

Projects 78 : Sabine Hornig : the Museum of Modern Art, July 17- September 8, 2003

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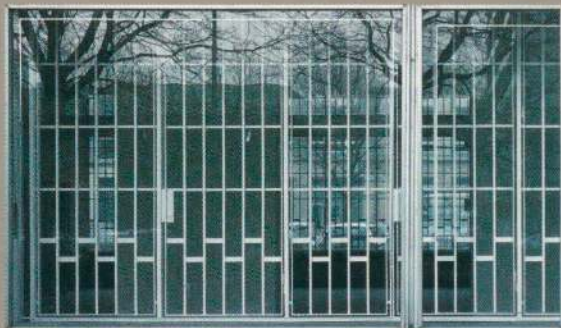
projects **78** sabine hornig

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Window III, 2000. Chromogenic color print, 49 x 86" (124.5 x 218.5 cm). Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin



Above: Details from *Projects 78*: Sabine Hornig at MoMA QNS, 2003. Color transparencies mounted on glass, each 59 x 101 or 59 x 106 1/2" (150 x 256.5 or 150 x 270 cm). Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

The experience of walking past a storefront window is familiar to us all. We are meant to admire the goods on display behind the window, but we can be equally aware of the glass itself: dirt, fingerprints, and scratches all draw our attention away from the interior of the store to the surface of the plane that separates us from it. In addition, we may notice a reflection of ourselves or of other passersby, so that the windows come to serve as mirrors in which we evaluate hair, posture, or gait. These overlapping images are not particularly difficult to interpret—we instinctively sort out the three and focus on the one we want. Sabine Hornig's photographs capture the nuances of these layers, but compress them into a single image. We are challenged to distinguish between the commercial space, the surface of the window and its frame (the dividing line between interior and exterior), and the reflected streetscape. Hornig's interest in these layers of space is not limited to the image itself: even more important are the reflection of the real (gallery) space on the surface of her images and the role that we, as viewers, play in complicating the interpretation of her work.

For *Projects 78*, Hornig has built a wall that bisects the sloping gallery, into which she has inset four nearly life-size images of the empty windows of abandoned Berlin storefronts on panels of glass. Although the space itself, an enclosed overhanging ramp, is on an incline, the images are perfectly level, so that the viewer's perspective and his or her relationship to the images changes while walking along the installation. The images are printed as transparencies, and as they are mounted on glass the viewer can see through them just as one would see through a storefront window, and can see other viewers on the opposite side of the wall. Hornig's installation perfectly divides the space, so that each side mirrors the other, inviting the possibility that a viewer looking through one of the "windows" could perceive the other side as a reflection. The three layers of space depicted within the transparencies parallel three layers of space that the installation establishes in the gallery: the storefront windows are equivalent to the transparencies mounted on glass; the stores' interiors correspond to the space on the other side of the installation's bisecting wall; and the streetscape that is reflected in the images of storefront windows corresponds to the space we occupy (and our own image) that is reflected in the transparencies. The depicted and real spaces intersect most dramatically at the framing edges of Hornig's transparencies, which coincide precisely with the frames surrounding the windows captured in the images. The result is a trompe l'oeil effect: the original storefront window frames, which appear to be holding the transparencies in place, are in fact only illustrative of structural support.

Hornig is not interested in using photography as literal description, but she concedes that the absence of objects for sale in her storefront windows is a metaphoric comment on the economy. "The first windows I photographed were former East German trade centers, empty and untouched for more than ten years in the center of [Berlin. . . Later] I understood that it is not about historic sites, it does not matter where they are, and [their] exchangeability is part of it."¹ She appreciates that in a time of economic recession, each store that opens is an expression of "hope and utopias. . . fresh and modern," while each one that closes reflects their abandonment.

Hornig's images of abandoned storefronts are not always presented as transparencies. She likes to print certain images as opaque photographs, an example of which, *Untitled* (2002), hangs in the lobby area of MoMA QNS (see reverse of brochure). In such photographs she explores similar issues of interior/exterior space through reflection, their opacity underscoring the illusive nature of the layers of space in her work. For Hornig, there is a fundamental difference between the use of transparencies and opaque photographs: while her transparencies have a specific purpose within an installation, overlapping and interacting with the surrounding space, her photographs are conceived as "autonomous." Hornig minimizes the contrast in her transparencies to maximize their potential for reflection, encouraging a close resemblance between her work and the windows they represent, while her photographs describe a more legible, realistic space, where color and form play a dominant role (see, for example, *Window III*, 2000, above).

The history of art is filled with examples of images that depict the world as seen through its reflective surfaces, and the subgenre of photographs of storefront windows has been explored with great success by leading figures of twentieth-century photography, from Eugène Atget to Lee Friedlander. Atget's photographs of storefront windows in the mid-1920s marked the intersection of his interest in expressions of contemporary commercial activity in Paris with his exploration of photography's potential to confound distinctions between positive and negative space. There are obvious physical differences between Atget's and Hornig's work relating to scale, color, and format, but there are other more subtle distinctions that Hornig uses to clarify decisions about perspective and framing. "For me it is quite important that there is only the window [and] the view into the window, ending with its frame. . . so that the viewer in front of the photo becomes the one looking into the empty window, not the photographer." Atget was concerned with capturing the unique characteristics of the world as viewed through a camera lens, while Hornig uses photography as a tool to enable the viewer to enter into the world she has created. The nearly 1:1 scale and precise cropping of Hornig's images invite confusion between the real and depicted spaces, facilitating the viewer's incorporation of him- or herself into the work.

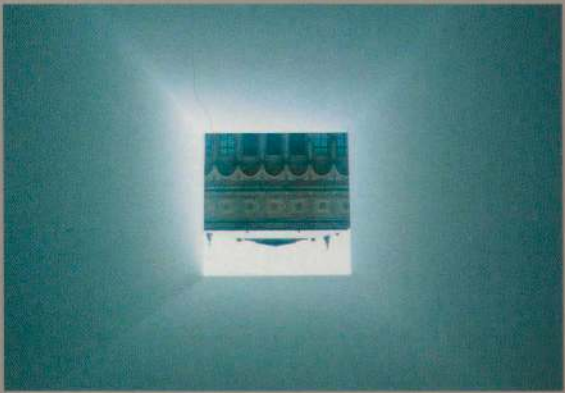
Hornig's conceptual approach to defining the edges of her photographs contrasts with Atget's use of elements such as window frames and facades to define the composition. In the essay "Inside the White Cube," which first appeared as a series of three articles in *Artforum* in 1976, artist and writer Brian O'Doherty traces the development of edge-awareness and its impact on the way works of art are framed and exhibited. He points out that "the classic package of perspective enclosed by the Beaux-Arts frame makes it possible for pictures to hang like sardines. There is no suggestion that the space within the picture is continuous with the space on either side of it." He notes that with photography, where the definition of the edge is one of the primary artistic choices, "the best early photographs reinterpret the edge without the assistance of pictorial conventions. They lower the tension on the edge by allowing the subject matter to compose itself, rather than consciously aligning it with the edge" (and Atget's work clearly falls within this category). He then observes, "Through the [nineteen] fifties and sixties, we notice the codification of a new theme as it evolves into consciousness: How much space should a work of art have (as the phrase went) to 'breathe'?"² Hornig's work belongs to this context-sensitive era, with the placement of her transparencies being fundamentally linked to the space in which they appear.

Despite the perfectly squared view of each of her storefront windows, Hornig is notably absent. Interested in the role the viewer plays in her work, how the viewer's own reflection both adds to and complicates his or her understanding of the images, she considers any reflection of the photographer and his or her camera and tripod to be a distracting element that interferes with the viewer's ability to project him- or herself into the space. To avoid this result, Hornig occasionally hires a photographer to make the exposures at her direction, and employs digital manipulation if necessary—practices that underscore the practical, rather than philosophical, relationship of her work to the history of photography.

Hornig is part of a generation of artists who use photography in their work but don't necessarily consider themselves photographers. Hornig first used photography as a component of her installations, and it was several years before she began making photographs that existed as independent works of art. Hornig's interest in perception is something she has in common with Uta Barth and other photographers, but she also shares it with artist James Turrell and his work with illumination and color; and while her interest in transparency and its role in the division of space links her to Atget and Friedlander, it is equally fruitful to consider in light of Dan Graham's architectural work.



Above and top right: Installation view and schematic drawing of *Orange Facade* at Galerie Lukas + Hoffmann, Cologne, 1995. Photo: Andrea Stappert



Above: Installation views of *Window* at Kunsthalle Hamburg, 2000-01. Photos: Ottmar von Poschinger and Sabine Hornig

Biography

Sabine Hornig (German, born 1964) lives in Berlin with her husband, Johannes Schütz, and their one-year-old daughter Lila. She received her B.A. and M.F.A. from the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. Hornig was winner of the Karl Schmidt-Rottluff Stipendium in 1998, among other awards, and from 1999–2000 was a participating artist in the P.S. 1 International Studio Program, in New York. Hornig's work has been featured in several solo exhibitions, most recently in New York (Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, 2002); in Berlin (Galerie Barbara Thumm, 2000; Wiensowski & Harbord, 1998); and in Malmö, Sweden (Malmö Konstmuseum, 1996).

Grateful thanks are due to Sabine Hornig; to Larry Kardish, who oversees the Projects series at MoMA; to Tanya Bonakdar, for her assistance in making this project a reality; to Agnes Gund, for sharing my enthusiasm for Hornig's work; and to Claire Corey, Peter Galassi, Cassandra Heller, Jerry Neuner, Ed Pusz, Eva Respini, Mari Shinagawa-Thanner, Jennifer Wolfe, and Carlos Yepes for their invaluable help on the exhibition and brochure.

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Untitled, 2002. Chromogenic color print, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin

Sarah Hermanson Meister, Associate Curator, Department of Photography

This and all other unattributed quotations from Hornig have been taken from correspondence with the artist in March and April, 2003.¹ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 19, 20, and 27.

Hornig's project at MoMA QNS is an expression of her ongoing interest in artistic interventions that are specific to a given space. In one early example of her installation work, *Orange Facade* (1995), she constructed a cube that fit within the walls of the Galerie Lukas + Hoffmann storefront space in Cologne—while it shared most of the gallery's facade, it was slightly smaller at the sides and in the back. It was into this cube that the visitor entered, little knowing that he or she was not entering the gallery proper. In the top right corner of the back wall, which Hornig painted orange, there was an opening onto an impenetrable darkness, providing a clue that the gallery had been modified. It was only by entering the cube and attempting to peer through the opening at the back wall that the viewer became aware of the fact that he or she was enveloped by a space of the artist's creation, and had thus become part of the work.

Another of Hornig's installations, *Window*, was shown at the Hamburg Kunsthalle in 2000–01. Hornig built a wall that blocked seven of the nine preexisting window sections, leaving two deep openings with a view of the old Kunsthalle. This intervention, which rendered the proportions of the wall and windows "suddenly more domestic," alluded to the mass-produced apartment buildings in her sculptural work. The interior gallery wall in which these openings appeared was treated with a rough, greenish, stucco-like material similar to that which she often uses for her sculptural pieces, and between the openings she placed a motion-sensitive light that turned on when visitors entered the gallery space and approached the wall or windows. The surface treatment of the wall, being generically appropriate for outdoor use, blurred the distinctions between interior and exterior space. The light also alluded to these distinctions: in a gallery space it could be interpreted as a symbol of the alarm that goes off when viewers are too close to the art, while in an outdoor setting, a motion-sensitive light is often installed as a security measure. These internal/external dualities were echoed in the two openings, and relate not only to her early work with transparencies and installations, but also to her project at MoMA QNS, which is intended to be encountered from both sides of the space. The museum visitor plays a critical role in activating the space, without which action the work would not be complete—and again, this ties into Hornig's photographic work, in which the reflection of the viewer completes the layering of real space that mirrors the layers of depicted space.

At MoMA QNS, the enclosed overhanging ramp in which *Projects 78* appears was designed by the architect Michael Maltzan. The gradual change in elevation of this gallery is repeated elsewhere in the public areas of MoMA QNS, and Maltzan intended this fluid space—an allusion to the temporary nature of the Museum's home in Queens—to be appreciated in motion. Hornig's installation at MoMA QNS is also meant to be encountered in an ambulatory fashion: there is no single, stationary point where a viewer should stand. Although the images are not linked to one another in a narrative progression, they were taken on a single street in the center of Berlin; an attentive viewer will notice that the reflections in some of them repeat, so that encountering the installation in sequence parallels the experience of walking along a street before a series of stores. In all areas of her art, Sabine Hornig encourages her viewers to draw connections between the world she has created and the world from which it was drawn. Her project for MoMA takes the familiar experience of walking past storefront windows, and renders it less familiar.

