

On John Armleder's Furniture Showroom  
(A Misguided Tour)  
Bob Nickas

Sculpture was once famously defined as what you bump into when you step back to look at a painting. This almost never happens with John Armleder. Beginning with *7 June 1980*, designated as FS1, 1979, he introduced his concept of Furniture Sculpture more than thirty years ago. In these works, everyday objects such as chairs, tables, cabinets, and lights, but also musical instruments, mirrors, and even surfboards, accompany canvases or are painted upon themselves. There are precedents, to be sure, most notably the combines of Rauschenberg, the domestic sculpture of Oldenburg and Artschwager (and the glories of formica), as well as the inescapable readymades of Duchamp. There are any number of particular examples which might be useful in terms of connecting the dots between artists and ideas, setting the stage for the Furniture Sculpture, so to speak, never forgetting that Armleder is very much a master of staging. But in terms of opening up to a larger view, one must look to the painted elements to more fully grasp the radicality of the artist's gesture, revealing the canny mind at work here, and above all his intention to interweave art and life, originality and appropriation, folly and fidelity, abstraction and representation, the realms of the real and the unreal.

And what has been painted? Dots, circles, stripes, checkerboards, monochromes, seemingly random marks and pours of paint. In terms of the language that was popular at the time the Furniture Sculpture began taking on greater visibility in the mid-'80s, these signs of painting were themselves readymade. Armleder's paintings were as instantly recognizable to us as the vernacular objects with which they had been paired. But when combined with an armchair or flanked by a pair of conga drums [FS143, 1987], geometric or gestural abstractions would partake of a new reality. Not only would paintings and vernacular objects simultaneously ground and liberate one another, they would perform, and often comically. Why, for example, was a painting immersed in a fish tank? [FS166, 1987] Why had a chair been hung thirty feet above the ground, from a tree trunk in the park? [FS87b, 1985] Armleder's gestures can be both absurd and direct, an artist for whom there has always been a reverence and an irreverence with regard to the act of painting. He didn't pull the rug out from under painting. The rug became the painting's support [FS30, 1982]. And the figure/ground relationship was established from the moment the viewer walked into the room and gazed down upon a composition to which he or she would momentarily participate. Armleder's engagement with happenings and performance in the '60s and '70s should not be underestimated, for their insistence on the reciprocal nature of an audience/performer situation, as well as for the animation of objects and instruments. In later years, his use of furniture, both painted and unadorned, set on the floor, tilted and balanced against the wall, or installed on the ceiling, would amplify their other reality as props, and for Armleder so too would painting function as such.

Armleder has never made a figurative painting, and yet the human form is always present in relation to the Furniture Sculpture. He has likewise never produced a representational painted scene, and has never had to. Four chrome stools with red vinyl cushions, placed in front of a blue monochrome hung low to the wall [FS196, 1988], represent a classic streamlined '60s diner as well as, or even more evocatively than a photo realist painting. This calls to mind one of the great strengths of this work: the power of suggestion, and the exchange between abstraction and narrative. In a museum, when one encounters a pair of large monochromes behind a bench messily heaped with children's clothes and two

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skateboards on the floor [FS237, 1990], one imagines that this could very well be a scene

displaced from a collector's home. Painting, for Armleder, is also intimately related to design and decor, to presentation and display. His friend Olivier Mosset once joked that some artists make paintings that you can hang above the sofa, while John gives you the painting *and the sofa*. It's an amusing remark on the face of it, and certainly true, yet it also points to the fact that art is routinely subjected to the vicissitudes of daily life, to happy and unhappy coincidence. Coming from Fluxus, Armleder welcomes chance while at the same time he orchestrates the set of circumstances we embrace as art. When you encounter a pair of electric guitars hung on either side of an otherwise austere canvas you acknowledge the fact that Armleder intends not only to instrumentalize painting, but also the everyday. There are other artists who "sidelined" into furniture production, Donald Judd most notably, extending their esthetic from sculptural to functional realms, meaning they want their desk to function as a desk. John Armleder wants to repurpose and transform an object, meaning that he needs a desk to participate equally in a composition, to take its place within an arrangement, either harmoniously or anarchically. Simply put, this is the difference between a desk by an artist and Art.

John Armleder's Furniture Sculpture is the one aspect of his wide-ranging body of work which was given its own official designation. It appeared to dovetail neatly with the emergence of so-called Neo-Geo painting in the second half of the '80s, and the re-emergence of the readymade at around the same time. It was fortuitous, of course, but obscures the fact that Armleder is an artist who had been engaged with an intermingling of art and life since the mid-to-late '60s, and with geometric abstraction since the '70s. A hazy black-and-white photograph identified as *Installation*, 1967, has occasionally been reproduced in his catalogs. In it, we see a pair of tufted French boudoir chairs illuminated by a floor lamp in a darkened room, with a framed painting dimly visible in the background. Evocative of a Proustian film noir, it precedes by more than twenty years a trio of similar chairs, presented on a low platform, that constitute FS230, 1989. Another occasionally reproduced image which is captioned "Assemblage, Prison St.-Antonie, Geneva, 1968," offers a glimpse of a proto-Furniture Sculpture. Here, we see a table upended on a laundry line, as if held in mid-air by an open umbrella and a broom. Improvised while the artist was briefly held, and on friendly terms, as a conscientious objector for refusing his obligatory military service, the piece was recreated in 1992 for the exhibition, "1968," at Le Consortium in Dijon, France, underscoring its whimsical/political dimension.

Two years prior to the debut of his Furniture Sculpture, Armleder exhibited an animated tableaux of common objects which he titled, *Here Comes My Face*, 1977. An oscillating fan set on the floor turns in front of an upright mirror, while a bare lightbulb hung low from the ceiling sways back-and-forth in the breeze. While this may be as close to a self-portrait—at least rendered with objects—as the artist has ever come, we can clearly see that the Furniture Sculpture, a body of work that has been ongoing for more than thirty years now, regularly offers a glimpse of the man himself. Although John Armleder may neither surf [FS201, 1988] nor play the trombone [FS227, *Seafoam*, 1989], he has always maintained perfect poise and an elegantly incongruous balance. He walks into the room and one is met with a man meticulously dressed. Only after a moment do you realize that his tie is imprinted with puppies or skulls, and only when he turns to leave are you aware that his hair falls to his waist, although in a perfect braid. Unfailingly well-mannered, he is also possessed with a wry sense of humor and an incisive perception, gentlemanly and devilish in equal parts. If this also seems to describe the formally anarchic spirit of his Furniture Sculpture, it is certainly no coincidence. The man and his art are without doubt very well put together, a study in the equilibrium of poised and free-wheeling associations. And nowhere is this more evident than in his endlessly fascinating and mischievous work with Furniture and Sculpture.