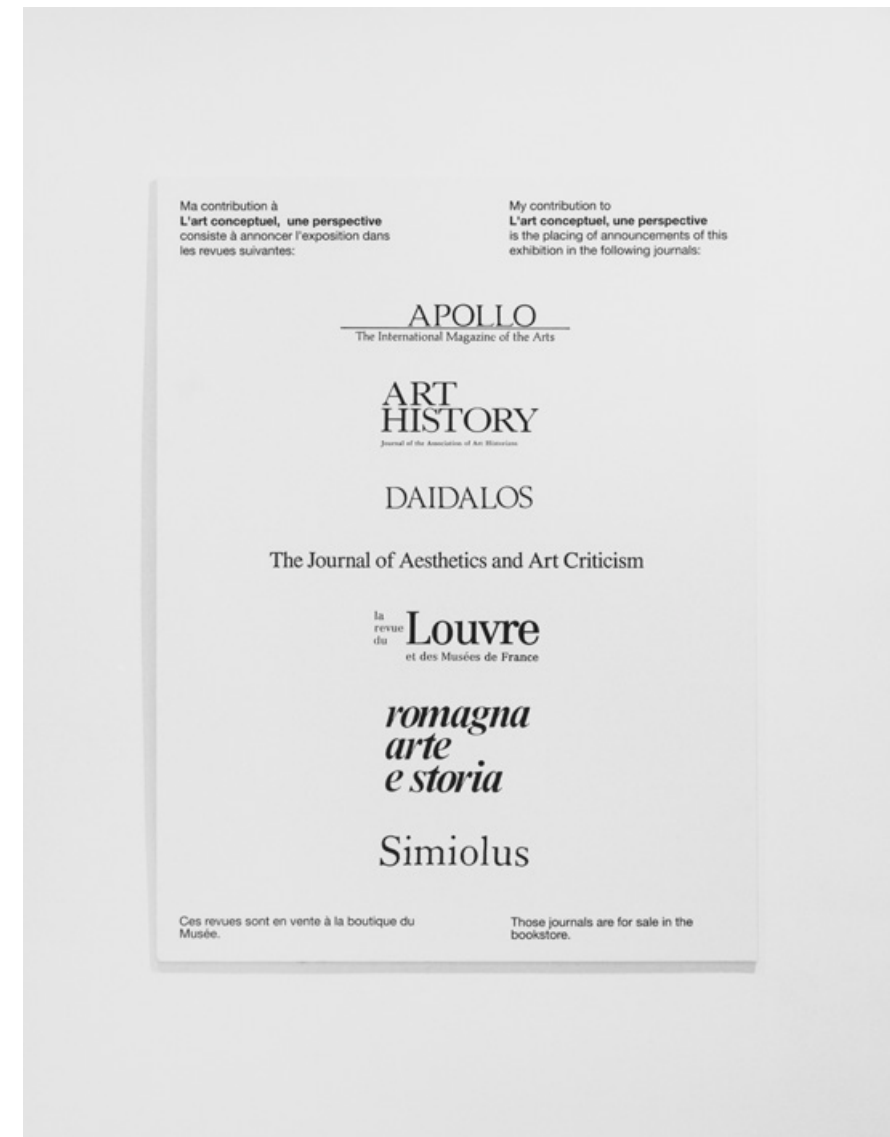
Paris, France

(Traveled to Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montreal, Montreal, Canada:

August 5–October 21, 1990)

The group exhibition *l'art conceptuel, une perspective*, curated by Claude Gintz, sought to begin "building, a posteriori, something like a history of conceptual art."¹ The exhibition gathered artworks made in the 1960s and '70s by thirty-seven artists, nearly all from Western Europe and the US and nearly all men. Asher agreed to contribute, though he almost never participated in historical group surveys and declined the curator's request to remake one of his site-specific works. Instead, he asked both participating museums to place advertisements for the show in seven academic journals: *Daidalos* (published in Germany), *Romagna Arte e Storia* (Italy), *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* (France), *Simiolus* (the Netherlands), *Art History* (the UK), and *Apollo* and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (both US).² The publications' countries mirrored those of the artists, and thus were, according to the show, the birthplaces of conceptual art.

It is clear from simply paging through the publications that they were not the typical contexts in which the modern and contemporary host museums of *l'art conceptuel* would normally advertise. For the run of the show, copies were available for purchase in the museums' bookshops, where they looked conservative and plainly out of place. The ads were minimal, listing the artists and contributors to the catalog, but offering no acknowledgement of Asher's project. He had chosen scholastic venues of art history (peer-reviewed essays, or philosophical texts on aesthetics) and connoisseurship (coverage meant for museum officials and private dealers, regarding objets d'art or the collection of King Wilhelm II, for example). As such, his project effectively characterized the making of such an exhibition as a dusty, dry, and somewhat funerary act.³ Gintz's exhibition marked the passage of conceptual artworks into the sanctioned halls of the museum with its mandates to canonize and preserve. This prospect was all the more epitaphic since it ran counter to the ephemeral and institution-critical aspects of conceptualism. On the other hand, Asher's ad campaign was a conceptualist move done in real time using the magazine page as its exhibition site. Asher thought of it as a passing of the baton: if conceptual art was now in the hands of art historians, it was up to them to carry the movement's spirit forward and to denaturalize habitual practices of art and institutions. As he states in the exhibition's catalog, "historical objectification ought to be accelerated while there is still a collective experience and memory which can assist in the clarity of an analysis simultaneously, opening up a space to ask fundamental questions regarding history making."⁴



Michael Asher, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montreal, Montreal, Canada, *l'art conceptuel, une perspective*, August 5–October 21, 1990. Wall panel in the museum's bookstore listing publications featuring advertisements placed by Michael Asher.

1. Claude Gintz, "'l'art conceptuel, une perspective': Notes on an Exhibition Project," in Claude Gintz, ed., *L'Art conceptuel, une perspective*, (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989), 19.
2. The advertisements appeared in: *Apollo* 332 and 341, *Art History* 12:3 and 13:2, *Daidalos* 33:15 and 36:15, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47:4 and 48:3, *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* 4 and 3, *Romagna Arte e Storia* IX:27 and X:29, and *Simiolus* 19:1/2 and 19:4.
3. Asher had initially considered running the ads in magazines for senior citizens. *Public Knowledge*, 24.
4. Michael Asher's statement in *L'Art conceptuel, une perspective*, 112.

May 22, 1991
Le Nouveau Musée
Villeurbanne, France

A photo Asher took of the spray-painted phrase “RENOVATION = EXPULSION” illustrates the cover of the catalog for his project in Lyon. This work responded to the gentrification of the city’s working-class neighborhoods, of which the rehabilitation of old buildings by cultural institutions was an early sign.

Le Nouveau Musée, a contemporary art venue located in a former school building, commissioned Asher to create a project while the institution was closed for renovations. Inside the building’s basement were large, cast-iron furnaces that were going to be thrown out. Asher sent the furnaces’ dismantled parts to the smelter in order to melt them down and cast the iron into several hundred small, tapered blocks.¹ In raised lettering on one side of the blocks was an explanation of their source material and an instruction that the blocks should be given for free to low-income residents facing housing crises or displacement. On the other side were the phone numbers of two nonprofit agencies for the defense of housing rights, as well as the message SE LOGER EST UN DROIT! N’ACCEPTEZ PAS L’EXPULSION OU LA DISCRIMINATION (HOUSING IS YOUR RIGHT! DON’T ACCEPT EVICTION OR DISCRIMINATION).² The blocks were given to social workers and local associations for distribution.

Photographs taken of the monumental, outmoded furnaces before their demolition evoke a bygone industrial era that had, by the early-’90s, given way to an economy driven by more “flexible” organization, information-driven networks, and financial speculation. Melting down these central heaters into hundreds of distributed blocks formally illustrated a transformation marked by the neoliberal dismantling of social support structures, requiring the individual to ask for help on their own. That the blocks pointed to the museum’s furnaces as their origins also called out the institution’s responsibility to the collective. In his catalog text, Asher suggested that the blocks could serve as housewares, paperweights, doorstops, or something to hold open a window; their density also suggests a more violent use, like bricks or cobblestones thrown during protests. Born out of a moment of urban transition, Asher’s work was essentially a small counter-measure in the face of ongoing dispossession and the rising costs of living. As sculptures, they were both practical domestic objects—functioning as heavy weights and providing access to a social service—as well as conceptual allegories of material, societal transformations.



Disassembled heater furnaces from Le Nouveau Musée at the smelting plant before they were melted down and re-cast for Michael Asher’s project in Villeurbanne, France, 1990.

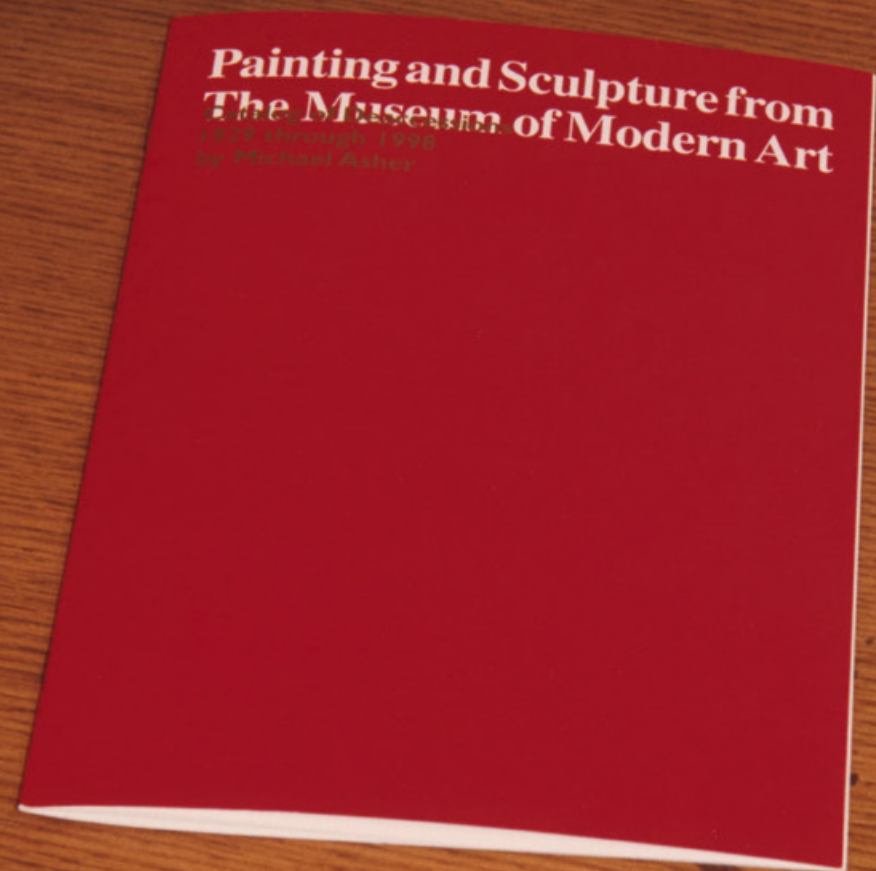
Overleaf: research photograph, Lyon, France, July 1990. Photograph by Michael Asher.

1. This work was the first of four by Asher to use heating systems. In fall 1991, he used radiators at the Carnegie Museum as pedestals. In 1992, he diagrammed the furnaces of Dijon’s local institutions for a solo exhibition at Le Consortium. For his well-known exhibition in 1992 at Kunsthalle Bern, Asher redirected the building’s heating pipes to lead all of its radiators into two front rooms.

2. The choice of these two organizations was deliberate: Action Lyonnaise pour l’Insertion Sociale par le Logement (ALPIL) and Association Villeurbannaise pour le Droit au Logement (AVDL) acted in the public’s interest without political or financial ties to real estate developers. Frederik Leen, “Asher’s Model of Mimetic Rationality / Rational Mimesis,” in *Michael Asher* (Villeurbanne: Le Nouveau Musée, 1991), 16.

FIGHT AGAINST SYSTEM!
DO THE RIOT THINGS!





Painting and Sculpture from the Museum of Modern Art: Catalog of Deaccessions 1929 through 1998, 1999

March 14–June 1, 1999

The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect

Museum of Modern Art

New York, New York

For MoMA's 1999 group exhibition *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, Asher took on the "myth of the Museum of Modern Art" by producing a catalog of deaccessioned artworks that listed 403 paintings and sculptures removed from the collection between 1929 and 1998. By the late '90s, deaccessioning had become a common practice. At MoMA, this precedent had been established in its founding days by collector and patron Lillie P. Bliss, who gifted over 150 great works of art to the museum, including many by Cézanne. Forming the core of MoMA's collection, Bliss's paintings were handed over with the stipulation that "the Modern should sell whatever it needed to buy works deemed more important."¹ At the time, MoMA's first director, Alfred H. Barr, lauded the metabolic character of the museum, which would be determined by the evolving nature of its holdings. From the outset, and continuing into the present, the modernist canon, as circumscribed by MoMA's collection, was, and is, unstable, subject to current trends or shifting institutional priorities determined by the social and economic conditions of a given historical moment.²

The Museum as Muse was meant to include works that addressed the concept and function of the museum. Asher's contribution was a publication made specifically for the occasion that reflected on how art history is written via institutional self-presentation.³ Asher based his design on a published record of works acquired by MoMA between 1967 and 1977. With a red cover, a title in white serif font, and a subheading in smaller gold text, Asher's version is nearly identical to MoMA's publication save for the fact that its color is warmer and that its header and subheader are overlaid, a device he also deployed in his redesign of the Stuart Collection's stationery. Aping the museum's format, Asher asserted his version of history as equally important to the institution's proclaimed narrative. His itemized report contained previously unpublished information researched by a team of MoMA interns at his request and not only illuminated the critical role of deaccessioning in the shaping of the canon but also implicated the system and actors who determine the objects' fates. Asher also exposes a private, and often condemned, museum practice commonly shrouded from public view: the dumping of unattributed works and the selling of canonical ones that are integral to our cultural knowledge.

1. "Lillie P. Bliss's Legacy," in *MoMA Through Time*. https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/1930/lillie-p-bliss-legacy/. Accessed June 3, 2024.

2. As director of MoMA Glenn Lowry (1985–2025) stated in an interview, "It is by selling [a work] to get an even more important work that we became and are the most important museum of contemporary art in the world." Louise Nicholson, "Modern Master: Interview with Glenn Lowry," *Apollo* 165: 540 (February 2007), 27.

3. *Situation Aesthetics*, 172.

4. Asher's letter to Kynaston McShine, February 4, 1999, as cited in *Situation Aesthetics*, 178. Also, Asher's publication is included in the literature accompanying the sale of Stuart Davis's painting *Carrefour*. Christie's: *American Art*, November 19, 2015. <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5945996>. Accessed August 28, 2024.

5. Kirk Varnedoe, "A Note on Deaccessioning at the Museum of Modern Art," in Michael Asher, *Painting and Sculpture from the Museum of Modern Art: Catalog of Deaccessions, 1929 through 1998* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 5.

In its final form, Asher's catalog functioned as an analytical model for the study of unpromoted institutional practices. "I am depending upon the catalog to be a useful object rather than [its being regarded as] a symbolic object," Asher writes.⁴ Its potential functionality, however, triggered a deep anxiety on the part of the exhibition's curators who, in response, tightly controlled the catalog's public life. Just before it went to print, chief curator Kirk Varnedoe insisted on adding a disclaimer on the first page, undermining the authoritative validity of the project: "We have tried to cooperate with Michael Asher's request to have a list of works of painting and sculpture sold or exchanged by the Museum over the years. Given the time limitations of the project however, we have not been able to assure ourselves that the present list meets the criteria of completeness or accuracy we would require in a museum publication. Readers are thus cautioned to be aware of possible flaws."⁵ Varnedoe's warning distances the institution from Asher's project by tacitly questioning the artist's method and ultimately rendering the catalog illegitimate. Wary of drawing attention to the publication, the curators placed it in two covert locations: behind the front desk where it was available only upon request, and inside a wooden rack installed on the edge of a bench in the gallery. By doing so, they exacerbated the tension between the artist and the institution at the very heart of Asher's project.

**Painting and Sculpture in
The Museum of Modern Art**
Catalog of the Collection
January 1, 1977

Painting and Sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art: Catalog of the Collection, January 1, 1977 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977). Photograph by Carter Seddon.

Preceding pages:
Michael Asher, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York, USA, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, March 14–June 1, 1999. Installation view, museum bench with deaccession catalogs made available within the exhibition space. Photograph by Andrew Freeman.

Advertisements for California Institute of the Arts
Art in America, Vol. 88, No. 8, August 2000
Art in America, Vol. 88, No. 10, October 2000
New Art Examiner, Vol. 28, No. 2, October 2000
New Art Examiner, Vol. 28, No. 5, February 2001

Asher taught at the California Institute of the Arts from 1973 until 2008. In 1999, he responded to a call from the administration to art faculty inviting them to participate in advertising its MFA program in art magazines.¹ His project notes show that he explored context-driven ad copy ("Artforum is skeptical about our ability. Are you?" "Don't go to Cal Arts until you check us out on our website"²) and banal imagery. In the end, Asher designed three quarter-page print advertisements that were circulated four times.

Two identical ads appearing in *Art in America* enact a directive from his notes on one idea: "It makes no claims and positions itself as public information."³ The ads simply list, in alphabetical order, the names and websites of twenty-seven leading art school programs in the US and Europe (with CalArts bolded within the list), thereby functioning more like a directory than a promotion. Defying the basic imperative that an advertisement needs to stand out on a page, the copy, running as a single paragraph of text, was set in the same font as the magazine's nearby reviews and news items, making it somewhat indistinguishable from the editorial content. For the Chicago-based *New Art Examiner*, Asher took a more local approach, alphabetically listing the names and websites of eight Illinois art schools in typewriter font as one running paragraph of text that included CalArts at the end. In both designs, URLs are featured as prominently as school names and serve as potential students' only point of access.

"Use hill of used tires with just our name and website,"⁴ indicates another of Asher's notes. A third ad, also placed in *New Art Examiner*, did just that, superimposing CalArts's URL at a slight angle along the bottom of a black-and-white photograph of a vast tire junkyard. Depicting Southern California via a deflated image of automobile waste offers a view that contradicts the clichés of its open roads and spaces and invokes founding CalArts faculty member Allan Kaprow's infamous 1961 environment, *Yard*.⁵ Like the Stuart Collection stationery, Asher's ads are seamless interventions into the functional role of institutional self-presentation for which he does not claim authorship. They also express the artist's keen interest in actively draining the seductive potential of advertising to see what else might be revealed in its place.

Opposite:
 advertisement
 designed by Michael
 Asher for California
 Institute of the Arts.
Art in America,
 Vol. 88, No. 8,
 August 2000, 342.
 Photograph by
 Carter Seddon.

1. Asher was part of an ad-hoc Print Ad Committee, which also included Leslie Dick and Sam Durant.
2. Asher's unpublished notes on ideas for CalArts advertisements, n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
3. Annotation on a sketch in Asher's unpublished notes on ideas for CalArts advertisements, n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
4. Asher's unpublished notes on ideas for CalArts advertisements, n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
5. According to Durant, who assisted Asher in laying out these ads on the computer, both Volkswagen's infamous "Think small." advertising campaign and Kaprow's *Yard* were active references. Conversation between Durant and the authors, February 19, 2024.

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Circle 91

September 7, 2000–September 9, 2001, First Rotation of Student Reinstallation
Made in California: Now
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Los Angeles, California

June 29, 2002–August 2003, Second Rotation of Student Reinstallation
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Los Angeles, California

Upon accepting an invitation from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) to participate in the group exhibition *Made in California: Now*, Asher proposed that students from the nearby Fairfax High School reinstall a gallery of the museum's permanent collection. The project was his first engagement with young people as his "primary receiver."¹ Produced by LACMA Lab, the museum's education initiative which had been recently inaugurated to advance "new forms of display,"² Asher's installation comprised two parts: the creation of a framework whereby the students reorganized the display of 19th century European artworks in the Palmer Gallery, and a series of "before" and "after" photographs hung in the Boone Gallery. Due to its popularity, the project was repeated and a second student-led reinstall took place in LACMA's Modern and Contemporary Art Council Gallery in 2002. Asher included clear procedural guidelines in both his initial proposal and his contract with the museum in order to safeguard the students' curatorial freedom against any oversight from LACMA's staff. An experiment in egalitarianism and role reversal, his project "gave young people an opportunity to order historical artifacts in a way they would prefer to experience them."³

Like many of Asher's intrusions into institutional practice, the artwork was authored by Asher but carried out by others. A memo titled "Planning/Approval Procedure" was provided to both the students and museum staff, listing the steps required to complete the installation—from an initial meeting with Asher to discuss the project, to a series of meetings with the heads of each department including education, curatorial, conservation, and exhibitions—to the final construction of the show.⁴ The students were instructed to use all the artworks currently on view and to adhere to the modest budget of five thousand dollars. Over the course of three months, the students met twice a week to discuss the installation and the history of the art objects. All communication between students and staff was facilitated by an outside mediator hired by Asher.⁵ In the contract, LACMA agreed to allow the students autonomy if they positioned the work in such a manner that it could not be damaged, ensured the viewer's safety was never in doubt, and made all texts, such as wall labels, legible.⁶

1. Asher's unpublished lecture notes, "Made in California Now," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
2. Asher's unpublished lecture notes for a symposium at UCLA, in "Preface (Invitation)" section from "LACMA," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
3. Asher's unpublished lecture notes for a symposium at UCLA, in "Project Structure," section from "LACMA," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
4. "Michael Asher, Planning/Approval Procedure," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
5. Flora Ito served in this role in the first reinstallation while Mara Lonner did so for the second.
6. Asher's unpublished lecture notes for Serpentine Gallery, London, "Student Reinstallation," June 24, 2003 (Updated 2006), Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.



Announcement poster for *Made in California: Now*, 2000. Courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, USA.

Despite Asher's work being "no more than a structure," the students' redesign radically exposed the limitations of curatorial convention.⁷ In the first reinstallation, a highly untraditional scheme of green, orange, and purple lighting illuminated the masterpieces as though they were in a nightclub. Disregarding the rules of the canon, the students chose to prominently display lesser-known works like Sir Edwin Landseer's *A Group of Animals, Geneva* (ca. 1851)—a large painting of donkeys, cows, a dog, and a pony—while relegating a classic by Eugène Delacroix to a stairwell.

In the second reinstallation titled *The Beat Road*, the students painted the gallery dark indigo blue and installed large mirrors on two facing walls to create distorted reflections of works by Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, René Magritte, and others. The paintings were hung off the wall on industrial metal poles atop eccentrically-shaped indigo blue pedestals placed in the middle of the room. During the meetings, the students had become fascinated by the labels affixed to the backs of paintings that track their exhibition history and previous ownership—in essence, the works' circulation within a network of social and economic transactions. The students made this otherwise obscured information visible by installing the artworks in the round, displaying the provenances as equal to their visual content. They also offered their own deeply subjective interpretations of the works in a didactic text that they plastered on a recycled bus bench and further dramatized the scene with store-bought replicas of streetlights. Music by John Coltrane continuously played in the gallery, contextualizing the artworks within the transformative Jazz era.⁸ As Stephanie Barron, senior curator at LACMA, noted, "The students created a metaphorical city, where art was inextricable from life."⁹

Heightening affective experience through relational display, they also subverted a central modernist dictum: that the artwork is a self-contained object best viewed in isolation. Instead, the students showed that together, the works could form an interconnected, pulsating mirage. This optimistic reimagining is underscored by their subjective texts, many written as first-person narratives. Anticipating audience response, they claimed responsibility for their work by disclosing their motivations and the desired effect of their display. "We hope that our efforts please you and that the unorthodox presentation of the art and utilization of three-dimensional space in no way frightens you," they wrote in their collective curatorial statement.¹⁰

Reflecting on the overall process in his notes, Asher underscored his commitment both to the project's framework and to the subsequent analysis of its result. He writes, "I wanted to challenge my practice, where my projects are carefully planned on a visual level. I was hoping that the visuals in this case would be totally beyond my control yet the critical dimension could withstand these unknowns. I also wanted to demonstrate that the artist could be responsible for the structure and not its visualization and this might be a productive strategy



Fairfax High School students reinstalling the display of 19th century European artworks in the Palmer Gallery, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, as part of Michael Asher's project for the exhibition *Made in California: Now*, 2000. Courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, USA.

7. Asher's unpublished lecture notes for Serpentine Gallery, London, "Student Reinstallation," June 24, 2003 (Updated 2006), Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

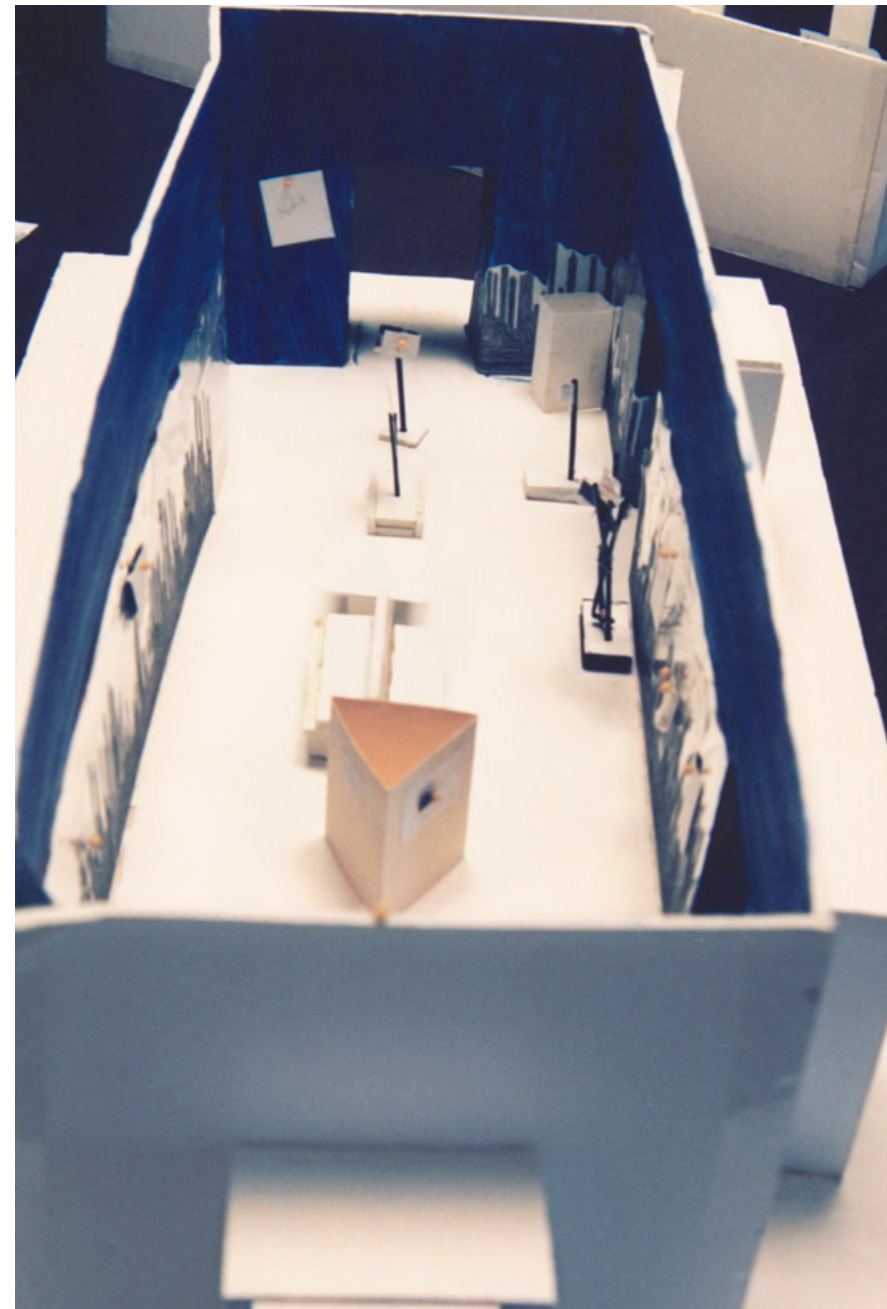
8. *Situation Aesthetics*, 109.

9. Stephanie Barron tribute to Asher at the Michael Asher Memorial at CalArts, December 7, 2012.

10. *Situation Aesthetics*, 109.

to initiate social change."¹¹ In order to subvert ingrained structures of authority, Asher not only prevented the staff's imposition of professional knowledge and personal taste but also relinquished his own control. This is evident in LACMA's documentation of the students' work: two rows of photographs taken from consistent viewpoints before and after the installation. The images in the bottom row were of the museum professionals' previous installations while those in the top row documented the students' reinstall.

"Increasingly this work makes clearer the shortcomings we have in education," Asher writes. "It underscores how high school curricula [have] been designed to prepare youths to work in a corporate world. They are prepared to take positions where critical [thinking] is unwanted—and only self-motivation which will further the corporation and not the individual."¹² Elsewhere, Asher states: "This project was meant to be a model which proposed youths as cultural producers rather than willing consumers of culture."¹³ In finding language to articulate the project, Asher adopts the bureaucratic vernacular of education, repeating phrases like *model for experimentation*, *comparative analysis*, and *maximizing the student's potential*. His notes read like a direct appeal to educators to implement an alternative pedagogy, one which abandons a top-down approach. He deploys language to effect real change in teaching methods, a shift that he believed would empower young people to drive their own processes of learning through free, unguided inquiry. Asher states, "this artwork is meant to generate many other types of experiments in arts education and museum critique."¹⁴



Exhibition model made by students from Fairfax High School for the second rotation of the student reinstall for Michael Asher's project for Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, USA, 2002–2003. Photograph by Michael Asher.

11. Asher's unpublished lecture notes for a symposium at UCLA, in "Purpose/My Practice" section from "LACMA," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

12. Asher's unpublished notes "Student Reinstallation (Education)," April 6, 2003, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

13. Asher's unpublished lecture notes, "Made in California Now," n.d., Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

14. Asher's unpublished lecture notes for Serpentine Gallery, London, "Student Reinstallation," June 24, 2003 (Updated 2006), Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

53°16'N 9°57'O 52°55'N 9°8'O, 2003

September 6, 2003

Outlook

Kunstverein Springhornhof
Neuenkirchen, Germany

Asher and six European artists were asked to contribute to an open-air exhibition titled *Outlook*, organized by the Stiftung Springhornhof in the North German town of Neuenkirchen. Since 1967, this foundation had used government funding to host exhibitions inside a former horse stable (called the Kunstverein Springhornhof) and to commission site-specific works in the surrounding rural landscape. Asher met with the town's civic agencies and compelled them to give him comprehensive technical maps of the supply lines of power, water, and gas in the region, which he copied and republished in a custom-designed box set.¹

The woods and farmland in this area are picturesque and when Asher described the work informally, he would often show photographs of the landscape to give a sense of the topography. In contrast with the other site-specific sculptures that sat on top of the land, Asher's project offered a functional picture of the infrastructural networks that lay beneath the earth's surface and that had intruded upon the region's natural landscape even before the artworks did. The work also reflected Asher's use of the readymade in a non-arbitrary manner. To make the blueprints' information legible to the general public served by these utilities, Asher asked staff at the Stiftung Springhornhof to create a key that identified and explained the locations of the gas main lines and their pressure levels; the water supply pipes, valves, hydrants, and purified water sources; and the voltage transmission cables, copper shields, substations, and connecting points in the Neuenkirchen area. The maps demonstrated that the region was divided up by property lines yet tied together by circulatory systems of material and economic interdependence.

Asher wrote to art historian Frederik Leen that these documents "first show the utilities' overall district and then zoom into the Kunstverein to show its hook up." He further explained, "These are reproductions of maps that the service companies use to fix or add to the system."² Asher notes the heightened American security following September 11, 2001, writing that in the US, "we are regularly reminded [of] how terrorism will destroy our infrastructure and it must be carefully protected," whereas in Germany these pipeline diagrams were willingly provided by local utility companies.³ On the occasion of the show, Asher's boxed edition containing the maps and the custom legend were available to buy for twenty-four euros, and the contents were also displayed on the facade of the Kunstverein Springhornhof.⁴ At one point, the power went out in the village and the local mayor, who was also an electrician, ran straight to the Kunstverein to consult the plans.

1. According to Dirck Möllmann, "The total of seventeen maps were provided by Stadtwerke Schneverdingen (six maps of gas lines), Wasserversorgungsverband Rotenburg (seven maps of water lines) and Ewe (Ems-Weser-Elbe, four maps of electric lines). Dirck Möllmann, "Electricity was Off for 22 Minutes," in *OUTLOOK / Landschaftsbezogene Kunstprojekte in der Lüneburger Heide* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver and Kunstverein Springhornhof e.V., 2005), 51.

2. Asher letter to Frederik Leen, June 26, 2004, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

3. Asher letter to Frederik Leen, June 26, 2004, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

4. Bettina v. Dziembowski in conversation with the authors, September 12, 2024.



Research photographs showing the landscape of Neuenkirchen, Germany, 2003. Photographs by Michael Asher.

February 8–June 30, 2010
How Many Billboards? Art in Stead
MAK Center for Art and Architecture
West Hollywood, California

In 2010, the MAK Center for Art and Architecture organized a widespread public art exhibition presenting twenty-one new artworks on billboards across Los Angeles. According to the press release, "Artists working in the vein of California's conceptual art movement were commissioned to create a new work that critically responded to the medium of the billboard and interpret its role in the urban landscape."¹

From around 2003 to 2009, Asher made extensive project notes imagining how advertisements might speak. Brainstorming ad copy in which billboards directly addressed drivers, he developed a long list of rhetorical questions around various subjects: consumerism and corporate advertising; the current recession and poverty; how inequality is exacerbated by politicians and banks; and President George W. Bush's global policies including arming and disarming Iraq with US tax dollars, defining "enemies" as being good for American business, and controlling access to oil at all costs. In one drafted slogan Asher concludes, "Most of us are too small to succeed."² This rumination on smallness when at the mercy of market power led to his eventual decision to redeploy an existing commercial artifact within the space of the billboard. In Asher's own words:

"My contribution to the exhibition of billboards produced by artists and assembled by the MAK will (if accepted) be a reproduction of a 1959 print ad designed by Doyle, Dane, Bernbach for the marketing of Volkswagen in the US often referred to as the "Think small." ad campaign. "Think small." was a tag line in the 1959 ad and, at some point in time, became the name of the concept for the campaign. . . . Hopefully it is evident that one of the many reasons I have selected the "Think small." print ad for a billboard is that this is the only historically accurate way of presenting it if one were to take the liberty and place it into a billboard space. Since this ad and its attendant campaign embodied a critique of the dominant modes of advertising used to mobilize and increasingly inflate desire, perhaps we can begin to ask ourselves about its merits in relation to the strategies used to assemble textual and visual/formal meaning in contemporary advertising? We can also ask ourselves if the meaning of an ad campaign shifts once its remedy (perhaps fortuitous) fits reality such as that which occurred between wage stagnation and the need for unfettered consumption? Finally, if it were requested that

we seek historical models to help us better understand the value of recent art practices which have adopted codes as well as modes of production from advertising, I believe the "Think small." campaign would be one which could offer us some insight especially since we can see when the comparison might mix apples and oranges and when it does not."³

Since the "Think small." advertisement was designed to fit the format of magazines, Asher's dutiful enlargement only filled the left third of the billboard's horizontal expanse. The remaining blank space exaggerated the original ad's calculated use of emptiness and diminutive scale, as well as its awkward retrofit within this new site.⁴ By installing a magazine ad from fifty years ago high above the street, Asher's project implicitly questioned the exhibition's precept that art is, by nature, more critically self-aware than design. His work appeared to level both art and advertising by reintroducing a commercial image within a commercial space. His appropriation also effectively reversed the mechanisms of marketing itself whereby the audience is convinced to spend. The 1959 campaign had been a groundbreaking exercise in minimalism and critique, ushering in a new paradigm that advertised not only a product but a way of life; in 2010 the ad became a powerful note-to-self pulled from the past to undermine a ubiquitous site of capitalist manipulation at a time of widespread economic precarity. Driving by, passersby would see a calculatedly misfit, hard-to-read ad for an obsolete product.

So too, Asher's work also signaled how the VW bug was an idea and not just a car: "In the end I would like to better understand how the VW was transformed from a mode of transportation originally designed and produced to assist the destructive forces of the German war effort in WWII to the iconic and discursive status which constitutes its contemporary reception. Hopefully this work opens up a small aspect of this process."⁵



Michael Asher, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, West Hollywood, California, USA, *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, February 8–June 30, 2010. Billboard designed by Michael Asher, located on Sunset Boulevard. Photograph by Kimberli Meyer.

1. <https://www.makcenter.org/exhibitions/how-many-billboards-art-in-stead>. Accessed August 28, 2024.
2. Asher's unpublished notes, "Possibilities for Billboard (In Relation to Recession)," March 2009, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
3. Asher's unpublished notes, "Billboard Notes: Michael Asher," September 24, 2009, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.
4. Asher's work proved attractive to vandals and was tagged before it could be professionally documented in its first location on Sunset Boulevard. It was thus reprinted and reinstalled in a second location on Glendale Boulevard where it remained for several months. Kimberli Meyer in conversation with the authors, July 18, 2024.
5. Asher's unpublished notes, "Billboard Notes: Michael Asher," September 24, 2009, Michael Asher Archive, Michael Asher Foundation.

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