

Some of the information in this publication is printed using an invisible ink, which fluoresces when viewed under an ultraviolet light, sometimes referred to as a black light.

THE BIG NOTHING OR LE PRESQUE RIEN

organized by guest curator Kerri Scharlin

The New Museum of Contemporary Art

583 Broadway, New York, NY 10012

On view January 15 to April 19, 1992

French Cultural Services

972 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10021

On view January 16 to February 28, 1992

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Kerri Scharlin

The Big Nothing

What is there to look at?... Is there anything here to see?... It seems there's nothing here... And then, hidden in some corner or behind some wall (as one's eyes adjust), the almost invisible contours of an "artwork" gradually begin to emerge. Peer closer at that all but imperceptible shift in the texture of the wall. Or run your hand across another wall to find an unexpected moment of heat. Are there messages encoded in these gestures? And what – if anything – do these refusals of the visual signify? What is suggested by these interventions that slip and slide around the boundaries of visual codes, that render representation itself mute, shy, overlooked, lacking? What you see is not what you get.

The artists in this exhibition ask viewers to look into emptiness. First of all, there is the presumed emptiness of the white, ideal museum space. That space may be, more than any picture, the archetypal image of twentieth-century art, and the single major convention through which all modernist art has passed. "A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a Medieval Cathedral," wrote Brian O'Doherty in *Artforum* in 1976:

*The outside must be sealed off. The walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor becomes polished so that you can click along clinically or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, "to take on its own life."*¹

It was in this hothouse of "purity" that modernism's thrust toward reduction was nurtured, pruned, refined. Inside these pristine walls, an art of the avant-garde staked its claim to expressing values and meanings increasingly dismissed by bourgeois society. In the absence of a larger social accountability and meaning, this was an art compelled to assert its own means as meanings. Born in the climate of loss, the project of modernism was one of defending art's existence against a society which no longer had use for it. The most striking motif of this response to loss is the penchant for reduction, the search for essence – for that which is most simple and elemental.

The Big Nothing asks the viewer to consider the ways in which, like an invisible pentimento, modernism's pristine white walls are

brushed with the “emptiness” of the modern era: the theology of God’s absence, the loss of commonly assumed moral directives, the loss of certainty in arenas of knowledge, the disintegration of traditional social structures, the alienating complexity of urban space and experience. But it also asks the viewer to contemplate the ways in which these losses, against which modernism has asserted itself, still bear their marks deep within our cultural unconscious.

For no loss is endured painlessly. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, observing that our early lives are a succession of separations from the mother’s body which we experience as losses, argues that these formative experiences instill a sense of “lack” in all of us. Those people or ideas – or objects – that we most value later in life, our objects of desire, are representatives of our attempt to eradicate or compensate for this lack. Obsessively overvalued, these compensatory objects become fetishes. The fetish is *presence* designed to efface that which is different, which is other, which is lacking.

And what is modernism – as it overvalues the formal qualities of

the art object and makes it stand in for the whole broad range of meanings and values that we desire from art – but a form of fetishism par excellence. Content is vehemently denied legitimacy, avoided like a plague, Clement Greenberg has said. But buried and hidden beneath modernism’s isolation and valorization of flatness and edge is an absence that these more or less effectively suppress – an absence of an adequate social milieu within which larger meanings can be addressed and received. Like the fetish, the art object masquerades as pure presence, its function being precisely to deny absence, to fill, by slight of hand, the “lack in being.”

What are the implications of conceiving of modernism as paradigmatically fetishistic, and even of the museum space itself as a fetish object? First and foremost, it suggests that we might explore and challenge modernism’s politics of suppression of difference and of anything that threatens its unity of dogma. In its dis-ease with absence or anything that might be suggestive of a weaker element, modernism must legitimate “mastery” and “genius” and a host of other hierarchical principles that serve to consolidate power in the hands of the “strong.” Modernism must

continued

present a view of history as linear, as though some great all-knowing mind were inside of history, directing it forward and sweeping us passively along with it. And just as in the psychoanalytic arena, in which the male child discovers sexual difference and power by looking, the art world has privileged male vision. Nothing to see becomes nothing of worth.

One wonders then, what has fallen by the wayside in this hyper-visual, “what you see is what you see” monolithic schema that modernism proposed. What discourses have been excluded, what differences ignored?

By shifting focus from a perceptual experience of the object towards an investigation of the conditions that permitted the object to exist and determine its production and reception, a number of artists in the 1960s began asking the viewer to look between objects – at the relationships that connect them and at the conventions upon which they rest – in order to see how they are inscribed within language and institutional power. For a time, it seemed that the very object itself had been scared out of

existence. In its place, conceptual artists presented us with propositions, legal contracts, photo documentation, and information “bits.” This move toward ephemeralization was radically antivisual. Aside from whatever else was accomplished when in 1960 Yves Klein sold certificates assigning zones of immaterial pictorial sensibility and Piero Manzoni issued certificates defining persons as temporary or lifetime works of art, one thing was clearly in evidence – a reversal in the dichotomy of presence and absence. The grip of the fetish was loosening.

That trend continued well into the '70s. And with the emergence of feminist politics, with its insistence upon difference and a multiplicity of discourses, a plethora of mediums and practices flourished: performance, body art, conceptual art, earthworks, abstract painting, photo-realism, hyper-realism, and installation art. And a range of practices were introduced into the visual field that were not exclusively visual. Often, if involving objects, these were the relics of some prior physical task where their function was one of bearing witness, like physical evidence, to an extra-visual event.

If the fetish is designed to deny that which threatens the unified integrity of the body (of art) in question, then it is not surprising that the feminist politics of the '70s – which tolerated difference, which did not try to line up all knowledge under one rubric or one theory, which did not isolate difference from the realm of the senses – created anxiety symptoms. In the revival of large-scale expressionistic painting of the '80s, there was an impassioned return to “presence.” For whatever else it may mean to own one of these frantic icons of mastery over the canvas, one thing was literally as well as ideologically certain: one was owning a piece of a “being that did not lack.”

In recent years, post-modernist critiques have attempted to expose systems of power that authorize certain representations while suppressing or denying others. *The Big Nothing or Le Presque Rien* means to figure forth absence, not as a style, but rather as a metaphor for all that has been suppressed by presence. That which is ordinarily invisible – the walls, the ceiling, the infrastructure of an exhibition - are here rendered visible. The gestures put forth by *The Big Nothing* deny the fundamental hierarchy which privileges the art object over and above the wall

it hangs on, the floor it sits on, or even the magazine article which critiques it, or the viewer who contemplates it. Those conditions which usually exist at the periphery of the object and function only to allow the object to exist here replace the object altogether.

The spaces which have been rendered blank by deconstructive practices now loom large as perhaps the most important image to confront. As we stare at these gaping holes in our cultural fabric, it is incumbent upon us to be exceedingly attentive. We are clearing things out of the way to make room not for more things, but rather for the heightened awareness which permits us to see what is really before us and to experience with all of our senses. For what will emerge to fill these gaps may come from the ranks of the ordinary, the banal, the outside, and the unexpected. The artworks here do not speak with (patriarchal) certainty from a position of authority, but dare to speak a lack of knowledge, a lack of mastery, that allows for difference, and in a language that is permeable, questioning, heterogeneous. For if the world of things is big, so is the world of nothing.

Kerri Scharlin

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The individual views expressed in the exhibition and the publication are not necessarily those of the Museum.

The New Museum
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

The New Museum

- 1 Rainer GANAHL
**empty space ad
nauseam**, 1989/91
Photo mechanical rub off
- 2 Jérôme BASSERODE
Untitled, 1992
Turbine, ping pong balls,
wood, mixed media
- 3 Janine ANTONI
Hot Spot, 1992
Heating pad, construction,
extension cords
- 4 Gary SIMMONS
White Noise Installation,
1992
2 stereo speakers
- 5 Karin SANDER
Wall Piece, 1992
White paint, polishing
papers, plaster, brushes
- 6 Roddy BOGAWA
NO BIG SECRETS HERE,
1992
White-on-white wall text in
acrylic paint
- 7 Laurie PARSONS
Pile of Money, 1992
500 one-dollar bills
- 8 Claire-Jeanne JÉZÉQUEL
Untitled, 1990
Plexiglass, wall paper,
plaster
- 9 Anne-Marie JUGNET
(with Noëlle DELHOMME)
**seemingly, forgotten
memories**, 1992
Charcoal, acrylic paint,
fixative spray
- 10 Devon DIKEOU
well, 1992
Kholer "Edgebrook"
drinking fountain, pump

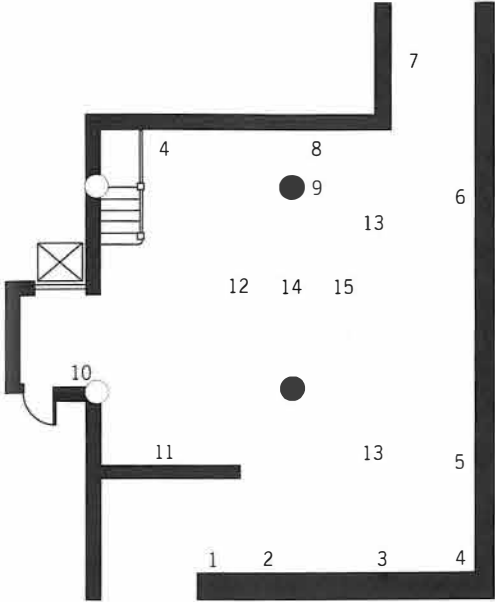
French Cultural Services

- 1 Fred WILSON
Released/ Liberated,
1992
Dust, chalk, charcoal,
glass, insects, wood, hair,
paper, ink
- 2 HAHA
Errata, 1992
Marble, printed matter,
products of France
- 3 Simon LEUNG
Ascent, 1992
Perfume, announcement
cards
- 4 Devon DIKEOU
Title Board, 1992
Felt, vinyl letters, glass
- 5 Jeff SPAULDING
Re-place, 1992
Installation with trees and
tree parts, hardware
- 6 Manfred STERNJACOB
artist in charge, 1992
Performance
- 7 Roddy BOGAWA
NO BIG SECRETS HERE,
1992
White on white wall text in
acrylic paint
- 8 Anne-Marie JUGNET
(with Noëlle DELHOMME)
through, 1992
Charcoal, acrylic paint,
fixative spray
- 9 Claire-Jeanne JÉZÉQUEL
Untitled, 1992
3 pieces of presswood,
paint, glue
- 10 Rirkrit TIRAVANJIA
Untitled (view), 1992
Viewer
- 11 Simon LEUNG
ascent, 1992
Performance
- 12 Sam SAMORE
**categories of descrip-
tion, cultural relations
(French windows)
(incomplete)**, 1990s
Vinyl transfer letters on
windows

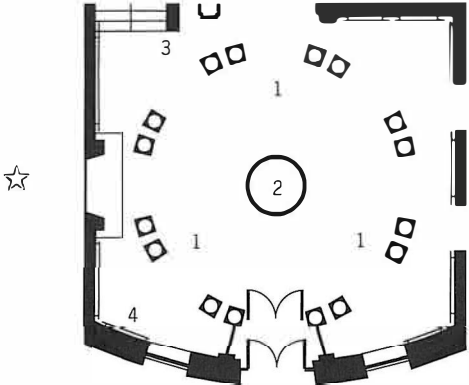
None of the Above

- Howard HALLE
Troubleshooter, 1992
Exhibition maintenance
- Alexandre LENOIR
Statement New York 2,
1992
Empire State Building,
Observatory deck, 86th
floor
- Lois NESBITT
Lost in Translation, 1992
Press review

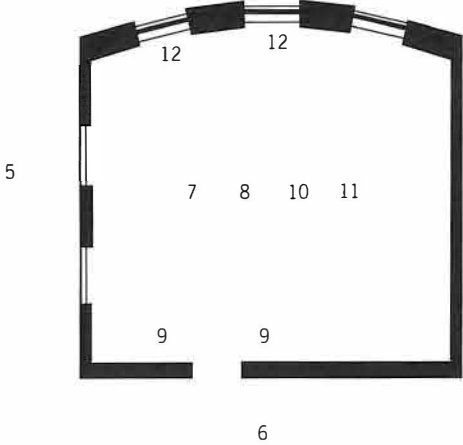
The New Museum - New Work Gallery



French Cultural Services - Entrance Hall



French Cultural Services - Upstairs



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