

P R E S E N T

Certainly, some kinds of music demand passivity from the listener. Having cut my improvisational teeth at the 75th Street jazz clubs on the South Side of Chicago, however, I have come to realize that audiences can be anything but passive, even if they don't whip out musical instruments and play or sing along. For one thing, audiences listen and respond to each other. In the best cases, the experience of music is an intensely communal one. Assuming that audiences are simply passive is a gross oversimplification of the interaction between audience and performer, and amounts to a denial of the role of empathy, imagination, and dialogue in the act of listening and viewing.

George Lewis, "Singing the Alternative Interactivity Blues," *Grantmakers in the Arts*, Volume 8, Number 1, Spring 1997, p.4

The work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it. Thus language involves what logicians call a triadic relation. There is the speaker, the thing said, and the one spoken to. The external object, the product of art, is the connecting link between artist and audience.

John Dewey, "Art as Experience," 1934

In *Present*, we have sought to assemble artists who probe the presentational and aesthetic parameters of the art world and who seek to understand and express their concerns about the underlying relationships of artist, object and viewer. John Dewey's text "Art as Experience" (1934) served as a foundation as we planned the exhibition. In it, Dewey proposes "recovering the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living." Dewey's ideas were particularly influential in Chicago, where he laid the foundation for the University of Chicago Laboratory School, and served as an advisor to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy on the board of the New Bahaus while he headed the department of philosophy at the University of Chicago.

In Dewey's assessment, the artist—an individual interested in new ways of seeing the world—develops propositions, embodies them in the creation of objects, and offers the propositions up for scrutiny by interested individuals who, in the act of applying their own set of parameters to the object, create art.

ART IS NOT AN OBJECT, ART IS THE RESULT OF AN INTERACTIVE PROCESS.

If the studio/gallery/museum is closed, there is no engagement. Open the doors to visitors, and the possibility of art unfolds. Some artists choose to make the viewer's participatory role obvious by encouraging a physically active interaction through objects that can be touched, manipulated, or even destroyed. But viewer participation occurs as well in plainly viewing traditional art. The readiness to have an experience counts, not the means by which it comes about.

Seen in the light of John Dewey's assertion: "art is not an object, art is the result of an interactive process", each artwork has to be deemed interactive, regardless of the medium that has been used in its creation. As we become more immersed in the technology-driven, multi-media world of "interactivity", this understanding can be easily missed. If interactivity is confused with physical interaction, and is seen as exclusively inherent to technology, we run the risk of using the new techniques to implement the same old structures in a new guise. Instead of creating situations that elicit questions about the process of making and viewing art, "touching the art" or clicking the mouse become new (or not so new) ways of instructing the viewer what to expect, and when and how to interact.

Present explores how artists consider the ways in which the viewer perceives and meets art. As we visited studios we were drawn to artists who were interested in exploring possibilities—artists who had a clear sense of how they wanted their artwork to function, but resisted the impulse to impose definitive answers to the questions their own work raised. We looked for artists who were willing to leave open to view their creative process by incorporating its activities into the work itself.

The pieces in *Present* are predominantly non-object oriented and low-tech. The actions that the objects propose or conjure up are crucial to an understanding of the work. The pieces in the show have borrowed lessons from conceptual and process art traditions, but in this exhibition the artistic process—the activity of thinking and making—does not reduce the objects in the gallery to a secondary position. Here, the art object is not a remnant, but a crucial link. Drawing from simple gestures, autobiographical sources, everyday experience, and the activities that take place in the space itself, the artworks in the show in a straightforward way propose a direct, dynamic, and sometimes physical engagement with the viewer.

Using a stark, steady stream of words as the single image on the screen, together with the pulsating sounds of a person playing basketball, **Lisa Conrad's** video/audio installation imbues written text with the characteristics of the fleeting spoken word and gives sound almost the permanence of a visual offering, involving the viewer in a rhythmic narrative.

In a game of time and self-imposed rules similar to that of musical improvisation, **Tom Torluemke** uses the audience's movements to set the parameters for his wall drawings. Through this creative structure, he delays his own expectations of the work to the moment of response.

Eduardo Martinez's work unfolds in the context of a mock architect's studio. Objects are rearranged, materials are brought in and removed, at times the artist is present, at times just his objects can be seen, and an installation is created in the space by means of performance.

The images in **David Meyer's** sculptures continuously create, destroy, transform themselves as a result of the viewer's active participation. Action leads to sound and motion, bringing to mind similar noises, familiar patterns.

Arthur Myer brings his studio into the gallery space in the form of an array of scavenged fragments, and offers them up for examination. The rich history of natural objects and artefacts may be tapped. Order, material and play suggest possible stories.

Shuko Wada's masking tape piece randomly accents the architectural details of the space like a giant, coy gesture. It clumps together, sticks and makes a mess.

Lili Martinez offers a collection of written moments along with a space to rest the body, allowing the mind to wander, probe and recognize.

Chris Heenan, Dan Wallace and Jack the Dog (Jeff Kowalkowski/Carrie Biolo), have been invited to contribute their musical compositions, to create additional opportunities to engage in the already ongoing exchange between auditory and visual artists.