

The Exhibitionist



Exhibition as Image: Art through the Camera's Eye

CONVERSATION BETWEEN JOSEPHINE GRAF
AND PIPER MARSHALL,

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The following conversation took place on August 2, 2017, at Ludlow 38 in New York. The participants were Josephine Graf, a writer and curator based in New York, and Piper Marshall, an independent curator and Editor-at-Large of *The Exhibitionist*. They met on a humid late summer evening to discuss *Exhibition as Image: Art through the Camera's Eye*, an exhibition organized by Eric Bell and Saim Demircan as part of Ludlow 38's curatorial residency program.

The exhibition opens with a text and sculptural work by Judith Barry, and continues in a second room with a sequence of videos by Eric Bell and Eric Sidner, Dave Carbone and Bernhard Schreiner, Stephan Dilleuth, Hollis Frampton, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, Mark Leckey, and Nora Schultz. Each work trains focus on other artworks and exhibitions; brought together, they question standard paradigms of recording art. In what follows,

Graf and Marshall consider the implications of positioning the artist as both subject and object of documentation, and how the recursive nature of these works might offer resistance to a contemporary culture of seamless digital distribution.

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Piper Marshall: The first impression of *Exhibition as Image: Art through the Camera's Eye* establishes the idea of the exhibition as a model. At the entrance to the gallery, three waist-height plinths hold Judith Barry's *Damaged Goods 3D* (2015). These printed dioramas reference the eponymous 1986 exhibition designed by Barry and curated by Brian Wallace. For me these artworks serve as a mediator between past and present as well as a prop that performs the exhibition's title.



Josephine Graf: Barry's dioramas suggest a mode of doubling that extends to the other artworks in this show, whereby each work replays a past exhibition, displaying former instances of display. It's interesting to consider this doubling or nesting effect in relation to the stated premise of this show as, following the press release, "art documented by artists." The word "documented" gets at the heart of what's going on here, as the exhibition seems to be questioning the markers of documentation, how we parse the objective from the subjective. Moreover, it seems to question what the memory of contemporary art exhibitions looks like. *Damaged Goods* was one of the first shows to survey the tactics of appropriation. So the question here becomes how we differentiate between documentation and appropriation—because one could say that all the works in this show are in a sense appropriating—not specific artworks, but exhibitions themselves.

PM: Or perhaps a more precise word would be "scenarios."

JG: Yes, and the differentiation depends on the dilation of the lens through which we're looking. These works remind me of the large photographic walls of Louise Lawler recently on view in the exhibition *Why Pictures Now?* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. They similarly appropriate an arrangement while abstracting the display.

PM: Yes, and these artworks are likewise inflected by our contemporary media-saturated environment, in which technology mediates the present and supplies a constant

stream of images. This brings to mind the question: What are the stakes of asking an artist to design, frame, or document an exhibition today?

JG: Maybe the title of the 1986 show is actually an interesting way to think through this, because the phrase "damaged goods" is an apt descriptor for how the mediation of artworks is traditionally viewed. This view goes something like: the further away from firsthand experience of the object, the more mediated the interaction and the more damage you're doing to the experience of that artwork. Hence the appeal to objectivity or transparency of conventional exhibition documentation. When one brings in an artist, this experience is altered and might help unearth the subjective, "damaged" nature of all mediation and documentation, from beneath the veneer of objectivity that convention can confer.

PM: In addition to these Barry dioramas, this show features video works from American and European practitioners made from 1980s through the present day. One of the most compelling is Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven's *Komfort Über Alles* (1980). The video footage is shaky. It features a series of arrows which then point to accompanying artworks. The POV operates within the codes of the index and the discourse of photography, but also it also exceeds that discourse. I think of it as ambivalent toward the recording of experience, all while registering the loss of "being there" firsthand.

JG: I consider video, like photography, as indexing visual information—and as a documentary form, at times in a fairly

cold or objective way. But here, video is being called on to reinject aura into tactics of documentation. In many of these videos, the camera's shaky point of view makes you feel the eye of the camera collapsed with the "I" of the filming subject.

PM: Mark Leckey's work offers a rejoinder to this, as it is formed from the promotional video made by Haus der Kunst for his show *As If* (2015). Leckey edits the "experts" called in to speak for the show. So he, in turn, mediates the mediation of the exhibition.

JG: Yes, there is a recursive effect to all of these works. I question the generosity of that recursivity. There is a sense that the works aim to be more generous to the exhibitions they highlight than conventional documentation. But on the other hand, whoever is viewing these works must reconstruct multiple layers of references.

PM: As well as the fragmented histories, which one must piece together from existing knowledge at best. We've talked about the artist mediating the scenography of exhibitions, artists mediating their own exhibitions, and artists mediating the mediation of their exhibitions. How do these efforts alter the role of the curator?

JG: The artist has absorbed the role of the curator to a certain extent. I was thinking about that in regard to the second Barry piece, an essay she wrote for the catalogue of the *Damaged Goods* show, presented here on wall-mounted boards. Her essay literally inhabits the place where the exhibition didactics would be. This kind of usurping or blurring of typical forms of mediation and documentation makes me think about Michael Sanchez's "Art and Transmission," a text published in *Artforum* in 2013. This show seems a rejoinder to the tendencies Sanchez noted, such as the "Contemporary Art Daily" effect, or the idea of a shared code for how we ingest shows as images.

PM: His argument hinges upon the idea that the style and content of art mirror the technological frame of the moment. Could the same be said for exhibitions?

JG: Yes, there's a feedback loop, in the sense that art is being made contingent on its display within the technological parameters we uphold—or literally hold, in our phones.

PM: But this exhibition is playing with that idea, taking that discourse into consideration, metabolizing it, and then presenting a sideways view.

JG: Yes, toward the end of the piece Sanchez suggests that the current framework through which we look at art online has created, following Giorgio Agamben, "non-subjects." If we see this show as a retort to that tendency, it marks a return to an interest in subjectivity, in almost a humanist way. Which gets back to the potentially problematic qualities we alluded to. In appealing to distance and mediation, this show actually marks a return to the presence of the subject.