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Perverted by Theater

In his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," art critic Michael Fried established as his central thesis "theater's profound hostility to the arts": "theater and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture) but with art as such." Art was being "corrupted or perverted by theater." Theater threatened art through its "sense of temporality" and, even worse, "theater has an audience – it exists for one – in a way the other arts do not." Fried tied the audience to the evil of the subject/object relationship: "It is the explicitness, that is to say, the sheer persistence with which the experience presents itself as directed at him [the audience] from outside . . . that simultaneously makes him a subject – makes him a subject [sic] – and establishes the experience itself as something like that of an object, or rather, of objecthood." The subject/object relationship was like "being, distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person." The purported horror of the theater and its human presence, temporal dimension and dialectical process of the subject/object relationship were thus, according to Fried, the "negation of art."

This exhibition turns Fried's hypothesis on its head, purposely selecting art for its theatricality and installing it in an environment molded by theater. "Perverted by Theater" is dedicated to evoking "unpresentness" by emphasizing the temporal dimension, the subject/object relation, the audience, the presence of the actor, and the implication of dramatic concepts such as peripeteia, character, and story in visual art. Cognizant of the critique of Fried's bombastic theorizing by postmodern theory and contemporary art discourse, "Perverted by Theater" takes the negation of Fried's thesis as its program. While the art world is currently seized by a fascination with performance which is not theater (e.g. the Performa biennials, the recent exhibitions "The World as a Stage" at the Tate Modern and "A Theatre without Theatre" at the Berardo collection in Lisbon), this exhibition embraces the very elements of theater that Fried decried and that performance seeks to exclude as well.

In this sense, the exhibition takes a provocative stance toward theater itself. The material and philosophical innovation of 20th Century visual art (DADA, Futurism, Surrealism, Happenings) drove the development of avant-garde theater, even as the visual arts inched ever closer to the realm and practices of theater. Important contemporary theater artists (Robert Wilson, John Jesurun, Romeo Castellucci) were trained in visual art. As Hans-Thies Lehmann wrote in his book "Postdramatic Theater," because of these influences, concepts from the visual arts drive the forms and meaning of contemporary theater. Theater has dissolved into dance, performance, movement, video, film, and installation, as theater has been absorbed, deformed and, even by its own practitioners, deemed irrelevant and roundly criticized when examined psychologically, socially, politically and artistically.

The principles and elements of theatrical performance and its reception guide the selection of works and their installation in "Perverted by Theater." Whereas the visual arts traditionally constituted the background for dominant elements of theater (the play and the actors), here the visual art becomes the play, the actors and the constitutive elements of theater itself. The performance is relocated partly to its reception by the spectator, who also controls the duration of the performance. The invitation to this forbidden theater of art appears through handbills by Jack Smith for performances that may or may not have occurred. The tension between theater and art finds its parallel in the blocked image of Alexi Worth's painting "Lenscap." Character in its accretion and suspenseful reconfiguration through narrative comes into view through the layered, temporal portraiture of Jackie Gendel and the sliding, fractured paintings of Jim Nutt. The narrative ensnares its protagonist in the video performance of Kate Gilmore's "Going Under" where the artist is lassoed. The uneasy relationship of the audience to theatrical representation is queasily reflected in the undulating mechanical funhouse mirror of Peter Coffin's "Absinthe Drinker." Luis Camnitzer's "Painting under Hypnosis" explores the collaborative work of the audience in instructing the artist to paint. The delicate equilibrium of Ross Knight's sculpture "Fragments for Studying What's Left Over", suggests the key dramatic shift of balanced opposing forces in the plot of Aristotelian poetics. The audience by definition audits or listens; here to Kabir Carter's installation "Shared Frequencies," a transmission of modified, modulated environmental sounds. The hovering dimensionality of Ann Pibal's painting evokes the inherently abstract nature of

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theatrical representation. Periodic actions by the “cool aesthetic” choreographer Trajal Harrell and dancer Ede Thurrell in the gallery space investigate the live presence of the body of the actor. The final unraveling of the narrative, or denouement, is instantiated in the ripped residue of fabric in Elana Herzog’s “Plaid.”