

John Ros: Art Space Installation Essay.
by, Adam Thompson

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 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.

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. 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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