

john ros
untitled: chamberlain, 2014

john ros

by Adam Thompson, 2014

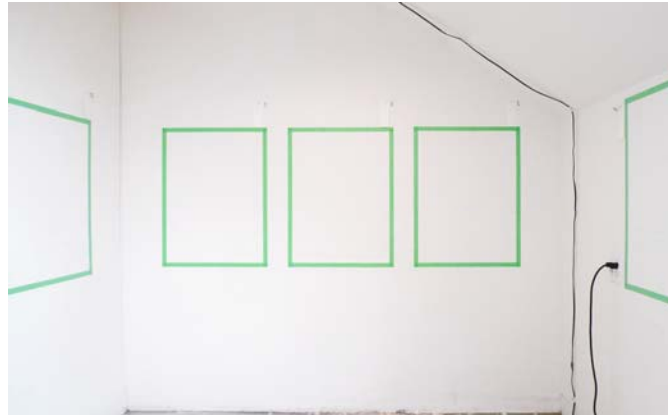
Depending on your cast of mind, john ros' work will either fade into the room, or it will reinvent the room. A rectangle of inky black might lurk low on a wall. Another might hover on a window, gently illuminated by a fluorescent light fixture. A neat pile of paper and cardboard might be configured in a corner, a dim bulb hanging above it, uncomfortably close. The walls might be white, or they might be an ever-so-slightly not-white. ros's interventions are supremely subdued, and yet nothing makes an effort to hide itself; nothing makes an ostentatious show of its subtlety. These materials and forms are merely present, offering themselves simply and openly, in the same way the room offers itself to our bodies.

Though it is easy to link ros's work with Minimalism (owing to the prevalence of very simple geometric wall drawings, orderly arrangements of materials, fluorescent light fixtures, etc.), this superficial resemblance misleads. There is no sense of monumentalism, grandeur, or confrontation; in comparison to the modest arrangements ros fashions, a Lewit wall drawing is a history painting, an Andre floor piece is a Persian carpet, and a Flavin is a fireworks display. Also absent from ros's work is the unitary, fixed quality that we associate with Minimalism, the geometric basic-ness that eliminates composition. ros's installations are intricately composed, each element considered in relation to all other elements according to a byzantine, private logic: A perfect black square is exactly this far from the floor, this pile of cardboard is exactly this big relative to the window, etc. Each measurement and proportion buzzes with intentionality and contingency, with the memory of hundreds of minute adjustments by an obsessive mind. Over time, these compositions morph, elements move, are eliminated or elaborated. The surface simplicity of his work masks a tangled web of evolving relationships.

Like many artists, ros has worked for years as an art handler, a fact that seems crucial to understanding the ethos of his work. First, the experience of constantly moving artwork around, packing and unpacking it, seems to be reflected in the way ros's pieces shift and and develop over time; his work is not so much "made" as "handled." Second, the materials involved in art handling are deeply important to his visual language (when working his day job, I imagine ros often finds the crates, the cardboard sleeves, and the french cleats more rich with meaning than the art itself). But there is a deeper layer of import: Art handling is a profession in which goofy baubles must be treated with great care (no artist wants their work to be stored or moved or installed "artistically"), and there is an existential tension between the professionalized rigors of dealing with art and the squishy uncertainties of art itself. I see ros's work as an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities.



the suppression of awareness part 2:4, 2012
ongoing mixed media installation
8 x 14 x 8 ft., detail: 8 x 8 x 8 ft
brooklyn college, brooklyn, new york



untitled - sequence of time, space and everything in between, x,y & z. , 2011
ongoing mixed media installation
8 x 8 x 8 ft., detail: 40 x 90 in.
brooklyn college, brooklyn, new york

I have visited ros's studio many times over the past several years, and can attest that to see his work installed in a gallery is to see only the iceberg tip of a set of activities and attitudes that colonizes his entire engagement with the material world. In his studio (and, I would imagine, his home), you feel a strong paranoia that no object present is fully outside the boundaries of his art, from his tools, to his clothes, to his coffee maker. Everything is placed with an almost pathological care, everything shares the same spartan aesthetic, and nothing seems superfluous, merely "there." As far as I can tell, there are two types of neat-freaks: one is fundamentally an aesthete, who fetishizes neatness and decorates his life with orderliness the same way a stripe painter might decorate their house with stripes. The other type is a pragmatist, who puritanically insists that form follow function. ros doesn't quite belong to either species – he is rigorously aesthetic, but at the same time he is supremely attuned to practical necessity. His art, his work spaces, and work habits propose that aesthetics and pragmatics are not fundamentally distinct. When we attend to both with equal faithfulness, desire and necessity resolve into grace.

It is this unusual blend of aesthetic control and pragmatic, situational awareness that enables ros to respond so effectively to architecture (in which aesthetics and practicality overlap by definition). Just as his work is definitely not Minimalism, it also stands apart from many well known examples of architectural intervention. Despite their supposed sensitiveness to the environment in which they occur, most famous site-specific work (Matta-Clark's incisions, Robert Irwin's partitions, Rachel Whiteread's negative spaces), ultimately betray an assumption that the site is boring, and needs to be brought to life. ros, on the other hand, approaches even the dullest space as though it is already a work of installation art, replete with rich history and artful nuance. He inhabits the space with an open mind, communing with its particulars with all the studiousness of a scholar at an ancient ruin. He then sets about adding a few finishing touches to the space, touches whose primary function is to make the space visible as art. You don't get that aha experience, the sense of normalcy interrupted, typical of interventionism.



compilation one., 2012-2013
ongoing mixed media
Installation, 10 x 16 x 12 ft., detail: 10 x 8 x 8 ft.
brooklyn college, brooklyn, new york

What you get instead is a redemption of normalcy, a palpable sense that within the banal specifics of the forms that populate our environment is a world of meaning and beauty that transcends that which we too stridently claim for our deliberately aesthetic creations. ros, in his patient attention to the spaces around him and the materials in his hands, offers himself as a kind of ideal artist-bureaucrat, who manages the banal minutia of the real with sensitivity and beauty. What if every slab of sheetrock, every cubicle, every parking lot in our world received such individualized, humanizing attention? It is a vision of a utopia, one achieved not through any top-down, prescribed system for living, but rather through the vigilant engagement of individual human minds, hearts and hands, whether those hands make- art, wire light fixtures, or push papers across a desk.

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Adam Thompson Bio

Adam Thompson received a BA in Art History from Yale University in 2004, and an MFA in Visual Art from Brooklyn College in 2008. He has exhibited at galleries including Regina Rex, Sara Meltzer Gallery/Projects, Gallery Thomas Jaeckel, Centotto, and Crossing Art, among others. Thompson is an adjunct instructor of studio art at Brooklyn College and Pratt Institute, where he teaches design and directs an undergraduate BFA Seminar program. He has written reviews for Art Papers and The Brooklyn Rail on artists such as Catherine Opie, Louise Bourgeois and Liam Gillick, among many others. He currently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

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the specifics of *untitled: chamberlain*, 2014

by john ros

upon my arrival to the artspace project room in the former civil-war era furniture factory chamberlain building, i was immediately drawn to the immense and changing light. light passed through a row of antique leaded windows (including their cracks and missing glass) above a giant glass wall separating the room from the street. as traffic moved by, the glass windows reverberated its sounds. the ceiling, pocked with holes, showed evidence of previous installations, outlined within a network of pipes and casting shadows on the grey plywood grid on the floor below.

the architecture of the artspace project room prompts the viewer to more intensely explore the relationship between inside and outside space. the windows, for example, act in two seemingly contradictory ways -- as a barrier and as a looking-glass. but this discovery is not introducing something new, a window is an architectural element that we're all familiar with. rather, the point is to think about ordinary objects that we encounter but overlook in our everyday lives in new intense ways.

consider the two grates on the sidewalk and the electrical outlet in the right corner of the room as two examples they are both prominent fixtures, yet easily missed. passersby are likely to walk over the grates without a moment's notice and gallery visitors are likely to ignore outlets, focusing on objects displayed at eye level. to draw attention to the grates, i have transposed their shape onto the gallery floor and wall. to illuminate the outlets, i've added fluorescent fixtures with exposed electrical cords found within the basement of artspace.

in this new situation, the grates and outlets are elevated to an unusual heightened status. they may encourage the viewer to walk through artspace with a new attention to the building's existing and functional fixtures.

the grates and the electrical outlet are the two starting points for *untitled: chamberlain*, 2014. i built the room sized environment out of and around these two elements from monday, july 21 to thursday, july 24.

artist statement

my practice is based in creating durational site-responsive installations in specific places. each instance typically involves a process of taking up residence in order to fully engage with the space. my materials are sourced at each space and include forgotten and discarded items such as cardboard, paper, wood, brick, glass and many other overlooked objects. in a continual site-responsive process i move these materials to emphasize subtle tensions within the specifics of each space. i go through a process of assembly and disassembly by shifting objects, accumulating masses and rearranging elements. the tensions created between viewer, art object and existing environment activate a contemplative time-piece. focal points are accentuated through the process of moving elements throughout the space. they indicate concentrations of potential energy within the room and elevate the subtle tensions present.

i search to see more clearly. the unseen or forgotten elements hidden in a space are of most interest to me. they are the places where tensions are activated and intervention is initiated. my exploration includes the possible and impossible while delving into the idiosyncratic elements that make the specifics of any space truly unique. any place and all material and objects found within the space can become an element within an installation recycled, humble pieces lay as reference to our culture of over-consumption.

awareness is the only way we can begin to understand our surroundings. it is with this impetus that i create subtle, minimal environments seeped with spatial tensions and contradictions. awareness to these subtleties empowers the viewer to uncover the potential within the inconspicuous and overlooked. it is within the magical moments of contradiction, of neither here nor there, that power is activated and potential is unleashed.

notes on lowercase

by john ros

many years ago i started utilizing all lowercase grammar in my creative and artistic writing. it all started in my youth. i am a first generation american born of québécoise and cuban parents – both non-native english speakers. as i learned the days and months in french and spanish, neither capitalized, i began to question why we capitalized them in english. later in life, my obsession with the writers, e. e. cummings and aram saroyan, allowed me the permission i was looking for to take on my own grammar rule of keeping all words lowercase.

initially, it was a way of being more democratic. i didn't see why some words (proper nouns) deserved more recognition than other words – they all carried the same weight to me. especially the use of the word “i” when referring to myself. “i” just seemed more appropriate than “I”. after some time, i also began to appreciate the disorientation that the use of all lowercase words caused the reader. yes, the writing was a little more difficult to read, but that engagement was something i was interested in. in order to keep sentences a little more separated, i always added two spaces after each period, another remnant of my youth, learning to type on a vintage royal typewriter.

much of us can appreciate that art isn't just an oil painting hung at eye-level in a white cube. art is all around us, we are surrounded by the curious works of artisans and crafts people. the problem being, we have to open our eyes and minds in order to see these wonderful works. the adjustment one must make to shift his or her own perception of what they are looking at is precisely the point of my work. the more we step out of the notion that we know what we are looking at, the more open to possibility we become. my art practice doesn't stop in the studio, it is a part of me and is reflected in everything i do.

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