Dislocations : October 20, 1991-January 7, 1992, the Museum of Modern Art, New York

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DISLOCATIONS

OCTOBER 20, 1991 – JANUARY 7, 1992 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Where are we? There are plenty of reasons to wonder. And even more, perhaps, to ask why we don't wonder more often. Especially since the reference points we habitually rely upon to situate ourselves are so many and so easily mistaken for others bound to lead us astray. Most of the time we would just as soon pretend that we are sure of our surroundings, and so, sure of ourselves and who we are. Rather that than pose the simple questions that might abruptly shatter the illusion of dependable normalcy. The decision to enter unfamiliar territory means accepting the possibility, perhaps the probability, of losing our way. But what happens when one steps outside one's usual environment only to find that one cannot go back, or that once back nothing seems the same? How does one deal with a world out of joint?

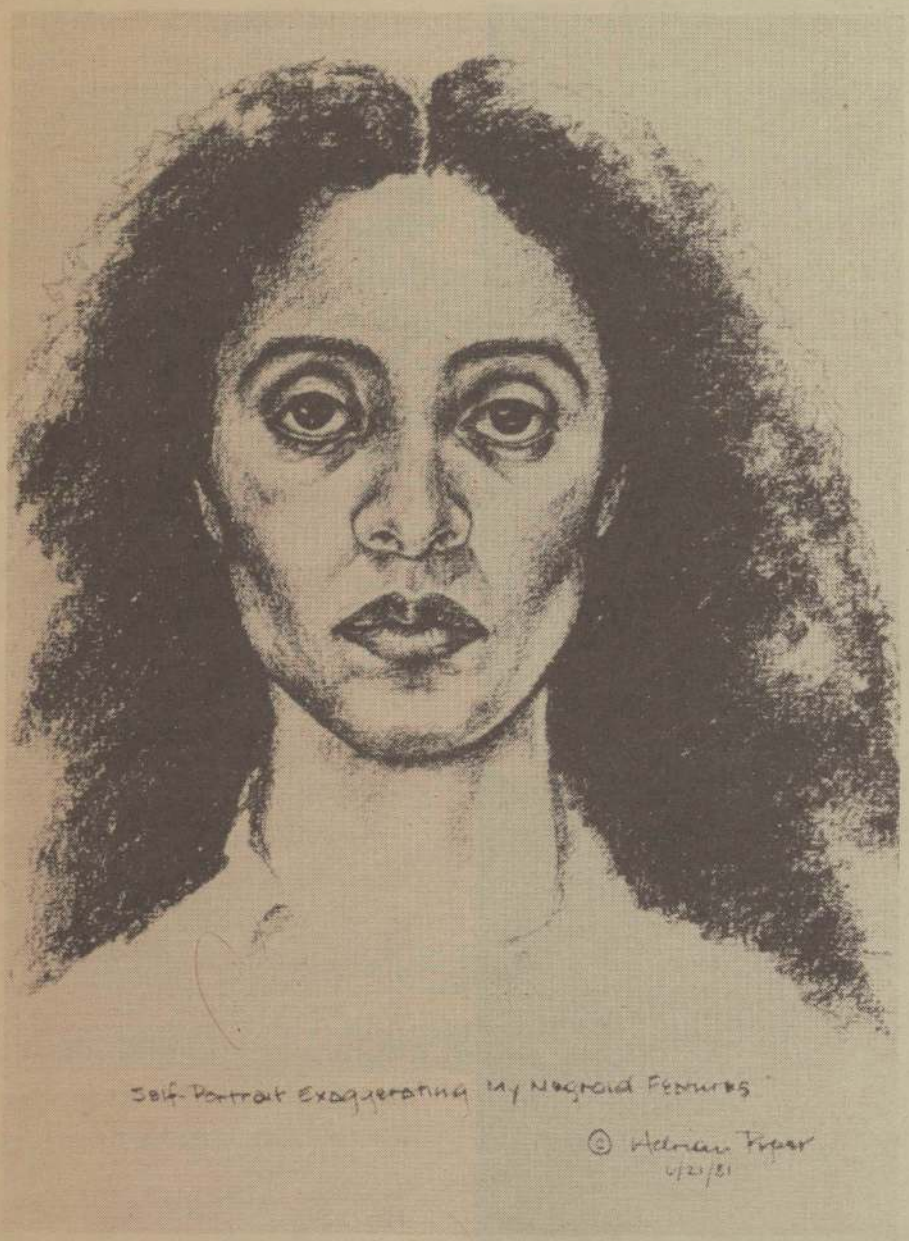
*Dis*location implies calculated shifts of location and point of view and the indirect collaboration of artist and audience in mapping previously unimagined spaces or remapping those taken for granted as self-evident. Such public involvement is demanded in the exhibition, since the artists—Louise Bourgeois, Chris Burden, Sophie Calle, David Hammons, Ilya Kabakov, Bruce Nauman, and Adrian Piper—have so carefully set the stage for our initial estrangement. All test our vision for impatient habits of observation and the reflex need for reassurance when confronted by unfamiliar circumstances or familiar but hard-to-endure causes of anxiety. Each requires the individual beholder to reconsider their identity in light of a given situation and the freedom or restriction of movement—hence, perspectives—imposed upon them within it.

As important as this loosely shared ambition, however, are the pronounced differences in intent, method, and motivation these artists act upon. Mindful of the amount, but especially of the diversity of installation work currently being done, the aim here has been to bring together as wide a range of formal, poetic, and social practices as possible in such a numerically small sampling.

Spread throughout the museum, including the subtly changing "permanent" collection, the works in the exhibition are for its duration linked to the many comparable constellations of the recent and not-so-recent past that fill the separate mansions within modernism's overarching house. Hopefully, their presence highlights some of the connections between that structure and the world around it.

LOUISE BOURGEOIS • CHRIS BURDEN • SOPHIE CALLE • DAVID HAMMONS • ILYA KABAKOV • BRUCE NAUMAN • ADRIAN PIPER

The strategic poise Piper maintains in the face of casual bigotry is also wholly consistent with the basic thrust of her thinking. Regardless of the medium she chooses—since 1967 Piper has worked in performance, texts, sound, drawings, photomontage, and installations—the



ADRIAN PIPER

set of problems she addresses remains the same: at what threshold do people perceive difference? Under which circumstances do they admit to it? Where does your physical or psychic space end and mine begin? Is there any such space that we share?

Perversely, the fact of racism is one of the key things we in this country have in common. Ultimately, any system based on bloodline percentages or categorical distinctions of skin color is absurd. In every way injurious to individuals and to society, racism is, not least, an offense to reason. Such propositions are the focus of Piper's contribution to this show. The third in a series of recent installations, all with the same title, *What It's Like, What It Is* consists of a tiered geometric structure reminiscent of minimalist sculptures of the 1960s and 1970s. In the middle stands a tall box, each facet of which frames a video screen. Together, as if in three dimensions, they show the face, back, and left and right sides of a black man's head. The litany he enunciates and denies represents a partial list of negative characteristics ascribed to his "kind." As he speaks, his head turns and his gaze sweeps the pristine amphitheater, staring back at those that stare at him, as well as at his own mirrored image on the surrounding walls. From all sides come music and the noise of a crowd, vital and vastly bigger than the one in the room: it is the sound of the populous and motley world beyond.

Verifying what we know firsthand against what we know intellectually has been Chris Burden's long-standing project. Of a generation with Piper—Burden presented his first performances in 1971—the latter artist is the more empirical of the two. Initially his body was the prime tool of research, and he put it to extreme tests. Most infamous was *Shoot*. Curious to know what it was like to be shot, Burden stood in front of a gallery wall and had a friend put a .22-caliber bullet through his arm.

Whether he was acting out violence or directing it toward himself, the reasons for and discipline necessitated by Burden's early works were the same: transforming ideas and images into crucibles, Burden wanted to touch raw nerves. Naysayers and thrill-seekers forced Burden to revise his tactics. As with other kinds of situational art, one really had to be there, but few people were, among them even fewer reliable witnesses. Except for the artist's own terse accounts of each action, and a certain amount of art-world commentary, the literature around Burden's performances tended predictably and discouragingly to the extremes of ridicule or sensationalism.

From the late 1970s onward, Burden diversified his means, producing objects, machines, assemblages, collages, and artist's books. Whatever format he chooses, he continues to literalize ideas, particularly institutional or political attitudes normally taken for granted. Invited to make a work for the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1985, Burden constructed a pyramid of gold ingots worth exactly one million dollars, and surrounded the decidedly *arte-non-povera* construction with "armed" matchstick guardians.

Far harder to objectify and so demystify than the symbols of cultural authority are the abstractions used to apportion political clout. In an international balance of power based on mutual deterrence, all the contenders calculate their relative advantage—or disadvantage—in stockpiled weapons. Generals and arms dealers persuade the public that there is safety in numbers, but after a certain point the numbers surpass comprehension.

Neither an avowed pacifist nor declared partisan, Burden is fascinated by the potential for violence but refuses to take sides. The politics of his work consists not in his approval or disapproval of the arms race or the ostensible justifications for it, but in his determination to render intelligible the huge scale on which preparations for war are constantly being made. "I'm interested in the gray areas, not black or white. I like to take something that people look at one way and turn it around and examine it from the opposite direction."[4]

Conceived of seventeen years after the end of the American phase of the conflict and almost ten years after the completion of Maya Lin's Washington monument to our troops, *The Other Vietnam Memorial* is Burden's effort to make the full impact of our might real. Although the *Memorial* is a departure from his "gray-zone" projects because of the artist's stated opposition to United States involvement in Southeast Asia, the point of commemorating the Vietnamese dead is less a laying of blame than an accounting of the sheer magnitude of the slaughter in which we took part. Maya Lin's work lists by name every one of the

CHRIS BURDEN

American losses—the total runs to 57,939 men and women. Exact records equivalent to those kept by the Pentagon are not available from the various Vietnamese sources, although its own losses are remembered by virtually every family on both sides. As a result, Burden's monument is intrinsically different from Maya Lin's.

In order to register the at least three million casualties, he was obliged to take a basic catalogue of nearly four thousand Vietnamese names and repeat them as verbal integers. Reckoning the gross facts of history in terms of the fate of individuals, Burden's *The Other Vietnam Memorial* thus partially retrieves the Vietnamese dead from statistical purgatory and so from double disappearance: the three million it symbolically lists are the displaced persons of the American conscience.

Absence and fleeting presence obsess Sophie Calle as well, but for her they are mundane, rather than epochal, contingencies. Like Piper, she is interested in the point at which awareness of others is reciprocated, then becomes self-recognition. Like Kabakov she collects souls, though as often as not they are soon lost once more.

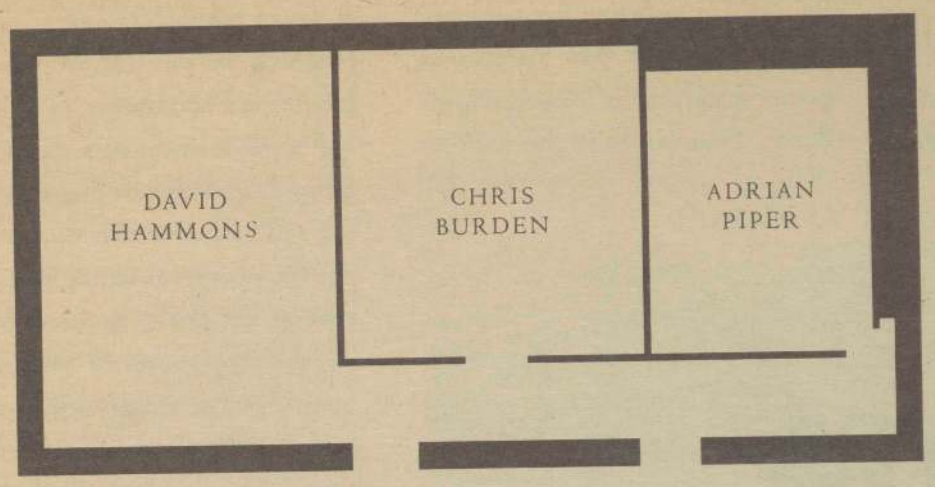
Calle's scrutiny can be direct and interrogatory, or it can be surreptitious and voyeuristic. In either case, the focus of her attention shifts constantly between objective inquiry and subjective musings, just as she may at any point shift roles from that of the watcher to that of the person being watched. The artist's conceptual, as well as literal, point of departure was simple enough. Returning to Paris in 1979 after seven years away from her home ground, Calle experienced a physical disorientation that triggered an even more profound sense of psychic alienation.

At loose ends and with nothing but her affective compass to guide her, Calle became a geographer of displacement and an anthropologist of intimacy achieved or failed. In New York during 1980, she picked people up outside of The Clocktower and Fashion Moda—two alternative art spaces, the first in Manhattan, the second in the Bronx—and asked them to lead her to someplace that was important to them. On arrival she took their pictures and wrote down the explanations for their choices. In Venice the next year, she hired herself out as a chambermaid for a month, recording her activity as she made composite portraits of the occupants of the rooms she cleaned from snapshots of the things she found in their drawers and luggage.

On occasion, Calle has relinquished the role of the observer and placed herself under observation. This change from active subject to passive object repolarizes the erotic charge that is a more or less consistent component of her behaviorist poetics.

Enlarging for this exhibition upon a single experiment made in Paris several years ago, Calle asked a cross-section of museum staff members what they recalled of several paintings that had been removed from their usual locations in the galleries. All of these paintings were classics of their kind. One, Edward Hopper's *House by the Railroad,* was the first work ever acquired for the permanent collection. The personnel interviewed were selected to represent all levels of involvement with the paintings—curators, preparators, registrars, framers, conservators, and others

SOPHIE CALLE



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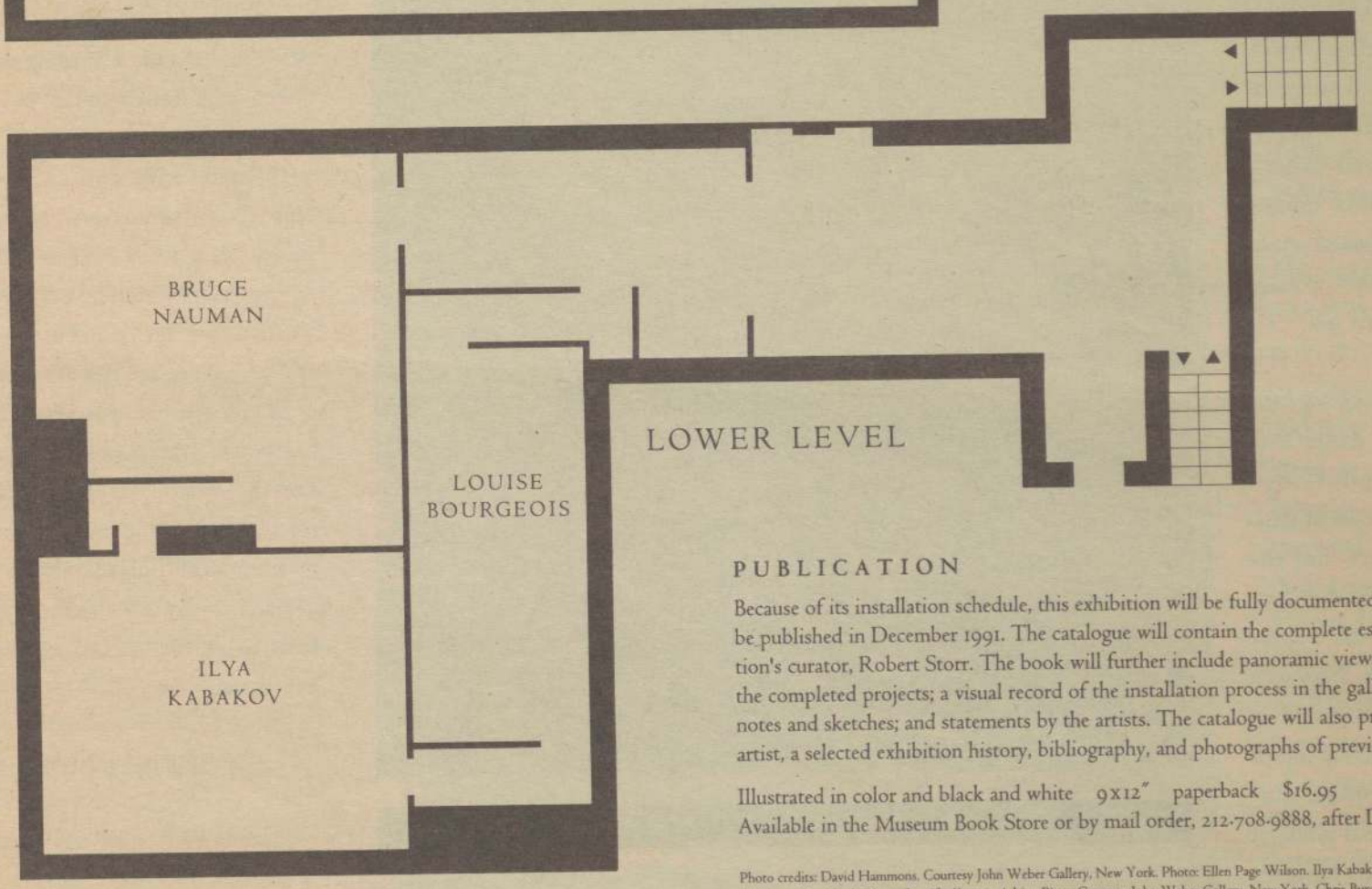

LECTURES

Two evenings of discussion with Robert Storr,
Department of Painting and Sculpture, and guest:

Tuesday, October 22, 6:30 p.m.

Chris Burden, artist

Tuesday, November 26, 6:30 p.m.

Lynne Cooke, Curator, Dia Center for the Arts
Tom Finkelpearl, Director, Percent for Art Program,
City of New York Department of Cultural Affairs
Jeanette Ingberman, Founder and Director, Exit Art
Charlotte Kotik, Curator of Contemporary Art, The Brooklyn Museum

The Garden Cafe. Tickets $8; Members $7; students $5. Tickets are available at the Lobby Information Desk. For more information, please call The Department of Education at 212·708·9781. The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York. This program is made possible by The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

PUBLICATION

Because of its installation schedule, this exhibition will be fully documented in a catalogue to be published in December 1991. The catalogue will contain the complete essay by the exhibition's curator, Robert Storr. The book will further include panoramic views in color of each of the completed projects; a visual record of the installation process in the galleries; preliminary notes and sketches; and statements by the artists. The catalogue will also provide, for each artist, a selected exhibition history, bibliography, and photographs of previous work.

Illustrated in color and black and white 9x12″ paperback $16.95
Available in the Museum Book Store or by mail order, 212·708·9888, after December 17, 1991.

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Dislocations has been organized by Robert Storr,
Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

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