

An abstract artwork featuring large, bold shapes in red, purple, and black. The red shapes are the most prominent, forming a central, somewhat organic form. To the right, there's a vertical strip of purple with a textured, almost wood-grain-like pattern. The top and bottom edges are defined by thick black horizontal bands. The overall composition is dynamic and expressive.

PATRICIA
ROSOFF

INNOCENT EYE

A PASSIONATE
LOOK AT
CONTEMPORARY
ART

“I assure you that the work of the present is as interesting, beautiful, and complex as any that has been done in the past, but its scope and significance hasn’t been filtered out for us yet—which makes the experience of looking doubly interesting.”

—Patricia Rosoff, *artist and teacher*

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and current and former students
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From *Innocent Eye: A Passionate Look at Contemporary Art*.

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Acknowledgments

Preface

I have been an art educator for thirty years, and an artist even longer. I was formally educated at professional art schools, the Rhode Island School of Design and the Hartford Art School, from which I hold undergraduate and graduate degrees, respectively. I continue to teach art and art history at the Kingswood Oxford School in West Hartford, Connecticut, the independent school where I began my teaching career in 1975.

For the past fifteen years, I have been an art critic and contributing writer for a number of art periodicals, including *Arts Magazine*, the *Hartford Advocate*, *Art New England*, and *Sculpture Magazine*.

This book, which is generated from some of that publications work, is intended to accompany you into the sometimes tricky terrain of contemporary art—that often contentious ground on which I have found myself engaged as a teacher and as a writer, and for which, over the long course of my own education, I have come to have considerable appreciation, enthusiasm, and affection.

I hope by this book to loan you my eyes and my empathy, professional and personal, as I bring you with me through the galleries and museums in which I have learned so much about ideas and questions not yet codified in “art history.”

While it is certainly true that an art reviewer needs to come armed with substantial knowledge of what came before, the trouble with looking at contemporary art is that the jury is still out on art of the present.

The test of time awaits most of the work I’ll discuss here, and my job, like the viewer’s, is to do the best I can at making sense of what I see.

This book represents a visual journey, scholarly and personal. I cannot imagine that you will fail to be as affected by some of this work as I am.

I assure you that the work of the present is as interesting, beautiful, and complex as any that has been done in the past, but its scope and significance hasn’t been filtered out for us yet—which makes the experience of looking doubly interesting. The questions posed, like the answers proffered by the contemporary generation of artists, keep the dialogue of culture alive, and there is nothing more lively and entertaining than that vigorous and sometimes contradictory world of thought.

I have learned that this is the heart of the experience of living with art; this is the reason I’ve written *Innocent Eye*.

What Do You Mean, Conceptual?

Sol LeWitt

Perhaps like the draftsmen who are commissioned to execute Sol LeWitt's work from a set of written instructions and diagrams (but may never actually meet the artist himself), you may be wondering, who is this guy? The impact on twentieth-century art of LeWitt's ideas has been both profound and controversial, among artists and in academic circles.

Yet if approached with the thoughtful neutrality that the work demands, the paradoxical character of LeWitt's art—that it seems so clear on the one hand (i.e., in the instructions: “ten thousand lines about 10 inches long; covering the wall evenly; black pencil”) and is so impossibly complex on the other (resulting impression: a silken web of silvery marks, like mohair gauze)—makes curiosity acute.

Unless you refuse to cross that barrier around what many consider the definition of art: hand-made, one-of-a-kind works in traditional genres. By contrast, LeWitt's refocusing of attention on the intellectual rather than the manual takes some people one step too far into an art world where they do not want to go. For those people, LeWitt's departure from treasured artistic values opened the door to the greatest ill of contemporary art, its incomprehensibility, the impossibility of “relating” to the work.

What may be surprising to those who lament the loss of “classical” values in art is that the first step in this direction was made during the High Renaissance by none other than Leonardo da Vinci, who relentlessly sought to elevate the status of the artist by arguing that the visual arts (then considered manual trades) were an occupation fully equal to the liberal arts of literature, poetry, music, and dance. Giorgio Vasari, that great sixteenth-century chronicler of the Italian Renaissance, describes Leonardo's response to a patron who complained that the artist stood too long lost in thought when he should have been working: Leonardo “. . . reasoned about art, and showed him that men of genius may be working when they seem to be doing the least, working out inventions in their minds, and forming those perfect ideas which afterwards they express with their hands.”

Sol LeWitt: a phrase of two words and three syllables, one separated, two attached, each beginning with a capital letter. Could be a witticism—“sol” (the sun) / pregnant pause / the Wit—but it might not be. Go figure.

Born in Hartford and raised in New Britain, LeWitt lived until his death in 2007 in Chester, Connecticut. If anything is true about LeWitt, it is that his artwork is not about *him*, it is about art, which he defined as a good idea generated into physical form. He conceived of the artist more along the lines of an architect, whose blueprints direct a construction of a building, or a musical composer, whose notations direct a performance, than as someone with skillful mastery. To LeWitt, art is the idea.

Or, as he wrote in 1969, “Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution.”

Or, even more pithily: “It is difficult to bungle good ideas.”

So with calm wit and steady modesty, LeWitt quietly exemplified certain revolutionary *principles* (that art is about ideas, not their physical embodiment); *forms* (that drawing should be intrinsic to a wall, rather than “hung upon it,” or if structural, embodied in self-effacing, non-aesthetic materials); *approaches* (that an artist does not personally produce the expression of his ideas); and *attitudes* (that art-as-concept is physically temporary, situationally flexible, and cannot be “owned”): the concepts that have so deeply influenced successive generations of viewers. Among these “viewers” are not only many of today’s most prominent artists, curators, critics, and historians, but also (and to a remarkable degree) many regular folks—people outside of elite art circles who have had direct access to LeWitt’s work at colleges and junior colleges, hometown museums and galleries.

And we mustn’t fail to mention the art students and tradespeople who have volunteered or been commissioned to participate on the work crews needed to execute the monumental “wall drawings” (LeWitt will not call them paintings) and “structures” (he declines to call them sculptures) for which he has become famous.

In 2000, LeWitt was the subject of an encompassing retrospective, the artist’s first comprehensive survey since 1978. This forty-year recapitulation, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and featuring over one hundred and fifty works that represent every phase of the artist’s career, was subsequently showcased at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In concert with the Whitney show, Hartford’s Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art featured “Sol LeWitt: Incomplete Open Cubes,” the first exhibition devoted entirely to that set of seminal works. This is a particularly appropriate effort for the Atheneum, which is the museum where LeWitt took art lessons as a child and to which he remained extraordinarily generous and accessible even after he became an artist of the highest stature.

What is revealed by a survey of LeWitt’s entire career is how the pursuit of answers to direct, concrete, open-ended questions can yield formal solutions that are not only groundbreaking but also reach back in history. As utterly modern as

his often sparse, architectonic forms may seem to be, they are not without relation to early Renaissance concepts of visual representation—emptied, of course, of the perspective illusion that was the fundamental premise of Renaissance artists’ new approach to the visual world.

If a Martian, or a child—unaccustomed to the accepted conventions of Western perspective—looked at sketches for fifteenth-century frescos by Paolo Ucello or Piero della Francesca, they might see the structural scheme that enabled perspective: a checkerboard ground-plane setting up modular spaces for projected figures. Each hypothetical space-block on the posited horizontal and vertical grid served as a modular “measurement” in the translation of figures and structures arranged into mathematically ciphered optical recession.

Similarly, LeWitt sets up his sequential progressions of modular structures, such as “Serial Project # 1 (ABCD), 1966,” with blocks on a grid. Four separate visual systems are woven together at once (solid blocks and “open” or skeletal blocks: rising incrementally, falling incrementally), interpenetrating in reciprocal passes, side to side, top to bottom, corner to corner. Standing beside this work, which rises to waist height and inhabits the gallery space at the Whitney like a pristine white architectural model of a city block, one *senses* rather than understands the music of the artist’s logic.

Visually, each motif of LeWitt’s puzzle becomes comfortingly clear, like pieces on a chessboard. Here’s a row of solid blocks, the same height right across; here’s an adjacent row of skeletal blocks, also the same height. Looking across from another side, however, the blocks step up one module at a time towards center, then step down, passing “through” the original rows. Wherever you stand, a different system makes itself known, like interwoven voices in a musical round, complicated but harmonious.

Such engaging “conceptual” richness is characteristic of even the earliest works in the San Francisco / Whitney retrospective, which are drawings executed directly on the wall (like frescos), shaped to their architectural surface like a skin. Over the decades, LeWitt’s wall drawings evolved from penciled, gridded, then overlaid configurations to free-form, full-color arabesques. Remember that Muslim “arabesque” decoration was accomplished, like LeWitt’s, with the simplest of drawing tools: a straight-edge and a compass. What remains consistent is their scrupulous abstraction, freed from the hand of the artist, which constitutes the intrinsic democracy of the work—nothing elitist or erudite, just plain logic, clearly demonstrated. These pieces are not bravura self-expression. They are artist-driven systems—ideas—that adapt not only to realities of the physical spaces upon which they are installed, but also adapt to an individual viewer’s vantage, in the sense that each piece insists upon a completely contextual reading.

“It doesn’t really matter if the viewer understands the concepts of the artist

by seeing the art,” LeWitt wrote. “Once [it is] out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way.”

Or, as he states this in other words: “A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist’s mind to the viewer’s. But it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artist’s mind.” Groundedness is the generating point of LeWitt’s creativity—a methodology that is all the more inclusive in refusing to illustrate the so-called real world, instead acknowledging the reality of art: that while a drawing of something in the world is not the real thing, a drawing of a line is a *real* line.

The Atheneum’s more focused exhibition is not only historical—demonstrating how “Incomplete Open Cubes” plays out its conceptual basis. It also holds up a lens to a key point in the evolution of LeWitt’s process, or what curator Nicholas Baume describes as a demonstration of “what this conceptual process really is and what it means and what it can produce.” The exhibit speaks in a fresh voice to contemporary ideas about presentation and perception. Especially interesting is to see LeWitt’s notation schemes, numerical or alphabetical, together with his related drawings, which were executed in isometric fashion (rather than in perspective), in order to represent and explain but not *illustrate* the three-dimensional structures he had built to carry out 122 possible non-repeating permutations. As presented at the Atheneum, “Incomplete Open Cubes” is a suite of representational systems devoted to expressing each iteration of the same idea in an individual way—following its own particular rules—showing how many possible combinations of three, four, five, up to eleven drawn or constructed edges might physically imply (but not delineate) a cube.

LeWitt’s drawings are, variously, thought-sketches, graphic “symbols,” or a kind of runic iconography of his thought process. The physical structures themselves are the physical “test” for the theory—proving the possibilities of the hypothesis. Taken together, they sound a sort of visual chord for an idea that by this point is far too complex to hold in memory. Yet individually each one, neatly gridded and labeled, is spare, concise and devoid of expressive (narrative) burden.

Interestingly, photographs of these works yield the image in diminishing space, but the artist’s drawings correspond to an architect’s mind’s-eye, insistent-ly graphing increments of angle and proportion true to fact and not warped by pretensions of illusion. They also adhere tenaciously to the integrity of graphic form—interesting as shapes in their own right, irrespective of representational bias. The Renaissance is consequently unwrapped by LeWitt’s modern hands (or the hands of his hired artisans) and brought round again, and is then displayed in a traditional museum with barrel vaulting and gilt picture moldings that frame that oldest of western conceits, the “window on the world.”

For all of this artist's career-long reticence, Sol LeWitt's name managed to make art headlines at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The forty-year retrospective at the Whitney revealed his capacity to evolve, attain successive kinds of synthesis, and yet never to repeat himself. Together his "Paragraphs of Conceptual Art" and "Sentences on Conceptual Art," published in *Artforum* in 1967 and 1969 respectively, remain the most coherent body of thought on their subject.

And in unforeseeable ways, LeWitt was instrumental in opening up the way art is conceived, executed, and considered in the modern world, due to his ongoing conversations with other artists across every possible genre, his dialogue with art history, and his exemplary stance regarding "ownership" and "permanence" of art objects, and furthermore thanks to the generous distribution that continues to be made of his personal collection of contemporary art, which includes over 45,000 objects, 1,700 of these made by over two hundred and fifty other artists.

Early in the 1970s, critic Donald Kuspit assessed LeWitt's work as absolutely rational, as "the Look of Thought." Critic Barbara Krauss, looking at the same work, disagreed, calling LeWitt's achievement a paradox of rationality.

Ultimately, LeWitt's work makes sense but also demonstrates the limitations of sense. Its logic is implicit, its execution a negotiation, its potential both inchoate and concrete. Here logic is made *transparent*, in the dual sense of that word—visible and invisible at the same time. LeWitt's conceptualism takes a stance midway between the artist's intent and the viewer's perception, and defines both viewer and artist with respect to their physical relation to the work, giving no hierarchical preference to one or the other when interpreting objects generated from the artist's impulse. LeWitt's art is a matter of ideas, but it is also matter of fact, centrally concerned with the inherent shortfall in our perception of ideas.

LeWitt's works inhabit a space, much as his ideas inhabit their physical embodiment; in special ways his works are *of* the space, *of* the form, but they are bound to neither. Which is why these works can be carried away with the viewer or reconstructed in another place, can even take on new form in that new place, and why LeWitt's works cannot precisely be bought, why their life survives mere expertise, or finesse, or interpretation.

All ideas are latent until they find form, perhaps, which is to say ideas *are*—present tense—art.

Of course, as LeWitt would say, they've got to be *good* ideas.

Sol LeWitt: Incomplete Open Cubes, at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; and *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York. 2000.

Ellen Carey: What dread hand and what dread eye . . .

No matter what their grievances with modern art, almost everyone is comfortable with photography, which constitutes the last bastion of popular assumptions about what is commonly termed realism. Here is a medium that is necessarily “real”: technologically reproduced from reality itself, without any of the offending manipulation and abstraction to which modern drawing and painting so often succumb. That photography is the epitome of realism is implicit in my students’ compliments about artists they admire: “Van Eyck’s painting is so amazingly realistic—like a photograph!”

What most people don’t realize is that photography, too, is open to abstraction, and even its earliest practitioners created forms on photosensitive paper that were adventurous experiments with light and shadow, not merely recordings of visual data.

What is remarkable about Ellen Carey is, first of all, that her work is entirely abstract, and secondly that her abstraction is for the most part joyously accessible—large-scale, glossy, and gorgeously colored.

Simply put, it is a pleasure to stand in front of this work and just look.

If you stop there, however, you’ve missed essential parts of the potential experience—the complexity of the artist’s conceptual foundation, and the surprisingly personal genesis of her imagery—which are the wacky, irreverent, and well-informed sources of her experimentation. Because for all the polish of Carey’s finished works, they are the result of an ecstatic, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants, crazy-assed instinct.

In Gaelic, the name Ellen means “light,” and light is the very engine of her chosen medium as an artist. Where most photographers use a camera as a kind of recording device, Carey takes the mechanism apart, conceptually, letting its processes become her subject. The results are real objects, all right, but their subject matter is metaphoric, not directly illustrative. Uniquely among her peers in the world of large-format Polaroid 20 x 24 photography—notably including Chuck Close and William Wegman—Ellen Carey does not “take” pictures. She makes them.

Ellen Carey’s artistic intent might seem to be an oxymoron: she makes abstract photography. Hers is not the product of filmed imagery manipulated in a darkroom through an enlarger. Carey’s works are the result of a process far more direct: the transcription of the *event* of light—its recorded absence or presence, its movements, and what happens when light is filtered with colored gels, double exposed, refracted through transparent matter, or masked by opaque presences laid directly onto the surface of the print. Like an alchemist, Carey

traps light's fingerprint without the intervention of outside references. For her, and for us, that fingerprint is the material manifestation of metaphor.

In Greek myth (as related by Pliny the Elder), the origins of art were simple: a woman traces her lover's shadow as he prepares to go to war. Implicit in the act is the impulse that spawned it—the desire to fix a shadow as a spiritual hedge against loss. If we fast-forward to the early nineteenth century, the English inventor William Henry Fox Talbot pioneered the “art” of photography by laying a fern leaf upon a paper made chemically sensitive to light. To fix a shadow was the point, enabled by a newfangled chemistry of silver and salt.

This poetic truth—a dance with legend and history, light and shadow—lies at the heart of Carey's approach. For as innovative as her work might seem, it cannot be separated from history: not from the history of photography, nor from her personal history, nor from the history of art. Carey's exploration of photography follows a thematic trajectory that early on embraced the figure, then incorporated abstraction, and in more recent years has embraced minimalism and conceptualism.

An exhibit at Real Art Ways in Hartford in 2000 showcased three major series of Carey's work, which would tour the country before and following the 9/11 tragedy. Titled *No Voice is Wholly Lost* (a phrase derived from a book on grieving by Dr. Louise Kaplan), this fugue of works includes *Family Portrait* (1996 and 1999), *Birthday Portrait* (1997), and *Mourning Wall* (2000). These works are the artist's responses not only to the dying of the millennium but also to the deaths of three immediate family members. In what she calls “grief work,” Carey transmutes the pain of loss into a conceptual dialogue with light, manipulating the process of Polaroid photography into an elegiac form.

Carey's father and mother and her brother John each died within days of their birthdays, lending a double-edge to the remembrance. The artist's abstract memorials are at once celebratory and pensive, monumental-scale “photographs” that are whimsical and transcendent, resembling melted Crayola crayons or puddling birthday candles (rose-pink and blue) and also Japanese scrolls. They are produced by the signature processes that Carey has pioneered in her two decades of large-format Polaroid work. That she calls them Pulls is a descriptive reference to their process, which should be familiar to anyone who has used a hand-held Polaroid camera. Each of these huge pictures is the product of successive exposures of Polaroid film to colored light—colors derived from her parents' and her brother's birthstones as well as tones of pink and blue, the conventional assignments of gender.

As mutely abstract as Carey's Polaroid images may be, their double meaning (birth/death) is made evident in the fact that she displays them side-by-side with their “negatives,” the chemically coated facing-paper that has been peeled away

from the mirroring positive. Further, in the *Birthday Portrait* group, in a kind of conceptual denial of death, instead of cutting Polaroid prints off at the conventional twenty-four inches as they scroll out of the camera, Carey continues to pull them out into six-, eight-, ten-foot runs—whatever length is required for the developing inks in the camera to expend themselves. After each exposure to colored light, the film's pods of colored dye are squeezed empty between the camera's internal rollers, laying down glassy pools of ink in great, looping ellipses. After a first exposure, the Polaroid's "sandwich" is pulled apart (as the negative's facing is peeled away from the print), then the ink is allowed to dry, and then the glossy, jewel-like positive is spooled back into the camera, where it receives a new "negative" for each of a second, third, and even fourth exposure. Like *raku* pottery, the combinations are unpredictable productions, intuitively managed relations of chemistry and timing. The *Family Portrait* suite (1996) is another "memento mori" to Carey's family, its form even more austere. Entering the room, the viewer encounters on the center wall seven color Polaroid positives tacked to the white drywall. They are arranged in a disrupted rhythm of pairs, left to right: two glossy black rectangles, then two ivory white, a single black pane, then two more in white. These are exquisitely clean objects, like polished onyx, "framed" top and bottom with smeary dark edges of golden brown. These are the positives that represent Carey's immediate family, living and dead, her father and mother, her four siblings and herself.

The black images are created by the lack of exposure: no light reached the film. The white images are their converse, produced by exposing the film to a brightly lit white rectangle.

Thus we are presented with death, death, life, life, death, life, life—like musical scales, like keys on a piano, mirroring the spectator in the glossy sheen of their surface, blocking entry into the picture plane, which is not a picture at all but merely the registered evidence of the presence or absence of light. Each flanking wall presents an echoing series of images, told "in the negative." Those on the left are velvety black upon a brown paper. These are the color negatives, peeled away from the exposed Polaroid film displayed on the center wall. All are identically black—whether exposed to light or not, the negatives present the same. These convey a physical history instead of a picture: silvery streaks at the edges record the squeegee swipes that removed the dripping emulsion from each image's margins. In the silence of these images, this subtle visual indication of the artist's hands has an effect equivalent to sound—something homey and routine, as if someone, invisibly, were washing down the kitchen counter after the noisy turmoil of a funeral wake.

Mourning Wall (2000) is the newest of these series and Carey's most monumental work, her millennial crossover. A composite image thirteen feet high and

thirty-eight feet wide, this is certainly one of the largest photographic works in contemporary art. Here she offers an austere, spiritualized lament. It is a composition whose immediate impression is physical—a wall of slate-like rectangles face-on to the viewer, with a grid of one hundred unique photographic “windows,” one for each year of the century, rendering meaning like a silvered mirror-back, opaquely. Each image is executed in black-and-white Polaroid film, confronting us with the contrasting effect of a *non-color* “black”: not black at all, but whitish-gray and leaching silvered salts.

Each image is a large-format (20 x 24-inch) Polaroid negative, created by exposing the black-and-white film to a white surface illuminated by white light. Peeled away from the positive—which looks white—these negatives assert themselves as black, which is to say: the physical and conceptual opposite of light. The stark beauty of the piece is metaphorical, not narrative; as in all minimalist work, the aim is presentation, not *re*-presentation. Stirringly so. Graveyards present a grid like this one, as do barrier walls. The Wailing Wall’s weathered stone face, constructed with ancient ashlar building blocks, comes to the mind’s eye, an allusion underscored by the delicate fringe—like a prayer shawl’s—that is created in the dripping margins of each print where the chemical emulsion “weeps” with gravity.

These surfaces reveal the stew of chemical salts that are the material truth of Carey’s photographic method. This is no pretty Kodachrome moment, but a profoundly quiet one, while we are brought close to living surfaces that respond to temperature and moisture as they cure, a crystallization that continues as they hang.

Speckled, salty, and lichen-like, Carey’s “pictures” are immensely rich and utterly mundane—more connected with frayed duct tape or crumbling mortar than with picturesque vistas. But they also stand as emotional equivalents, in a sense-specific way, to the numbing effects of a chemical burn or the visual “sound” of a hundred television screens gone suddenly blank—switched on, but vacant.

Carey’s imagery has none of the stupefying vacancy of television, and everything of direct visceral experience. Unalleviated by any hint of documentation, of “friendly” figural and spatial references, this testament to mourning demands a viewer’s embracing empathy.

No Voice is Wholly Lost: Family Portrait, Birthday Portrait, and Mourning Wall
by Ellen Carey, at Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut. 2000.

Forty-five Ways of Looking at a Hotel Room

Like most digital media, videography—the younger sibling of filmmaking—is a genre that has not had time to settle into convention, in large part because the ubiquity—and user-friendliness—of digital-editing capabilities, which have opened the door for anyone to tackle an art form that used to require massive corporate organizational structures and investment. The result is an explosion of creativity and an anything-goes spirit of the frontier. YouTube enables everyone to broadcast videos into cyberspace, where, remarkably, somebody is bound to discover them.

The essay that follows deals with an enterprising young artist who, by writing a successful grant proposal, was able to bring together forty-five artists and produce a multi-site exhibit whose sole continuity was the use of film or digital video in the consideration of a shared but open-ended topic: the hotel room.

It's hard not to miss the bare-bones simplicity of Sol LeWitt, who died in 2007, leaving in his wake a whole new way of considering what constitutes a work of art. His pithy outlook, articulated in 1969 in a list of influential sentences, included the assertion that "It is difficult to bungle good ideas."

If ever there was a test of that declaration, it is the ambitious curatorial experiment mounted by three prominent Connecticut contemporary art spaces—Hartford's Real Art Ways, Artspace in New Haven, and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield.

"I've been thinking a lot about Sol LeWitt," says Chris Doyle, the director of the venture, whose own work dealing with hotel rooms (inspired by his peripatetic experience as an artist) was the germ for the idea that ultimately involved three institutions and forty-five artists in a collaborative video project titled *50,000 Beds*.

Doyle's concept, commissioned by its three host venues from a shortlist of solicited proposals, was open-ended: "What would happen if people went into [hotel] rooms with [film] crews and made pieces behind closed doors?"

His project orchestrates forty-five takes on the "hospitality" industry, pursued with an artistic freedom that is the heart—and liability—of the entire enterprise. This was an undertaking of quite stunning liberality, as a diverse ensemble of videographers (documentary and narrative filmmakers as well as media artists) were set loose in hotel rooms across the state of Connecticut. Each was allotted twenty-four hours to film *in situ*, from which each produced a video work. Only

after the forty-five works were created did Doyle finalize the three exhibitions that knit them together.

These videos run the gamut, riffing on the notion of the hotel room as a workplace and as a dreamland, as settings of both desperate loneliness and fetishist obsession, and perceived from viewpoints as disparate as surveillance cameras and marketing fantasies. They range from the self-consciously fictional (“Let’s pretend we just discovered a camera lens”) to surreal and cartoon landscapes.

As a viewing experience, *50,000 Beds* is hard to consolidate. At each venue, the viewer serially encounters fifteen strikingly unrelated videos, and you move from program to program without any sense of where you are going, or why—an experience in some ways equivalent to watching television programming except that your route controls the “remote.” At each of the venues, there were rapt viewers tucked into chairs or leaning against railings, some connected by earphones, and everyone seemed mesmerized by the lit-aquarium specter of the proffered screens.

The audience members are eerily solitary, viewers who move past each other in silence, waiting patiently outside of each other’s private “spaces” for a turn in front of each viewing station.

We may experience these compound works as complex wholes, in a seemingly unmediated way ... until it dawns on us that we are passing along anonymous corridors separating individual worlds that have little or nothing to do with one another except through some accident of architectural alignment.

Yet none of this is an accident. Doyle’s shaping intelligence can be felt in the sometimes subtle visual affinities between adjacent works. His “design” involves the cunning interplay of peripheral vision and carefully gauged audio-sound leaks. Even the stage-set installation strategy (a viewer must climb stairs to a succession of landings, or move down maze-like corridors to encounter the video placements: some on monitors, some projected directly on the wall, some over neatly-made beds) becomes the metaphorical projection of hostelry.

50,000 Beds is most successful in its overall concept, or in independent moments. There is no satisfyingly unifying means to perceive the work in its entirety except conceptually. As a cumulative “event,” *50,000 Beds* insists on contemporary rather than modernist tactics, employing juxtaposition rather than unity, duality rather than integration, parallel universes rather than universality. A viewer needs buckets of time (not to mention transportation) and considerable willingness to see all of forty-five of the videos.

The key to Doyle’s strategy is its emphasis on the virtual. As viewers, we must enter and act upon the stage the curator and the participating artists have provided. It is necessary to become self-conscious, as, for the moment, we are pressed into vacation. Strangers to these spaces, we are made to occupy the place

between one individual's perception and another's. What is "real" (documentary moments recorded with hotel workers, for instance) are salted among specious videographers' fictions, a largely incompatible relation. What is "false" (animations overlaid onto real-time footage) is likewise shocking.

The whole is a fugue of democratic proportions, whose real power is offering a vantage point somewhere in-between the microcosm and macrocosm.

There is generational disconnect, perhaps, intrinsic to the forms employed—the umbilicus of earphones, the ubiquity of monitors and television screens. Even so, we encounter moments from the "old-time religion"; and certain images (though they were conceived and executed separately) echo and dance with one another from adjacent walls. There are transcendent works like Melissa Dubbin and Aaron Davidson's *Thank You For Not Smoking* and the genuine poignancy of Liz Cohen's *Housekeeping*, in which a hotel housekeeper tells of suicides in the rooms she cleans.

First and last, however, something as banal as the idea of a hotel room galvanizes the whole—and in the end, it is a concept that gathers the forces of this disparate colloquium of filmmakers.

50,000 Beds, a collective project coordinated by Chris Doyle and exhibited at Artspace, in New Haven, Connecticut; Real Art Ways, in Hartford, Connecticut; and The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut. 2007.



Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource.

Sol LeWitt, "Two Modular Cubes / Half-Off" (1972). Enamelled aluminum.



From the collaborative installation *50,000 Beds*, coordinated by Chris Doyle and hosted in 2007 by three Connecticut venues: Real Art Ways (Hartford), Artspace (New Haven), and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (Ridgefield). Forty-five artists took twenty-four hours to make films or videos in hotel rooms. Images shown here are from (clockwise, from top left): Pawel Wojtasik and Terry Berkowitz's *Three Chimneys*; Jorge Colombo's *Scott*; Karina Aguilera Skvirsky's *Giocanda*; and Tyler Coburn's *HOTEL HOTEL HOTEL*. Used courtesy of the artists and Chris Doyle Studio.



Ellen Carey (*above*), “Multichrome Pulls” (2007). Polaroid 20 x 24 Dye-Diffusion Transfer Prints from *Photography Degree Zero* (1996–2012). Collection of the artist; used with permission.



Ellen Carey (*left*), “Purple Negative Pull” (2005). Polaroid 20 x 24 Dye-Diffusion Transfer Print from *Photography Degree Zero* (1996–2012). Used with permission of the artist.

Patricia Rosoff: From There to Here

I was born in the heroic shadows of abstract expressionism, went to art school at a time when talk itself was suspect, and started writing just about the time someone announced that painting was dead and that everything I had finally learned about it was consequently irrelevant.

A relatively verbal type, I stumbled through my undergraduate days at the Rhode Island School of Design largely in the dark about what was going on—damned if I tried to steer a good-student’s course; damned if I tried to work instinctively, since I didn’t know how. What art was, how it worked, what we were trying to accomplish, all were deep secrets, I could only suppose, given to few and obscured by impenetrable mists of genius. But that’s only art school.

One lesson was clear: you were not supposed to talk about art; art was something that should explain itself—or go without saying.

I’ve since learned that the regular world, too, packs a valise—and the message is pretty much the same, although for distinctly different reasons. Artists want art to stay a mystery; “civilians” are sure it’s a hoax. Many in the audience want their art to take the form of pictures and sculptures of the regular sort, meaning representational: simple, declarative, and directly illustrative of the world they received from a largely conservative tradition, from photography, and from motion pictures.

A picture, most folks assert, is or should be worth a thousand words ... and, of course, nobody wants to *hear* those thousand words.

Beyond this matter of representation, there’s also the general hostility towards “modern art,” roughly translated as anything abstract or otherwise execrable. “Modern,” or any of its more recent permutations like “contemporary” or “conceptual,” is a dirty word, implying a scam perpetrated by shysters who want to make a lot of money by selling utter nonsense to complete idiots. (Where anyone got the idea that art was so easy to sell, I have no idea.)

My struggle as an artist has been to shut up and pay attention to what is happening under my hands, physically and visually.

My struggle as a writer and as an educator has been to step out from behind the shield of preconceptions to form my own opinions.

It has been through writing about art that I found a way to understand it, which in turn transformed the way I paint. It is by writing—that is, bringing a viewer with me to look where I look and see what I see—that I hope to make today’s art understandable to others.

INNOCENT EYE

A PASSIONATE LOOK AT CONTEMPORARY ART

by Patricia Rosoff

Award-winning journalist, artist, and educator Patricia Rosoff offers a first-hand tour of the sometimes shocking, often challenging ideas and approaches that continue to fuel the art of today. Rosoff describes the sources of contemporary painting, sculpture, photography, and mixed media in the works of such radicals as Monet, Kandinsky, and Joseph Cornell, who are now part of the tradition but who keep on catalyzing experimental innovators such as Ellen Carey, Spencer Finch, Janine Antoni, and Inigo Manglano-Ovalle.

With close (and sympathetic) consideration of conceptualism, including works by Sol LeWitt and Mierle Ukeles, and with special excitement about the inexhaustible potential in abstraction, Pat Rosoff is the gallery or museum guide you've always wished to have along.



Patricia Rosoff received her B.F.A. in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design and her Master's degree from Hartford Art School. Former Chair of the Creative Arts Department, she serves as Academic Dean of Humanities at Kingswood Oxford School, where since 1975 she has taught studio art and art history. Rosoff has been a long-time contributor to *Art New England* and was art critic for the *Hartford Advocate* newspaper from 1994–2007. She has published reviews in *Arts Magazine* and her essays frequently appear in *Sculpture Magazine*.



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