

Art in America

A Year in Notes: Q+A with Richard Birkett

by Courtney Fiske 01/25/13

White Columns' annual survey show stands out in an art world awash in biennials. Against predominant positionings of the curator as neutral interlocutor, the Annual bills itself as the singular vision of a single person: the distillation of its curator's idiosyncratic course through 12 months of art in New York. In keeping with White Columns's history as an alternative art space, usual suspects and big-name galleries lose out to under-recognized artists and commercially minor venues. The result reads not as a frantic attempt to see and sum up but as a subjective, sinuous traverse of the New York art world's less-tread paths.

The Annual's seventh edition, up through late February, is the effort of Richard Birkett, a transplant to New York from London and the curator at Artists Space. As in previous iterations, the installation is dense and deliberately open-ended. Neither press release nor wall text attempts to tell a narrative using the works on view, placing the onus on the viewer to string disparate projects. Henrik Olesen's spare grid of screws bound to primed canvas with skeins of hot glue rhymes with Martin Beck's nearby patchwork of blanched fabric panels, while the pairing of Alexander Kluge's *Früchte des Vertrauens* (*Fruits of Trust*), 2009, with Helke Sander's *Break the Power of the Manipulators* (1967–68) on back-to-back monitors yields unlikely alignments between two moments of crisis. At times, the connective logic is more difficult to discern, as with the inclusion of nine glossy, New Deal photographs by Alfred T. Palmer.



VIEW SLIDESHOW Yuji Agematsu 1/12 – 3/12, 2012 Mixed media 119 x 58 x 4 inches Courtesy of the artist and Real Fine Arts, New York; Peter Fend *Über die Grenze : May Not Be Seen Or Read Or Done*, 2012 Collage (color laserjet copies, b/w laserjet copies, magazine pages, maps), colored pencil, ink and architectural tape on paper 12 works, Total Dimensions are variable each work 50 x 38 inches Unique Courtesy of ESSEX STREET, New York;

The themes that emerge revolve around reading, writing and artists' debts to art-makers past. In the gallery's backmost room, Moyra Davey's striking 2011 video, *Les Goddesses*, documents the artist as she ambles around her apartment, combing through old photographs and musing on literature, memory and interiority. Elsewhere, Yuji Agematsu's constellation of dust, discards and street debris, *Not Yet Titled* (2011), provides an especially strong moment. Arranged on gold-painted walls, his self-effacing, sensitive sculptures come as a welcome counter to the recent spate of monumental trash-art installations.

A.i.A. spoke with Birkett in a SoHo café about his attempt to take stock of the past year in an art scene where dispersion is the norm.

COURTNEY FISKE Matthew Higgs, the director of White Columns, approached you about curating the Annual at the end of 2011. Did the prospect of the show change the way that you approached seeing art?

RICHARD BIRKETT It certainly forced me to take more notes than I would otherwise [*laughs*]. Essentially, it was a good kick in the backside to go and see more art. New York is such an intense environment, and the sheer number of shows makes it impossible to see everything. I took the Annual as a kind of challenge to see as much as I could within the space of a year.

FISKE The Annual features only art that was shown in New York. Given the ever-expanding purview of the art world, this limitation is somewhat unusual.

BIRKETT Within the show, it's evident that there's an internationalism to what goes on in New York, as with anywhere. But, for me, what was interesting about curating the Annual was that restriction. It's not possible for a gallery like White Columns to ship work from Europe or to cover massive insurance premiums, and you don't have the lead-time to borrow work from museums. These geographic and temporal constraints establish a frame for the show. They stop you from being a mirror to the internationalism of the New York scene that's built around the wealth of the art world. You're forced to be more precise about your interests.

FISKE The scale and diversity of the New York art scene can be overwhelming. It's daunting at times to try and wrap your head around what's happening and what's important. What's your take?

BIRKETT I studied as an artist in London before moving to New York. Coming from a different art world context has given me a different perspective on what's happening here. In a certain way, it feels pretty homogenous. It's also quite dominated by a commercial scene in ways that London is not, at least in my experience. There, there's a tradition of self-organized and artist-led spaces. In the '90s, especially, that really was the only means for younger artists to engage in an active discourse with their peers and broader intellectual networks. It's only in the last decade or so that commercial galleries have opened in London that show the work of artists straight out of college, whereas in New York, that model feels more embedded in the scene. Here, the commercial sector is a viable way to work with young artists and to have a discursive engagement with their work. I don't say that in a negative sense, because I think that some of the most interesting things that are happening now in New York come through young galleries started with a commercial model in mind.

FISKE When you select work for a show, you're making a statement about what art matters, even if just to you. It's interesting to think about who or what determines which art becomes significant: Is it curators? Galleries? Biennials? Critics? The market? Artists themselves?

BIRKETT As a curator, it's not necessarily about trying to make a diagnosis with each exhibition that you do. Certainly the Annual is unique because it centers on a very subjective experience. It's not like the Whitney Biennial. There's a sense that you don't have the responsibility of visiting every show in New York in the space of a year to make the best choice. It's about following the paths that you naturally take.

FISKE Several of the artists in the show—Bill Hayden, Sam Pulitzer, and Yuji Agematsu—work with

Real Fine Arts, a gallery in Greenpoint that's open only two days a week. You seem to have made a deliberate effort to highlight alternative, less commercial galleries.

BIRKETT Yeah, I think you start to follow certain paths because you're drawn to the work that's being made. What's interesting about Real Fine Arts is that it's run by an artist, Tyler Dobson. For Tyler, it's not just about picking a group of artists who are viable in terms of the market. It's about creating a structure that can sustain itself. Even though the gallery's hours are limited and it's not exactly easy to get to—I can't imagine big-name collectors heading there constantly—it still works because of the strong interest in New York in those kinds of artist-led spaces.

That's one side of the coin. I'm also interested in how there's a certain discourse around art in New York that operates outside of commercial networks and goes beyond exhibition-making and gallery display. With the Annual, I wanted to try to find a position between this discourse and concerns of form and aesthetics. In the past year, for example, the Occupy movement enabled artists to exchange ideas in ways that weren't driven by the art world. I'm drawn to those sorts of dialogues, but they were not easy to represent in the Annual, which, like any exhibition, is tied to the presentation of works and objects.

FISKE Where does this discourse come through in the show?

BIRKETT Pieces like Chris Kraus's wall-mounted text and book [*Kelly Lake Store and Other Stories* (2012)] were a way of suggesting that discursive aspect. It's something that I felt could happen because Chris's writing is so direct. It's not like printing out a theory text and nailing it to the wall, which would be a bit pretentious. It's a text that was very important to me in thinking through questions around social engagement in art that I think have been very live in the past year in New York.

The second small room with the video of David Grubbs' and Susan Howe's sound performance [*Frolic Architecture* (2011)], Martin Beck's fabric panels [*Rumors and Murmurs (Polygon)*, 2012] and Julie Ault's edited text about James Benning's project [*Two Cabins* (2011)], implies something outside of art as object. For me, these works gesture toward a model of art-making that's about people's discursive relations with other artists and thinkers. They open up a space between artistic form and politics, which I think David Grubbs and Susan Howe's piece does quite powerfully. The dynamic between the two, and the relationship of Susan's poetry to her voice, really interested me. The voice is a way of making things public, in a sense. Then there's Martin Beck's practice, which strays into the realm of exhibition design and impositions in space that structure the way in which we encounter art. Finally, Julie's work is an in-depth investigation into ideas around solitude and the politics of social isolation.

FISKE You mentioned the role of Occupy in clearing a space for alternative sorts of dialogues to occur among artists. Did the protests impact your thinking about the show?

BIRKETT Not directly, as I think that it would be problematic to try to represent Occupy in the context of this kind of exhibition. But it's certainly had an impact my conception of this city. What strikes me as unique about New York is that there's an active conversation occurring between three generations of artists. Figures like Zoe Leonard and Moyra Davey who were heavily involved in activism and identity politics in the '80s and '90s are still totally engaged with younger artists in the city. There's no disparity there. It's really incredible. We just don't have that in London, or not to the same extent anyway.

FISKE Barbara Rose recently wrote a scathing piece for *The Brooklyn Rail* damning the state of political engagement in contemporary art, as compared the heady moment of the '60s and early '70s. These sorts of laments are rather common among older critics.

BIRKETT Right, art and politics: it's a very complex relationship. I think we're all aware of the fact that being an artist or being involved in this art complex, if you like, is not the ideal context in which to function socially. But, at the same time, because of art's remove, it has the ability to provoke a lot of interesting questions. I think that artists are dealing with politics as much now as they did in past moments. They're just approaching it in different ways.

Yuji Agematsu's installation at Real Fine Arts I thought was incredible because it's a kind of life work. It's become a slightly clichéd idea, but it's not often that you encounter that level of integration between life and art. For me, the piece is very apt for this city: it almost feels like a direct portrait. What makes it so powerful is that it enables a different understanding of New York. It opens questions of how we relate to the social and economic structures around us. In some sense, the most that you can do as an artist is to lay those questions bare.

FISKE Many works in the show deal with writers and writing. There's Moyra Davey's video, *Les Goddesses*, which traces the lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter, Mary Shelley, among others. There's Kaucyila Brooke's series of photographs of experimental author Kathy Acker's clothes. There are also four books nailed to the wall: Chris Kraus's *Kelly Lake Store and Other Stories*, which you touched on, and three novels by Tan Lin. When looking at contemporary art, for me, questions of the work's legibility (or illegibility) are foremost. Was mounting books on the wall, thus rendering them unreadable, a way to signal this problem of legibility vis-à-vis contemporary art?

BIRKETT I had the idea of presenting books all along because of my interest in representing writing-based practices like Chris's and Tan's. It's very different to think about Chris's writing, which takes on a direct, explanatory mode, and Tan's work, which often is very experimental. What interests me about Tan's work is it almost acts as an object, in that you're very aware of language as form. Nailing his books to the wall, it's a gestural act, but it also reinforces the sense of his language as an object. One of the books on display is *Heath Course Pak* [2011], which is partly composed of meta-data streamed from the Internet. To transform text that's ephemeral and, in a way, autonomous into an object is quite perverse. Mounting Tan's books on the wall was, in part, a way to avoid setting up a reading table and expecting people actually read them in the gallery. But it also worked on this other, meta-level.

The question of legibility is a big one in the context of the Annual, because you're re-presenting work that you've experienced in a different setting. If a piece is legible, in part, because of its context, how does it then work when you position it in a new context? Rather than rule out anything that was context specific, I tried to think around this problem. For example, there are several pieces in the show that involve artists interpreting other artists' work through an intervention, like Jason Simon's collection of Chris Marker materials [*Collection: Materials of Chris Marker (2012–13)*] or Kaucyila's photographs of Kathy Acker's clothes. Including pieces like Jason's and Kaucyila's that thematize this process of collecting and making sense of other people's work was a way to get at the problem of re-presentation.

FISKE The press release touches on this idea of creating new narratives and conversations among artists by situating their work in a novel context. What narrative or thematic threads did you feel ran through the Annual?

BIRKETT Because of the fact that you're condensing a year's worth of very disparate things, I think it would be a mistake to try and create a thematic show. That wouldn't do justice to the multitude of voices that you experience in a year of looking at art. That being said, there were certainly connections that emerged for me that had to do with a loose space between form and politics. I'm not

sure how to define that more specifically, other than through this idea of interpretation as being similar to a Russian nesting doll. In a way, doing the Annual is closer to the logic of collecting than it is to curating. You collect art over the course of the year and then you end up including artists' work that is similarly about the process of collecting the work of other artists. The layers of interpretation carry on into infinity.

FISKE I found myself spending an unexpected amount of time with the show, especially with the video works near the back, like the Moyra Davey's *Les Goddesses* and the collaboration between David Grubbs and Susan Howe. I wanted to just sit and watch each all the way through.

BIRKETT Yeah, I find that all the videos in the show really suck you in. Even the Alexander Kluge, which is over two hours long . . .

FISKE And totally bizarre.

BIRKETT Yeah, it's incredible because it shifts pace so frequently. One moment, it's direct and documentary; the next, it's oblique and introspective. As a viewer, you're taken through these different modes and levels of engagement, some of which are very trying, others of which draw you in and time passes quickly. That's very much Kluge's idea of montage as being a way to address the speed at which we engage with images and content. To me, it's similar to how an exhibition can function. You get these fast moments, these interstitial moments, and these more drawn-out moments. If you strike the right balance, it works quite well.