

Outside Architectural Confines

In the category of works by Asher that take place outside the institutional space, three of his outdoor works – in Munster (1977), Groningen (1979) and Montreal (1980) – further speak to the morphological variety of his production, which is always contingent on the purposes of an exhibition and the conditions at its site. Although these works were intended to be viewed outside of brick-and-mortar confines, all three represented institutionally based circulation and connection, although in a less concrete manner than the physical manifestation of the museum's heating system in the Bern exhibition.

In 1977, Asher, invited to participate in the first instalment of *Skulptur Projekte*, an exhibition organized subsequently once a decade by the Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte in Munster, confronted the question of producing an outdoor sculpture without creating a discrete or monumental object confined to one place. Throughout the nineteen-week space of the project, Asher arranged for a small (slightly over three-metres long), white camping trailer to be parked in nineteen different locations across the city and its environs.¹ The selected sites – which changed weekly and included an alleyway, in between parked cars, outside of a housing project and along a grassy riverbed – formed a trajectory that moved away from the museum for the first half of the exhibition, returning toward it during the latter half. In each of its parked positions, the trailer, unhooked from any motor vehicle, inserted itself – as a windowed container for temporary occupancy – into the urban and suburban landscape (fig. 18-21). In symbiotic manner, the trailer metaphorically attached itself to the locales in which it was successively stationed without ultimately straying from its organisational centre at the Landesmuseum. Figuratively grounded by the museum – the trailer's center of gravity – the vehicle delineated the boundaries of an artwork that was absorbed into the entirety of the city of Munster, within a work that critiqued the fixed and immobile object.² It anticipated Asher's ensuing revision of the sculptural practice in Bern, where the work overtook the entire Kunsthalle, albeit within an enclosed architectural framework rather than within an open-ended urban context.

In the university town of Groningen in the Netherlands, Asher's solo exhibition for the Stiftung Corps de Garde also materialized in the public realm, but in a less structured fashion than in Minster. The Groningen work, which opened on 30 August 1979, relied on the participation of anonymous individuals who frequented the outdoor farmer's market held regularly on Saturdays in the Grote Markt, in the centre of town. An advertisement placed in the newspaper *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* on a Friday announced, 'Je Eigen Telefoonnummer Op Een T shirt, Grote Markt, Zaterdag' ('Your own telephone numbers on a T-shirt, Grote Markt, Saturdays'). The numbers '12 45 02', representing a model number, appeared inside the accompanying outline of a short-sleeved shirt. During the six weeks the work

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lasted, as stated in the advertisement, T-shirts were available for a modest price at a stand among the regular market vendors of wares and produce. Designed by Asher, they were made of soft, white cotton and possessed the same gently scooped neckline whether turned front or back. Each shirt provided the surface on which black numbers could be heat transferred. These numbers, aligned vertically two-by-two in Futura Bold typeface down the centre of the garment, displayed the home telephone contact of the person who purchased the shirt.

When individuals wearing the shirts emblazoned with their phone numbers were spotted at the market, Asher's exhibition was in full operation. Activated by each and every one of its participants, the work rested in the hands of the random people who came across – or were informed about – the Corps De Garde concession, and who voluntarily bought and wore the shirts as they perambulated the square and beyond. If the individuals wearing the shirts directly contributed to the work's implementation, the passers-by more generally defined the viewing public. People moving through the square could not help but notice the garments, which presumably led them to question why fellow strangers would display three vertically aligned couplets of integers, possibly local telephone numbers printed on their clothing. Although Asher deliberately relinquished authorial control over his work in favour of the chance involvement of willing participants (as opposed to hired individuals), he was responsible for putting the elements of the work literally and figuratively 'in place'. The work fanned out from the city centre into the public domain, as those sporting the numbers on the front or back of their shirts merged with the social fabric. Having taken into account the all-pervasive ubiquity of public display of clothing, Asher's shirts evidenced the dividing line between adornment and advertising as much as the line between public and private space. Simultaneously, he dispensed with the need for museum walls and galleries, as the work, attached to its sponsoring institutional auspices, radiated outward by the movements of persons walking to and from the Saturday Market. Predicted on a low-cost transaction, the work also escaped subjection to high-powered systems of economic exchange incurred by art objects. Although outdoors, uncontained and amorphous, the Groningen work possessed an affinity with *Kunsthalle Bern, 1992* to the degree that it, too, was constructed on a model of circulation of how water from wall valves to radiators along a 'route' away from the boiler to the basement.

An international conference held from 9 to 11 October 1980 at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) marked the occasion for a three-day installation by Asher at the invitation of the contemporary art journal *Parachute*, under whose auspices the conference 'Performance and Multidisciplinarity: Postmodernism, a Colloquium on the Theory and Practice of Contemporary Art' took place.³ Although the colloquium lasted only three days, films and performances were held at the university throughout October and November. Asher, however, chose to time his work to coincide with the conference, and took inspiration from the school's main building, specifically its tiered architectural configuration around a large, open,

central space resembling the layout of a shopping centre. Asher installed his work on the communal video monitors that the university routinely uses to dispense in-house information to students and faculty. At half-hour intervals during the three-day period, Asher presented a video loop of one of three shopping centres in the Los Angeles area: Fox Hill Mall was shown on 9 October, Old Town Mall on 10 October and Del Amo Fashion Square on 11 October. In addition to the video presentations, he placed three black-and-white production stills (one from each of the videos) side by side on the school's outdoor notice board at its rue Saint-Denis entrance, where they remained for the duration of *Parachute's* two-month programme of activities. From behind the framed glass of the encased announcement board, Asher's video stills gave the superficial impression, because of their presentational context, of brokerage firm advertisements or cinema production stills.

The three-day installation took full advantage of the sense of immediacy created by the transmission of the video footage taken at the three malls. On each of the three successive days, the monitors displayed variations on the theme of consumerism, as it plays out specific reference to spaces constructed for shopping. The shopping centres resonated with the architectural character of UQAM's building, although they did not possess the same degree of interior expanse apparent in the school's premises, its several floors and its ample atrium with fountain and trees. With its tiered levels surrounding an indoor core, Fox Hill Mall most closely approximated the university's complex. The most striking aspect of this particular mall was the degree of blatant advertising marked by ubiquitously beckoning neon signs and a barrage of commercial information. The entrances of individual shops and businesses gave onto simulated outdoor walkways, as if they were in the open air, all to disorienting effect. The footage of Old Town Mall, not unlike that of Fox Hill, emphasized the inherent artifice of shopping-centre architecture in general, where, for example, a false outdoor street was enclosed within the building. The accoutrements of the street, such as lamp posts and bus benches, lined the ersatz avenue, while architectural facades were designed in a number of pseudo-period styles. Visitors to this shopping centre could follow various pathways leading them to diversion and spending sprees. In contrast, the architecture at Del Amo Fashion Square might be said to have consumed its consumers, captivating shoppers by means of reflective surfaces in which patrons could see themselves in the process of shopping. When looking up to mirrors in the ceiling, customers observed the reflections of themselves and others, while angles and disjunctions in the glass served to entrance, rather than to edify. As opposed to seventh-century Italian ceiling paintings, in which painted illusion ideationally passes as being real, the shiny surfaced of the shopping centre's ceiling deliberately distorted and distracted shoppers, seeking to waylay them rather than to inspire critical reflection or speculation.

The Montreal installation, carried out under the auspice of an art magazine, took place in a public arena associated with an educational facility instead of in an art museum or gallery. In this regard, the work could attend to contemporary culture's obsession with shopping – verse studying – and to the concomitant pursuit of

tangible goods over the more elucidating pursuit of knowledge. By enlisting the technology then available for providing channels for political propaganda, Asher's work lent 'perspective' to its own and to viewers' contextual circumstance, transporting them to geographically distant, yet, analogous architectural surroundings. Footage on the monitors, spliced into the school's daily bulletins, reminded students and educators of their place in society where sites of entertainment out number those of erudition are encroached upon by having to generate revenue rather than education, students are transformed into customers and knowledge into marketable goods. In the video images of the California shopping centres, students and faculty could observe in real time, the manipulation of architectural ruses for encouraging acquisitive behavior at the expense of inquisitive thought, and draw comparisons to the changes taking place in their own academic environment.

Such attempts to expose artifice – or market economy, of history and of social constructions, but also of art itself – have characterized Asher's practice to date. Whether inside or outside of the institution, his works have succeeded in reflecting on each organization situation, cutting through the false, the illusory or the otherwise unperceived, to give material and ideational form to transparency.⁴