

# **Projects 20 : Vernon Fisher : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 19-March 6, 1990**

Author

Fisher, Vernon, 1943-

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1990

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primary documents, installation views, and an  
index of participating artists.

# projects: vernon fisher

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20



Detail from the installation *Movements Among the Dead*, south wall. 1990. Paintstick and acrylic on black latex, with chalk and chalk trays. Surveyor's level in foreground. Courtesy the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo: Julie Bozzi

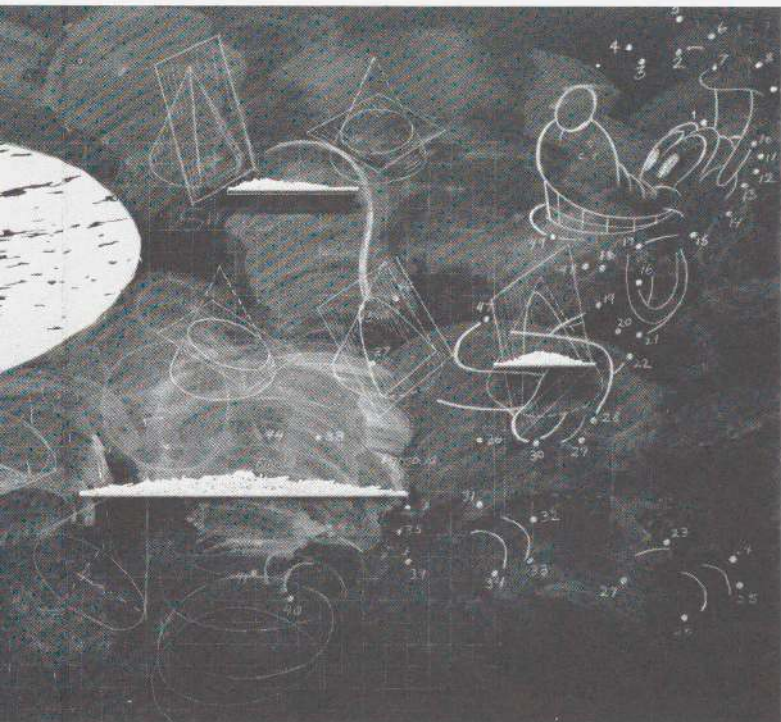
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Detail from the installation *Movements Among the Dead*, south wall. 1990. Paintstick and acrylic on black latex, with chalk and chalk trays. Courtesy the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo: Julie Bozzi

**vernon fisher**  
***movements among the dead***

Word and image, and the exploration of complex and unexpected connections between the two, are the essence of Vernon Fisher's work. For over a decade, he has created site-specific installations that combine painting, wall drawing, three-dimensional objects, and narrative texts he writes himself. His fictional narratives, complemented by painted or drawn and sometimes erased images, question and subvert conventional meanings. By playing the text off against the images, Fisher strives to achieve a



balance between two distinct forms of cognition, reading and seeing. The pictures never directly illustrate the words, but act as a visual metaphor and introduce imagery that provokes a multitude of disparate associations, aiding the viewer in decoding both language and image, and often crossing the borderlines between fact and fiction, reality and illusion.

This investigation of language in art reflects the influences of the late fifties work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, the concerns of Pop artists James Rosenquist and Andy Warhol, and the early sixties work of the Conceptual artists. It should also be seen in the context of the work of such California artists as Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari.

Fisher's installations reveal his interest in nature, culture, language, and the unconscious, as well as his fascination with the human relationship to nature, human emotional states, and the notions of the sublime, nostalgia, and memory. He believes that these have been contaminated and trivialized by a materialistic, insensitive world with dictated attitudes and responses to daily life and experience. Thus, his aim is to detoxify and restore their meaning by creating new contexts for them through words and images in unorthodox pairings or juxtapositions.

In his installation for The Museum of Modern Art, titled *Movements Among the Dead*, Fisher focuses on nostalgia and contemplates human responses to sorrow, death, alienation, longing for the unattainable, and, finally, conditioned but uncontrollable destruction and self-destruction.



The central conceit of the installation is divulged on one wall, in Fisher's written narrative on the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936) and his experiments culminating in his famous discovery of conditioned reflex. Fisher's text contains part fact and part fiction. While recounting Pavlov's training a hungry dog to salivate at the sound of a bell previously associated with food, the artist comments on the significance of conditioning to the reflexes of the nervous system. Indirectly, he remarks on the relationship between humankind and nature. The description of the dog's increasingly destructive behavior discloses the vagaries of the artist's imagination. Pavlov presses himself against a wall in fear, forced to confront an unexpected reaction induced by his own experiments on the animal. Similarly, Fisher asks the viewer to face his or her own unexpected responses while viewing his work.

The installation is composed of four parts, reflecting the architecture of the gallery. Fisher has transformed the four gallery walls to look like blackboards—a consistent support element in his recent work. Blurring the lines between reality and illusion, the artist has drawn on three of the walls with white paintstick to imitate actual slate boards covered with drawings in real, white chalk. On one wall, chalk trays are filled to overflowing, and chalk spills to the floor.

This same, long wall is dominated by a white ellipse with an upside-down abstraction of a dalmation. The dalmation was projected at such an angle that it is elongated, and now, painted in, is indecipherable until the viewer looks through the surveyor's level. Positioned in the middle of the room and pointed at the dog's reflection in a parabolic mirror on another wall, the level reconstructs the image for the viewer, turning the oval into a circle and returning the dalmation to its natural form. This process of decoding the image is analogous to the one that takes place in the viewer's imagination while reading the text on Pavlov. Language and image function as two indispensable and yet interchangeable agents to push the narrative forward, beyond the written text and pictures that appear on the walls.

Featured on the adjacent wall, with the parabolic mirror attached to the top center of it, is a silkscreened image of explorers—a symbol for humans in an alienating environment, and a metaphor for the artist's, the viewer's, and Pavlov's search for clues to hidden, as yet undiscovered, meanings.

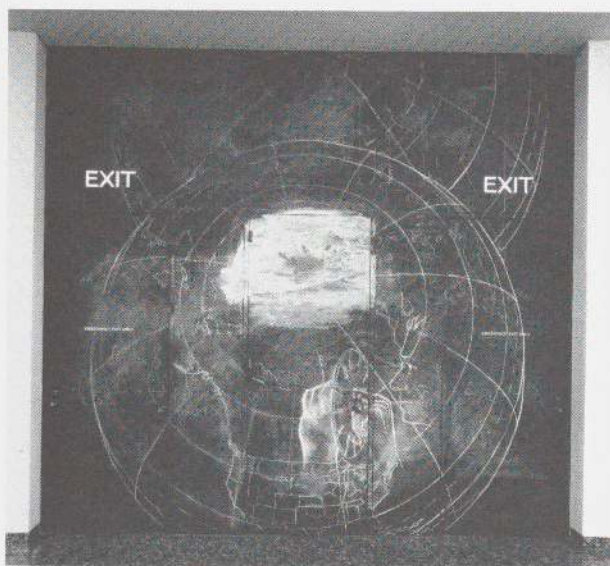


**Detail from the installation *Movements Among the Dead*, east wall. 1990. Silkscreen on black latex. 48 x 66" (120 x 169 cm). Courtesy the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo: Julie Bozzi**

The remaining, freestanding wall is positioned in such a way that natural light enters the dark space at one end of the room. A "doorway," about seven feet square, is blocked by a heavy, false-slate blackboard that looks as if the upper left-hand corner were broken off, allowing a view of the installation from the walkway outside the gallery and permitting an additional stream of light to enter the room.

Half-erased images on the blackboard walls, drawn from the artist's personal, iconographic vocabulary, provide a broad, evocative, visual backdrop for the text. Cones intersected by planes to form ovals; diagrams and renderings of brains; and schematic mountains intersected by cones, together create a visual and psychic landscape. By erasing the images and preserving the residual markings, Fisher teases the viewer's notions of memory and offers visual stimuli, encouraging participation in and a rapport with different components of the installation. The disjunction of images, the meanings of which remain in constant flux, allows the viewer to select those that correspond to his or her own emotions and perceptions. Through the interplay of word and image, the artist motivates the viewer to respond to his work and, by extension, his or her environment, intellectually, emotionally, and physically and, in those responses, to find a personal interpretation.

Magdalena Dabrowski  
Associate Curator  
Department of Drawings



**Works 88: *Parallel Lines*. 1988. One of eight. Paintstick, acrylic, and latex on wall. Installation at Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Courtesy Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Photo: Lee Stalsworth**

Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts. The **projects** series is made possible by a generous grant from the Lannan Foundation.

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## biography

Born Fort Worth, Texas, 1943  
Resides in Fort Worth

## education

University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana.  
MFA, 1969  
Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene,  
Texas. BA, 1967

## selected individual exhibitions

- 1989**  
Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York.  
*Niagara: Welcome to US\** (installation)
- La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art.  
(traveling exhibition)\*
- 1988**  
Dallas Museum of Art.  
*Lost for Words\** (installation)
- 1987**  
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.  
*Building Our House*
- Lannan Museum, Lake Worth, Florida.  
*Perdido en el Mar\** (installation)
- 1986**  
Asher-Faure Gallery, Los Angeles.  
*The Knight's Move* (installation)
- 1985**  
Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston
- 1984**  
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York
- 1983**  
Madison Art Center, Inc., Madison, Wisconsin.  
*Bridge* (installation)

## selected group exhibitions

- 1988**  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art.  
*Awards in the Visual Arts 7\**  
(traveling exhibition)
- Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
*Works 88\** (installation)
- The Menil Collection, Houston. *Texas Art\**
- 1987**  
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.  
*Comic Iconoclasm\** (traveling exhibition)
- Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.  
*Past/Imperfect: Eric Fischl, Vernon Fisher,  
Laurie Simmons\** (traveling exhibition)
- 1986**  
The Art Institute of Chicago.  
*Seventy-Fifth American Exhibition\**
- Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.  
*The Texas Landscape, 1900-1986*
- Centro Cultural Arts Contemporaneo,  
Mexico City. *Memento Mori*
- 1984**  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
*Content: A Contemporary Focus, 1974-1984*
- 1983**  
The Corcoran Gallery of Art,  
Washington, D.C.  
*Second Western States Exhibition—The  
38th Corcoran Biennial Exhibition of  
American Painting* (traveling exhibition)

\*A publication accompanied the exhibition.