

Art & Language

Sheila Pepe

Jenny Perlin

Michael Smith

Olav Westphalen

May 27 - June 26, 1999

Curated by

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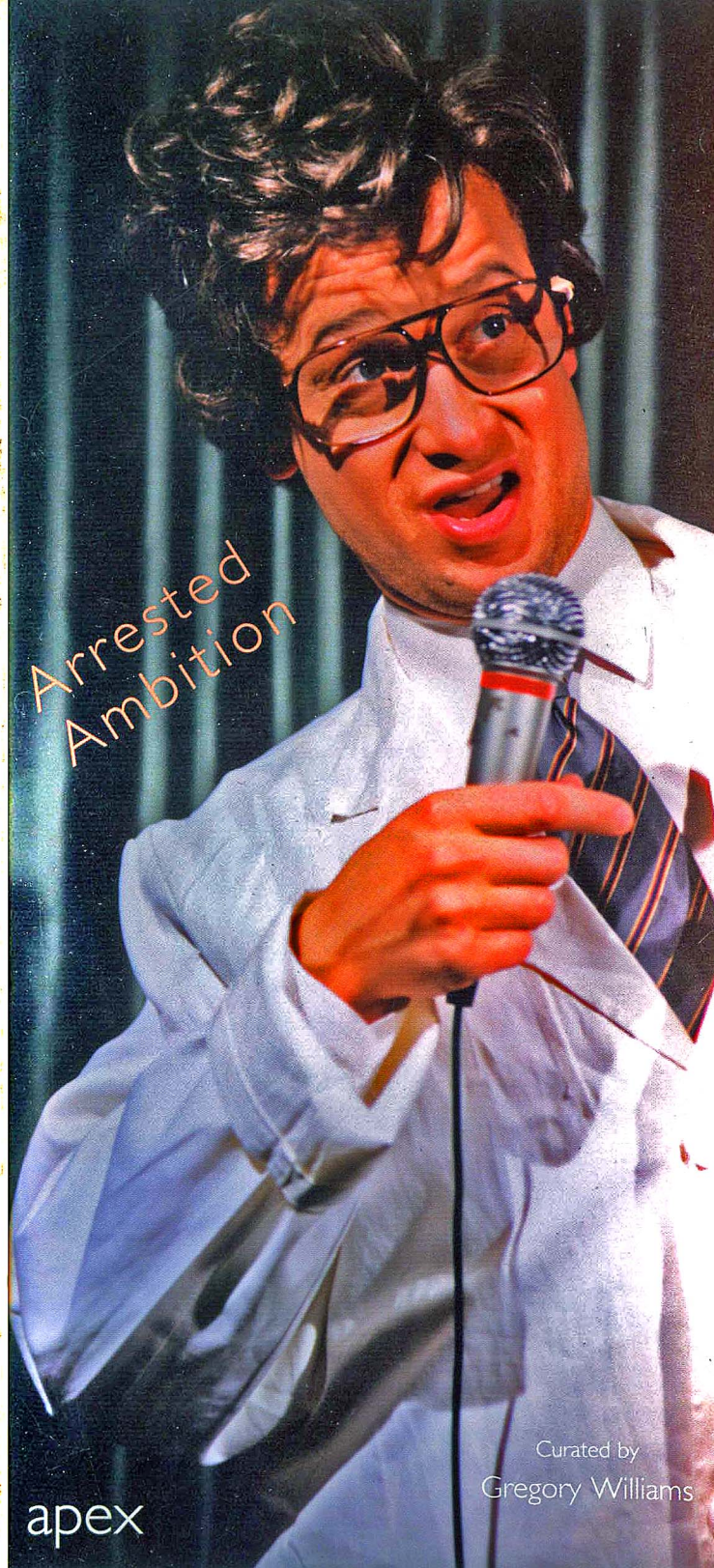
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Cover: **Olav Westphalen** *Stand-Up* 1997 Performance/installation,
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

Thank you: Bianca Baader, Andrea Codrington, Jason Dodge, Marian Goodman Gallery, Andrew Richards, Steven Rand, Eric Rosenberg and Nancy Wender.



Arrested Ambition

Perfection can never be actually attained, and those who pretend that, at the very first trial, they are able to walk without any difficulty along the path of accomplishment, are no more than idle boasters, filled with an exaggerated idea of their own merits, sacrificing everything to their vanity, and disregarding altogether the good impulses that spring from proper pride.¹

Though it's difficult to pin down a date, at some point during the past thirty years or so a certain approach to the concept of failure started making its presence felt in the art world. Perhaps we can locate the moment in the wake of the declarations of various cultural deaths—of the author, criticism, painting, etc.—when a general awareness of finitude, of the inevitable effects of a limited set of options, caught hold.

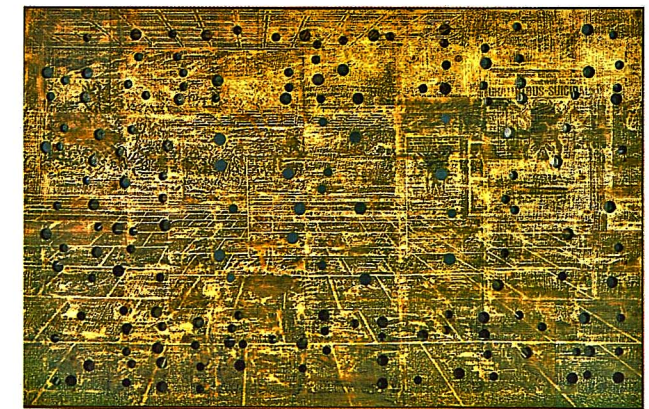
As is well known, the history of modernism was always shadowed by deeply rooted anxieties which often manifested themselves in the products of culture: Francis Bacon's paintings, Antonin Artaud's theater, Samuel Beckett's plays and novels. While their often painful search for meaning was not bereft of humor, it was preoccupied with calling attention to the many absurdities and injustices of life in the mid-twentieth century.

The strain of failure under consideration in this show might be thought of as post-existentialist. When the categories under which art was operating in the 1960s exploded, ushering in new possibilities for innovation,

artists thrived on the energy and altered their practices accordingly. Yet this dynamic moment was not to last: in the 1970s, as the dust settled in the aftermath of late-60s utopianism, artists in certain quarters began recognizing the collapse of collective hopes—for a better world, for transcendence, for personal enlightenment.

This situation prompted a healthy phase of self-questioning that has yet to reach a conclusion. At what point during the course of any creative act does the artist recognize defeat? In another sense, can the very awareness of the potential for disaster hinder ambition? The artists in this exhibition are not flustered by such questions. In fact, they have consciously and quite happily embraced the present condition and opted to devote their energies to an examination of its most desperate ramifications.

Art & Language was among the first to deliberately and forcefully reckon with the newly perceived obstacles to artistic practice. Once an international collective of some 30 or more individuals, the group was reduced in 1976 to Michael Baldwin

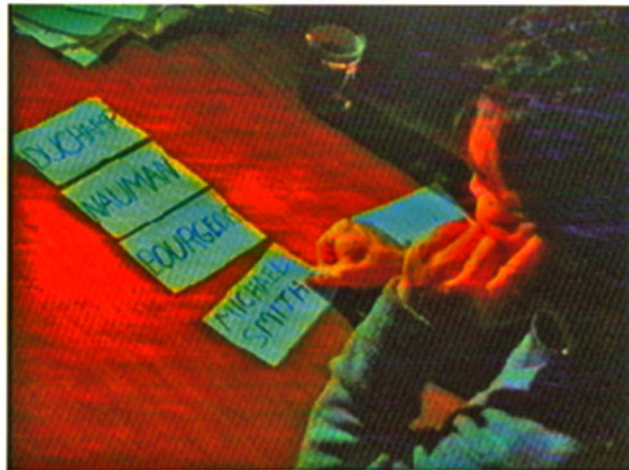


Art & Language *Index: Incident in a Museum XIX* 1985 Alogram on plywood oil on canvas 72.5" x 123"

and Mel Ramsden—with the art historian Charles Harrison as collaborator—and their subsequent work has centered on the demise of modernism and the complexity of negotiating its legacy. The premise of the *Index: Incident in a Museum* series is based on a quixotic endeavor: the infiltration by these two British artists of an inaccessible space, namely, the Whitney Museum of American Art. In the work included here, a sheet of plywood provides the surface for a ghostly rendition of the painting that might be glimpsed through several “peep-holes,” making a pointed commentary on the restricted nature of meaning production and dissemination. As Michael Baldwin wrote in 1986, “Art & Language’s practice has been a dialogue with the conditions of failure and refusal in respect of the signifying languages of art.”²

Since the late 1970s, Michael Smith’s alter-ego, Mike, has occupied the role of poster child for every hapless artist out to maneuver through the art world. Mike is the sincere embodiment of the “artist’s artist” and as representative of Smith’s naive, earnest side, he has to be kept at a distance while always maintaining his connection to the

Michael Smith *How to Curate Your Own Group Exhibition* 1996 Still from videotape



Sheila Pepe *Different Things* 1999 Ceramic and plaster Dimensions variable

“real” artist. Yet in *How To Curate Your Own Group Exhibition*, Mike and Michael seem to merge during the performance of an exercise in art-world strategizing. With index cards bearing the names of highly established artists, he imagines himself in the company of virtual peers—he calls it “elevation through association”—and reflects on the skills needed to make it in today’s climate of hyper-networking. No mention is made of the type of work sought after in this era of the artist as entrepreneur; like many of Smith’s projects, the emphasis is placed on the arduous process of simply inserting oneself into the scene.

Sheila Pepe’s work deals with a more elemental set of concerns: the conflict between technical expertise and the more primitive need to create. Her rows of lopsided, bisque-fired clay and plaster forms recall the amateur ceramist’s need to mold, to enter into the never-ending process of making objects despite the initially thankless nature of such activity. By undertaking what she refers to as “cheating craft,” she attempts to suppress the artist’s training while rediscovering the first, tentative gestures made when faced with a mound of unformed clay. The end result is somewhat akin to what happens when an adult tries to write by

hand in the manner of a child: though the letters may be backward, they still look too considered, too perfectly off-kilter, to be accepted as truly innocent.

In her 16mm film, *Perseverance & How to Develop It* (a work in progress), Jenny Perlin thematizes the search for a *raison d’être*, but she looks to sources other than herself for answers to the question of artistic commitment. Having found a how-to book, published in 1915 as part of Funk & Wagnalls’ “Mental Efficiency” series—while Duchamp was busy producing his ready-mades—Perlin followed to the letter several manual exercises promoted as the means to find the true path to personal fulfillment. Patience is clearly required: one drill involves methodically tangling a ball of twine and, in longer sessions each day, slowly and conscientiously pulling apart the mess you’ve made. With its aura of last-ditch solutions, Perlin’s film offers the kind of panacea that artists might find useful when faced with an empty studio, or a conspicuous lack of ideas.

Although Olav Westphalen doesn’t deal directly with the space of the studio in his work, he does draw a connection between stand-up comedy and the performance anxiety induced by bare walls. Hovering in the

Jenny Perlin *Perseverance & How to Develop It* 1999 Still from 16mm film 30” x 40”



middle of the gallery, a self-supporting, significantly undersized, red-velvet curtain alludes to a theatrical event that may or may not materialize. There is a considerable degree of honesty in his brand of blunt humor, and the impression conveyed is that he enjoys wallowing in a state of voluntary mediocrity. His drawings are more pointedly satirical with their playful references to various cultural clichés—the prevalence of hackneyed post-structuralist theory in the art world, rejected proposals for television pilots, self-defeating promotional efforts—in order to highlight the pathetic side of the drive for success.

It’s possible to detect the somewhat nostalgic presence of modernism’s literary anti-hero in this show. The artists are actually in an ideal position: enough time has elapsed since characters like Joyce’s Leopold Bloom were created that their circumstances can be addressed from a distance. With the advantage of hindsight, the willingness to forge ahead is sufficient to override any defeatist tendencies that might stand in the way of the pleasure of courting misadventure.

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¹ H. Besser, *Perseverance: How to Develop It* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1915), 109.

² Michael Baldwin quoted in Paul Wood, “Art & Language: Wrestling with the Angel,” in *Art & Language*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1993), 32.