

# **Projects 15 : David Ireland : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 10, 1988-January 15, 1989**

Author

Ireland, David, 1930-2009

Date

1988

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

[www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2137](http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2137)

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*Pan of Pamphlets.* Installed at the University Art Museum, Berkeley. 1988. Courtesy Damon Brandt Gallery, New York. Photo, Ben Blackwell



## projects

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 generous grants from the Lannan Foundation and J. P. Morgan & Co. Incorporated.



Above: Interior view, 65 Capp Street, San Francisco. 1981. Photo, M. Lee Fatherree

Right top: *School of Chairs*. Installed at the University Art Museum, Berkeley. 1988. Courtesy Damon Brandt Gallery, New York. Photo, Ben Blackwell

Right center: *Broom Collection with Boom*, 500 Capp Street, San Francisco. 1978–1988

Right bottom: Interior view, 500 Capp Street, San Francisco. 1982. Photo, Henry Bowles



## David Ireland

*Ideally my work has a visual presence that looks like part of a usual, everyday situation. I like the feeling that nothing's been designed, that you can't tell where the art stops and starts.*

—David Ireland, 1988

David Ireland's work is based on the conviction that art and life, although unequivocally not the same, are indivisible. Like other site-specific artists who hold this view, he sets out to activate a given space by searching for a site-inherent context. But unlike an artist such as Richard Serra, who wrenches meaning from a site by an imposition of will, Ireland submits himself to a process in which there is minimal imposition. Often described as an urban archeologist, he approaches each situation as an excavation site. Combining his own personal response with a contextual analysis of the space—whether it be private or public—he attempts to regain its past and from that construct a present. Many of Ireland's projects, therefore, do not look like what we think of as art, but come precariously close to ordinary, mundane settings. His spaces become transformed by what he terms "a visual presence." What is the art and what is not, when the art began and when it will end are not clear. Ireland's intentions remain elusive, guarded, inexplicit: he works in the world of the evocative. Needless to say, he is not alone in trying to close, or at least bridge, the gap between art and life. Expanding the effort begun by Duchamp, and continued by Rauschenberg, Warhol, Beuys, and others, Ireland extends the definitions of what can constitute an aesthetic experience.

Ireland is variously referred to as a sculptor, environmental artist, archeologist, architect, designer, and historian. Though none of these terms is accurate, all are consistent. Formally, no two of the artist's installations look the same, and yet we recognize that certain characteristic elements recur—the chair, the treated and glossed walls, the natural light, and the display vitrines containing his own eccentric objects. His work does not define itself under the constrictions of style, but through the subtleties of a consistent sensibility. For Ireland, the making of a work of art is not an act of what we traditionally think of as spontaneous artistic originality, but rather a process of uncovering or illuminating what was or is already present, thereby sensitizing threads of connectedness and memory.

Ireland is best known for his work with architectural interiors, the most celebrated of which are his own home at 500 Capp Street in San Francisco and what is now the Capp Street Project at 65 Capp Street. Together they indicate the range of his investigations. Both residences possess an ongoing life of their own: Ireland continues to live in the former and the latter is now a nonprofit space for artists' projects. After buying 500 Capp Street in 1975, Ireland, keeping its Victorian origins in mind, proceeded in his own fashion to restore it. Like the archeologist who uncovers fragments of history and pieces them into a whole, Ireland began a patient reconstruction that has produced a continually changing, allusive environment. Not only did he preserve the original walls, stripped of layers of paint and wallpaper, but he treated them with a glossy polyurethane coating, capturing every crack and trace in a seemingly timeless covering. The walls and floors, treated in the same way, have taken



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on a reflective sheen that tends to obliterate the distinctions between them. Throughout the house are objects that the artist discovered in the course of his work and altered in some small way. A pile of old brooms found in the basement becomes a sculpture; sawdust from the sanding of floors, and rubber bands collected from the daily newspaper, are stored in canning jars and displayed like museum artifacts. In fact, the entire house becomes its own domestic showcase.

In startling contrast is Ireland's more recent project, 65 Capp Street. Here the artist has transformed the interior of the house into an architecturally scaled, open, light environment. While 500 Capp Street calls to mind the generations of inhabitants who lived out their days within it, 65 Capp Street heightens awareness of the rise and setting of the sun: reflections, permutations, and illuminations suffuse the space, changing it hour by hour, according to Ireland's arrangement of the light sources. Exercising a similar control in the current installation, he has sought to modify the natural light as it enters the Museum's Garden Hall through the large windows.

That Ireland's work has been defined in terms compatible with artists as disparate as James Turrell and Joseph Beuys hints at the unorthodox realm his work occupies. Both Turrell and Ireland are engaged in the creation of spatial situations. Turrell's medium is light, which he approaches from a minimalist, purist aesthetic; he explores the perceptual phenomena of light and its properties, emphasizing the relationship of light to time. For Ireland, the manipulation of light is also related to the passage of time, but for him it is diffused, integrated into an earthbound context, interrupted by other activities. Time is marked by its passage as articulated by the variability of the natural light as it enters a space, and at 500 Capp Street, for example, by the cracks and lines caused over time and preserved by the treated walls.

The closest ties would appear to be with Beuys. And, indeed, their similarities are many—in the use of found, often domestic objects that are only slightly altered; in the use of raw or discarded materials; in the choice of sites that can be transformed to resonate with memories and history; and perhaps most significantly, in the attitude that art should raise questions and not be separate from everyday life. But their dissimilarity is basic, and perhaps reflects their very different personal histories. Ireland's down-to-earth, American form of directness, not to mention his wry sense of humor, as evidenced in *Pan of Pamphlets* and *School of Chairs*, is much removed from the almost Romantic sensibility of the German artist. While history plays a key role for both Beuys and Ireland, Beuys refers in his art to the dark, mythic past of Northern Europe and the even darker, more recent past of Germany itself. The history Ireland peels away and discloses is the particular, almost pragmatic past of an actual site. His American roots make for a specifically induced sculptural response determined by the architectural realities and public and private histories attached to that site. With each new situation, Ireland subtly reveals to us the myriad forces that shape our private experiences of place.

Linda Shearer  
Curator  
Department of Painting and Sculpture

## biography

Born Bellingham, Washington,  
August 25, 1930

Resides in San Francisco

## education

California College of Arts and Crafts,  
Oakland, BA, 1953  
San Francisco Art Institute, MFA, 1974

## selected individual exhibitions

Damon Brandt Gallery, New York  
*David Ireland: Multiple Implications*

University Art Museum,  
University of California at Berkeley  
*David Ireland: A Decade Documented,  
1978–1988*

1988

1987

San Francisco Art Institute  
*David Ireland: Gallery as Place*

1986

Gray Gallery, East Carolina University,  
Greenville, North Carolina  
*David Ireland: Cafeteria*

1985

Washington Project for the Arts,  
Washington, D.C.  
*David Ireland and Robert Wilhite:  
The Jade Garden/Artists' Apartment*

1984

The New Museum of  
Contemporary Art, New York  
*Currents: David Ireland*

1983

Leah Levy Gallery, San Francisco  
*David Ireland: Tableau*

1988

## selected group exhibitions

Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
*Awards in the Visual Arts*  
Traveled to Carnegie-Mellon University  
Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, and Virginia  
Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond

1985

San Francisco Art Institute  
*Inspired by Leonardo*

1984

Hayden Gallery, Massachusetts Institute  
of Technology, Cambridge  
*Visions of Paradise: Installations by Vito  
Acconci, David Ireland, and James Surls*

## selected bibliography

Atkins, David. *Currents: David Ireland*.  
New York: The New York Museum of  
Contemporary Art, 1984

*David Ireland: A Decade Documented,  
1978–1988*. Berkeley: University of  
California, 1988

Garrels, Gary. *Visions of Paradise:  
Installations by Vito Acconci, David  
Ireland, and James Surls*. Cambridge:  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology,  
1984

McCormack, Carlo. "David Ireland."  
*Artforum International*, vol. 27, no. 1  
(September 1988), pp. 138–39