

# Funky Ceramics Are Everywhere. Including in Galleries.

The fine art world has started to embrace works made from clay — a material it once deemed lowly.



Clockwise from top left: Work by Ruby Neri, Julia Haft-Candell, Didi Rojas and Woody De Othello. Clockwise from top left: courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, photo: Lee Thompson; courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery; courtesy of Didi Rojas; Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery

By Kate Guadagnino

## MARTOS GALLERY

More than sewing, flower-arranging or zine-making, clay might offer the perfect antidote to modern times. Hyper-tactile, it taps into a primal desire to shape earth — what the potter and writer [Edmund de Waal](#) has described as thinking through the hands — and is beloved for its immediacy. “You move and the clay moves with you,” says [Aneta Regel](#), who was a finalist for this year’s Loewe Craft Prize and who, 12 years after graduating from London’s Royal College of Arts, now finds her works — lumpy, funky, cooked until cracked — aligned with a prevailing taste for artfully imperfect handwork, more generally, and for all things ceramic, in particular. If it is unsurprising to find mounting evidence of the trend on Instagram and at lifestyle-leaning boutiques like [Samuji](#) in New York and [CristaSeja](#) in Paris, it is notable that clay’s proliferation has, over the past decade, extended to the fine art world, which has long been wary of the material, widely considered to be lowly, functional and inexpensive. One of de Waal’s early teachers liked to say that his pots “had to be cheap enough to drop,” a condition that recalls the train tracks around Kolkata, India, strewn with shards of terracotta as a result of riders’ tossing their empty cups of chai out the window.

That has not been the attitude taken at recent art fairs. At Frieze New York last month, Matthew Marks Gallery showed a speckled and contorted coil by the ceramic artist [Ken Price](#), while Parrasch Heijnen showed craggy forms by [Julia Haft-Candell](#), one of Price’s artistic heirs. On the walls of Martos Gallery’s booth were paintings by [Dan Asher](#); in the center, several small sculptures of his — modest unglazed stacks of what looked to be clay scraps. A low-slung table at the Blum & Poe booth was set as if for coffee

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with friends — or, dare I say, a craft fair — with pretty but plain-looking mugs and bowls by J.B. Blunk. In a way, it was among the most provocative displays at an event so focused on remarkably high prices, underscoring how, by placing ceramic works in this context, these artists and gallerists are not merely signaling a stylistic shift, but asking age-old questions about what qualifies as art.



Betty Woodman, "Striped Napkin Holder," 1983.

Courtesy of Charles Woodman/The Estate of Betty Woodman and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; photo: Thomas Müller

Of course, plenty of modern artists have at least dabbled in ceramics — most of the Fauves took a turn painting on pitchers and platters, and then there are the several thousand ceramic works by Picasso, from plates with faces to vases with tails, some

of which were recently on view at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art outside Copenhagen. As Picasso worked in Vallauris, France, an emerging band of California sculptors (Viola Frey, Peter Voulkos, John Mason) made strides in establishing clay as a primary fine art medium. As did Betty Woodman, who started out as a “precocious studio potter,” says Stuart Krimko, the research and editorial director at David Kordansky Gallery, which works closely with the artist’s estate, and who ended up being the first living woman to have a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art — in 2006. Woodman struggled for most of her career to be taken seriously, in part because she was a woman, in part because she worked in a medium that was relegated to the realm of decorative arts, but her work resisted easy classification. (Krimko mentions her “sort of proto-pillow pitchers that she dubbed erotic burritos.”) According to the sculptor [Arlene Shechet](#), a friend of Woodman’s and a witness to her ongoing frustration with her lack of acceptance, “She’d ask me, ‘Why should we agree to be in any of these ceramic shows?’”

Perhaps thanks to battles already waged, today’s contemporary artists seem to be relatively free of hang-ups about turning to clay. In addition to planning a coming retrospective of Woodman’s work, David Kordansky recently exhibited a series of large-scale pots by [Ruby Neri](#) depicting naïvely painted female nudes, their breasts in relief and their ponytails doubling as handles. Neri, whose father is the Bay Area sculptor Manuel Neri, trained in painting at U.C.L.A. in the late ’90s and transitioned to making fully ceramic works around 2015. “At first, I didn’t know if I could overcome ceramics’ heavy-handed history,” she says. “And I’d sort of pooh-poohed ceramics in grad school, like a teenager rebelling against their

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parents, but once I crossed over I realized it allowed me to shed all this debris, like fabricating armatures to put other material on top of, and focus on the enjoyable aspects of making work.” She considers the move a breakthrough, but says she does not feel inclined to push clay to its technical limits, as a traditional ceramist might.



From left: Ruby Neri, “Women with Burdens,” 2018; detail from Woody De Othello’s “At Night I Can’t Sleep,” 2018. From left: courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. photo Lee Thompson; courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery.

Shechet, who makes sculpture in clay as well as in a variety of other mediums, believes there is indeed still a line between fine art and crafts, and that good art is imbued with conceptual rigor and chases a higher aim. “More than any one material, what interests

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me is making works that are about being human,” says Shechet, whose partly porcelain sculptures will be [installed in](#) New York’s Madison Square Park in September. Though one could argue that, especially when compared with, say, bronze, ceramics, these fragile works that can’t help but retain traces of their maker, possess an inherently human quality.

This philosophy pertains to work by a new generation of ceramic artists as well. [Didi Rojas](#), a recent Pratt graduate, experiments with sculpting clay shoes — color-blocked Balenciaga sneakers, pearl-studded Gucci boots — expressly not made for walking. (Some of her latest creations are currently up at [Andrew Edlin Gallery](#) on the Bowery in downtown Manhattan and are about to go on view at [Fisher Parrish](#) in Brooklyn.) “Shoes are self-portraits of their wearers,” Rojas says, “and I like the idea of making something attainable through material, one made of the very ground we walk on.” [Woody De Othello](#), who graduated from California College of the Arts last year and is set to have a solo show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco this September, also uses clay, with all its associations of functionality, to build nonfunctional versions of everyday objects, such as a warped air vent or a blocky TV remote. He hopes that viewers will see themselves in the pieces, which droop downward as if they’ve had a long day, and uses a high-gloss, almost reflective glaze to heighten the effect. “A lot of times when people look at my sculptures,” Othello says, “they experience a desire to reach out and touch.” Does he allow it? “It’s definitely not allowed.”

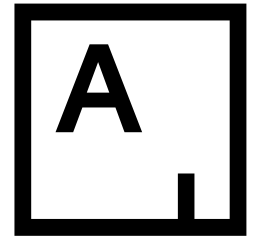
# The 11 Best Booths at Frieze New York

Alina Cohen

## Martos Gallery

Focus Section, Booth A8

With works by Dan Asher



May 3, 2018



Installation view of Martos Gallery's booth at Frieze New York, 2018. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.

Martos is giving away a publication entitled *Class Notes*, filled with scanned pages from Dan Asher's 1991–92 notebooks (the booth itself features a suite of his paintings—mostly portraits painted and drawn with frantic, energetic lines). The New York-based artist, who died in 2010, created wacky, inventive, and funny scrawls. One page features what looks like a mock-up of a license plate: “ISUE4YOU,” it reads. Asher wrote “American Jurisprudence” underneath. Another page merely reads “self-cleaning outhouse (privy).” Altogether, the scribbles enhance the viewer’s understanding of Asher’s wry and ever-inventive mind. “It’s like a collection of his brain,” says the gallery’s Ebony L. Haynes.

Mar. 15, 2017

## Interview with a Dead Friend: Dan Asher

by Barry Kostrinsky



Why only interview the living? This is an interview with Dan Asher who passed several years before I wrote this. It is an attempt to channel his spirit and to reveal how he would respond and give depth to this great artists complexity while hinting at explanations of who he really was.

Barry Kostrinsky: What is your name, what is your quest, what is your favorite color  
Dead Dan Asher: My name is Dan Osher, I changed it to hide from some shit. My quest is to seek the real among the muck of mankind. Black is my favorite color.



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BK: What do you want to tell us from the other side

DDA: Barry, it's not the other side

BK: What do you mean?

DDA: It all just, is, the past, the present, the future, I see clearly now and am here.

Can we go for sushi and can I have uni?

BK: Yes, my friend, same spot in the LES, my treat.

DDA: Well, not exactly your treat, you bought my art dirt cheap.

BK: Yes, I did.

BK: What makes an artist great?

DDA: Barry, there is no great, no good, no bad, these are silly terms, you should know better by now.

BK: Why did you create art?

DDA: Does it look like I could do plumbing?

BK: Your apartment was a mess, it saddened me so to see it, with the pills strewn about, the art all over the place, the books piled high everywhere, what happened to you?

DDA: I sold my apple stock too soon and ran through my inheritance.

BK: You once said you were not a photographer yet your photos of random birds in flight are sublime, the icebergs you shot off Greenland are beautiful and the bloody fight scenes of wrestlers adds another dimension. How are you not a photographer?

DDA: I just took pictures. I don't develop images, care for the specific camera body nor lens nor do I speak to the history of photography. I just press a button.



BK: What medium or media were you most comfortable in?

DDA: Comfort is not a part of art.

BK: What media did you like most?

DDA: Like is for eating cakes and sushi.

BK: Why did you start singing and getting into music towards the end of your career?

DDA: What end, my career is just beginning. However music offered to touch my soul deeply and more properly the question is why didn't I do it earlier in my career. Come on Barry, do I have to do all the work here?

BK: Yes.

DDA: Well, you're gonna have to pay for that privilege then.

BK: Anthony Haden-Guest was/is a big fan of yours and introduced us. What do you think of AHG?

DDA; He's cool.

BK: elaborate please.

DDA; He is cccoooooIIlll.

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BK: Can Anthony Draw?

DDA: He is learning.

BK: Which artist do you respect most?

DDA: none, all, none, all, none, all

BK: Just one name?

DDA: Jean Michel, he liked my work too, you know.

BK: You sang of hatred being everywhere a few years before you passed and now with Trump in office you seem to have foretold the future.

DDA: Yes.

BK: What is your summation of the art world?

DDA: 743

BK: Why did gallerist run from you when we walked in Chelsea to see shows?

DDA: Because they didn't have a car nearby to zip away in.

BK: Did you irk some people?

DDA: hopefully.

BK: Matthew Higgs from White Columns gave you a show not to long ago, what did you think of him?

DDA: He should have given me a show sooner.

BK: A Movie has been made about you.

DDA: People will see anything to make them feel alive in their dead worlds. Who's the dead one, me or them?

BK: Is that rhetorical?

DDA: Explanations will cost more.

BK: You softened up whenever I saw you spoke to a pretty lady. Though a brute at times, you were the softest guy I knew at times. Why the polar pairing?

DDA: Are you the same shit always? I am still a guy.

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BK: You once jumped out of a taxi after ordering it to stop in the middle of a street when you didn't like what a friend of mine, a great and very real photographer like yourself said about politics, why?

DDA: I didn't suffer the living lightly.

BK: What does it look like from up there?

DDA: It is not so much an up here or down there thing and more of an inside thing. It looks much the same, ants running around to and from the mound not knowing what they do.

BK: What advice would you give artists and humankind today?

DDA: I'd tell the artists to get the proper value for their art work and not to sell to low. I would tell the world to wake up and see the connectedness of all things, not just art and to go for a walk and shoot oil in water puddles as I once did in your driveway.

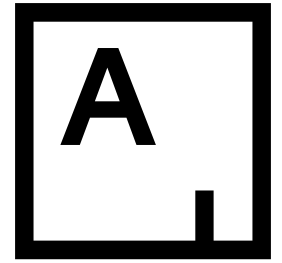
BK: Thank you for your time.

DDA: your welcome, I look forward to you joining me one day soon.

BK: I'll take a rain check as there is much to do and say here for a long while to come but look forward to our reunion, shall I bring some oil sticks?

DDA: We don't need that here, we paint with thoughts and ideas. You'll like it here and everything is sold to the universe as soon as it is created. There are no dealers, no critics, no press and no collectors, just artists.

BK: Sounds like a cool place



Dec 1, 2016

Art Market

# NADA's Emerging Art Community Thrives amid Turbulent Times

Alexxa Gotthardt



Installation view of Martos Gallery's booth at NADA Miami Beach, 2016. Photo courtesy of the gallery.

The 14th edition of NADA opened its doors on Thursday morning with buoyant energy and significant sales, gathering 110 galleries from 17 countries. As is tradition for the emerging art fair—a perennial foil to Art Basel in Miami Beach's more formal atmosphere—the ambiance felt communal, even familial as the day kicked off. Dealers, collectors, and

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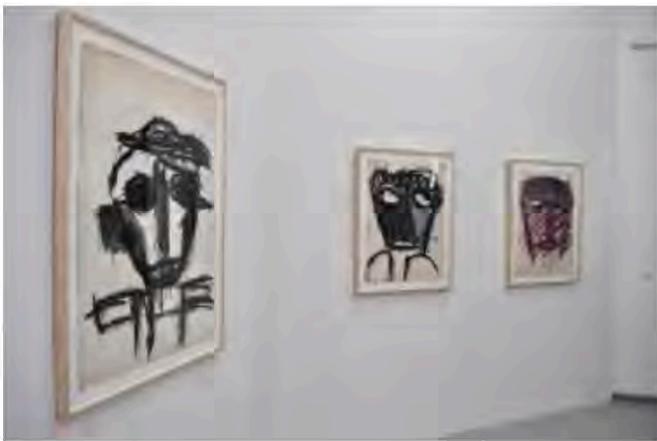
artists filing into the halls of the Deauville Beach Resort could be overheard discussing the power of art and coming together in moments of political and social turmoil, the likes of which we've seen of late. Indeed, never before has NADA's warm environment been more welcome. And that atmosphere encouraged interest in a strong, wide-ranging selection of work—from sought-after figurative paintings by Alex Chaves and Mira Dancy, to a politically pointed installation from Terence Koh, to the spellbinding works of self-taught artists Derrick Alexis Coard and Karen May, which could be taken home for a little as \$200.

Just an hour after the fair kicked off, the owner and director of Martos Gallery rubbed elbows with exhibiting artists Alex Chaves and JPW3, along with a throng of collectors. By that point, all four of Chaves's paintings in the booth—which ranged from \$5,000 to \$14,000—had sold or were on hold. And while the young, Los Angeles-based artist's canvases could certainly be considered part of the thriving figuration trend, they're also loaded with weighty social and art historical content.

“His work really responds to his community,” said the gallery's Ebony Haynes, as she looked at the booth's centerpiece, a painting brimming with fractured figures—several nudes, a prince, and a classical bust. She went on to explain that the piece fused likenesses of Chaves's friends with his interest in the late downtown New York artist Dan Asher's work, which also hung in booth. “They both approach portraiture almost anthropologically, through close interaction with the people that surround them,” she continued. “And people really seem to be responding to that sense of human connection right now.” Asher's series of loose, gestural portraits on paper, made with heavy scribbles, were a talk of the fair. Priced from \$7,000 to \$15,000, several had sold by the afternoon.

ARMORY WEEK 2014

# Martos Does a Dan Asher Booth at Independent

By Charlotte Kinberger

The booth.

Tucked away in a corner on the Independent Art Fair's third floor, Martos Gallery has on display a mere three pieces, all drawings from Dan Asher's estate. Though the collection is small, it packs a punch. The drawings, made with oil stick on paper and completed between 1980 and 1983, depict expressionistic,

melancholy and energy-infused masks.

The Chelsea gallery began working with the estate after the artist's death at the age of 63 in 2010, and has since displayed his works at fairs in Los Angeles and, now, New York. They've planned their first show with the estate for later this year, director Taylor Trabulus said, because Asher "was such a key player in the Lower East Side, so many people know him, so we wanted to bring his work out of that area" and to a wider audience.

Not that they haven't succeeded in that already. Ms. Trabulus had just finished closing a deal (each costs between \$15,000 and \$18,000), and said the fairs have allowed Martos to sell his work to private and public collections in New York, Los Angeles, Michigan and abroad.

ART REVIEW

# An Art Fair That Tries to Be Something Else

By Martha Schwendener



Richard Nonas's sculptures from the 1980s rearranged on the floor at McCaffrey at the Independent art fair. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

In its fifth year, [the Independent](#) continues to assert its maverick identity. It's an art fair that pretends not to be an art fair. And



because it takes place in [Dia Art Foundation](#)'s former exhibition space, you're almost convinced. If fairs are part of the new necessary evil for small galleries to stay afloat, this one offers a good concentrated roundup of artists and exhibitors: nonprofit institutions, alternative spaces along with a few commercial galleries that might be barely paying their bills.

The fair still eschews souklike booths or the gridded cubicles of more corporate art fairs. And the organizers employed two young architects, Andrew Feuerstein and Bret Quagliara, to create a layout inspired by the tangram, a puzzle said to help develop spatial reasoning skills.

The conversation running throughout the fair this year has to do with history. Contemporary art is often accused of recycling and repurposing, and among the more than 50 participating galleries and nonprofits from 14 countries, there is plenty of work that looks old but is actually new, and vice versa.

Among the new work that nods to older models are paintings by [Jessica Warboys](#) at [Gaudel de Stampa](#) from the series "Sea Painting, Dunwich, 2014," on unstretched canvas flowing onto the floor made by soaking the canvas in seawater. The works look like a cross between Abstract Expressionism and the mechanically produced "machine" abstractions of [Pinot Gallizio](#).

At [Labor](#), a Mexico City gallery, [Etienne Chambaud](#) has retooled a

trope made famous by Andy Warhol in his “[Oxidation Paintings](#)”: urine applied to pulverized copper to create dazzling metallic effects. In Mr. Chambaud’s case, the urine is from animals and refers to the Anthropocene or urbanizing human impact on the planet. (The gallery also points out that in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1968 film “Teorema,” a character urinates on a painting, which may have provided Warhol with the idea.)

At [Gavin Brown](#), [Jennifer Bornstein](#)’s rubbings made with wax and oil pastels are strongly reminiscent of the [frottage](#) technique employed by Max Ernst and the Surrealists. Most of Ms. Bornstein’s were made on site and include objects like [Joseph Beuys](#)’s “[7000 Oaks](#),” squat basalt columns that line 22nd Street (also a Dia-sponsored legacy).

A tabletop display by the Czech artist [Eva Kotatkova](#) at [Meyer Riegger](#) recalls [Hannah Hoch](#)’s photomontages except that Ms. Kotatkova’s images, cut from Communist-era books, have been fashioned into an accordion-pleated book. At [Untitled](#), [Brad Troemel](#)’s panels with objects vacuum sealed into them hark back to ’80s bedroom bulletin-board collages, although these won’t be on view for long. Mr. Troemel sells his work on the website [Etsy](#), where people “around the world connect to buy and sell unique goods” (just like art fairs).

Nostalgia is also a boon for older (or dead) artists whose work look remarkably fresh. [Rosemarie Castoro](#) is a painter from the first

generation of minimalists. [Broadway 1602](#) has two of her paintings from 1965 that use methods derived from modern dance in their composition. They feel perfectly relevant now.

[Robert Mallary](#), who was included in the Museum of Modern Art's 1961 exhibition "Art of Assemblage," is featured at [The Box](#). His dark and existential works, are reminiscent of European painters like Alberto Burri and Antonio Tàpies. [Julian Beck](#), a co-founder of the Living Theater, is represented by paintings and works on paper from the '40s at [Supportico Lopez](#), while an exhibition of [Richard Nonas's](#) drawings from the '70s and small, steel sculptures from the '80s, rearranged on the floor here to respond to the immediate spatial environment, are at [McCaffrey](#).

The Austrian artist [Gerwald Rockenschaub's](#) colored dots displayed throughout the stairwell, courtesy of [Mehdi Chouakri](#), have a '60s feel. [Martos](#) is showing works on paper by Dan Asher from the '80s. Another artist who became known in '80s is [Julia Wachtel](#), who exhibits at the gallery of the Independent co-founder [Elizabeth Dee](#). Given the art world's current interest in the '80s, Ms. Wachtel's paintings, which juxtapose found images with goofy cartoons, look contemporary again.

Another prevalent strain here is so-called outsider art (which also includes people simply unacknowledged by the institutional art world). [Suzanne Zander](#) rounds up William Crawford, an avid draftsman of erotic scenes and photographs taken by an unknown

man named Gunther K. of his red-haired secretary, with whom he had an affair.

[Alice Mackler](#) is a ceramic artist whose brightly glazed sculptures of female figures, with their exaggerated eyes and breasts, look vaguely “outsider.” (She is also represented by [Kerry Schuss](#), who deals in outsider art.) And yet, Ms. Mackler, famous now in her early 80s, doesn’t identify as an outsider artist; her aesthetic shows the blurring of boundaries, which often seems merely a matter of institutional recognition.

There is a lot of painting in this year’s Independent. Painting sells at art fairs, but it’s also popular right now. The young Brooklyn gallery [Real Fine Arts](#) has an extravaganza, with [Nicolas Ceccaldi’s](#) portraits of the writer Michel Houellebecq and Morag Keil’s funny text paintings, as well as a larger abstract canvas by [Jon Pestoni](#).

Beyond the painting-centered nature of the fair, [Art: Concept](#) offers a thoughtful roundup of [Roman Signer’s](#) videos, as well as a work that involves a grand piano, Ping-Pong balls, and fans that blow the balls along the strings. And [Mendes Wood](#) from São Paulo is showing [Adriano Costa’s](#) playful, topical sculptures that address Brazilian politics and culture.

Given the season, there are overlaps with the just-opened Whitney Biennial: Michel Auder and David Diao, both at Office Baroque, are in this year’s edition, as is Paul P., shown here by Broadway 1602.

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The other hopeful aspects of the season are daylight saving time beginning on Sunday and the forecast for warmer weather, since a selection of books from [Artists Space](#) is for sale on the roof. It is a poignant reminder of the time when the building was occupied by the Dia Art Foundation, conceptual commissions appeared on the roof, and March in New York wasn't dominated by art fairs.

The Independent continues through Sunday at 548 West 22nd Street, Chelsea;  
[independentnewyork.com](http://independentnewyork.com).

# Our guide to Independent 2014

Matthew Higgs, the creative adviser of Independent, talks about New York's coolest art fair



Photograph: Charles Benton | Dan Asher, Untitled, 1982

7/25



Photograph: Charles Benton | Dan Asher, Untitled, circa 1980s

8/25

This week, New York's art world experiences its own version of March Madness, as a wave of art fairs hits town—led, as usual, by [the Armory Show](#). In recent years, art fairs have displaced galleries

as the places where collectors do most of their shopping, which is why exhibitors focus on business. But the Independent bucks that model. Instead of booths, the fair, which takes place in Dia's old Chelsea building, is organized almost like a group show. Deals are done, sure, but the proceedings also showcase the art world as a community for dialogue, learning and engagement, with the emphasis on how and why artists make their work. Started in 2010 by Elizabeth Dee and Darren Flook, the fair is curatorially helmed by White Columns director and creative advisor Matthew Higgs. *TONY* recently caught up with Higgs to discuss the fair and its collegiate spirit.

### **What's the philosophy behind the Independent?**

We wanted to show emerging, established and historical works while moving away from the cubicle aesthetic of most art fairs. We're trying to create a platform that's sympathetic to both the audience and participants.

### **What's your role?**

Ultimately, it's quite loose because it's never been defined. But as someone running a non-profit, I'm very interested that such organizations are seen alongside galleries. I'm also interested in presenting what I call maverick dealers.

### **Like who?**

Well, this year we have The Box from Los Angeles, which was co-founded by Paul McCarthy's daughter; they're showing work by American junk artist Robert Mallery. Kerry Schuss, whose gallery offers outsider, folk and contemporary art, is presenting vintage paintings and new ceramics by Alice Mackler, an artist who recently had her first solo show at age 82. Jose Martos is showing pieces by the late Dan Asher, an incredibly underrated New York artist.

### **How do you decide who goes where, given that you've got blue chip galleries like Michael Werner juxtaposed with emerging spaces?**

The idea is to have an intergenerational fair that doesn't reflect the economic pecking order of any particular artist or gallery. Michael Werner's program is interesting because it shows both historical and contemporary positions, so here, he's presenting modernist works by Hans Arp alongside recent pieces by Enrico David.

## MARTOS GALLERY

### **You're including more exhibitors this year; how do you do that and still maintain an intimate environment?**

The allocation of the space stays the same because the number of galleries that are collaborating has gone up. For example, Modern Art and Maccarone are sharing a room to present Paul Lee's series of small tambourine paintings. The Independent's manageable scale has always been one of the interesting things about it, and it changes subtly each year as galleries rotate out. It'd be nice to have everyone back each year but the way the fair drifts organically is part of its nuance.

### **Who do you consider the standout group presentations this year?**

Cologne's Susanne Zander is bringing examples of outsider and vernacular photography, including Polaroids of a cross-dressing man shot over a seven year period. Plus, there's an archive documenting a love affair between a German business man and his secretary as well as an extraordinary collection of anonymous found photos by a foot fetishist. And Untitled from New York is showing the work of Brad Troemel, who's invited nine other artists to create two- or three-hour-long solo presentations with the transformation of the space happening in real time while the fair is open.

### **What about site-specific installations?**

Art: Concept from Paris is presenting a great one with a grand piano and videos by Roman Signer, and Berlin's Mehdi Chouakri is installing Gerwald Rockenschaub abstractions throughout the building, even in areas dedicated to other galleries. Dia, the former occupant of this building, had a history of installation art that was thoughtful and responsive to these really beautiful rooms, and we're trying to go for a little of that here.

### **Besides that, what has been the impact of the building on the show?**

For me it's one the most iconic and perfect spaces in New York for art. One of the great things about Independent is that it's not clear where one gallery's presentation begins and another one ends. This year we're working with new architects, Andrew Feuerstein and Bret Quagliara, who've come up with a very dynamic re-imagining of the place. And we're very keen on maintaining the idea that the space here is as much a part of the experience as the work on view.

***Independent 2014** is on view Thu 6–Sun 9.*



February 12, 2013

ON VIEW

# 'NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star' at the New Museum

By Maika Pollack

Art Club 2000, 'Untitled (Conrans I),' 1992–93.  
(Courtesy the artist and the Estate of Colin de Land)

Named for a Sonic Youth album, this exhibition, part of which opened last week (the rest opens on Feb. 13), is a madeleine opening onto memories of the grunge era. Gathering artworks that were made or shown in New York in 1993, the curators—Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Jenny Moore and Margot Norton—make the case that art-making had a vastly different role at that time.

Zingmagazine publisher Devon Dikeou's 10 directory boards (all artworks dated 1993 unless otherwise specified), displayed in the museum's lobby gallery, set up the era's art scene. White plastic letters on black felt spell out the title, venue, dates and names of artists of every group show Ms. Dikeou participated in that year. They were at alternative venues like the bar Flamingo East and PS1; some were curated by art gadabout Kenny Schachter. Among those on the circuit were Marilyn Minter and Paul McCarthy; the young Spencer Finch and Ricci Albenda appear next to Barbara Pollack (who is now better known as an art writer). Many of the names of the participants

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—like Jutta Koether, Matthew Richie, Dan Asher, Adrian Piper and Craig Kalpakjian—are familiar today, but many more have been lost to time.

These boards riff on what was then the mecca of art, the Leo Castelli Gallery at 420 West Broadway, which displayed the same make and model of board in its building’s lobby to announce its shows. Ms. Dikeou was 30 in 1993, and the golden keys inserted in the locks of each directory board, making it look as if you could easily reach out and change the names yourself, speak of her longing to be in the Castelli context, a world away from her own. Could you just make yourself a star?

If Ms. Dikeou’s work is a meditation on the center of gravity and the fringes of the New York art world, autobiographically self-lacerating ’90s wunderkind artist Sean Landers gets at the heart of what it felt like to make and show art in New York in 1993 with *[sic]*, a confessional ramble about ambition and uncertainty scrawled in all caps on 451 sheets of yellow legal paper displayed in a grid on the wall. “There really seems to be no point to my life these days,” reads a typical passage. Listening to soft rock on the radio, musing about his Catholic hometown’s strip bars (“bottomless is legal in this state unlike New York”), watching the TV show *Roseanne* and the movie *Soylent Green*, scribbling in notebooks at diners, philosophizing about breasts and Vito Acconci, smoking too many Marlboros—Mr. Landers’s embarrassing and canny portrait of the artist as a young man recalls Rembrandt’s and looks forward to confessional blogs. When he writes “I have to watch TV to escape ... I can’t write here I feel like an idiot,” his angst is performative, both sincere and put on. “Am I a manic depressive?” the text asks. “I wonder when I am finally forced to be alone what I’ll discover.”

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Jutta Koether, 'Antibody IV (All Purpose Substance),' 1993.

(Courtesy the artist and Bortolami Gallery)

People felt isolated in 1993, especially if they felt different. Sadie Benning's grainy 20-minute video *It Wasn't Love* was shot in the then-teenager's bedroom with a Pixelvision camera, a low-fi Fisher-Price video recorder that logged moving images on inexpensive cassette tapes. A tangibly bored butch 19-year old with bleached-blond hair re-enacts her fantasy narrative of glamorous movie romance ("Yesterday night I drove to Hollywood with this chick"). In reality, she's worlds from Hollywood: visible out a window is the snowy landscape of the suburbs of Milwaukee.

Ms. Benning, a lesbian, was pulled out of school at 16 because of homophobic bullying. She uses her toy camera and props (blond wigs, cigars, berets, leather jackets, makeup and drawn-on tattoos) to make videos about women like herself and their desires. She creates characters that morph through fluid gender identities, and her use of video as a diary feels political—the work examines the role media plays in constructing images of masculinity and femininity. The soundtrack ranges from rockabilly to Joan Jett and Nirvana's "Negative Creep." Her video is ultimately optimistic: you are the star; media isn't a one-way street but can be put to personal purposes. The work, dedicated to "Bad Girls Everywhere," was included in both the famous 1993 Whitney Biennial and the 45th Venice Biennale that year; Ms. Benning went on to co-found the band *Le Tigre*.

The rest of the exhibition will bring more on the AIDS crisis, gay rights, and race and gender politics. Rirkrit Tiravanija will serve Thai food; Hans-Ulrich Obrist will talk about his series of do-it-yourself artist instructional works.

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The questions of the '90s were: Who are you, and who am I? This show makes the case that isolation and how personal and political identities and alternative media made connectedness possible were major themes of art in this pre-Internet era. In the 1990s, it was hard to find people like you or to explain how you felt and get those feelings out there. (*Through May 26*)

MARTOS GALLERY

***BOMB***

Jul 1, 2010

# Dan Asher by Ben Berlow



Untitled, 1980s, pastel on paper. 14 x 11 inches. All images courtesy of the artist.

Before I knew Dan, I knew him as the craziest guy at the 10th Street Baths. He would walk into the Russian room and immediately conduct the psychic energy of everyone inside, rocking with the waves of pheromones, voices, and steam in the air. Muttering to the nearest ear, he would say what a fucking mess it was, or just glare and wait for a reaction from whomever happened to look his way. For a long time I avoided Dan, but also couldn't help hearing his conversations, observing him observe others.

Once a guy at the baths sitting next to me was talking with Dan about the old days when a Hassidic Jew would bring a guitar inside and they would sing Bob Dylan's "Quinn the Mighty Eskimo (The Mighty Quinn)." We began singing it together; Dan went loud when the chorus came around. The other people in the baths just put up with us.

Not long after this, I was working for Kenny Schachter and Dan would come by from time to time, hustling his photographs and drawings for cash. I talked with him whenever he was downstairs waiting for Kenny to get off the phone. One night I visited Dan's apartment, mainly because of Kenny's warning that he lived in squalor and was too much for anyone to handle for more than a few minutes.

Eight years later, Dan was one of my best friends. Though we would be out of touch for months at a time as he traveled or was too depressed to see anyone, we hung out a lot. I watched as he photographed amateur wrestling matches in Brooklyn, heaps of barbed wire, flocks of birds, or anything that grabbed his attention. We sat and talked in the park, went to concerts, the baths, and the Strand. I bought him lunch or dinner whenever he was broke and tired of eating for free with the Krishnas, which was most of the time. Throughout our relationship I collected Dan's art, buying works I loved so that he could live.

Now he is dead, and I am left with these memories of Dan and his works.

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It is hard to put into words now who he was or what he was doing. I can only say that he was someone who felt things tremendously. He looked to spirits, he looked to nature, he looked inside humans, and he looked inside himself. He avoided calling himself an artist; art just happened as Dan was looking.

This conversation was recorded soon after Dan came home from chemotherapy at New York Presbyterian Hospital. Two months later, he returned with a fever, fearing his white blood cells were plummeting. I spent as much time with Dan as possible, bringing him fresh juices, rice pudding, whatever he wanted. We talked for hours and walked laps around the hospital floor. After a month of treatment, on April 23, 2010, his body gave up.

### **Ben Berlow**

You were talking before about existing in the past, present, and future ...

### **Dan Asher**

Well, a lot of people live their lives as if it were 30 or 40 years ago—or 2,000 or 4,000 or whatever. I guess that means they don't have to deal with the problems and situations of the present. It's a way of creating a space between them and reality. Having leukemia ... see, I don't know if I should say leukemia or lymphoma. More people know about leukemia, even though Jackie O and MrT had lymphoma. Anyways, I had lymphoma for some time, and then I got leukemia. The leukemia became transformed and much more serious, quite potentially terminal. I have the option of getting a stem-cell transplant after having intense chemo, but in a very short period of time this could just kill me. So I *needed* that chemo to happen and I *needed* a stem-cell transplant. I asked the doctor, "Can't I just get the chemo and then think about it?" And he said, "The chemo you did for six months? That helped you a little, and then the cancer started coming back two months later." That's what would happen if I don't get the stem-cell transplant. Finally I just said, "Let's do it."

This is all part of learning to take responsibility for one's own existence. Having Asperger's and having whatever kind of chemo-brain I have now just forces me to live in the present and to be more practical with finances. When I do the stem-cell transplant, it's going to be one to three months in the hospital and for months after I'll hardly be able to do anything; how am I going to get by? I supposedly have enough trouble getting by when I'm *not* laid up! Another good thing is that various people have come out of the woodwork, including my brother. A lot of stuff has gone down between us. Like I was describing to you, this book about the Amish just came out, *Amish Grace*.

**BB**

About their concept of forgiveness, right?

**DA**

Yeah. It's saying even if there can be *total* forgiveness, that doesn't negate the fact that certain things took place. Egregious things that violated ethical or moral principles—or just uncompassionate human behavior. So the book considers how much energy we should direct toward thinking and worrying about it. Spent mental energy affects the physical and spiritual body.

Having whatever I have, certain people—especially if they're not really on par with you intellectually or artistically—can get to you. People like to show that they're in control, see you squirm like a fish with the bait. The more my mind clears because I'm dealing with these heavy-duty issues, the more I'm understanding. Like seeing New York City and where it's at right now: the more I see it, *clearly* the uglier it is. Not that it *seems* uglier, it just fucking *is*. And I don't mean just some cheap-ass building going up next to an old building; I mean on every level, there's this complacency.





Untitled, 2009, tempera on paper, 18¼ x 12 inches.

**BB**

Complacency regarding what, the power structures of the city?

**DA**

It's like the Dylan lyric, "Too much of nothing makes a man feel ill at ease." There's a Vic Chesnutt song called "Mystery" that goes, (*hums, then sings*) "Complete lack of mystery ..." It's about a situation with no unknown factors. If you have Spencer Sweeney doing a performance, it'll be at Gavin Brown's, everyone will clap and smile, and eight minutes later it's fucking over. I'm illustrating a point: what I try to do—and hopefully also my friends and the people I try to influence—is to break out of that. But not just by criticizing. The Amish book says it's actions that matter. Again with my brother, I had to admit that I needed a donor, but I initially thought, It ain't going to be my brother! But he had stem cells I could use, and he immediately called the hospital and said, "I'll do it," without even thinking about it.

**BB**

It's an action, like how Emerson said we should judge men by their actions.

**DA**

It's an action, that's right. Just like some guy sent Gavin an email about my condition, and then Gavin got me on the phone and said, "I heard you're really sick, Dan. What's going on?" And he was totally serious. He wasn't bullshitting. That was an action. Gavin helped me in certain ways, immediately. The way he can help in a *real* way, before the transplant, in my art career, would be to organize a small show, even if for two weeks, in part of his gallery ... (*Begins crying*).

**BB**

You okay? You want me to stop?

**DA**

No, I'm fine. Just emotional. This all started because I couldn't pay insurance and it was due in a week. On one nice day, I just decided to have a fucking art sale in front of my house. So I brought the stuff out, dragged tables from the backyard. I put a big, messy, crazy pile there and it turned out really good, partly because I got off my fucking ass.

You may find this creepily weird, but part of the fun was that I got to insult Devendra Banhart. He was coming out of the baths, and I noticed his hippie garb and beard and the little elves around him. I'm a good friend of Josephine Foster, an amazing musician who was on some bills with him. I called across the street, "You're full of shit. The *real* brilliant singer is Josephine." So he comes over and says, "Why are you on my case, man?" Then he says, "Let me look at the drawings," and he goes, "I love these." And I'm thinking, He's a fucking musician. They're cheap, bullshitting motherfuckers. So he pulls out his hippie purse. I'm sure he had a big hippie purse somewhere with hundred-dollar bills, but he pulls out his tiny hippie change purse. And this lady was there with an iPhone. So there's this picture of me while I still have hair and a beard with Devendra Banhart and this doofy drawing that he bought for 50 bucks.

**BB**

*(laughter)*

**DA**

But then he said, "You're right. She is the best one." I told him he impressed me right then because he finally told the truth. Then Jeff Bailey, the bass player from Phosphorescent was manning the booth for a while.

**BB**

He sell anything?

**DA**

No, his fly was totally down.

**BB**

Maybe he was cooling off after the baths.

**DA**

Well, he wasn't at the baths. The point is that people came. I sold the big picture of the bird that was in the White Columns show in 2008. Not to namedrop or whatever, but I had called up Sarah Driver—Jim Jarmusch's ... not *wife*, but he's lived with her forever. She called back and goes, "How much more do you need?" I said \$460, and she says I can come tomorrow and pick it up. It was an excellent thing.

The other thing has to do with Vic Chesnutt. Jem Cohen made a film with Vic called *Empires of Tin*. Chesnutt wrote amazing songs for many years when he was alive and was a difficult, cagey guy. Now that he's dead, those songs for sure are going to be used in feature films. I wanted Jarmusch to go to the concert and meet Chesnutt, thinking he would either make a film with Chesnutt acting and use his music, or just use the music. That also was an action. His songs should be out there and they would make Jarmusch's films a lot better and it would make Chesnutt feel good. I try to incorporate that way of being.

**BB**

Where, into your life? Performances?

**DA**

My performances or my off-the-cuff jokes. Most of them, like the best humor, have a point: stirring something up or making people think about certain things. The last few months have gotten me to think less in black-and-white terms. I was reading this book, *A Brilliant Darkness*, about a theoretical physicist from Sicily. It went into what quantum physics is about.

**BB**

Like the Uncertainty Principle?

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And indeterminacy and all that. What they found out in the last 50 years is how the universe works. It's not necessarily logical. It's wild shit and that's why a lot of eccentric, flipped-out people get into that stuff. This book was about Ettore Majorana, who probably killed himself when he was 36. Some people reasoned that he was working on or discovered an idea that could then become something atomic, like a bomb.



Untitled, 1983, pastel on paper. 30 x 22¼ inches.

**BB**

Wow. When did he live?

**DA**

He was born about 1900. This other book about Paul Dirac, *The Strangest Man*, says that he had Asperger's. A lot of these people had a bunch of things, so that's why they sometimes didn't get along with each other, but they also would figure out equations. A lot of Dirac's findings were before other people's. Sometimes he would just jot them down on matchbook covers and go, "Well, I'm not into publishing, fuck it," and toss them. One time he figured out this equation and Fermi asked him where it was, and Dirac said, "I threw it in the fucking wastebasket because I figured it out. Let's have another!" I can relate to it because he was kind of a punk. A punk theoretical physicist. Chesnutt was a punk too. Just pushing things. But a lot of people push all sorts of shit. There's bad crazy and good crazy and boring crazy. The musicians I knew were usually fucking BORING. But not Chesnutt; he was into history, language, and philosophy. I would give him three or four books at a time on all sorts of subjects.

**BB**

Yeah, I remember when we saw him a few years ago and you gave him those books on the Civil War and Flannery O'Connor.

**DA**

One time I talked to him in front of Bowery Ballroom. Jarmusch's brother Tom was there. In 1999 Tom had noticed a thing on my neck. He said, "That's not just a thing." A week later they said I had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Anyhow, recently Chesnutt and I were talking about Obama. I had given him this amazing book *Angler*, a biography of Dick Cheney. Then on Chesnutt's last record is the song "Cheney." He said, "You gave me the book, I read it, and I wrote that song." I said, "That's cool, but whatever." We had some bullshit. Intense emotion influences the cancer, and that influences your immune system. Three or four years ago I had to

hassle with Stephanie Schwam, the woman making the first film about me, *Near Life Experience*, and that's when the cancer went from eight years of being okay to being a problem. Subsequently, when something heavy-duty, jarringly emotional, happened, the tumors would grow. That's a hard thing to figure out.

**BB**

Well, it makes sense; it's how emotional and mental energy affect the body.

**DA**

I had a hassle with the guy who owns the club Cake Shop when Liz Durrett—Vic's niece—played a gig there in October. I got into a fight with the guy; that was my lowest point. At Vic's memorial, I knew Liz didn't want to talk to me. It was just obvious. But even though that happened, she was about to make a new record. Someone had said that Mark Linkous from Sparklehorse should produce it. At Chesnutt's thing, who was sitting on the couch? Mark Linkous. Immediately we got along. I just said, "They want you to produce the record, and she needs a new record label." I felt good about doing that. Obviously when we make things, it's an extension of ourselves, but hopefully we can also go beyond ourselves. Or at least understand that we're not the only ones that things happen to. I don't believe in the word "artist" anyhow.

**BB**

Through history there have always been people that just *need* to make things, things that extend or transcend their personhood.

**DA**

I think it's important to go beyond what we know and are comfortable with or fearful of. It's also important to take a view about the world that isn't just cynical. Cynicism is easy. And it can be totally right. But do we

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want to spend so much energy *not* doing something? I think that in this country, at the present moment, it's a super important point. Some people think the government's going to *dosomething*. Some people think the government's bullshit and shouldn't be involved. Meanwhile, the *populace* is not changing shit. They're not changing buying habits. They're not changing thinking habits. There's a lot of chaos, recrimination, blaming, victimizing, being thought of as a victim or a new-age savior. But there's no direct attack of what—collectively—we're dealing with. A lot of green marketing has to do with PR and money. Our carbon footprint here, our fucking brontosaurus footprint here. Why don't we talk about something else, Ben?



Untitled, 1980, pastel on paper, 30 × 22 inches.



**BB**

Why don't we talk about *your* footprint, what you are putting out there and adding to the world? You said you don't get hung up on yourself, that you don't like art that is about the self. You're more looking *out* at the world.

**DA**

More than I used to. Let's say a person is on a higher-level plane in terms of their humility. Not just because they *think* they are, but they actually are. I don't believe in poststructuralist this and that, that it's all the same and just semantics. I do believe that there are levels, hierarchies, whatever you want to call them. Also, people have a lot more talent and ability than they give themselves credit for. That's why a lot of times in galleries it's more edifying to talk to someone who's sweeping the floor or bringing the wood in than the curator or the salesman or the artist or whatever. In any field, not just in art.

Another thing I want to get into is that one of my goals is to set up a foundation. I don't know what the reach of the foundation will be, but I think my work will, at one point, be worth quite a bit of money. So I want that to go toward assisting people. Not just artists, and not just people who have Asperger's or are bipolar. It's my hope that I will actually be healthy enough to start this and get people involved so they'll get a real idea of what I'm thinking about. Also, I don't want to spend a lot of my time with bureaucracy. Some foundation grants are like getting on welfare. A lot of the people who really need them can't deal with forms and fine print. Some of it you need to deal with—because of the IRS and whatever—but there are still different ways of running something. I would hope this could have an effect on how other foundations are run and give people an impetus to start new foundations that don't just run like all the other ones. That's one thing my work has to do with. Plenty of kids need help. And if they're *really* brilliant, they have a problem.

**BB**

A foundation would be great. But first you've got to help yourself. I mean, the congestion of this apartment seems to be how you need to live but it also gets in the way of your living. How many guitars do you have?

**DA**

I have three guitars, and I'm going to have a dulcimer very damn soon.

**BB**

What about all these books?

**DA**

Well, you can see that my TV is covered by books. If it weren't so fucking heavy, I would throw it out the window. I guess the tubes in there would explode and maybe kill something. I use a computer, but books function as my personal Internet. Some are just titles I was attracted to at the Strand. I literally stubbed my toe on the Amish book. It fell on the floor, and I hit it with my toe, and it turned out being very pertinent to what I'm going through. A lot of Asperger's is dealing with sensory overload, not being able to filter stuff out. But a bunch of Asperger's people have a telepathy that can mitigate some of the deleterious effects of the chaos. With me, it seems like the psychic phenomena happens more and more. People I'm thinking of call. When Stephanie was making *Near Life Experience* it happened a whole lot, and it initially freaked her out. This is someone who goes to yoga, goes to 43 different AA and NA and GA meetings.

**BB**

What's GA?

**DA**

God awful. I once made a joke that they should have ... what was it?

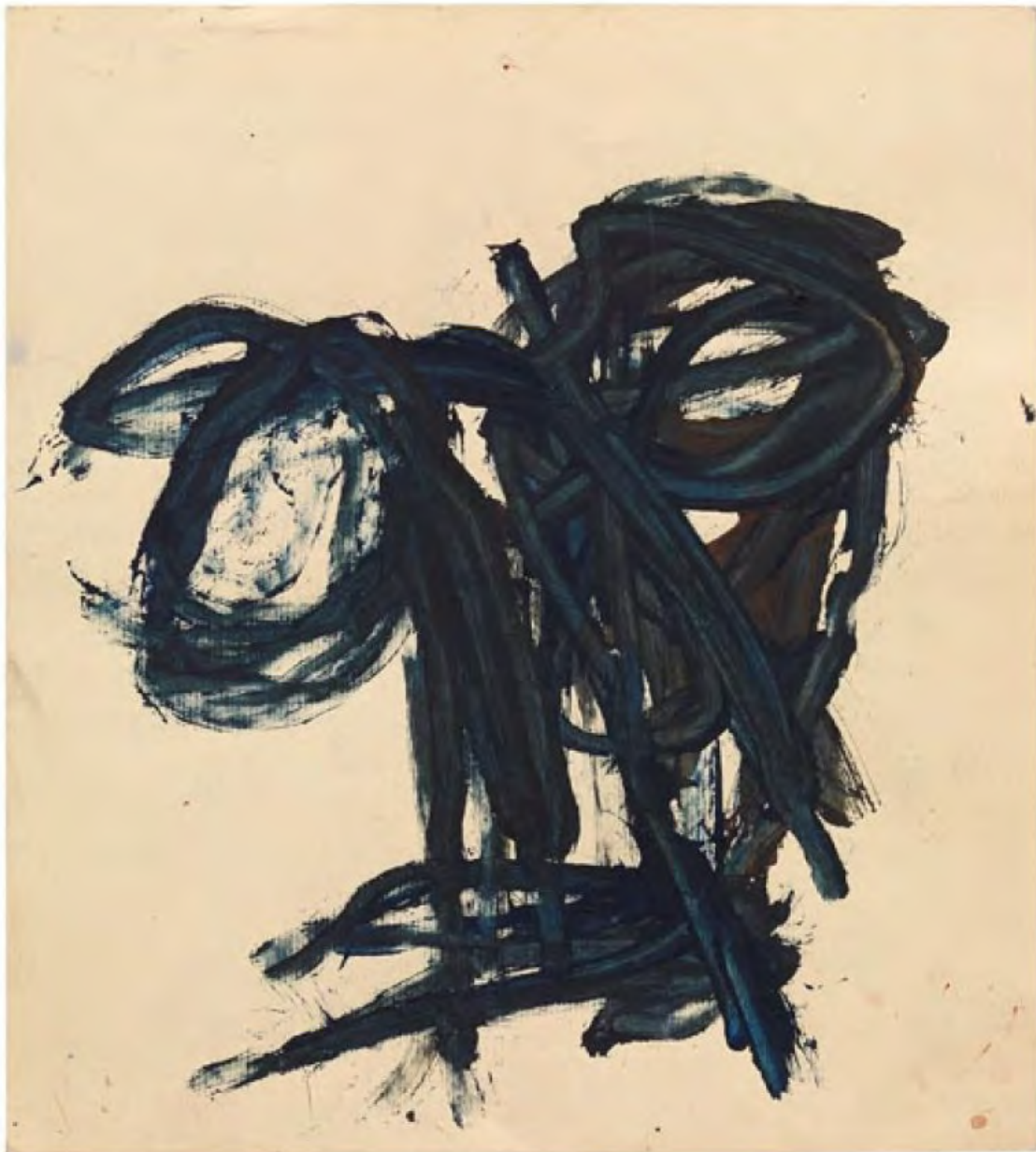
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**BB**

Anonymous Anonymous?

**DA**

Yeah, yeah. They don't like jokes like that. It's like in LA: when you make an LA joke they run you out on a rail. I don't know in New York. New York is both a joke and not a very good one.



Untitled, 1980s, tempera on paper, 10½ x 9¼ inches.

**BB**

Why have you stayed in New York for so long?

**DA**

At most I have only *spent* six or seven years straight in New York. But I've *been here* 35 years. Part of it is having a good setup now with the bookstore and doctors and the health-food store as I deal with this stem-cell thing. It's weird; now I have more desire *not* to be here. When I went to Jemez—the Zen place I've been to a bunch of times—they were very welcoming. But it's always the same in that environment. These people ... some of them meditated too much. A lot of strays were attracted there. I also didn't feel well physically during the trip.

**BB**

Where is it?

**DA**

In the Jemez Mountains between Albuquerque and Santa Fe. There are things that are good about it, certain other people. One of my problems about New York is that I want to hear *other people's* stories too! I love to be entertained! The weirder the fucking better. I would hang out at Burroughs's with Patti Smith in the '70s, before he hung out with James Grauerholz. We'd all tell stories and have a wonderful time. That's what I enjoy.

I enjoy music a lot, but I have to say I'm not thrilled by *musicians*. I was thinking the other day how artists are ridiculous in terms of their egos and personalities, and a lot of artwork is super ridiculous. But if artists are goddamn ridiculous, musicians are *beyond* fucking ridiculous. What about the ones who are both? What the hell am I? I learned singing from a crazy Mormon woman, I play some half-assed guitar, I can't write a fucking song to save my life, and I make art. I'm unbelievably fucked up and absurd. That's megalomaniacal, self-deprecating humor or some kind of

**BB**

I get it.

**DA**

I do hope there's some humor in this interview because *Near Life Experience* was 75 minutes of almost no humor. That was one of my main gripes.

**BB**

Could you talk about *your* videos? Can you try and put what was behind that video you showed at White Columns into words? I don't even know how to pose the question. You had the video of the moon, then you found the music, and that was the extent of your action in making it, but the result was something way beyond the combination of the two.

**DA**

That footage was shot on Tom Jarmusch's funky camera when we were on the Jersey Shore. But it wasn't until a year later that I got the footage. He had the raw footage and I had no idea it was any good. I got an idea to put it with one of Liz's songs. I was looking on MySpace in the middle of the night, and she had put up a demo version of this lullaby, "The Sea a Dream." It was perfect. It virtually didn't have to be edited.

I did another music video using footage that I shot of the hot-dog eating contest on Coney Island with the Josephine Foster song "The Garden of Earthly Delights." Then there's another beautiful video using another version of the same song. I shot the footage live when she was playing at Monkey Town and they had these projections of Busby Berkeley going. There was synchronized swimming in it and a silent movie of someone doing this dance with silk. I'm pretty used to making music videos by getting the music, finding old footage, and putting it together. Now it's probably good for me to make more videos by a different process. The problem with a lot of artists, musicians, filmmakers, or writers is that they

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do things that are easy or natural or successful for them, then stop.

**BB**

They just figure something out and stick with it.



Untitled, 2009, tempera on paper, 18¼ x 12 inches.

**DA**

The *real* visionaries—which is a word that’s used way too often—aren’t celebrities or CEOs, they’re the ones below. Either they don’t want to be visible or they’re too crazy or nasty. Nonetheless, they exist. That’s one thing I think about history: how it becomes about who is the villain and who is the hero. That’s why I liked photographing wrestling. The wrestlers *loved* what they did. There was a lot of joy and camaraderie there. I don’t see that much at concerts. I definitely don’t see it in the art world much. I see it more in communities that are smaller and closely knit. They have a party and actually *talk*. They don’t tell each other about their novel or their sandals or eyeglasses or the instrument they’re inventing. They’re serious and they’re living in the moment and that’s attractive to someone who might not be around much longer. This kind of thinking has made for a huge shift in my consciousness. I’m calmer; I’m becoming more self-aware, I’m more aware of other people. Do we have a few more minutes?

**BB**

Yeah. I want to talk more about your work.

**DA**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let me just mention one other thing: if I’m more known and respected I’ll get more of an opportunity to meet people who have influence, who run companies that collect art or whatever. I’d love to have a frank discussion with some of these people about the importance of how they spend their money. I think a lot of people with money are afraid of doing things differently and so they repress certain intrinsic parts of themselves. Some people who obviously have Asperger’s keep it secret or kind of know but don’t really *want* to know. Colin de Land didn’t say, “Hey, I’m Asperger’s,” but he said it without saying it. We also exchanged articles about alternative cancer treatments and I talked about him going to Brazil to see John of God, the healer. He almost went. When he died, his

memorial was at Cooper Union. When Pat Hearn died before he did, I asked Colin if I could speak and I said a couple things that just weren't what other people said. When Basquiat died, Glen O'Brien and John Lurie programmed the memorial service. O'Brien was really worried about what I was going to say, but Lurie said, "Dan's crazy and funny; put him up there!" He didn't prevail. My point is that around here, the only time people get together and talk is a marriage, funeral, or wake. Otherwise it's a networking party. I just think that's madness—that rote type of behavior and being.

If I recover from this thing I'm looking forward to traveling, showing my work in a place like St. Louis or a smaller out-of-the-way place. I'm quite certain people would be more serious about looking. They have more time. Maybe they won't be as informed, but they'll ask sincere questions. I think in general a lot of the best work isn't done in LA, Chicago, New York, or any "art place." When Joseph Beuys was in Documenta, he drove a Bentley at the time. But a few miles before he got there, he parked, got on his funky bicycle and pedaled into Documenta. That was the Joseph Beuys they wanted and that was the Joseph Beuys he *wanted* to present to them. If I behaved that way, I hope some people would call me out and tell me what a motherfucking hypocrite I am.

**BB**

Do you ever find yourself being a hypocrite?

**DA**

Sure. Everybody is. Dealing with the stem-cell stuff, I've become friendlier with myself but also friendlier with my faults. That makes life so much easier to confront. I read about this fundamentalist Jamaican cleric Abdullah Al-Faisal who lived in England for a long time before he was deported, and somehow he got to Africa. Gambia was the only country in Africa that would accept him; none of the Arab nations would permit him



on their planes. So at some point he was in a Kenyan jail, and his followers started having demonstrations, and all these people were getting killed. There's a macro-surrealism to this story. I like the word "irreal." It's not the same as surreal. It kind of means unreal, but the sound of it is just so much cooler. The actual *sound* of it.

**BB**

I want to return to the wrestlers you photographed and what led you to them. Being among them and photographing them seems to be distinct from the way you're drawn to aurora borealis and glaciers because we're talking about the difference between human subjects and nature. You can look at a glacier, but a human looks back at you.

**DA**

The backyard wrestling shows are modern-day morality plays. There's the bad person—the heel—and there's the good person. A wrestler might be a heel but a year or two later become a good person. History can be reductive, but it's also about foresight and hindsight and who should be the villain and who should be the hero. There was a lot of joy in those matches. How did I approach photographing them as opposed to the northern lights? The wrestlers, even if they were big and looked bulky, were super-energetic, and they could move fast. I liked that. The other thing that I liked about the wrestling was the more extreme stuff with the light bulbs, the weed wackers, and ...

**BB**

Necro Butcher?

**DA**

Necro Butcher, yeah. Visually more interesting. People would ask me, "Is the blood real? Is the violence real? Are they hitting each other? Is it theater?" Well, is Obama or Anderson Cooper real? How real is reality TV? How irreal is nonreality TV? Or how real or irreal is everyday frickin' life?

Generally I'm much more interested in things that happen in life to me or to other people. On TV the very best stuff doesn't have humans in it; it's animated or claymation. *The Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack* is one of my favorite things to watch.

**BB**

Yeah, you turned me on to *Flapjack*. It's the best cartoon since *Ren and Stimpy*. So when did you return to drawing faces? Some of my favorite works by you are the gestural faces from the '80s, and you seem to have returned to making similar works more recently.

**DA**

Well, I went back to the faces and made them look like a kind of underwater foliage. Those more abstract ones were an outgrowth or a revisiting of the earlier oil-stick pieces.

**BB**

They're like a confluence of lines coming together, treelike or wavelike. Are these faces mirrors? What do you see in the face and why do you make the faces?

**DA**

I don't know. One of the things that's said about autistics is that they have fewer facial expressions. One night I was in such a horrible mood with that shit at Beth Israel, and I came home and made drawings of faces. When I saw them later, I didn't like to look at them, and I didn't want anyone else to. They were too much for me. Sometimes the faces could be cathartic, or things I don't express in my own face, or a release of emotions I didn't want to release in another way. I'm also just really into color and want to use color more diversely.

In terms of photography, I can't use chemicals because of the cancer. It's interesting that in works on paper, I'm going into color after all those

years, and my photography is becoming more traditional in terms of using film and *not* using color.

**BB**

You seem less comfortable talking about the particulars of your work.

**DA**

No, I don't mind. I guess I just enjoy talking about other things so much more.

**BB**

Well you've made a lot of things. I mean, I know you'll never lead the straight life and have kids or anything. But in the end, it's everything that you're doing and everything you're making which is more important than those things, and I think it's pretty amazing. That's what people will see down the line.

*Ben Berlow lives in New York. He is a registrar at David Zwirner and an artist. He has had exhibitions at Studio Miko, Jack Hanley Gallery, Martos Gallery, and Callicoon Fine Arts, all in New York, and at Parade in London.*

# Art in Review

## **Right Back Here**

### *White Columns*

*320 West 13th Street (entrance on Horatio Street), West Village*

*Through Oct. 25*

The centerpiece of a well-matched selection of exhibitions at White Columns is “Begin Again Right Back Here,” a timely group show of modest items that pass muster as some hybrid of sculpture, design object, architectural model, furniture or even clothing or book. It is the first curatorial effort of the artist B. Wurtz, a veteran brinksman of sculptural variousness. A small, early Sol LeWitt grid sculpture is the touchstone here; the remaining 15 artists seem to build on it, contaminating its geometry, idealism and transparency.

The artists Vincent Fecteau, Sterling Ruby, Taylor Davis, Jessica Jackson Hutchins and a newcomer named Fawn Krieger contribute to this meditation on restrained, unmonumental bricolage, along with two Italian designers, Caesar Stoffi and Anna Castelli. Wayne Koestenbaum’s recent book, “Hotel Theory,” designed by Greenblatt-Wexler, contains parallel texts about the goings-on in hotels across the street from each other. The two columns of text resemble side-by-side elevators moving at different speeds.

The delicate mood is sustained in an exhibition of the wry, delicate

iterations and emphasizing of the canvas weave are countered by a fifth, made in collaboration with Sarah Parke, that involves paint added to hand-woven linen. Either way, the hazy grids owe something to both LeWitt and Anni Albers.

But the general reticence is disrupted by two other shows: the raucous quilt paintings of Violette Alby and a 25-year survey of the alternately Minimalist and Expressionist paintings and drawings of the talented Dan Asher.

But Mr. Asher brings everything to a gentle fade-out with a recent irresistibly musical video titled “Moonscape,” in which a succession of blurry photographs of a moonlit ocean finds its ideal accompaniment in Liz Durrett singing “The Sea a Dream.” It is amazing what can be accomplished with a cellphone in motion.

**ROBERTA SMITH**



## HOLLYWOOD REALLY DOES RULE: A CONVERSATION WITH DAN ASHER

I have been in close communication with Dan Asher for the past four years. Mostly by telephone. He would phone me from Germany. London. Madagascar. Los Angeles. Iceland. Indiana (while at an autism convention). And once even while in Antarctica . . . ? . . . I think? . . . from a pay-phone? . . . well, maybe not.

I asked myself . . . what do the readers want to hear about from him? 57th St? 22nd St? D Cortez? Pig's blood? I am hardly interested in any of these things anymore. And I am sure that he is tired of explaining them, especially the 15 year-old blood incident.

Jason Volenec: I heard that you lived with the breatharians . . . or was it the fresh arians, or the Fresh Aryans . . . for awhile in the '60s.

Dan Asher: Fresh Aryans in the '90s. But it was the *breatharians*. . . these are persons who theoretically exist solely on oxygen as sustenance. I knew one, for instance, who had studied with Johnny Love Wisdom and who would fast on nothing but a little water for three weeks and then hit the Dunkin' Donut Shop for dozens of creampuffs. I guess you could call him a bulimic breatharian. But I like the *fresh-airians* better. That is a word that you just made up. That's a neologism. That's when people with twisted brains make up new words. They just pop out of their heads. I just made up a word recently. *Pathographer*.

JV: Oh yeah . . . what does that mean?

DA: Well, it's something like Nan Goldin's "enlightened" Bar Mitzvah photography. The peeping Tom or Thomasina with a *point and shoot*.

JV: What?

DA: A pathographer can also be anyone documenting this slightly imperfect universe. *Pathogenic or photogenic*, what's the dif.

JV: You just got back from an autism convention . . .

DA: Yeah, I was there for ten minutes or 15 . . . it took 20 minutes to take the taxi up there and then . . . anyway, I guess you want to get a definition of autism . . . or something like that.

JV: Well . . . I don't, but maybe the readers do.

DA: They say it's a communication disorder . . . but it has a neurological basis . . . autistics have a basic problem with social communication and social skills themselves. These specialists recommended that I pay a bunch of money and go up to Mount Sinai hospital and join a support group that deals in . . . ya know . . . where I can learn social skills . . . ya know, people skills . . . how did they get that notion? I told them that, well . . . that they could use some social skills . . . and they said, "well, you're the one who's not allowed in any macrobiotic restaurants in lower Manhattan." And I said, well, yeah . . . you got a point there. But I'm better off if I go out of the neighborhood to go have something to eat anyway.

JV: These are not isolated NYC incidents. I have received numerous phone calls from you all over the world. I would answer the phone and you would be gasping for a breath. From some scuffle that you just got out of. You could hardly put a sentence together. You seem to get thrown out of nearly everywhere . . . an airplane, it would seem, would be your only security.

DA: Airplanes. Well, yeah! I like to spend the extra 200 dollars for the upgrade to fly first class . . . you know, flying from NY to LA . . . you're up there with these . . . well . . . I don't know what they are. Once I was sitting next to some woman VJ from MTV. She had just graduated from Oxford and all of a sudden she decided that it would help her acting career if she became a VJ on MTV.

JV: You ended up insulting her, I'm sure.

DA: No. No, not really. She just had gotten to be a bore after about . . . ten minutes or so, I guess. But she probably didn't like the fact that I had slightly long toenails and was sitting right next to her without any shoes on in first class. But . . . then she goes, "I think you're crazy . . . but inspired, or something . . . so you're . . . kind of . . . OK . . . crazy."

And I said, "Well, I don't know . . . you're kind of crazy, too . . . but you're not that OK."

She was something else! I don't know who she was. It wasn't Downtown Julie Brown, that's for sure. It was uptown somebody . . . or it was Midtown Julie Brown, so to speak.

[Dan says that he should mention something about his recent exhibition. There were other things that I would rather have talked about, but after all, the forum here is art.]

JV: OK Dan, do you have anything to say about your recent exhibition?

DA: It was quite dull unfortunately . . . apart from the DVD of the fish and the arial photos of Alaska. I took those pictures of the icebergs last year and you know, you take pictures and it's mainly the experience that you get off on and the pictures are kind of a memento or a memento-mori. It is like a relic. Or a trophy in the abstract, or a trope, to use artschool "slang." I want to go back to Antarctica again. Everyone says, "wow! . . . did you hear that they're [the icebergs] melting?" I mean you can read about it in *USA Today*. "No I didn't hear that . . . I mean, how did you come up with that?" You ask a three-and-a-half year-old and they know that shit.

DJ Spooky says he wants to take his DAT recorder down there and record the melting, crackling ice shelves . . . what an original idea . . . why doesn't he just sample it off of a geologist's CD and save himself 10,000 bucks?

Anyway . . . I wanted to mix it [the show] up, ya know. But hopefully, in LA, I'll be showing photos such as the one of the guy sunning his artificial legs in Santa Monica on the promenade and the boogie-boarder riding the Big Kahuna in the form of an artificial sand dune at Venice Beach.



Maybe they will want to see the slow motion videos of this wrestler. He weighs five hundred pounds but he lost 50 pounds. He wears this thrift store leather jacket and these baby-blue contact lenses. He's this black guy and I think he has bleached blonde hair, à la Dennis Rodman, and he's called Viscera. (Out with the dictionaries, *zing* readers.)

JV: What? He has a Bachelor's degree in ...? Oh ... bleached blonde hair. Nevermind.

DA: These are some of the new videos. Slow shutter speed. Slow motion, boxing, wrestling, women's boxing, and wrestling. Stuff like that. And I also shot videos in Tokyo of these people crossing the street in Shinjuku. And I shot some boiling mud pools in New Zealand.

I like shooting off of the TV. I like how the images look and how they break up and all that. I like the disjunction ... the talking is out of sync ... even more out of lipsync than Milli Vanilli. Completely off. Disorienting ... but I think it gets the point across ... of things which I call *ex-communication*.

JV: Is this another neologism of yours?

DA: No, it's kind of a malapropism, of sorts.

JV: On my part, or yours?

DA: Well, here it has to do with using e-mail or chat rooms or whatever. And how that is not real communication ... it is disabused and rather chilly. It is really abetting in the destruction of the planet ... what they call cyber-progress.

JV: But being autistic, and also being a self-proclaimed "information junkie," I would think that what *they* call cyber progress may be in your favor.

DA: It is, in a certain way ... but I use it instead of it using me. Of course, everybody says that shit. Any crack-head, or alcoholic or foot fetishist says, "I use it, it doesn't use me."

If you know exactly what's going on. I mean, you use what's at hand. It's better than critiquing something by being a complete Luddite and saying I'm anti-technology and blah blah blah. At least if you get really involved with these things you have a better perspective when you criticize them or try to change them for the better. 'Cause in the '60s if you had all this cyber-shit, or all these computers and all this e-mail you would have had these people that weren't just these 12 year-old snowboarding, bungee-jumping hackers ... I mean, they have fun, I'm sure. And they are good at what they do, but there is no ideological component and they are not really, well, very few of them are hooked up with the others (in a constructively destructive way). Or they just put some kind of busty babe on the front page of the web edition of the *NY Times* and say Free Kevin Mitnick.

In actuality this is a post-ideological age. But there are individuals who have beliefs ... *some*. But most of those people are afraid to kind of express their beliefs or it is unfashionable or they are stigmatized. Some people say that I say things that people think but are afraid to say. When you get to know people better, then they are at ease, and they express their disaffection with the state of the world, and sometimes even in public and not only by serial or spree-killing. [This interview took place before the Seattle WTO convention and the aftermath.] I try to encourage the young people to push the envelope a little bit. Especially if they are into social change or, like, true spiritual evolution and things like that, but I find mighty few like that.

Like there was this girl and she was selling her drawings on the street for five bucks. She was a very innocent and idealistic Japanese girl from Osaka. But the people didn't relate to her. There was this guy who walked up and said he was 1/2 Canadian and 1/2 Hungarian and part this and 1/2 that. Anyway, there were too many 1/2's. But I think he wanted to pick up this girl. He had this big wad of Canadian money but he didn't buy anything from her. And this other girl from upstate NY said, "I love your drawings," and I said, "They are only five bucks!" So she had a pile of like fifteen drawings and the girl from upstate said "I'll take this pile, here's five bucks." And the Japanese girl goes, "No, no ... they are five dollars each." and she said, "Well, I don't know, I'll see you later." And then Patti Smith passed by with one of her flaks, and kept on movin', as they say.

It was fucked up, but this is typical of what goes on. 'Cause the girl was this very gentle person and just very cool, but in a way vulnerable. But they are also pretty tough, the Japanese, even the young women. I think she knows how to get by, basically ... and to deal with things.

JV: Do you feel that in Japan you have more freedom to do what you want in your exhibitions?

DA: Yeah, it is because they don't understand, um ... well, anyway ... they *do* have an intuitive grasp of the work. And also they are really just into weirdos. I used to live next to this artist Nara in Cologne for three years and I met the Japanese dealer through him. Anyhow, that is how I had the show in Japan. Then they did an interview and at the end they said that I was schizophrenic ... which is complete bullshit, but they had misinterpreted me and came to that conclusion. I didn't realize it until two years later when I was reading the translation and I saw it. Oh! It says that I'm a schizophrenic motherfucker, and I said, "Well, thanks very much." I mean ... more or less.

Kenny Schachter also did the same shit in another article. He said that I go all around the world to these autism conferences but I am a schizophrenic bastard, a delusional bastard.

No. I'm not. I'm just an overly enthusiastic-eccentric-autistic-bastard. But I'm not delusional. And neither is Mr. Kaczynski.

JV: You seem to give the diagnosis of autism to Ted the Unabomber, and many others as well ... including myself.



# MARTOS GALLERY

DA: Well, it happens to be the case, at least according to the textbook definition. Kaczynski is definitely not a paranoid schizophrenic but a person with Asperger's syndrome or a high-functioning autistic, to use psychiatric parlance. But none of us are bona-fide psychiatrists . . . thank god. This psychiatrist that I went to see at Mount Sinai a couple times . . . he! . . . he! was a *psych* . . . *PATH!!!* He's no longer at that august institution. He claimed that he was an art collector. His name was . . . well, anyhow, I don't want to give him any PR here.

JV: What are you going to show at your upcoming exhibition in Holland?

DA: Hopefully, I'll have a DVD of the sharks in stop-frame motion, the jellyfish and the balletic octopii and some pictures of Alaska that can remind one of abstract cellular micro-assays, which were taken from the airplane en-route to Japan. And also hopefully I'll have some of these new videos of the wrestling and the boxing, in slow motion. I also did a video in slow shutter speed of some silent movie that was on TV in the middle of the night. And then I am supposed to . . . well, hopefully in February I'll go back Antarctica.

JV: Are you going to invite Spooky along?

DA: No. Spooky is an academically-challenged fashion victim and a self-parody.

JV: You received a chapter of a book-in-progress in the mail that was hardly flattering.

DA: Well she (the author) just didn't understand where I was at. She is this very straight person from Colorado who has spent the last 15 years learning German and speaking German and thinking in German. Just doing everything in German, which I guess . . . you just as well . . . She is not a bad person, per se, but she just has a problem with what they call *theory of mind* which means thoughts about other peoples' thoughts or being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. I mean, I have that difficulty too at times with this but I also realize that I have it, and I can understand when I really fuck up and sometimes I'll apologize or I'll figure it out. But sometimes it's also . . . for instance . . . well anyway . . . she started to write a book and she wanted to have

certain chapters about her son's friendships with various other autistic people. She spent a year writing this chapter about me, but she didn't send me any of the preliminary drafts. Then one day she said, "It's finished. I'm sending you a copy. You read it and you tell me what you think." Anyhow, it was completely off the wall. Completely. In just about every respect.

Mainly it said that I have all these books here and she named about five or six books and inferred that I just had the books here and that I didn't read the books. Ya know . . . but when I am depressed I don't do anything. Hardly. This is what she implied. Then she called me a *roly-poly* something or other . . . I am two hundred and five pounds . . . that is overweight. Yes. Right. But it is not *roly-poly*. *Roly-poly* is John Candy, not his skeleton or Dom DeLouise. She looks like Karen Carpenter. Ok, I'm *roly-poly* compared to Karen Carpenter. But, plus, Karen Carpenter is fucking dead . . . so I guess I am *super-roly-poly*.

JV: *Antarctica*

DA . . . the thing about it is that you're on this Russian boat that's formerly a research ship. First of all, I really like the rough seas. At first you get a little sea sick and then you get into to it. I like the stormy weather. And it's the most incredibly beautiful place in the world. They say that it is like climbing Everest . . . except you're kind of going horizontally. The weird thing is that the people are really drunk. The people steering the boat and the people running the tour are kind of blotto drunk but somehow they don't do a Titanic *number* and run into any icebergs. I mean if you knew how drunk they were you might not want to pay the ten grand to go on this trip. Anyhow, it was just really great except for what I call the "unnaturalists." These were the people who were counting every little penguin and every bird and everything like that but they didn't want to step in the penguin shit nor smell the penguin shit. But it [Antarctica] was really inspiring . . . even if the show was somewhat boring . . . in a way . . . I mean, the people did get inspired by the photos, which show the grandeur and massiveness and the otherworldliness of as yet unspoiled nature.

JV: *Hollywood*

DA: I would have to say that I'm looking forward to the show in LA because, well . . . it is the other side of the coin (of the realm, so to speak, the realm of the senses or possibly the realm of the senseless). And basically Hollywood really does rule, you see . . . in a real sense. In the terms of the collective unconsciousness or sub-consciousness or whatever the hell you want to call it . . . in Hollywood, . . . those people have far more influence in a "cultural" sense than the 25 year-old internet billionaires bopping along Silicon Alley in Manhattan. Anyway, it is becoming more akin to Manhattan, Kansas here, every single second.

JV: *Autism*

DA: . . . you see, they are either over-enthusiastic or too distant. There is no middle ground. They don't understand physical space, so they would either stay far away from a person or else come and speak right into their face.

JV: *Cyber-progress*

DA: The internet is good because you can get rid of your fantasies. You can actually see that Claudia Schiffer has these slightly oversized breasts and that she is a little bit fat. And then you can go, "why did I ever think that she was not like that?"

Jason Volenec  
New York, New York  
1999



**David Ebony's Top Ten****Dan Asher at Grant Selwyn Fine Art**

A friend and colleague who recently returned from a trip to the Arctic went on and on about the numerous varieties and forms of ice she encountered on her travels near the North Pole. She spoke of the mysterious, intense cerulean blue light that emanated from the interiors of the icebergs and flows. Only a hint of such things came across in her snapshots.

In this stunning photo exhibition titled "Ice(s)" by veteran New York conceptualist and video artist Dan Asher, however, I could see exactly what my friend might have meant. The dozen or so large-scale C-prints on view, most about 28-by-38 inches, are radiant images of icebergs and exotic birds that the artist took during a recent voyage to the South Pole. Asher has indeed captured the awesome beauty of the huge chunks of ice with their glowing blue interiors.

But these dazzling photos are not made simply as an art-world version of what you might see in the pages of *National Geographic*. Asher's project has a provocative edge that sparks discussions of melting polar ice caps and global warming. The photos of birds in particular convey the fragility of an imperiled ecosystem struggling to survive in this remote place near the edge of the dying earth.

Dan Asher, "Ice(s)," Sept. 9-Oct. 2, 1999, at Grant Selwyn Fine Art, 37 West 57th St., New York, N.Y. 10019.



**Dan Asher**  
*Untitled #10*  
1999  
C-print, ed. 5  
27.5 x 38.5 in.



**Dan Asher**  
*Untitled (Bird)*  
1998  
C-print, ed. 5  
26.5 x 38.5 in.