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OTHER VOICES, OTHER ROOMS

MAX COLE, MARCIA HAFIF, WINSTON ROETH, DAVID SIMPSON,
AND FRED SANDBACK

Curated by Steven Evans
April 19 – June 28, 2009

Opening reception: Sunday, April 19, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

Last summer in New York, in a grand production widely hailed and visited by spectators from around the globe, New York City's waterways were punctuated at various points by four enormous freestanding waterfalls that appeared to spontaneously erupt while at the same time were clearly emanating from the structures visible behind the sheets of falling water. At the same moment, the creator of the waterfalls, artist Olafur Eliasson, was being celebrated by crowds flocking to the Museum of Modern Art and P.S.1 Contemporary Arts Center to view the artist's first major survey exhibition in the United States, which had traveled from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

In both the survey exhibition, *Take Your Time*, organized by Madeleine Grynsztejn, and *The New York City Waterfalls Project*, commissioned and produced by The Public Art Fund, Eliasson's work brought the singular obsession of generations of artists to a wide public: the effort to understand and heighten phenomenal experience. Eliasson's recent investigations are dependent upon a wide audience; his focus on the natural colliding with the cultural reached its

apotheosis in the grand spectacle of the waterfalls. At the same time, the spectacles raised questions of how to incite moments of perceptual and cognitive clarity within a more modest framework.

Thoughtfully, the catalog for *Take Your Time* contains a lengthy and informative conversation between the Danish/Icelandic artist and one of his progenitors, California-based artist Robert Irwin. In the conversation, Irwin and Eliasson compare observations about the nature of art, perception, cognition, and the role of the audience in receiving the work. In a significant passage Irwin remarks that "the same reasoning that had moved us away from a pictorial reality — from pictorial to phenomenal — applied equally to the realm of objects... had nothing to do with object/nonobject; it had to do with how we see the object in context."¹ Irwin continues on to clarify his long-held position that perception is subject to "fluctuating sets of conditions that in themselves are not static."²

Irwin, his work recently the subject of a career spanning survey organized by Hugh Davies at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, is undoubtedly a key figure in terms of this pursuit. But in the roughly forty years spanning Irwin's abandonment of painting and the rise of Eliasson, a flourishing of artists have kept a sustained focus on the investigation into the nature of phenomenal experience.

This exhibition examines the work of a small group of American artists that have been developing their bodies of work since the late 1960s; they offer an alternative to both the dominance of contemporary media and image-based work as well as the blue-chip canon of minimalism. Enjoying wider recognition in Europe than in their home country, these Americans have deftly extended the innovations of early perceptual-based work and have influenced contemporary figures now working in the genre.

Other Voices, Other Rooms

The works of **Winston Roeth**, **David Simpson**, **Marcia Hafif**, **Max Cole**, and **Fred Sandback**, all painters with the exception of Sandback, create a narrative of perception with the viewer. Grounded in phenomenological rather than symbolic or descriptive strategies, and seen within the context of specific architecture and light, the act of perception becomes its own narrative. Each artist's work heightens the conditions and relationships which influence the experience of particular works of art. Consisting of non-objective and sometimes monochrome objects, on careful inspection the viewer can perceive the underlying complexity of the works presented, leading



David Simpson *True Blue*, 2000 and *Light Well #5*, 2007



Marcia Hafif *Fresco Paintings*, 2007-2008

to an understanding of the individual artists' methodology. Rewarding inquiring contemplation with experiences of sublime beauty, the exhibition compels a singular demand on the viewer: *Look closer*.

Carefully executed and delicately balanced, **Winston Roeth's** works appear deceptively simple when taken in at swift glance. Layers upon layers of velvety pigment reveal their nature through intense looking. Grids, frames, concentric circles, and systemic series all work to complicate the viewers' experience.

In the exhibition, Roeth's 2009 painting, *Skylark*, activates the eye with its playful grid of multi-colored tempera coated slate. Clearly referencing prior explorations of interactions of multiple colors (Albers, Richter, Kelly, and Rodchenko immediately spring to mind), Roeth complicates matters by insinuating depth into his color composition, as well as an obviously subjective choice of palette. The qualities of the slate tiles — their regular size, jagged edges, and porous sedimentary layers — absorb the intensely hued tempera applied by the artist in multiple thin strata, integrating both in an uncanny new whole. Some segments come alive with reflected light, while others absorb almost all light save a deep, barely-discernable hue. Understanding the work requires movement from the viewer, and the effort pays off as new color relationships reveal themselves under prolonged examination, but in defiance of literal translation. Indeed, artist Daniel Buren could easily have been speaking about Roeth's painting when he postulated that "color is pure thought, therefore totally incapable of being expressed in words. It is just as abstract as a mathematical formula of a philosophical concept. If a work of art... has a single reason for being, it is to show in the clearest, the most intelligible and the most sensual way its characteristics which cannot be described in words, and if possible, allow them to be shared."³

Citing a shared interest with artists as diverse as Dan Flavin, Ad Reinhardt, H.M.W. Turner, and Irwin, **David Simpson** is unambiguously interested in light and its relationship to color. Refining his prolonged practice to monochrome painting in the 1980s (Simpson, like Max Cole, has been painting and exhibiting since the 1950s), he has created an extensive

body of work investigating the properties and potential of interference pigments.

Interference pigment contains titanium-coated mica particles that impart unique qualities, which Simpson has thoroughly exploited. Likening working with the pigments to be something akin to an alchemist's potion preparations,⁴ Simpson utilizes his unusual pigments so that the colors of the works shift depending on the viewer's observational position; the blue surface of a painting will alter into a gold color as the subject crosses the work, for example. Teasing out the alchemical nature of art-making, Jacques Derrida also noted similarities between "the Illusionist, the technician of sleight-of-hand, the painter, the writer, (and) the *pharmakeus*. This has not gone unnoticed: ... isn't the word *pharmakon*, which means color, the very same word that applies to the drugs of sorcerers or doctors?"⁵

Simpson uses the technology of the interference pigments, but is careful to avoid a technological look to the work. The paintings clearly show the human hand at work; their surfaces have a skimmed appearance, like plaster. This form neatly ties with the artist's interest in architecture and the settings for his works. *True Blue*, 2000, included in the exhibition, was originally created as a test for a site-specific installation of the artist's works in the ornate Palazzo Ducale in Sassuolo, Italy, organized by Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo.⁶ Careful settings allied with the simplicity of Simpson's monochromes intensify the eventful moment when the color "flashes" and transforms as the viewer's position changes. The floor tondi, known as *Light Wells*, are equally effective, but in contrast to the wall-hung paintings, can draw the viewer in from any approach.⁷

Similarly engaging the vector(s) of the viewer's position(s), **Marcia Hafif** presents a linear arrangement of works from a recently initiated series, the *Fresco Paintings*. Hafif has exhibited extensively in Europe and the United States and has written on monochrome painting. Her pioneering work with color and technique has been a touchstone for many painters of the last four decades, and she is well known as one of the intellectual theoreticians of late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first century painting, monochrome or otherwise.⁸

In her *Fresco Paintings*, Hafif is engaging and layering a number of ideas, techniques, and precedents from both her own art making and from art history. The works, painted on canvas, are certainly not frescoes in any purely technical sense of the term, but the nomenclature is an indication of Hafif's consideration of the importance of conditional relationships to both the visual and intellectual understanding of her work. In written statements she has addressed these issues, specifically in regard to arrangements of monochrome works installed on a shared wall, inviting the consideration of the entirety as a composition.⁹

Talking about the *Fresco Paintings*, Hafif has remarked that the colors and color relationships she observed in the work of early Italian Renaissance painters Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca offered "inspiration, and clues as to how to proceed... the colors made their way into my sensibility, coming out as I worked..."¹⁰ Further, the *Fresco Paintings* contain within their methodology a partial inventory of Hafif's various strategies and techniques over the last forty years: the shifting vertical division of the canvas employed in such earlier series as *TGGT*, the delicate and shifting transparency of the *Glaze Paintings*, and the familiar repetitive vertical brushstroke utilized in many of Hafif's earlier series such as the *French Paintings*, the *Grayscale Paintings*, the *Roman Paintings*, and others, as well as her remarkable drawings dating from as early as 1972. The play of colors in relation to other colors, the interaction with the surrounding environment, and the importance of light and space are all brought to the fore in this remarkable group of canvases.

Max Cole's works suggest an obsessive meditative practice. Constructing her paintings from series of a multitude of parallel horizontal lines and layers of painted bands, the tiered marks visually lead outward beyond the edge of the painted plane. Organic and seemingly infinite, rising and falling, the lines suggest a gentle tide, sonic representation, or natural rhythm.

Comparisons between Cole's work and the work of Agnes Martin have abounded, but beyond a shared interest in horizontal composition and contemplative practices, the most pertinent common quality lays in the demands each artist's work places on the viewer. The act of perceiving the paintings is one that requires a sustained commitment. As the viewer

moves closer (or farther) from the work, new aspects are revealed; indefinite bands emerge to reveal themselves as rows upon rows of sharply drawn black lines. Washes and layers of color — and sometimes raw linen — become exposed.

Cole has stated an interest in heightened physical and perceptual states; she has drawn comparisons between herself during the creative process, the perceptive state of a viewer of her work, and the states experienced by humans in extreme situations such as skydiving — during which adrenaline and endorphins take over and perception is altered, time vanishing.¹¹

Fred Sandback also noted a relationship between the instant of the creative act and the viewer's moment of engagement, remarking that "I don't have an idea first and then find a way to express it. That happens all at once..."¹² and that his "work takes place in time... Initially, it is easy to see what the exhibition is about. But then comes the observation of the work: where is it, where are you, and how does the work change when you move about the room,"¹³ clarifying that true understanding of the work is inseparable from the experience of the work. It is non-verbal and non-textual, and never truly represented in documentation.

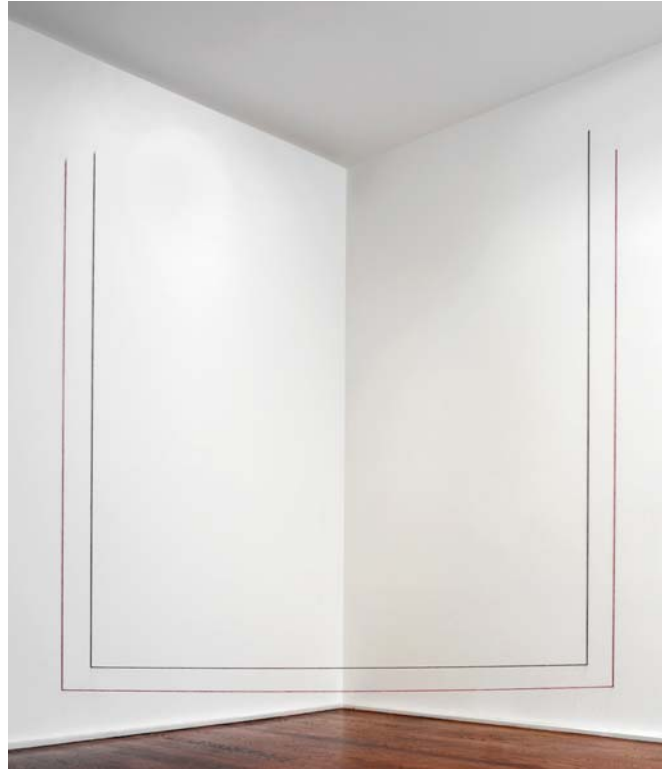
Sandback's sculpture, in this exhibition a two-color *Corner Construction*, delineates space with stretched acrylic yarn, creating a "sculptural space without an interior."¹⁴ Widely regarded since his debut in the late 1960s while still a graduate student (having switched



Max Cole *luft*, 2009

his field of study from philosophy to art), Sandback exhibited extensively and internationally during his lifetime. His work has been the subject of many international exhibitions over the last decade. Sandback's importance and influence is only beginning to be understood and felt; the sole sculptor in the exhibition, Sandback's work establishes a link between artists traditionally associated with minimalism and contemporary artists working with issues of perception.

Eliasson has clearly acknowledged Sandback's profound influence upon his own work, stating that Sandback's "work renegotiates itself every time it is exposed to any space or individual that encounters it. What inspires me most about Sandback is his idea that space is based on a relationship in progress, and within this relationship or trajectory I can both reflect on the space and use the space to reflect upon myself. Contrary to a generalized or 'normative' space that promotes a single view or method as being predominantly correct, this personal



Fred Sandback *Untitled (Fourth of Ten Corner Constructions)*, 1983

act of self-reflection — through the engagement with 'non-normative' space — both inspires and supports great ideas of individuality in the diverse range of experiences generated between the viewers and the work."¹⁵

The works in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* encourage a transaction that is beyond linguistic or semantic understanding. The works reinforce the individual nature of phenomenological experience and the establishment of shifting subjectivity. Strikingly simple upon first glance, these works reward sustained looking. An exchange takes place between the viewer and the work in an arena beyond spoken or written language, in a visual and spatial field conditioned by surrounding space.

Perception and cognition take place concurrently, in relation to the artwork, placing the viewer in a self-aware state. Perceiving ourselves perceiving, we become captivated by the sublime. □

— Steven Evans
Winter 2009

NOTES

1. Olafur Eliasson and Robert Irwin, "Take Your Time: a Conversation," from *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson*, Madeleine Grynsztejn, ed. (New York and London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 52
2. Eliasson and Irwin, p. 53
3. Daniel Buren, extract from "Interview with Jérôme Sans: Daniel Buren on the subject of..." (2006) in *Daniel Buren: Intervention I, Works in situ* (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006), collected in *Documents of Contemporary Art – Colour*, David Batchelor, ed. (London: Whitechapel, and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p. 222
4. Angela Madesani and David Simpson, "Interference Alchemy – David Simpson and Angela Madesani in Conversation," *David Simpson*, (Verona: Studio La Città, 2008), n.p.
5. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," extract from *La Dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972); trans. Barbara Johnson, *Dissemination* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), collected in *Documents of Contemporary Art – Colour*, p. 163
6. The Palazzo Ducale project also included site-specific works by Winston Roeth, who, along with David Simpson and Max Cole, is included in the Panza Collection of "Light and Space" works recently acquired by the Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
7. In conversation with the artist at his Berkeley, CA studio in January 2009, Simpson stated writer and critic Kenneth Baker had suggested this to him
8. Hafif has written statements for numerous catalogues throughout her career, and her essay "Beginning Again" was published in *Artforum*, Sept. 1978
9. See Marcia Hafif, "On Composition," from *Maleri Pur*, (Germany: Die Gesellschaft für akustische Lebenshilfe, Kiel, 1991)
10. Hafif in conversation at her studio, Laguna Beach, CA, January 2009
11. Max Cole in conversation with Stephen Zaima, "Glimpses of Clarity," from *Portrait of Max Cole* DVD, Stephen Zaima, ed. (Unpublished, September 2007)
12. Fred Sandback, "Notes," *Fred Sandback* (Munich: Kunstraum, 1975), pp. 11-12; referenced by Thomas McEvilly in "Fred Sandback: Nothing Outside Factuality," and reprinted in *Fred Sandback*; Friedemann Malsch and Christiane Meyer-Stoll, ed. (Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), pp. 57, 90-91
13. Ingrid Rein and Fred Sandback, "Pedestrian Sculptures, Ingrid Rein interviews the Minimal artist Fred Sandback," *Fred Sandback*; Friedemann Malsch and Christiane Meyer-Stoll, ed., p. 101
14. Fred Sandback, "Notes"
15. Olafur Eliasson statement from *Artists' Favourites: Act II*; Jens Hoffmann, ed. (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts; Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2004)

BIOGRAPHY

Steven Evans is Dia Art Foundation's Assistant Director for Beacon. He oversees Dia:Beacon Riggio Galleries, the museum for Dia's permanent collection of renowned artworks from the 1960s to the present. From 1999-2003, he was a member of the senior management team that supervised Dia's renovation of the 300,000 square-foot former Nabisco Box Printing Factory into Dia:Beacon. During his nineteen year career at Dia, he has worked with an extensive number of artists to help realize some of New York City's most impressive contemporary art installations. In addition to his duties at Dia Art Foundation, Evans is a freelance curator and writer, and has exhibited his artwork widely.

CHECKLIST

MAX COLE

LUFT, 2009
Acrylic on linen
68 x 80 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Haines Gallery

MARCH, 2009
Acrylic on linen
30 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Haines Gallery

MARCIA HAFIF

FRESCO: BURNT SIENNA NY 07
5, 2007
Oil on canvas
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Larry
Becker Contemporary Art

FRESCO: GREEN EARTH LB 08
3, 2008
Oil on canvas
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Larry
Becker Contemporary Art

FRESCO: YELLOW OCHRE LB 08
8, 2008
Oil on canvas
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Larry
Becker Contemporary Art

FRESCO: ITALIAN BROWN PINK
LAKE LB 08 7, 2008
Oil on canvas
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Larry
Becker Contemporary Art

FRESCO: VIOLET-GREY LB 08 4,
2008
Oil on canvas
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Larry
Becker Contemporary Art

FRESCO: VINE BLACK LB 08 9,
2008
Oil on canvas
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Larry
Becker Contemporary Art

FRESCO: TERRA VERTE NY 07 8,
2007
Oil on canvas
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Larry
Becker Contemporary Art

WINSTON ROETH

SKYLARK, 2009
Tempera on slate
124 x 50 inches
Courtesy of the artist

DAVID SIMPSON

TRUE BLUE, 2000
Acrylic on canvas
102 x 67 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Haines Gallery

LIGHT WELL #5, 2007
Acrylic on canvas
71.5 inches in diameter
Courtesy of the artist and
Haines Gallery

FRED SANDBACK

UNTITLED (FOURTH OF TEN
CORNER CONSTRUCTIONS),
1983
Maroon and black acrylic yarn
97.25 x 98.75 x 70 inches
Private Collection, courtesy of
Zwirner & Wirth

*A selection of works on paper by
the artists will be presented in the
project room.*

Cover: **Winston Roeth**, *Skylark*, 2009

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