New Sitings

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The art-museum model that developed after the nineteenth century has, to a great extent, prevailed ever since. Visitors generally encounter works of art within the boundaries of white-walled, climate-controlled, artificially lighted spaces. Designed as “neutral” backdrops, these galleries are in fact loaded with long-held traditions and assumptions. They seem to confer legitimacy on the works they contain, and museums usually demand that visitors keep a certain reverent distance. Since the 1960s, artists have been challenging this model of display. Carl Andre, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson, among others, created site-specific works that fostered new, more discursive relationships between objects and viewers. Museums have also explored different parts of their campuses as exhibition sites: plazas and gardens, for example. But for the most part, a museum is implicitly separated into two types of space, galleries and the in-between areas where art is seldom displayed: corridors, hallways, stairwells, landings, foyers, vestibules, doorways, cafeterias, and rest rooms.

Contemporary Projects: New Sitings, the fourth in LACMA’s series designed to explore contemporary art issues, dispenses with the traditional concept of an exhibition as a collection of objects displayed in strategic arrangement in a highly controlled environment. Instead, projects by three contemporary artists are installed at various sites around the campus: a video project by Los Angeles–based artist Kevin Hanley in the atrium of the Ahmanson Building; a group of sculptures by Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri on the bridge between the Anderson and Hammer Buildings; and two video installations by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist, respectively, in a foyer floor in the Hammer Building and in a bathroom stall in the Japanese pavilion (please see the map, opposite).

Like metafiction, a literary genre in which the narrator of a fictional work comments on its structure, New Sitings calls attention to its own design and challenges traditional museum installation procedures and the relationship of the viewer to the artwork. The placement of the objects fractures the rhythm of the traditional museum visit. Instead of following a predetermined route through a gallery, visitors may encounter the artworks by chance, on their way to something else, or on a self-guided tour. The projects share a fascination with time and narrative, which they express in a variety of ways. Each is distinct and rewarding on its own; considered together as an exhibition, they offer the visitor an opportunity to create his or her own reading of how they relate to each other, to take on the narrator’s role usually played by a curator’s organization of a gallery.

Kevin Hanley is represented by Persuasion (version 1: Slap), a video installation shown publicly for the first time in New Sitings. Hanley studied visual art in Los Angeles at Otis College of Art and Design and the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and is best known for his photo-digital and video work. Persuasion is one of a group of video projects he has created using a digital editing program. By moving his computer mouse, he alters the sequence of the events—in this case two separate video recordings of his own face being slapped. He reschedules moments, stretching them out, running them backward or speeding them forward in a twitchy, staccato rhythm, a video-playing technique he compares to the way a disk jockey “scratches” a record. Hanley calls his work in this vein “a funny engagement in a technology that is usually used for ‘illusion’ sake.”

Hanley’s art is a humorous reminder that expectations of narrative structure—the forward progression of events over time—are deeply ingrained in our imaginations. When chronology disobeys the laws of physics—momentum conservation, action and reaction, cause and effect—that are familiar from both real life and film and video, the result can be simultaneously entertaining and frustrating to watch. In the context of the hushed museum atrium, the irreverent spectacle of his imagery seems particularly jarring.

Gabriel Kuri, a Mexican pop musician turned conceptual artist, attended the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plasticas of Mexico and Goldsmith’s College, University of London. He combines text, photography, and ephemeral elements such as food and flowers to create sculptures and conceptual installations that explore a rhetoric of time, timelessness, commemoration, and mortality. To New Sitings he has contributed three painted, fiberglass sculptures of boulders, one with text that appears chiseled in the stone, two with what looks like dried moss shaped to spell out phrases. The “chiseled” text reads “A la brevedad
possible.” Spanish for “as soon as possible.” The “dried-moss” texts read “p.d.,” or “posdata,” the Spanish equivalent of “p.s.” or “postscript”; and “a la caída del cabello,” or “to the loss of hair.”

These boulder sculptures present playful dichotomies on several levels. Rocks are symbols of the monumental and eternal, or at least the very old and inert, but Kuri’s are molded from synthetic fiberglass resin. The inscription “A la brevedad posible,” an international dictum of efficiency derived from American business jargon, sends up the contemporary emphasis on fast but often transient results. A “p.d.” is an afterthought, something forgotten and added at the last minute to a letter. In the age of electronic communication, however, the term has become outdated and quaint, the appropriate subject of a primitive memorial to an old-fashioned mode of correspondence. And “A la caída del cabello” is a ruefully “eternal” memorial to the certainty of loss and human mortality. Separately, the sculptures are singular dedications to brevity, or things forgotten or lost; together they create a melancholy narrative of the passage of time. Visitors pass these man-made rocks on route to the galleries, a mountain hike displaced to the museum setting.

The work of Pipilotti Rist is represented here, for the first time on the West Coast, by two related video installations. Rist has won international acclaim in this medium, which appeals to her, as she has said, “because there is room... for everything (painting, technology, language, music, movement, lousy, flowing pictures, poetry, commotion, premonition of death, sex and friendliness—like in a compact handbag.”

Rist’s Selfless in the Bath of Lava is displayed on an LCD (liquid crystal display) video monitor embedded in the floor of the Photo Foyer on the second level of the Hammer Building. A hole in the carpet, which appears chewed by mice, reveals a naked female figure
surrounded by fire. The action recalls the iconography of hell and purgatory: As the virtual flames rise from the illusory depths and attack the woman, she jumps up and waves her arms, crying out to the viewer above for salvation.

Rist's related work, Atmosphere & Instinct, a vibrant, color-saturated video loop, is projected on the floor of a stall in the women's rest room in the Japanese Pavilion. (The rest room is open to both men and women during the exhibition.) This video shows a woman on the grounds of a hotel, walking over lush green grass by a bright blue swimming pool. She calls to the viewer in a singsong voice, waving her arms and pleading to be rescued. Designed to be viewed sitting down, the video creates a sense of vertigo in the dimly lit stall.

Both vignettes surprise the viewer with their unexpected locations, where they may even seem invasive. The mundane experience of walking into a foyer is destabilized by a glimpse of what looks like hell exposed underfoot; the private, often inconvenient function of visiting the bathroom becomes a theatrical event. Both videos' protagonists attempt to draw the viewer into a relationship by begging for help. The viewer, of course helpless to respond to either woman's fictive peril, can only stand by and watch the stories loop endlessly.

These three projects, in the context of New Sittings, invite visitors to explore their own expectatations about where and when art is displayed in the museum and how they experience it.

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Quotations attributed to Kevin Hanley and Gabriel Kuri are based on conversations and correspondence. The quotation by Pipilotti Rist is from the catalogue Himalaya: Pipilotti Rist (Cologne: Oktagon, 1999), unpag.