



Philippe Parreno, *Marquee*,  
Guggenheim, NY, 2008. acrylic,  
steel, LEDs, incandescent lights,  
fluorescent lights, neon lights.  
Installation view, Solomon  
R. Guggenheim Museum exterior,  
New York. Photo: Kristopher McKay.

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# “theanyspacewhatever”

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM,  
NEW YORK

John Kelsey

**MAYBE WE'VE FINALLY GIVEN UP** on the “old realism of places,” as Gilles Deleuze put it. In his book *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983), he used the term *espace quelconque*—“whatever-space” or “any-space-whatever”—to describe the cinematic image of undone space that, however shattered or blurred it may be, is also a space of pure potential. It could be a wasted urban void or a shaky zoom into the luminous screen of a Macintosh. It is a postwar feeling of lost coordinates, a certain anonymous emptiness. It is a space that could be “extracted” from the familiar state of things embodied in a place like the Guggenheim Museum in New York, leaving us even more floating and detached than before in the great rotunda. It is both ruined and fresh.

The discourse that supports the work of the ten artists included in “theanyspacewhatever”—Angela Bulloch, Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Douglas Gordon, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Jorge Pardo, Philippe Parreno, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, artists who were routinely grouped together in exhibitions in Europe throughout the 1990s but had never before been collectively presented in an American museum—links their practices to notions of promiscuous collaboration, conviviality, “relational aesthetics,” open-endedness, and the exhibition as medium. While such claims are typically inflected with a radical if not utopian promise that sounds even less credible today than it did

ten years ago, it should be said that, in their own statements, the artists themselves have been more ambivalent about the emancipatory possibilities of contemporary creative networks and exhibitions that emulate pubs, kitchens, laboratories, island holidays, or open-plan offices rather than product showrooms. Still, a long decade of effort by the artists and curators who populate this exhibition and its catalogue went into producing the feeling of a legitimate, international, hyperactive, jet-set avant-garde for these times—one that put the dream of the self-organized community back at the center of its project. It spread everywhere, seeped into institutions (from which it sometimes seemed to lose any distinction), and spiraled calmly down the drain of the Guggenheim. At the bottom, Cattelan’s Pinocchio floated facedown in a pool of water (*Daddy Daddy*, 2008), a Disneyfied version of a hard-core neorealist ending to this collective story—a false ending that greets you upon entering the show.

It’s usually at the very moment when an idea like “community” is on the verge of extinction that it becomes so obsessively evoked, even fetishized, in the art world. Echoing historical models such as Fluxus, but more sedately, and responding to contemporary influences such as institutional critique, but with a softer and more with-it attitude, the artistic strategies championed by curators such as Nicolas Bourriaud, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Maria Lind de-emphasize the finished product in favor of discursive situations, whether these be Plexiglas “discussion platforms,” shared meals, semi-fictional texts, participatory “scenarios,” or films based on conversations. Such scenarization and programming of social intercourse within art projects and institutions has brought frequent accusations of formalism, if not cynicism, against certain of these artists (see *October* 110 [2004]). And it’s true that in the whateverworld, discourse goes hand in hand with design and decor. In the Guggenheim, for example, one encountered Gillick’s floating powder-coated steel texts (*INFORMATION HERE, A CONTINUATION*, etc.), which attempted to have some Broodthaersian fun with the fact that the museum is also

a system of signs and commands (*theanyspacewhatever signage system*, 2008). Gordon contributed stick-on fragments of banal verbiage (*NOTHING WILL EVER BE THE SAME*) around the rotunda, viral advertising style (*pretty much every word written, spoken, heard, overheard from 1989 . . .*, 2006/2008). Both of these preserved a distinctly ’90s look, with all-lowercase lettering drifted in a lot of empty white. Parreno’s cartoonish, white-on-white illuminated marquee over the museum’s entrance, although blank, posited spectacle—paradoxically, and in a typically “relational” move—as a site of potential communication (*Marquee, Guggenheim, NY*, 2008). Blanking out some free space in the heart of the entertainment complex can be a disruptive gesture, or it can be another way of saying that whatever space is no longer a place to announce anything.

The show achieved a certain “badness,” and a certain self-consciousness around the possibility of a flop (especially following the opening salvo of Parreno’s marquee), which defused the old question of whether the work was utopian or complicit, of whether open works and promiscuous collaboration are part of the solution or part of the problem today. At the Guggenheim, the liberal-democratic call for free speech, or the relational proposal of open conversation *as art*, was answered by the glaring silence of not-great design or replaced by free-floating words that articulated no other possibility beyond the neutrality of metropolitan spectatorship—passively distracted, anonymously addressed, mildly amused, often bored. Free because unassigned to any particular subject, these whateverwords were also devoid of any recipe for action, collective or otherwise. On the ground floor were racks dispensing free copies of the *Wrong Times*, a happily low-budget newspaper documenting the history of the Wrong Gallery (founded in 2002 by Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni, and Ali Subotnik) and the many collaborations and conversations that took place under its semi-fictional auspices. After the Wrong Gallery agreed to curate the Berlin Biennial in 2006, decisively dropping any pretense of autonomy from institutional power, *wrong* seemed to take on another meaning. But



This page, from left: View of “theanyspacewhatever,” 2008, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. From top: Liam Gillick, *theanyspacewhatever signage system*, 2008; Liam Gillick, *Audioguide Bench, Guggenheim, NY*, 2008. Photo: David Heald. Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Chew the Fat*, 2008, mixed media. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: Kristopher McKay. Opposite page, from left: Angela Bulloch, *Firmamental Night Sky: Oculus.12*, 2008, LEDs, neoprene, animated program, hardware. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: Kristopher McKay. Pierre Huyghe, *Opening*, 2008. Performance view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, October 24, 2008. Photo: Kristopher McKay.



*bad, wrong, and empty* may also hide strategies for evading critical death traps and professional sclerosis. They became ways of undoing the Guggenheim moment and the pressures of containment here, of sidestepping achievement. Anyway, being right is a terrible way to end up, in a museum.

Besides discourse, functional seating is another trope common to many of these artists' projects, and in "theanyspacewhatever" bodies could park themselves on Gillick's handsome S-shaped benches (*Audioguide Bench, Guggenheim, NY, 2008*), on a beanbag chair in Gordon and Tiravanija's graffiti-decorated video lounge (*Cinéma Liberté/Bar Lounge, 1996/2008*), or on pillows in the carpeted area where Tiravanija's two-hour-long 2008 documentary *Chew the Fat* was playing. (Höller's bed, fitted with black silk sheets and presented within a hotel-room-like installation, presented another place to kick

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***Bad, wrong, and empty* may hide strategies for evading critical death traps and professional sclerosis. Anyway, being right is a terrible way to end up, in a museum.**

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back, but this was available by reservation only, for paying overnight guests [*Revolving Hotel Room, 2008*].) If seating is how a socially minded artwork installs the humans who are meant to complete it—as in Tiravanija's reconstitution of his East Village apartment as a public hangout inside the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 1996—extra chairs here were stand-ins for a micro-utopian possibility that was largely banished from "theanyspacewhatever." Sitting on a beanbag in an installation in a biennial may have been a novel experience for art viewers in the '90s, but in New York in 2009, after paying fifteen dollars at the door, one couldn't help but count the whateverminutes ticking by, wondering what had become of sociability in the city. An open seat, like a blank marquee, is a vacancy as much as an invitation, and anyway the downward pull of the ramp

was stronger. An event programmer and an urban planner lurk behind every relational artist, and these practitioners' proposals to reappropriate common space were always elaborated in a strict and conscious relation to the fact of functionalized, policed space. It was never either/or. It was always brief glimpses of the one within the other.

At times, one had the feeling that this show had been copied and pasted, dragged and dropped, into the museum. There was a disconcerting ease, an almost dialed-in feeling, and the impression that a laptop screen was always hovering between artist and viewer. A lot of the art was screenlike, too—for example, Bulloch's illuminated starscape installed on the ceiling high above, which was less a trompe l'oeil sky than a cathedral-scale screen saver (*Firmamental Night Sky: Oculus.12, 2008*). Pardo contributed an installation of intricately laser-cut partitions along one length of the ramp, a topology of veneers that viewers had to navigate on their way down (*Sculpture Ink, 2008*). Gonzalez-Foerster used a blank white scrim to screen off a section of the rotunda, with nothing behind it except the piped-in sound of trickling water, affording the viewer a brief walk through the ambience of a New Age relaxation tape (*Promenade, 2007*). Some areas of the exhibition were left yawningly empty of art or of anything save a snippet of Gordon's vinyl dialogue. The holes that were designed into the show, giving it a loose, work-in-progress feel, were either spaces of Deleuzian pure potential or far-off echoes of Michael Asher's empty galleries, or maybe just moments of empty-handedness, and as retinal as anything that might show up on a screen.

*Chew the Fat*, which appeared on multiple screens, presented an extended, serial group portrait of the participating artists (joined by nonparticipants such as Elizabeth Peyton and Andrea Zittel). The video dares to expose certain behind-the-scenes truths about this creative milieu: the physical bodies, the way they talk, where they reside, how they treat their employees, what they eat—the lives of the artists. It is a highly demystifying maneuver, and a generous one. Some sequences are edited to reveal what is common to everyone here—for instance, a certain hunched-over attachment to titanium PowerBooks (the

video could work as an ad for Apple). The artists also share the general condition of no-longer-emerging, and we see how it looks to inhabit a forty-something body in a polo shirt, in the comfortable environs of one's business-hippie lifestyle, with so many projects in progress on the screen. They talk of buying real estate, sometimes even calling their homes artworks. There are brief road-movie-like moments as artists shuttle from home to studio. Pardo appears with a big glass of red wine and even cooks a whole pig on camera. Gillick whistles along to the Clash in his sleek home office while working on the cover of an upcoming book. Gonzalez-Foerster strolls alongside a Parisian canal, commenting that these days she prefers to be alone. What *Chew the Fat* reveals is the fact of individuals: how they happen and how they, too, are the product of today's vanguard practices (and discourses). Here Tiravanija risks exposing the not always joyful anonymity that surrounds each artist, their common separation. Noticeably absent from *Chew the Fat* is Cattelan: Never appearing on camera, he is evoked by the other artists via anecdotes. He manages to exist almost purely as discourse and, so, was the exhibition's only escape artist.

"Theanyspacewhatever" also included programmed performances and film screenings in the Guggenheim's theater, as well as some off-site works and discussions. In the rotunda, Huyghe staged a work called *Opening, 2008*, in which viewers wandered the darkened museum with strap-on headlamps, an event that took place three times over the course of the show. Huyghe is the artist who in 1995 founded the Association of Freed Times, conjuring up Situationist calls to "never work." This gesture of appropriating free time for collective use was ambiguous insofar as it was wedded to a contradictory decision to legally register AFT with the local police. "Theanyspacewhatever" started there, on the clock and on the record, and then tried to unwork its way out again. □

*"Theanyspacewhatever,"* organized by Nancy Spector, was on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, from Oct. 24, 2008, through Jan. 7, 2009.

JOHN KELSEY IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.

