



Michael Asher, Skulptur Ausstellung in Münster 1977 (1977), Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, West Germany, 3 July – 13 November, trailer in various locations. Parking position, 1st week, 4–11 July, Siegelkammer and Pferdegasse. Photo: LWL-MKuK/Rudolf Wakonigg. © Michael Asher Foundation.

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Content, Context and Signification in the Work of Michael Asher

Abstract

Michael Asher's sculpture installation employing the same make and model of a modest travel trailer unmoored in the same sites and serial order in four contiguous iterations of the decennial exhibition Skulptur Projekte (1977, 1987, 1997, 2007) highlights the complexity of signification. The shifting context of production and reception rendered each of the four sculpture installations considerably different. Spatial, temporal and socio-historical factors imbued the artworks with a unique visibility, irony, rhythm and sense. The distinctness of the four nearly identical-looking sculpture installations raises vital questions concerning signification and how artworks gain definition.

Keywords

context in art
Michael Asher
originality and
repetition
post-studio practice
public sculpture
signification in art
site-specific installation
Skulptur Projekte

Jorge Luis Borges's whimsical 1939 essay 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*' spins a fiction about a recently deceased, minor early-twentieth-century French symbolist writer from Nîmes by the name of Pierre Menard, who undertook the seemingly absurd task of rewriting 'word for word and line for line' Miguel de Cervantes's 1604 masterpiece *Don Quixote* (1998: 91).¹ Rather than merely translating, Menard sought to immerse himself in the seventeenth-century Spanish environment inhabited by Cervantes to produce the text authentically. This act, Borges's narrator claims, resulted in a work that was significantly different from that of Cervantes. Menard, who was obviously both historically and linguistically removed from Cervantes's setting, had different subjects, forms, languages and techniques at his

1. This article revises and expands Alberro (2016).

disposal and operated in a considerably different social and historical context than the author of *Don Quixote*, who had access only to everything up to the early seventeenth century. As Menard explains in a letter written to and quoted by the narrator, 'Not for nothing have three hundred years elapsed, freighted with the most complex events. Among those events, to mention but one, is the *Quixote* itself' (Borges 1998: 93). Highlighting the different meanings the same text holds depending on its context, Borges raises questions about the dynamic between content and context in literary interpretation. His essay illustrates how texts accrue value through the lens of their time and how context shapes literary sense. They demonstrate that identical texts can have different meanings based on their circumstantial conditions. Not just content but also context can define the significance of cultural productions.

Like Borges's Menard, the US artist Michael Asher's decision to exhibit the same make and model of a modest travel trailer unmoored in the same sites and serial order in four contiguous iterations of the decennial exhibition *Skulptur Projekte* ('Sculpture Projects') in Münster (1977, 1987, 1997, 2007) serves as a salutary reminder of the impossibility of repetition ever being identical to an original. Asher's untitled sculpture 'project' reveals how historical context influences interpretation. It illustrates that, rather than being fixed, meaning is fluid, shaped by cultural and temporal contexts, thus questioning the idea of a singular, absolute truth in art. Each of the four sculpture installations exhibited by the artist in the German city was significantly different because the context of production, as much as that of reception, had changed. Spatial, temporal and sociocultural factors imbued each with a unique visibility, irony, rhythm and particular topical connotations, to mention just a few constitutive elements, and were essential to their overall sense. Each, in a word, was an 'original'. The distinct meaning of the four iterations of the same artistic project raises important questions about how artworks come to signify.

Critical Interventions

In many ways, Asher's sculpture installations at Münster are representative of his artistic practice. Research-driven projects that probed the web of underlying and often hidden conventions and conditions that determine how people view, assess and use art characterized his production. The artist's always-meticulous interventions encouraged spectators to reconsider their thoughts about art, including how and why they valued it and what they valued it for. He skilfully thematized or subtly made visible various architectural, linguistic and cultural frames conditioning the works. Museums were public spaces for Asher, and works of art were vital to a community's cultural memory.

Asher began his art practice in the mid-1960s within the context of a generation of highly innovative sculptors who treated the exhibition space's architecture as a crucial frame for their work. He went on to develop a sculptural practice that reflected on the formal relations between the aesthetic object and the spatial environment. Asher's production transforms the latter into an integral part of the artwork. One of the artist's first pieces, installed at Marcia Tucker and James Monte's *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969, used a concealed air blower he had installed in a passageway between exhibition rooms to create an invisible curtain of air through which visitors passed as they moved from one gallery

to the next. The installation focused on contextual and environmental interaction by taking physical form without visually intruding on the space. Asher's 1970 exhibition at Pomona College in Claremont reconfigured the gallery by removing its doors, blurring the boundaries between inside and outside. By allowing open and continuous access and light, air movement, street noise and public into the space around the clock, the artist expanded the experiential elements of art exhibition environments and moved the artwork beyond the aesthetic domain and into the socio-political realm.

In subsequent decades, Asher turned from practices of formal investigation that introduced foreign elements into the exhibition space to strategies of critical intervention that explored how works of art gain meaning. His central concern now became an inquiry and exposé of the various dimensions of artistic practice and the symbolic and material economies within which it exists. Working in situ, whereby the materials and techniques employed in the production of artworks are contingent on the particular requirements the works have to meet in what is, in each case, a different situation, Asher began to use only elements that were already present at the site of exhibition. The art



Michael Asher, Gladys K. Montgomery Art Center, Pomona College, Claremont, California, USA, 13 February–8 March 1970, view out of gallery toward street from small triangular area. Photo taken with daylight. Photo: Frank J. Thomas, courtesy of the Frank J. Thomas Archives. © Michael Asher Foundation.

historian Benjamin Buchloh reflects on the site-specific nature of Asher's work in an early essay on the artist:

[W]ith Asher, neither the materials, nor the techniques employed in the production of a work are determined a priori: they are, on the contrary, dependent upon the particular conditions under which a work is being created as well as contingent on the particular requirements the work has to meet in what is in each case a particular situation.

([1980] 2016: 14)

Henceforth, Asher's projects started to reveal and integrate distinctly cultural phenomena. The artist's removal of the partition wall that separated the office space from the exhibition space at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles in 1974 is a case in point. Asher's elimination of the wall exposed the art gallery's daily business operations, challenging traditional exhibition norms and highlighting the economic realities of art spaces. Asher aimed to integrate the gallery's functions with its artistic presentation, effectively making the commercial space part of the artwork.

At the Art Institute of Chicago a few years later, Asher moved a twentieth-century bronze-cast replica of a marble sculpture of George Washington by the eighteenth-century French artist Jean-Antoine Houdon from the museum's front steps into an interior gallery that housed French neoclassical art. The artist's relocation of the bronze sculpture demonstrated how an artwork's contextual surroundings act as a lens through which people view and understand it. For instance, the recontextualization at the Art Institute of Chicago eliminated the monumentality that the replica of Houdon's sculpture had assumed and conveyed for over sixty years in front of the museum, while the juxtaposition of the original objects in the period room with the highly weathered bronze copy disrupted the perceived timeless quality of the former. The questions raised by these and other artworks were only provisionally plastic or spatial. Increasingly, the works – which were previously concerned with purely sculptural matters – came to call attention to social and economic factors concerning the public function of art exhibition spaces and their impact on the production of artistic meaning. This approach encouraged viewers to reconsider their conceptions of art and the importance of institutional context on art's meaning.

Post Studio Art

Asher's artistic practice during these years eliminated the gap between art's traditional production, exhibition and distribution locations. In opposition to the conventional space of the artist's studio, which he came to see as the site that dictates the manufacture of discrete objects predisposed, if not predestined, to circulate as commodities, Asher developed a post-studio art practice that engaged critically with art's social and institutional contexts and moved beyond the production of artworks open to commodification and consumption. This approach emphasized non-formalist value criteria and focused on context and conceptual underpinnings rather than material objects and abstract ideals. Asher applied the same principles in his pedagogical method. The 'Post Studio' seminar that he taught for decades at the California Institute of the Arts involved exhaustive critiques that often lasted for hours. Asher's

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method encouraged students to analyse and articulate their work beyond formal aesthetics. The seminar's intensive group discussions of individual pieces fostered a culture of rigorous critique. Asher's emphasis on understanding the role of social and historical contexts in interpretation and the construction of meaning motivated students to question and assess the factors that actuated their art.

2. See Whitney (2010).

Asher's artwork was equally self-effacing. Finite duration was a fundamental aspect of all of his projects, which were contingent on the temporal length of the exhibition that featured them. He considered the complete reconstruction of the initial concrete conditions from which an artwork evolved as integrally necessary for its completion (Buchloh [1980] 2016: 20). All that remained following the exhibition of one of his art projects was the catalogue, installation photographs, drawings, contracts and other documents generated throughout its development – ephemeral artefacts not afforded the status of artworks in their own right. Not surprisingly, given these rigorous restrictions, Asher's post-studio art brought him little commercial or institutional success. As the artist Andrea Fraser observed, 'Asher will probably never be the subject of a museum retrospective. Short of a public presentation of his archive, there really would be almost nothing to show of his forty years of work' (2008: 377). His approach was modest yet incisive, challenging the art world's market-driven dynamics and encouraging a deeper reflection on the function of art institutions.

Temporal elements played an increasingly important role in Asher's artistic production over the years. His contribution to the curator Kynaston McShine's *Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1999 critically explored museum practices. It comprised a pamphlet, *Painting and Sculpture from The Museum of Modern Art: Catalog of Deaccessions 1929 Through 1998*, featuring a published list of the 403 art objects sold or traded by the museum since its founding. Asher's project highlighted issues of institutional authority and transparency. It questioned the completeness and accuracy of the museum's records, disturbed myths of finality and closure espoused by the museum and troubled the notion that profit from the sale of its holdings is extrinsic to its core mission. Judging from the institution's damning response to the work – Kirk Varnedoe, MoMA's then chief curator of painting and sculpture, felt the need to add a letter in the exhibition catalogue correcting what he perceived to be the negative implications of Asher's data – Asher's purely documentary piece hit a nerve. It touched on one of the museum's vulnerabilities and unresolved issues. It also revealed that deaccession over time plays a more significant role than previously thought in shaping the artistic canons museum's construct.

Time was also a crucial element of Asher's contribution to the 2010 Whitney Biennial. The piece generously extended the Whitney Museum of American Art's public hours around the clock, allowing visitors to experience the museum at all hours of the day. Ironically, although this untitled work radically disrupted the conventional museum schedule and challenged traditional exhibition norms, the Whitney Museum officials awarded it the Biennial prize, the Bucksbaum Award, which recognizes a singular combination of talent and imagination and comes with a large cash prize and an invitation to present an exhibition at the museum at some time within the succeeding two years.²

3. The other artists participating in the 'special projects' section of the show were Carl Andre, Joseph Beuys, Donald Judd, Richard Long, Bruce Nauman, Claes Oldenburg, Ulrich Rückriem and Richard Serra.
4. On the matter of the co-authorship of *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979* by Asher and Buchloh, see King (2007).

Skulptur Ausstellung in Münster 1977

But the projects by Asher that most poignantly brought time into play and exposed how artworks gain meaning were the installations he exhibited at *Skulptur Projekte*. Asher's contributions to this exhibition challenged the status of sculptural stability. The curator Klaus Bussmann organized the initial iteration of this show, *Skulptur Ausstellung in Münster 1977*, for the Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte ('Westfalia's Regional Museum of Art and Cultural History'). The exhibition included a 'special projects' section coordinated by the curator Kasper König that focused on different aspects of art in public spaces. Bussmann and König invited nine artists, including Asher, to work in outdoor sites throughout the city.³ The curators' decision to exhibit relatively large-scale artworks composed of what were then unconventional sculptural materials represented a counter-cultural attempt to problematize the false, harmonious atmosphere predominant in the public spaces of the highly parochial host city. The art historian Jennifer King has explained that the impetus for the event was 'to provide the city [of Münster] [...] with a kind of postwar reeducation in modern art' (2005: 3). It sought to increase the local community's appreciation of and engagement with modern art by featuring new productions that challenged preconceived notions of art.

Asher's contribution to this event offered a complex response to the questions posed by Bussmann and König about the relationship between contemporary sculpture and public space. He produced an outdoor installation without creating a discrete or monumental object anchored to one place. The untitled project work consisted of a rented, approximately 4 m-long Eriba Familia camping trailer parked at a different location in and around Münster during each of the nineteen weeks of the event. Asher's locations for the caravan were ordinary, even banal. In its first iteration, he positioned the white vehicle across the street from the Landesmuseum. In subsequent weeks, he placed it beside a mundane industrial complex, in front of an active housing project and along a bank of trees. Some sites were even more anonymous: a dead-end street, an alleyway, a parking lot (King 2005: 9). Asher instructed the exhibition staff to close the recreational vehicle's window curtains and lock its door once they situated it in its weekly spot. With no markings or signage to characterize it as art, the parked camper subtly melded into the urban or suburban landscape. To a casual passerby, it could go completely unnoticed.

Throughout the run of the sculpture exhibition, the curators made hand-out sheets informing visitors about the artwork and providing them with the trailer's location that week; these were available at the Landesmuseum's front desk. They also outlined the camper's trajectory for the show's duration in the exhibition catalogue. The critic Anne Rorimer has observed that the vehicle's weekly movement created a path away from the museum for the first half of the exhibition, into the countryside and even beyond the city limits, only to return towards the museum during the latter half (2012: 7). According to Asher, 'complete sequential viewing of all locations [in which the caravan was parked] was possible, but not a necessary requirement for the viewer's understanding of the work' (Asher and Buchloh 1983: 167).⁴ Figuratively grounded by the Landesmuseum – which, Rorimer notes, functioned as the travel trailer's centre of gravity – the camper thus spread throughout the city without ultimately straying from the framework of the show. It alluded to 'sculpture' even as the urban fabric absorbed it (2012: 7). At the same time, the vehicle perpetually affirmed its role as a utilitarian object. It thus oscillated between

its literal and figural functions, with its use-value and aesthetic signification in continuous tension.

In his collaborative text with Buchloh, Asher explained that by framing a standard middle-class recreational vehicle, a commodity that for many at the time in West Germany symbolized the economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*) of the previous couple of decades, within the theme of an art exhibition, his installation in Münster related art to everyday experience:

[The caravan had] all the features of architecture (a functionalized, human-scale shell suitable for dwelling) and all the attributes of sculpture (a three-dimensional voluminous container, to be seen in the round, attached to the ground by its own mass) [...]. [Yet, it] did not attempt a false, total synthesis of sculptural and architectural signifiers.

(1983: 171)

Indeed, for the artist, the physical dimensions of the piece called for 'high-cultural notions' of public sculpture to 'be reintegrated into the basic, underlying social practice' of architecture (Asher and Buchloh 1983: 171). It engaged viewers by altering spatial interactions and creating a dialogue with the environment.



Michael Asher, Skulptur Ausstellung in Münster 1977 (1977), Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, West Germany, 3 July–13 November, trailer in various locations. Parking position, 12th week, 19–26 September, church square in Nienberge, in front of a grocery store. Photo: LWL-MKuK/Rudolf Wakonigg. © Michael Asher Foundation.

Sculpture in Public Space

At the time of the 1977 show, conventional markers such as static perpetuity, monumental scale and conspicuous location characterized sculpture in public space (Finkelppearl 2000: 21). Asher's mobile installation had few of these traits. Rather than conceived and created in a studio and then situated in an exceptional urban setting in the typical manner of modernist public art, Asher rendered his sculpture project spatially, socially and temporally specific, significantly expanding the sculptural field (Krauss 1986). It derived its specificity from the structure and context of its various stations throughout the city. As Asher and Buchloh observed in a late 1970s discussion about the sculpture project, the caravan 'actively breaks down into a variety of contextual relationships rather than particularizing itself as a static structure, which eventually prohibits contextualization' (1983: 168).

In contrast to the unique, industrially produced materials and objects that characterized much Minimal art, the mass-produced trailer central to Asher's project negated all notions of singularity and inventiveness and entered the realm of the readymade. There, it provoked questions about boundaries and definition. Like readymade artworks that highlight context's effect on interpretation and meaning, Asher's untitled project foregrounded how environmental, situational and institutional factors fold onto works of art to determine their status and signification (De Duve 1994). Additionally, rather than attaching itself specifically to one location and its relation to the city in one iteration (as did all the other works in the show), Asher's ambulatory sculpture project coalesced slowly over time, one location at a time, over many weeks. And while the project continued to bear traces of Postminimal sculpture's interest in a transparent production procedure, it did not culminate in a completed, and hence commodifiable, object. Instead, Asher's artwork merged with the city's infrastructure, allowing the latter's basic and mundane currents to give it its lifeblood. In this sense, the artist did not integrate the sculpture into the city as much as the city into the sculpture.

Project Exhibitions

Over the years, the curators shortened the length of the exhibition. In 1987, they renamed the now decennial event *Skulptur Projekte* and truncated it to seventeen weeks. They cut it to fourteen weeks in 1997 and fifteen weeks in 2007. Project exhibitions crystallized the innovative artistic practices and formats critical to art's transformation in the 1970s and 1980s. This exhibition genre, which employs sites such as public streets, unoccupied lots, lounge bars, cinemas and other unconventional venues, combines artistic, curatorial and discursive practices to establish relationships between artists, communities and organizations. Its process-based format de-emphasizes aesthetic subjectivity's uniqueness and disavows conventional art exhibitions' tendency to construct spectators as potential collectors. It features dense assemblages of heterogeneous materials and media with specific community-directed aims and outcomes that play out over the exhibition's duration. Accordingly, project exhibitions function as 'fertile ground[s] for new possibilities' (von Osten 2010: 69); they are 'more about enabling a becoming and creating a (counter) public than about displaying knowledge in a representational mode' (Holert 2017: 103).

Reconceiving the decennial event as a project exhibition, Bussmann, König and subsequent curators invited Asher to develop new sculpture projects in

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Michael Asher, Skulptur Projekte in Münster 1987 (1987), Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, West Germany, 14 June–4 October, trailer in various locations. Parking position, 1st week, 8–15 June, Siegelkammer and Pferdegasse. Photo: LWL-MKuK/Rudolf Wakonigg. © Michael Asher Foundation.

1987, 1997 and 2007 that would open art spaces to non-art publics and unfold in time well beyond the frame of the events staged at the shows' openings. In response to these invitations, the artist produced new works by renting the same type of trailer as in 1977 and moving it to the exact locations and sequence as the first caravan. He also specified that the piece ended at the number of weeks comprising each successive show's run.

The shortening of the exhibition's duration and the disappearance of a growing number of the caravan's original parking sites because of urban development and the transformation of the city's infrastructure over the years lessened the temporal span of Asher's contributions to *Skulptur Projekte*. Viewers never again saw the vehicle in sites parked on Weeks 18 and 19 of the 1977 show, nor, following the 1987 event, the sixteenth and seventeenth spots. During the weeks in which the initial parking spots were no longer in existence – or, as Asher put it, had been 'so extensively modified so to no longer allow for access' – the curators stored the trailer in a garage away from public view ([1996] 2007: 103). The sum of parking positions thus dwindled to only ten by 2007.⁵ In this respect, each of Asher's sculpture installations at Münster was unique and, when considered in relation to each other, highlighted the shifting logistics of the once-a-decade exhibition and the evolution of the city.

5. In 1987, there were twelve sites, twelve again in 1997, and ten available spots in 2007.

However, in all other respects, the format of the artworks Asher exhibited at Münster was identical. The installation of each work in the same site as the others that the artist had put on display at this same exhibition over the years both increased the project's critical dimension and generated new layers of meaning, allowing it to reflect simultaneously on each specific iteration and the relationship between the distinct contexts over the years. For instance, along with placing emphasis – as had the 1977 installation – on the spatial gaps between the stationed trailers, and thus suturing the ambiance of those parts of the city mapped by the caravan's spatial trajectory into the operative logic of the artwork, ensuing manifestations of Asher's sculpture project at Münster also accentuated the temporal gaps, namely the curatorial – and therefore ideological and historical – differences between the exhibitions.

Skulptur Projekte in Münster 1987

The curators of the 1987 exhibition asked the more than forty artists they invited to participate to provide 'concrete answers to the question: What could be today's function of sculpture in public arenas?' (König [1985] 2007: 97). Many of the artists produced artworks that engaged with the urban environment. They formally and conceptually questioned history, culture, architecture and urban and social organizations. Some, such as Daniel Buren, revealed imprints of the past left behind on the urbanistic plan. Others, including Richard Serra and Sol LeWitt, established a dialogue with historical monuments. Lothar Baumgarten's and Rebecca Horn's projects made previously isolated historical places accessible and recalled episodes from the city's checkered past. Jenny Holzer installed five sandstone benches with inscriptions reflecting on the brutalities of warfare on the primary avenue through the city's palace garden. Dan Graham exhibited an octagonal pavilion mirrored on all sides in the same park setting. The structure *Octagon for Münster* (1987) alluded to the follies that long served as venues for social gatherings and festivities in this idyllic site. But the pavilion's two-way mirror glass panels, which resembled the facade of a nearby bank office building, evoked the infringement of financial interests in public space. Katherina Fritsch exhibited the show's most controversial sculpture. The artist's representation of the Holy Virgin upset the city's sizeable Catholic constituency. For many, Fritsch's life-size lemon-yellow sculpture of the Holy Virgin, *Lourdes Madonna* (1987), seemed to parody traditional Christian iconography and brought tensions between local cultural values and contemporary art to the fore.

The new conceptual framework of the exhibition and transformations of Münster's infrastructure in the previous decade led Asher to conclude that he could repeat the project he exhibited ten years earlier to highlight the transformed conditions of the urban landscape. However, by 1987 objectionable aspects of the now once-a-decade exhibition, such as the instrumentalization of site-specific art as cultural capital, were already becoming evident. In response to the growing perception that the show could increase the city's net cultural worth, the Landesmuseum and the city government initiated a campaign to acquire many of the exhibited sculptures as permanent installations.

Skulptur Projekte in Münster 1997

The controversies surrounding the *Skulptur Projekte in Münster 1987* exhibition significantly influenced future iterations of the decennial show by

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reinforcing the importance of public engagement. This emphasis led to subsequent editions of the exhibition focusing more on integrating art into the urban environment and fostering public interaction. The 1997 show asked the participating artists to work as much as possible within designated areas of the Old City. For Bussmann, the aim now was 'to make the Town of Münster comprehensible as a complex, historically formed structure exactly in those places that make it stand out from other towns and cities' (quoted in King 2005: 7–8). Concentrating the artist's projects in the historical district centred the exhibition around the newly renovated Westfälisches Landesmuseum and made the event more accessible for the growing number of international visitors.

The 1997 exhibition featured more than 70 artists from 25 countries. Almost a third of these artists had previously shown works in Münster. The show questioned how the media were changing in relation to the publics coalescing in the new 'borderless world' of globalization (Miyoshi 1993). The participating artists took over the city with projects that celebrated their encounters with the public. Practitioners such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Reinhard Mucha stepped back from previous beliefs that site-specificity answered how art should properly relate to public spaces and made artworks that emphasized action and participation instead. Andreas Slominski, Roman Signer and Tony Oursler produced ambiguous, ironic and derisory projects that provided publics with light entertainment while cynically suggesting a critical approach. Jorge Pardo's and Tobias Rehberger's projects occupied unused sites to create new environments where people could meet and indulge in leisure activities.

As in the 1987 edition of the exhibition, many sculptural projects featured in the 1997 show reconciled with architecture and blurred the line between aesthetic and use-value. For instance, the contributions of Per Kirkeby and Franz West wavered between utilitarian and visionary design, both lasting and temporary. The works of Janet Cardiff, Allen Ruppersberg and Mark Dion invited people to real and imaginary strolls through the urban centre. Some projects were more political and critical. Maria Eichhorn's *Purchase Contract for a Mulberry Tree* (1997), for instance, investigated the structure of property ownership in Münster. To draw attention to the gradual privatization of the city centre and question the overlap between public interest and the corporate economy, the artist used her production funds to buy a vacant plot of land in the city centre and track its increase in value during the show's run. Eichhorn resold the land when the show ended and allocated the proceeds to renovate buildings dedicated to affordable housing.

Asher responded directly to the curatorial program's idealization of the Old Town, which, far from unique, developers had rebuilt in the postwar years to look like the medieval and early modern city that Allied air raids during World War II almost destroyed, by reinstalling the same project he had exhibited in the two previous iterations of this show. The untitled project turned the city of Münster into its medium and asked how the city could claim a sense of identity and particularity when it had undergone such a thorough reconstruction in the recent past and was succumbing to market forces in the present. The artist's repetition of the same work highlighted the changing urban landscape and its impact on art perception. It also undermined the mechanisms of an art market system that demanded inexhaustible creativity and innovation. But as Asher's California Institute of the Arts colleague Allan Sekula astutely observed in retrospect, by 1997 the mid-1970s Eriba Familia camping trailer central to Asher's project had come to suggest something more insidious to



Michael Asher, *Skulptur Projekte in Münster 1997* (1997), *Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte*, Münster, Germany, 22 June – 28 September, trailer in various locations. Parking position, 1st week, 23–30 June, *Siegelkammer and Pferdegasse*. Photo: Roman Mensing, <https://www.romanmensing.de>. © Michael Asher Foundation.

many in the deeply conservative German city – namely, ‘the incursion of a vehicle from the East’, referring to the nomadic conditions of the large number of émigrés that flooded into the former West with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic (2016: 125). By the late 1990s, many former West Germans saw the Easterners as embarrassing poor relations. The aging travel vehicle parked in the tidy streets of Münster summoned not only the new reality of large-scale migration but also more traumatic postwar memories of a displaced society. The new social, cultural and historical context had shifted the meaning of Asher’s project once again.

skulptur projekte münster 07

The 2007 *Skulptur Projekte* was also dramatically different from its predecessors. König, who had fully taken over the show from Bussmann, put together a curatorial team that included Brigitte Franzen and Corina Plath. The exhibition featured mildly amusing projects that attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors. The curators invited 36 artists to take part in the exhibition. Many of the exhibited projects were interactive to the point where spectators could individualize the encounters.

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Yet the 2007 event lacked a cohesive theme. The exhibition neither engaged with public space in the rigorous manner of earlier editions nor addressed contemporary social issues such as economic inequality, climate change or the proliferation of warfare worldwide. Instead, artworks that infantilized their public predominated. Much of the work was juvenile and bordered on puerile witticism coupled with a self-satisfied smugness. This feature characterized Marko Lehanka's construction of bisected surfboards made to look like a giant flower, complete with a computer-generated monitor programmed to spin asinine narratives; Guillaume Bijl's fake architectural dig, which pretended to rediscover the steeple of a Neo-Gothic church buried in time; Suchan Kinoshita's sound-loop, *Chinese Whispers* (2007), which manipulated the popular children's game to garble an array of philosophical and other writings selected by the artist; and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's installation *A Münster Novel* (2007), which featured dozens of scaled-down replicas of works she believed to be the key objects exhibited over the years in the *Skulptur Projekte* shows. Gonzalez-Foerster's celebratory installation, comfortably placed on the border of one of the city's parks, functioned as a children's playground – a site of experience where, as König put it on a panel during the run-up to the exhibition, parents could leave their kids while they went shopping.

Rather than take public space for granted, the most powerful works in the 2007 incarnation of the show addressed its contradictions and prompted difficult questions about contemporary public space. It also critiqued the exhibition's complacency with the city's marketing needs. Tue Greenfort's *Diffuse Entries* (2007) transformed an industrial machine similar to those used in the region to fertilize fields into a fountain at the base of the city's picturesque Lake Aasee. As it turns out, run-off from the region's agricultural economy has highly polluted the lake. Greenfort's eyesore of a public fountain pumped a compound into the lake that neutralizes the toxins – a Sisyphean endeavour given the volume of the lake's water relative to the pumping machine. Annette Wehrmann constructed a project that consisted of a pseudo real-estate development on the scenic shores of Lake Aasee. And Andreas Siekmann presented, side by side in the courtyard of Münster's baroque City Palace, a trash compactor and a large, tangled sphere of more than a dozen shredded fiberglass figures – bears, swans, cows – of the type introduced as city mascots by marketing departments. Like Gonzalez-Foerster's *A Münster Novel*, Siekmann's project, titled *Trickle Down: Public Space in the Era of its Privatization* (2007), reflected on art exhibited in public space. Yet, whereas Gonzalez-Foerster's project unproblematically equated the objects featured in previous instalments of the Münster public sculpture exhibition with the false cheerfulness of city-sanctioned public art, Siekmann's *Trickle Down* clear-sightedly narrated with the help of pictograms that ran along the inner courtyard and covered the compactor and the remains of the mostly animal-shaped plastic figures capitalism's deep infiltration into public space. However, *Skulptur Projekte's* marketing strategies, which promoted the festival as highly conducive to art world tourism, largely muted the critical approaches that artists such as Siekmann, Wehrmann, Greenfort and others tried to develop. Indeed, by 2007, the local community had fully embraced the contemporary art festival as a savvy marketing tool for the city.

Asher's deployment once again of the same increasingly decrepit and obsolete vehicle was in stark contrast to the infantile projects and smart installations many of the other artists participating in the 2007 event put on



Michael Asher, *skulptur projekte münster 07* (2007), LWL-Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, Germany, 17 June – 30 September; trailer in various locations. Parking position, 1st week, 16–24 June, Siegelkammer and Pferdégasse. Photo: Roman Mensing, <https://www.romanmensing.de>. © Michael Asher Foundation.

6. The estimated number of visitors to the *Skulptur Projekte* exhibitions is as follows: 100,000 in 1977, 250,000 in 1987, 500,000 in 1997, and 800,000 in 2007. Stephan Pascher cites the 2007 curatorial team as a source for these figures (2008: 115, fn.5). In 2007, images of the caravan featured prominently in publications by and about the exhibition.

display. But in the new millennium, the trailer was much more conspicuous, and Asher's installation could not integrate into its surroundings as seamlessly as it had in previous years. For many, the now over three-decade-old Eriba Familia caravan, the central protagonist in a scheme that initially challenged notions of sculptural stability and contextless sites by seamlessly blending into the city's infrastructure, had attained near-iconic status. Its image had become a vital reference for *Skulptur Projekte*, serving as a kind of logo for the blockbuster show that in 2007 welcomed nearly a million visitors.⁶

Undoubtedly, it was this turn of events that prompted the group of enterprising artists who, on a late July morning during the run of the 2007 exhibition, illicitly hitched the trailer to the back of their automobile and displaced it from the town. As artist and critic Stephan Pascher notes, when the police investigating the theft questioned König about the value of Asher's artwork, the exhibition's chief curator had to explain that, for all intents and purposes, the trailer was 'not art when it was not parked in one of its designated spots' (2008: 117). In other words, 'the caravan itself had absolutely no artistic value. In fact, the trailer had practically no value at all'. As König told the police, '[o]ld caravans like these do not sell for very much, and besides, it was a rental and insured. The stolen trailer could not even be considered an original,

since it was not the same vehicle used in 1977' (quoted in Pascher 2008: 117). The artist mobilized the same type of object but not the same object to make the work.

Asher's initial installation in Münster subtly but powerfully put forward a new model of sculpture. It spatially and temporally integrated into the city's infrastructure and allowed everyday elements in the life of the city to become an intrinsic part of its formal and categorical components. The artwork became the city and the city the artwork for the show's duration. However, Asher's contributions to subsequent stagings of this art event, while functioning similarly to the 1977 work, also mobilized the ten-year gap between each exhibition as raw material. The distinct factors and conditions of the new context significantly altered the sculpture project's meaning. Similar features became constitutively different from previous instantiations as they interacted with their specific milieus. The various stations of the Eriba Familia trailer now related not only synchronically to each other across the city but also diachronically to the artist's sculpture installations in previous iterations of the same exhibition.

Asher's project compressed space and time. The sculptures became palimpsests of earlier presentations of the decennial event with the traces and marks left by the sociocultural and historical conditions of the host city readily discernible. Like the *Don Quixote* by Borges's Menard, where the identical words of Cervantes have different meanings when rewritten in a later century, the lapse of time between Asher's first and subsequent installations at Münster entailed further hermeneutic indeterminacies. The artist's project layered complex past events onto the present. It entertained these events, including the present perspective, all at once. Accordingly, the significance of the sculpture installations relied on their particular entanglements and their distinct contexts' unique patterns. In the end, Asher's artistic contributions to the four iterations of the *Skulptur Projekte* highlighted the great degree to which the meaning of artworks mobilizes yet vastly exceeds plastic elements and turns on the viewers' spatial, temporal and social contexts.

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This article was researched and written to the standards of Intellect's Ethical Guidelines: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/ethical-guidelines>. No approvals or subject consent were required.

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