

Forty Years of Projects

**Kathy Halbreich
(2011)**

Founded in May, 1971, MoMA's Projects series debuted with an installation by Keith Sonnier, which was described by the Museum as "the first in a series of small exhibitions presented to inform the public about current researches and explorations in the visual arts." From documentation in the files and reviews it appears the Museum got what it wished for, as Sonnier's untitled installation, occupying two galleries near the cafeteria, was a spatially aggressive and psychologically complex experiment that was precisely of its time. The smaller room had both an unusually squat doorway and a four-foot ceiling through which red light emanated from a rectangle at the far end of the room. If one hunched forward, it was possible to stand up through the hole and experience—seeing was but one of the senses involved—the top half of the gallery, which contained light fixtures and a camera affixed to the wall. Grating feedback from the video equipment filled the first room, as did the red light. In his Artforum review, Kenneth Baker described the next sequence of experiences: "Two telebeam projectors cast the image received by the video camera, divided down the center into positive and negative halves, onto the opposite walls of the second gallery. The image consisted of the camera's view, though in larger close-up than one would have thought, of the opening as seen from above the partition in the first room. After watching the projections for awhile, and seeing strangers appear truncated like puppets, one concluded that the transmission was in fact immediate rather than delayed, and that one could necessarily never see one's own image." The disconcerting, manipulated imagery of the spectators was in black and white, as hand-held color cameras were not in widespread use at the time. Sonnier,

in collapsing the viewer's sense of what constituted public and private space, further underscored a sense of participating in a hallucination that took place in space and over time. Perhaps most importantly, as Baker noted in his conclusion, "These notions were put across by Sonnier's piece in a way that was quite unavailable to modernist painting; they may have been communicable only because of the possibility of freeing pictorial space from within pictures and allowing the spectator literally to enter it. This accomplishment of Sonnier's work shows how the bounds of modernist convention could be broken without sacrificing strength of meaning and without direct appeal to the convention of modernist painting for justification."

I've quoted these remarks not only to expand an understanding of the daring of the first project in this long series, but also to suggest that many artists followed the same trajectory. Projects has often expanded our understanding of what art could be made of and what it could mean, demanding that we think anew about our own place in the world. These installations more than occasionally displayed an oedipal relationship to the accepted masters—in truth there were only a few mistresses—housed in other parts of the building, a relationship that necessitated upturning ideas upon which modernist painting and sculpture were predicated. With Projects, MoMA put a spotlight on such critique.

The number of exhibitions has fluctuated annually from seven, each lasting six weeks, to three, spanning roughly three months apiece; similarly, Projects has inhabited a number of different galleries and spaces in the Museum. The purpose, however, has remained bi-focal: offering artists early in their careers the resources to make new work specifically for the exhibition or to show work shortly after it was made, while simultaneously exposing the public to the most challenging aspirations of artists that the curators believe hold great promise. While one would expect a program that embraces such risk to fail often, a surprising number of these roughly 235 artists, from as near as Brooklyn and as far away as Shanghai, remain essential today. It is appropriate, then, to thank the perspi-

acious curators from every department who participated, paying special tribute to Kynaston McShine, Barbara London, Robert Storr, and Peter Reed, curators with an abiding commitment to living artists, and who have been such strong shepherds and advocates for this program.

Projects appears to be the first program of its kind in the U.S., with the Matrix presentations at The Wadsworth Atheneum and Berkeley Art Museum following four and 10 years later, respectively. But while MoMA was an early institutional proponent for the commissioning and exhibiting of new work, the Museum's efforts must be seen as part of an emerging, widespread interest in contemporary art. Despite a national economy slowed by the oil crisis and the near bankruptcy of New York, this city paradoxically became a singular place in the 1970s for the creation of new alternative spaces where provocative art could be made, shown, and debated. These included P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, founded by Alanna Heiss; Food, the artist-run restaurant founded in 1971 by Gordon Matta-Clark and others; the Kitchen, an artists' collective founded in 1971 by Woody and Steina Vasulka; Artists Space, founded by Irving Sandler and Trudie Grace in 1972; the DIA Art Foundation, founded by Heiner Friedrich and Philippa de Menil in 1974; and Franklin Furnace, founded in 1974 by Martha Wilson. Perhaps the growth of these important organizations—all but one of which are still in existence—in a decade of economic stagnation stemmed from a renewed sense of the power of the individual in the face of disappointment at the hands of most authorities. Today's similar lack of certainty in the financial world reminds some pundits of the 1930s depression. People around the world have followed those who started Occupy Wall Street in Zuccotti Park earlier this year to protest the inequities that have become more acute in recent times, and many from both sides of America's ideological divide wonder what the role of government should or could be. Is it too much to imagine that these times will also prompt brave people to create new opportunities for artists from down the street and around the globe?

Two MoMA exhibitions in particular also provided a

context for this new program: Jenny Licht's 1969 Spaces exhibition, which presented installation art for the first time at the Museum, and Kynaston McShine's groundbreaking 1970 Information exhibition, which focused on Conceptual art. The Information show, in particular, raised questions about the Museum's willingness to engage with political issues. As John Hightower, MoMA's director for the brief and tumultuous period of May, 1970, to January, 1972, wrote in the Museum's newsletter, "There is very real concern among contemporary artists —'the antenna of society,' as Ezra Pound has described them—that we are collectively, systematically, and yet unwittingly destroying ourselves. Their art strongly reflects their feelings, as indeed it must. The war in Southeast Asia, they claim, is the culmination of a whole pattern of cultural excess—over-population, the automobile, neon blight, putrid water and air—as well as the frustrating unwillingness of our society to even recognize, much less correct, its own abuses. Focused against the Establishment, as was the case in some of the material in the Information show, the artist feels that if the Establishment were really committed to correcting societal excess and ending the war, collectively it could do so." Hightower also mentioned that several FBI agents spent the day at the Museum listening to the controversial Dial-a-Poem section of the exhibition, curated by poet John Giorno, which, to the dismay of a Congressman from Iowa, contained poems by Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale.

The market for art is radically different today than it was 40 years ago, and it's easy to lose sight of the need for places of unrestricted risk and support for unpopular ideas or for works that cannot be "collected" or may not receive much attention. Consequently, Projects remains as pertinent today as it was at its inception. Recent Projects installations have included an assembly of thousands of consumer items, drained of life but still collected by artist Song Dong's mother, who came of age during the cultural revolution, a time of extreme hardship in China; an architecturally scaled drawing consisting of witty political cartoons drawn on the walls of the Marron Atrium over a

two-week period by Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi; and a monument largely constructed from the Museum's cardboard waste by Swedish-born artist Klara Liden. Each of these Projects pushed the expected dimensions of their medium, reflected the ways in which performance inflects other artistic practices today, and grappled with the darker undercurrents of globalization.

The first Projects installation of 2012, Projects 97, is a two-channel video installation by 36-year-old Mark Boulos, an American-born artist living in Amsterdam and a former member of Paper Tiger Television, which was “founded on the ideal that freedom of speech through access to the means of communication is essential in a democratic society.” *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (2008) presents two opposing perspectives on one of the most prized and aggressively pursued commodities: petroleum. The title, taken from the opening chapter of *The Communist Manifesto*, which outlines the history of class struggle, suggests both the alchemical exchange that occurs when something “dirty” from the ground becomes the equivalent of liquid gold and the ways in which human dignity can be vaporized in circumstances of oppression. In one video, Boulos shows traders in the Chicago Mercantile Exchange on the first day of the 2008 credit crisis as they attempt to capitalize on the volatile market. In the other, Boulos presents his experiences living with members of the militant group Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, who employ violent acts to expose and undermine what they see as the exploitation of their land and people by international oil corporations. Something strange happens in the ways in which reality is experienced in the two projected images: the traders, enmeshed in an environment composed of flashing colored numbers and using complex signals to communicate with their hands, become abstractions, part of a pattern beyond their control, while the militants, filmed in the natural landscape they inhabit as both farmers and aggressors, seem all too real, flesh and blood. In an unexpectedly harmonious sense, the work of Sonnier and Boulos speaks to each other across a 40-year divide.