

“Gaylen Gerber”

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“One of the reasons I’m interested in engaging with other artists is that it’s a way of attempting to break down categorical parameters without losing individuality.”¹

The work of Gaylen Gerber expands the formal and conceptual possibilities of both abstract painting and installation art. Gerber himself is a complicated, consistent, and profoundly self-aware thinker; he is also an eminently practical artist. As a consequence, his process is at once decidedly intellectualized and completely accessible, conceptually programmatic and charmingly idiosyncratic. Specifically, Gerber is engaged in a rigorous study of gray monochrome as a means of theorizing conditions of spectatorship and site. For over two decades, he has employed the putatively “neutral” vocabulary of gray as a means of addressing normative aspects of shared visual language, questioning the ways in which viewers equate certain forms, colors, and presentation modes with meaning. Importantly, Gerber occupies this position of studied, reflexive objectivity in an effort to shape deeply subjective results. His strategic use of sameness registers difference.

The artist’s recent paintings and paper works have assumed monumental proportions; they now physically and intellectually adopt the role of architecture. Inserted seamlessly into or in front of existing walls and windows, these works simultaneously dominate and disappear. Wall-sized canvases are referred to as *Backdrops*; smaller ones are labeled *Supports*. With both, Gerber asks other artists to cooperate with him and let their expressions be seen against a ground he provides. Always, these system-specific installations aim at defining new spatial, temporal, and corporeal relationships between audience, artists, and objects.

Gerber’s art has always involved, in an essential way, the layering of images. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he routinely executed uniformly sized, 38-square-inch canvases that contain latent, practically invisible still lifes rendered in three tones, or values, of gray on gray grounds. The referential image was legible only with prolonged, absorbing viewing. Gerber’s precise intent was, and remains, difficult to locate among the work’s competing, at times contradictory,

valences—alternating between reticent and obdurate, meticulous and apathetic. Both in spite and because of its complexity, the strategy has proved hugely generative.

For a watershed exhibition at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago in 1992, Gerber hung twenty-five of these nearly identical canvases edge to edge, forming a continuous horizontal band over 79 feet long. The monochrome still lifes were installed on, and functioned integrally with, a specially built wall that prohibited entry into most of the rest of the gallery. Like their Minimal art precedents, Gerber's forms implicated the surrounding display space. Untitled and undated, these paintings stubbornly refused the usual protocols of art historical chronology, seemingly existing only in the present tense of their highly theatrical installation. The artist began to understand that formal operations contained within the painting itself could be extended beyond the edge of the canvas to include a vast array of experiences. With this revelation, Gerber was able to transform his closed network of painterly resistance into an open system designed to realize a maximum potential of acceptance and inclusiveness. Speaking of his work at that time, Gerber remarked: "For me, what started as negation—an acceptance of the lack of signification to everything—came to simultaneously include its contradiction—an acceptance of the significance of everything."²

In 1994 Gerber began sharing his exhibitions with other artists.³ For his solo show at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in New York, for example, he produced a 3.67-by-6.8-meter [12-by-22-foot] monochromatic gray painting, scaled to match a wall of the gallery, which effectively served as a "backdrop" for an installation of works by Joe Scanlan, including his scattered, manufactured potting soil. The layered "image," no longer secreted within the canvas itself, was thus activated in a social space. Over the last twelve years, Gerber has drawn works by Joseph Beuys, Scott Burton, Jeanne Dunning, Michelle Grabner, Stephen Prina, Gerwald Rockenschaub, Kay Rosen, Adrian Schiess, Remy Zaugg, Heimo Zobernig, and others into collusion with his own. In a gesture that is at once aggressive and generous, ambitious and self-effacing, Gerber enlists other artists as subversive,

largely willing participants in the making of exhibitions. Explaining his motivations, he has stated:

I think there is something appealing about the potential . . . for transgressing boundaries in a cavalier way. In so much of my recent work I've used other artists' work as a way to approach certain ideas, and in the process, my work has sometimes been interpreted as a kind of Huck Finnism, getting others to white wash the fence for me while I watch. I understand why people think of that, but I think it's beside the point. What I'm really interested in is not using people, but in thinking about how art, among other things, is opened up by the shifting of frames of reference.⁴

Indeed, since the mid-1990s, Gerber has projected films and videos, hung photographs and paintings, placed furniture, painted text, and set natural elements on or in front of his apparently neutral gray surfaces. As a result, these paintings function simultaneously as both object and ground; the work of art itself becomes the context for a range of aesthetic and non-aesthetic activities. With these subtle but complex interactions, Gerber is interested in "turning what often seems like abstract, normative structures into framing devices for more temporal, individual, expressions."⁵

This impulse is perhaps made most literal through Gerber's practice of lending small, discrete, gray canvases (his *Supports*) to other artists, who are invited to complete the work by adding their own creative expression on top of Gerber's ground. For a 2004 exhibition at Donald Young Gallery in Chicago, Gerber included twelve *Support* canvases produced in cooperation with thirteen artists. These were installed in a row adjacent to and over Gerber's 16-by-20-foot *Backdrop/Everybody*, a work realized in cooperation with the design firm M&Co.⁶ The word "Everybody" was set in bold black capital letters against a yellow-gold field, a reprisal of the firm's iconic 1992 billboard for Times Square, New York. When Tibor Kalman and M&Co first presented that work, chairs were fixed to the surface of the billboard, literally inviting the passerby to modify the inclusive linguistic construction by becoming its active subject. Alluding to the precedent, Gerber asked the Danish collaborative group N55 for the use of their log seating

sculptures in front of the *Backdrop*. In Chicago, the installation was unified on a single wall. Yet Gerber's projects ultimately undermine the notion of a work of art as an individual object. Instead, he suggests that all identities shift in relation to a set of contingent, overlapping expectations and experiences. Transforming the rhetorical operation of collaboration, Gerber sublimates the desire for individual expression—his own as well as others—in the hope of forging a new model for art based on shared perceptions of commonality and difference. "In my work there is a direct exchange of visibility for use. I ask the artists that I work with for the use of their work in producing my art and in exchange I offer them the lion's share of visibility. This is why I refer to these as cooperative rather than collaborative works."⁷

From this experience, Gerber uncovered a further use value for the *Backdrops* and *Supports*—as vehicles for a very different kind of group exhibition. For his project for the inauguration of the Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg, Gerber aims to fracture the viewing experience by incorporating *Backdrops* and *Supports* throughout the institution, both in galleries and in transitional spaces. In two adjacent, hexagonal galleries that are nearly mirror images of each other, he will install four large *Backdrops* with an assortment of new and recontextualized works, including art from the museum's collection. Works by veterans of previous cooperative projects with Gerber—such as Kay Rosen, Stephen Prina, Joe Scanlan, and Remy Zaugg—will hang alongside conceptually sympathetic articulations by Daniel Buren, Dedier Vermeiren, and others. Some of the relationships between the artists and objects will emerge from formal considerations, others will be driven more completely by content. All will deal, in different ways, with questions of figure and ground. In cooperating with these other artists, Gerber is seeking equivalencies between elements, things that are almost identical in function and effect but not the same.

Gerber's *Backdrops* are flexible, temporary, built-to-order interventions largely but not exclusively seen within the context of art institutions; as such, they can be understood as aligned or in dialogue with issues surrounding contemporary investigations of site-specificity and institutional critique. Addressing recent

critical formulations of “site-specific” creative practice, art historian James Meyer has drawn an important set of distinctions between two notions of site: a *literal* site and a mobile or *functional* site. The literal site is an actual location or physical place. “In contrast, the mobile site may or may not incorporate a physical place: it certainly does not privilege this place. Instead, it is a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations, and the bodies that move between them. . . . It is an informational site, a palimpsest of text, photographs, and video recordings, physical place and things: an allegorical site . . . the functional work refuses the intransigence of literal site-specificity. It is a temporary thing; a movement, a chain of meanings and imbricated histories; a place marked and swiftly abandoned.”⁸ With a debt to the pioneering projects of Michael Asher and Daniel Buren, Gerber exploits the very contingencies of place as the core content of his work. In the process, his work significantly expands prevailing understandings of site-based art.

James Rondeau

¹ Gerber, in conversation with Konrad Bitterli, in *Gaylen Gerber: Project Room*, exh. cat. (Melbourne: Monash University Galleries, 1998), p. 10.

² Gerber, in Kathryn Hixson, “In Neutral,” *Flash Art* **vol. # (year)**, p. 116+.

³ For his three-person exhibition with Jim Welling and Angela Grauerholz, Gerber asked Welling for permission to pair their works.

⁴ Gerber, in conversation with Stephen Prina, in exhibition brochure for *Focus: Gaylen Gerber with Stephen Prina*, Art Institute of Chicago, 15 January–15 May 2002.

⁵ Gerber, in conversation with the author, August 2001.

⁶ This collaboration was first realized for an installation at the Charlottenborg Exhibition Hall, Copenhagen, in 2002. The 16-by-20-foot canvas was sized to match an interior exhibition wall and presented outdoors.

⁷ Gerber, in e-mail to author, 12 February 2006.

⁸ James Meyer, “The Mobile Site,” in *We Represent Ourselves to World: Stephen Prina* (Los Angeles: UCLA Hammer Museum, 2004), p. 202.

Gaylen Gerber, *The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago*, 1992, installation view including constructed partition and 25 paintings each *Untitled*, not dated, 38 x 38"

Gaylen Gerber, *Donald Young Gallery*, 2004, installation view including constructed partition and 13 individual works, 16' 5" x 39' 5" overall

Photography: Tom Van Eynde