Michael Asher – Down to Earth[1]

by Allan Sekula

Michael Asher's work since the late 1960s has been founded upon a number of related strategies: subtraction or relocation of *a priori* elements, serial repetition under variant conditions of the artist's own *a priori* moves, deliberate historical stagnation or regression (that is, staging of anachronism), and logical or symbolic inversion of an explicit or implicit institutional condition.

Sometimes Asher produces a work in which all four operations overlap, as was the case in his 1996 project for the Kunstraum Wien. Asher was invited to work in a space that had been an eighteenth-century imperial stable, located across from the Museumsplatz, a key site of nineteenth-century Ringstrasse modernization. Employing the labors of a crew of welders and riggers, Asher 'subtracted' the vertical supports for the late-modernist free-standing mezzanine that had elevated the Kunstraum's offices above the open exhibition space, dropping the catwalk and office platform down to the level of the gallery. The horizontal I-beam supports that had traversed the space above the internal walls now blocked the floor. Here Asher was repeating an earlier work in which the boundary between a gallery office and an exhibition space was removed, his 1974 project at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles.[2] But he was also 'bringing the office down to earth,' levelling the architecture's symbolic but also literal hierarchy which elevated art administration above art-in-itself. So there is a kind of anti-bureaucratic sentiment operating here. Furthermore, by partially demolishing the late-modernist addition, by actually hastening the dismantling process that was likely to follow the Kunstraum's imminent closing – his was the last exhibition in the space – Asher was helpfully restoring the space to its earlier baroque identity, but doing so by cluttering it up with a parody of minimalist sculpture. Thus the dropped I-beams of the mezzanine echo both Richard Serra or Robert Morris and the imperial horse-stalls that once subdivided the floor of the space. But this latter faux-restorationist aspect of Asher's gesture is even more tricky and paradoxical. At this point, the broader history of late nineteenth-century Ringstrasse modernization comes into play, for the broad open boulevards of the

(1) This essay also appeared in *Afterall* no. 1 (London), 1999.

(2) Michael Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, edited by and written in collaboration with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design), 1983, pp. 95–100.

Ringstrasse development, like Haussmann's contemporaneous project in Paris, were designed in part to prevent the construction of insurrectionary working-class barri-cades. So Asher produces a peculiar historical chain of associations: twentieth-century mock-minimalist object, eighteenth-century imperial stable, nineteenth-century workers' barricade. The dialectical antagonism between the second two terms calls into question the supposed neutrality of the first.

For a historically-conscious Vienna art audience viewing this work on the perimeter of the Ringstrasse, an audience aware of the specific connotations of the 'mezzanine' as the metaphoric space in which a parvenu bourgeoisie mingled with the Habsburg monarchy during the period of Ringstrasse modernization that commenced in the 1860s, the leveller's joke would have been evident.[3]

Furthermore, in his study of the Ringstrasse development, Carl Schorske points out the way in which the heterogenous period styles of the various official buildings ran counter to the encompassing modernity of the ring boulevard itself, an anachronistic yoking of historicism and modernist traffic functionalism that deeply impressed itself upon the architectural imaginary of the reactionary-modernist author of *Mein Kampf*. In a sense, the Kunstraum space, with its free-standing internal 1994 steel structure designed by the Vienna team of ARTEC, reversed the spacial relation of old to new found just outside the old baroque edifice. Asher's 'regressive' dismantling can thus be read backward to the incipient and ambivalent modernity of the 1860s. (Thus Otto Wagner might have been an interesting subject for alternative architectural investigations by Asher in Vienna.)

But there was also another dimension to Asher's joke, this joke played out at the expense of anxious Viennese modernist pretensions. Asher plays on the association between dismantling and dismounting, between *abmontieren* and *demontieren*. Readers of Joseph Roth, that great Galician Jewish novelist of the corruption and decay of Habsburg power, will recognize this association, especially as it is played out in *The Radetzky March*. In that novel, an incompetent junior calvary officer, who owes his rank to imperial favor bestowed upon a valiant forbearer, is humiliatingly reassigned to an infantry regiment posted on the polyglot eastern borderlands of the empire. Here, in the summer of 1914, facing the Cossacks, the bored officers drink themselves into oblivion, avoiding as best they can the dust and mud of their calling, prefiguring in microcosm the imminent defeat of imperial power.[4] I'm not suggesting here that Asher is a reader of Joseph Roth, but the anti-aristocratic and anti-militarist suspicion of mounted authority rings through. The

(3)
Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage), 1981, p. 45.

(4)
Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March* (1932), trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press), 1995.

parallels between Asher's architectural interventions and Joseph Roth's social allegories, woven around architecture, would bear separate investigation. Both play on peculiar inversions of spatial hierarchies, as when Roth, in a memorable passage in *Hotel Savoy*, speaks of 'the comfortable rooms of the well nourished guests sitting down below, untroubled by the flimsy coffins overhead.'[5] If Roth asks, 'How high can one fall?,' Asher, in a deadpan, non-heroic reenactment of the labors of Hercules and Samson, brings the bureau down to the level of straw and manure.

Asher's architectural allegorization of the weakness and reversibility of Austrian modernity was especially timely, given the enthusiasm, in certain powerful quarters of Austrian politics, for a late-twentieth century return to something resembling an Austro-Hungarian sphere of influence, predicated on the breakup of Yugoslavia and the re-Balkanization of southeast Europe. Here is one account of the Austrian role:

'Austria's leadership on the Yugoslav issue, in which it was soon joined by Germany, represented a purist notion of a nation-state. If a Yugoslav nation had not been created sufficient to supplant parochial loyalties and cultural identities, they argued, then Yugoslavia was an artificial state, and if a people freely chose to be independent, they had such a right. Although this was presented as a case of freedom, it was in fact an extension of the German idea of citizenship through blood alone *(jus sanguinis)* and the impossibility of ethnically heterogenous states – ideas that had been at the core of fascist ideology.'[6]

While I have no reason to believe that Asher was analyzing Austria's geopolitical role in the early 1990s in this fashion, in an earlier work from the pivotal year of 1989 he displayed a remarkable geopolitical prescience. The work is unusual for Asher in its purely documentary character: that is, it had no prior existence beyond its status as a document of an event external to the work itself. Typically, Asher's works survive only for the historical record merely through printed documents of ephemeral projects. These projects constitute the *a priori* of the subsequent documentation. The projects themselves necessarily exceed the physicality of the surviving documentation, but are irrevocably 'lost' or 'abandoned' in keeping with Asher's ethic of resistance to *post hoc* commodification. Almost without exception, other conceptual artists of Asher's generation have made accommodations on this front.

The work in question consists of a series of superficially innocuous photographic postcards depicting individual lorries at a checkpoint on the East German-West German border. The lorries are transporting waste – none of it specifically identified, but some of it

(5)
Joseph Roth, *Hotel Savoy* (1924), trans. John Hoare (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press), 1986, p. 33.
(6)
Susan Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution), 1995, pp. 205–206.

toxic – from West Germany to landfill sites in East Germany.

The photographs were made several months before the collapse of the Berlin wall. The evidence is clear that the border was already open in a limited sense, a sense in which 'socialist' East Germany already served as a garbage pit for the West. The evidence is annoying for those who subscribe to the orthodox view that the political opening – the collapse of the DDR – was necessary before the free market could extend eastward. As with Susan Woodward's analysis of the Austrian and German complicity in the breakup of Yugoslavia, another related complicity is suggested here. The argument cannot be closed by pointing only to the dangerous backwardness of East German industry: even before the *Wende*, the unequal relationship of first to third world mushroomed in the shadows.[7]

The preoccupation with the flows of waste, with plumbing and heating – with what, in American parlance, are termed utilities – is central to Michael Asher's work. The realm of culture is always shadowed by the realm of utility, in an often very funny enactment of the old-fashioned Marxist hierarchy of base and superstructure, grafted onto an appreciation of the specific Duchampian origins of the ready-made. Thus the picturing of the various tourist sites of Dijon solely in terms of their basement heating units.[8] Thus the sub-novelistic documentation of the near-miss 'encounter' between two Faustian *Doppelgängers*, the Brussels *beaux arts* architect Victor Horta and the Los Angeles water engineer William Mulholland (a project that allows Asher to make pseudo-scholarly use of movie stills from *Chinatown* in a way that slyly reproaches artists who pride themselves on the notion that allegory can only be approached through decontextualized appropriation).[9]

Speaking retrospectively, Asher described his postcards of trash-trucks as 'objects that could conceivably circulate as waste and perhaps even be hauled by one of the vehicles.' And in what amounted to yet another reproach, this time really a double reproach, directed both to institutionalized art photography and to the post hoc commodification of conceptual works, he noted that the project had been 'perhaps an attempt to resist an expansion of value for art while noting the expansion of value for waste'.[10]

Thus Asher is producing an deliberately abject parody of the international artist as someone whose work 'crosses borders'. This parodic reproach was reinforced by his insistence, for the 1997 Münster sculpture exhibition, that the very same caravan he had deployed around the city in 1977 and 1987 be redeployed.[11] Of course, the caravan had gained two decades in its decrepitude and obsolescence. And now, for the first time, it suggested the incursion of a vehicle from the East, from Poland or Rumania, as in the open-

(7)
Michael Asher, Camera Austria 59/60 (1997), pp. 3–13. The work was produced for the D & S Ausstellung at the Kunstverein Hamburg, 14 October through 26 November 1989. The Berlin Wall was broached on November 9.

(8)
Michael Asher (Dijon: Le Consortium), 1992. Accompanying essays by Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Frederick Leen.

(9)
Michael Asher (Brussels: Palais des Beaux Arts), 1995. Accompanying essays by Birgit Pelzer and Frederik Leen.

(10)
Michael Asher, op. cit., p. 4.

(11)
Sculpture Projects in Münster 1997, ed. K. Bussman, K. König, F. Matzner (Münster: Verlag Gerd Hatje and Westfälisches Landesmuseum), 1997.

ing shots of Claire Denis' film *J'ai pas sommeil (I Can't Sleep)* of 1994, in which a young Lithuanian woman emigré enters Paris on the autoroute in a decrepit Soviet-era sedan. In Münster in 1997, Asher's stubborn insistence on the same decrepit vehicle exposed the modish mobile projects of many of the other artists as so many 'transport fantasies', to borrow Reyner Banham's apt description of the rides at Disneyland.[12]

The mobility of Asher's eight trash-trucks from 1989 and his single caravan from 1977/1987/1997, the fact that all nine are pictured in fleeting moments of stasis, at the 'official' moment of the border-crossing in the first instance, and at various discretely opportune 'unofficial' spots within the city in the second, gives his photographic documentation a peculiar resonance. If the work of Bernhard and Hilla Becher amounts to a positive archive of the obsolescent and near-obsolescent practico-inert, of water-towers and blast furnaces and coal winding-towers, a methodical and melancholic inventory of past progress, Asher's postcards and site documentations amount to something else, a recognition that even decrepitude and waste constitute zones, not of melancholy stasis, or the ineluctable pastness that is so fundamental to photography, but of restless flux, and big and little opportunities.

The fact that in one of his most recent projects, Asher reveals that the museum itself is open to outgoing flux, shedding works through a covert but energetic policy of deaccession as tastes and priorities change, is entirely consistent with his 1996 remarks on value. If the circular teleological conceit of MoMA's recent 'Museum as Muse' lay in the notion that the museum is now both the end and the beginning of all noteworthy artistic practices – a conceit consistent with the grandiose institutional narcissism of late-twentieth century media culture – Asher's answer was to suggest that the museum is increasingly just another way-station in the exchange process, leveraging up its assets like any other big firm, willing to treat some dead artists like gold and others like so much moveable garbage. The institutional response to Asher's not-so-surprising revelations has been remarkable, ranging from official disclaimers of his 'unofficial' project, to droll journalistic characterizations of his catalogue of deaccessions as a 'little red book', to an extraordinary letter-to-the-editor from a museum director chastising Asher and suggesting, absurdly, that 'most American museums acquire far more than they remove,' which leaves room for quite extraordinary exceptions.[13] There is something Borgesian about the notion of the – admittedly rare – museum that removes more works than it has acquired. So this work, which along with the trash-truck piece is of a purely documentary character, touches a nerve or two. Asher dis-

(12)
Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 1971, p. 128.

(13)
Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: MoMA), 1999. Michael Asher, *Painting and Sculpture from the Museum of Modern Art: Catalogue of Deaccessions, 1929 through 1998* (New York: MoMA), 1999. Roberta Smith, *What's No Longer on Museum Walls*, New York Times, 31 May 1999. Steven H. Miller, *letter to the editor*, New York Times, 3 June 1999. See also Stephan Pascher and Michael Asher, *Cave Notes*, Merge 5 (Summer 1999), pp. 23–26.

turbs the myth of the finality and closure of the museum, the myth of the old purely political border between East and West Germany, the notion that economic forces are extrinsic in both cases. And in both cases, something embarrassing is revealed about otherwise hidden processes of elimination, about the economic *Gesamtscheissewerk*. It is not surprising that Thomas Crow speaks of being presented with Asher's catalogue of deaccession in the museum bookshop as if it were a 'forbidden work of heresy or pornography'.[14] And in this spirit, we might also imagine that Asher's mock-touristic postcard portraits of waste-trucks waiting to be checked through to the DDR have a whimsically analogic relation to the ritual visibility encoded in German toilet design.

(14) Thomas Crow, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, Artforum, Summer 1999, p. 146.

It is worth recounting a story Michael Asher told me once. It's a story about cars, not about horses. We were standing around one night in the CalArts parking lot, postponing our long drives over the pass and back through the San Fernando Valley to our respective precincts of the Los Angeles basin. Asher was having trouble with his old Volkswagen, and this led him to mention his uncle, a mechanic, who helped him out with automobiles from time to time. As it turned out, this uncle, who had of course developed an acute and extensive acoustical memory of engine noises, always complained when Hollywood films would, for example, accompany a shot of a '56 Ford with the sound of a '56 Chrysler engine. At the time, this story, casually told with lots of laughter, seemed like a parable of Asher's own essentially realist and comedic esthetic procedures.