

Laurie Parsons

“Security and Admissions Project,” 1992–93

Correspondence, photographs, press materials, and planning documents
Courtesy the New Museum, New York

Nancy Spero

**Exhibition catalogue and brochure from
“Nancy Spero: Works Since 1950,”
May 19–July 9, 1989**

Courtesy the New Museum, New York

Julie Ault & Susan Cahan

**Exhibition booklets from “Rhetorical Image
Resource Room,” 1991**

Courtesy the New Museum, New York

Julie Ault & Susan Cahan

**Exhibition documentation from “Rhetorical
Image Resource Room,” 1991**

Courtesy the New Museum, New York

“To live and die in the museum,” 1991

Sixteen guest books

Courtesy the New Museum, New York

Amalia Mesa-Bains

**Artist sketches and planning documents for
“The Living Altar,” 1991**

Courtesy the New Museum, New York

Laurie Parsons

“Security and Admissions Project,” 1992–93

VHS transferred to digital video, color, sound;

02:05:08 hr

Courtesy the New Museum, New York

Susan Cahan

“Responses to Nancy Spero: Works Since

1950,” 1989

VHS transferred to digital video, color, sound;

17:05 min

Courtesy the New Museum, New York

Julie Ault & Susan Cahan

**Audience responses to “Rhetorical Image
Resource Room,” 1991**

Courtesy the New Museum, New York

Laurie Parsons

**“Security and Admissions Project,”
1992–93**

Correspondence, meeting notes, and
planning material

Courtesy the New Museum, New York

Julie Ault
virtrine by windows

An assemblage of viewer responses collected during “Rhetorical Image Resource Room” was published in a small booklet produced by the New Museum. In the introduction, organizers Susan Cahan and Julie Ault explain that the chosen selection “is partial and suggestive of the range of responses generated and the potential for museums to create conditions for public dialogue and criticism around issues of cultural politics.”

In vitrine

A selection of archival material from “The Living Altar” and “To live and die in the museum,” organized in conjunction with the New Museum exhibition “The Interrupted Life,” September 13–December 29, 1991

Laurie Parsons
vitrine under monitors

“The Spatial Drive,” an exhibition held at the New Museum in 1992, focused on the emergence of art forms that fell between the categories of “art object” and “installation art.” The show called attention to specific characteristics of sites of display. For her contribution to the exhibition, artist Laurie Parsons collaborated with staff members in the Museum’s Admissions, Education, and Security Departments to shift the responsibility of framing and interpreting the artworks and exhibition theme away from the curator. In lieu of explanatory labels and texts, Parsons proposed that information about the art on view be offered through dialogue with people in the space—in most cases this meant in conversation with the Museum’s security guards and admissions staff.

The “Security and Admissions Project” facilitated real-time dialogue with visitors, emphasizing meaning as produced through exchange and highlighting the open-ended and personal nature of interpretation. Instead of relying on standardized mediation techniques, which usually deploy the written word, the project afforded visitors the chance to learn about the artworks through dialogue with Museum employees who arguably spend the most time in proximity to the artworks during the course of the exhibition. Working closely with a number of the show’s artists over the course of one year, Museum guards and admissions staff met with individual artists, visited studios, and learned about individual artworks. The project also challenged an “unspoken policy” of many institutions that museum guards should not offer personal opinions regarding works on display.

Displayed on this table are photocopies of a selection of original postcards from “Rhetorical Image Resource Room.” Throughout the run of the exhibition, the Museum received over four thousand responses that were pinned to the gallery walls. On the postcards, viewers filled out responses to questions such as “How do you attempt to understand a work of art? How do you see your role as a member of the museum’s audience? How do you think the museum perceives you?”

“Rhetorical Image Resource Room” was an educational project co-organized in 1991 by artist Julie Ault and Susan Cahan, then Education Curator, in conjunction with the larger New Museum exhibition “Rhetorical Image.” The curated space provided documentation and information on the artists and issues in the larger exhibition, and invited visitors to respond to topics raised by the exhibition and consider the role of art in society. Viewers filled out postcards in response to questions such as “How do you attempt to understand a work of art? How do you see your role as a member of the museum’s audience? How do you think the museum perceives you?” The Museum received over four thousand responses throughout the run of the exhibition. Describing the project in a subsequent publication, the organizers explain, “Our goal was to subtly shift the discursive focus onto voices which are seldom, if ever heard, to blur the distinction between speaker and listener, and to problematize the separation between authoritative and non-authoritative positions within the museum.”

To live and die in the museum

During the run of the “The Interrupted Life,” viewers were invited to contribute to a series of small collectively generated guest books that posed specific questions to the audience, such as “What purpose can art serve in the face of death?” and “Do you ever think suicide is an appropriate choice?” Presented here are sixteen of the original guest books, which were placed along the walls adjacent to “The Living Altar.” The select pages displayed here reflect the wide range of critical responses that directly address many of the themes discussed in the exhibition, and the greater cultural debates of the time. Collectively, these traces demonstrate the potential for art museums to serve as sites for dialogue and criticism amongst active viewers.

Amalia Mesa Bains

During the onset and early years of the AIDS epidemic in the '80s and '90s, the theme of death emerged as a significant and visible concern for many artists and activists. Directly responding to the ubiquity of this topic as well as its particular context at the time, New Museum Chief Curator France Morin organized “The Interrupted Life” (September 13–December 29, 1991). The exhibition brought together works that examined “how the significance of death is translated into a variety of contemporary artistic and cultural practices, through non-traditional visual representations.”

As an educational component of “The Interrupted Life,” “The Living Altar” was constructed in collaboration with the artist Amalia Mesa-Bains. Following the tradition of the Chicano celebration of Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead, the *ofrenda* [altar] combined customary offerings of candy skulls, flowers, and paper decorations with more personalized mementoes of the dead. During the course of the exhibition, Museum visitors were invited to bring personal or symbolic offerings to commemorate deceased relatives and friends. The artist sketches and installation views presented here document how the altar was constructed and formed through the donations of visitors.

Laurie Parsons

The video footage presented here documents the “Security and Admissions Project” developed by artist Laurie Parsons for the New Museum exhibition “The Spatial Drive” (September 27, 1992–January 3, 1993). The unedited footage consists of a series of vignettes showing Museum visitors conversing with security guards and admissions staff. The footage also depicts visitors and staff members interacting and discussing individual works such as Marina Abramović’s *Shoes for Departure* (1991), as well as works by Gretchen Faust, Rei Naito, and Kevin Warren. The video was coordinated by Education Curator Susan Cahan.

Susan Cahan

This video—conceived, directed, and produced by Susan Cahan, then Curator of Education at the New Museum—documents the voice of the audience during the New Museum presentation of “Nancy Spero: Works Since 1950” (May 19–July 9, 1989). Reflecting the audience at the time, the video includes interviews with a range of Museum visitors, from critics, tourists, high-school teachers, as well as artists including Julie Ault and Simon Leung. While the credits run at the end of the tape, Spero is shown watching and reacting to the audience interviews. The edited video was on display in the Museum lobby during the second half of the exhibition’s run. (The show was loaned from the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, but due to the New Museum’s 583 Broadway location could not accommodate all of the works and had to be split into two presentations.) Spero’s exhibition elicited a wide range of responses—some of which were highly charged and captured in the video—situated within feminist debates around mimicry and depictions of the female nude in the late 1980s.