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Open Plan: The Whitney Museum's Arts of Time and Space

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Curated by: Scott Rothkopf, Laura Phipps, Christopher Lew, Donna De Salvo, Melva Bucksbaum, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Jay Sanders, Lawrence Kumpf, and Christie Mitchell

Exhibition schedule: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, February 26 through May 14, 2016 (*Andrea Fraser*, February 26–March 13; *Lucy Dodd*, March 17–20; *Michael Heizer*, March 25–April 10; *Cecil Taylor*, April 15–24; and *Steve McQueen* April 29–May 14)

In winter and spring 2016, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented *Open Plan*, an innovative five-part exhibition comprised of a mix of new and historic projects. The iterations progressed with a definite rhythm; austere projects with sober, restrained palettes alternated with more ebullient and colorful selections. Distributing curatorial authority, *Open Plan* united an ensemble cast for the following program: A sonic work by Andrea Fraser, curated by Scott Rothkopf and Laura Phipps; a painted environment created by Lucy Dodd, curated by Christopher Lew; projected photographs by Michael Heizer, curated by Donna De Salvo, Melva Bucksbaum, and Carol Mancusi-Ungaro; an exhibition of Cecil Taylor's documents, curated by Jay Sanders and Lawrence Kumpf, accompanied by performances by the jazz musician; and a presentation of a filmic FBI file by Steve McQueen, curated by Donna De Salvo with Christie Mitchell.

Lasting as few as four days, the series of provocative shows possessed an accelerated temporality, which seemed closer to that of performance than the duration of fine arts exhibitions (for example, the following temporary exhibitions ran for nearly four months). *Open Plan* should therefore be conceived as one more twist in the performative turn—a recent humanities trend, which has been manifested in both museums and art-historical scholarship. Instead of just a turn, this mode of conceiving art and work may also be considered a return. In the 1960s, critic Michael Kirby grouped various emerging forms—Kinetic art, new media art, theater, and dance—under the rubric "arts of time." Similarly, the Whitney series convincingly proposed that the apparently diverse projects in distinct media that it presented possessed a common logic. Curating converged with directing; the galleries became a stage for mounting productions.

Beyond reimagining the temporality of exhibitions, the show importantly implicated space as well. The title, *Open Plan*, refers to the flexible architecture that hosted each installation: the Neil Bluhm Family Galleries in the new Renzo Piano building. Bluhm's wealth has spatial origins too. He made his fortune in real estate. Perhaps appropriately, the museum site has exceptional views of the Hudson River as well as Chelsea and the Meat Packing District, areas that have undergone a significant revaluation in recent years (in part due to the arrival of the museum and the High Line Park). Buoyed by its trendy location and

the sheen of “starchitecture,” the renewed Whitney Museum elicited significant excitement when it opened in 2015. The series highlighted institutional space, and the mixed-use volume boasts an area of “approximately 18,000 square feet . . . making it the largest column-free museum gallery in New York.”¹ With its numerous makeovers, *Open Plan* showcased its potential.

Open Plan’s format also meshes with museum marketing. The limited time offers operated perfectly well independently; the serial structure implied serial attendance. The novel exhibition seemed to be designed for members—who would not be charged admission every couple weeks to see all of the parts—and those who came to the Friday night pay what you wish hours. Another consequence of the experimental series was that going to the Whitney became a habit. Patrons ideally made repeated pilgrimages to the museum as a destination. Every part ushered in an associated media wave of visitors’ digital posting and journalists reporting. Ultimately, each iteration of the exhibition inscribed new meanings onto the galleries. The projects recoded the space, such that it no longer solely signified institutional potency and the benevolence of a magnate and his heirs.

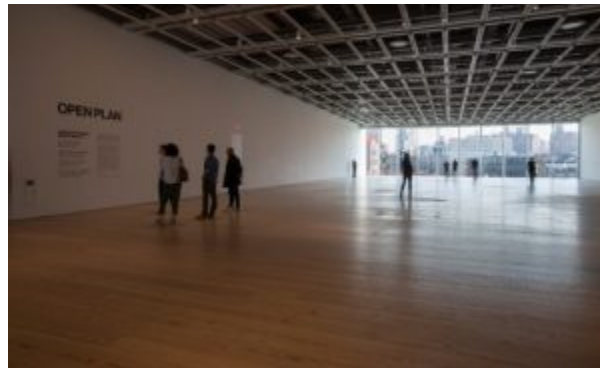


Fig. 1. Andrea Fraser (b.1965) *Down the River* (installation), 2016. Multichannel audio installation. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph by Bill Orcutt.

Andrea Fraser, famous for her interrogations of institutions, realized the most dialectical critique. In *Down the River*, 2016, she confronted two seemingly opposed institutions and ultimately synthesized them. The project consists of looped audio from the interior of Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a prison roughly twenty miles upstream on the Hudson River. Bangs, clangs, metallic clinks, screams, and public address system announcements were translated to the vast chamber of the museum. Contemplation became coextensive with doing time. Moreover, as her title inverts the euphemistic saying, “sent up the river,” it implies a consideration of perspectives from the prison. Fraser’s insinuation evoked the argument by Donald Preziosi that the museum is a “panoptic apparatus.”² Actually, the more literal relationship of museums and prisons has long preoccupied her. She views them as interconnected sides of neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, in *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989, (which was shown in an adjunct black box gallery) Fraser touches upon the development of civic institutions with distinct disciplinary functions. Recently, her focus tightened—as is evident in *Tehachapi at Kings Road*, 2014, a recontextualization of recordings from California penitentiaries, and *Index II* 2016, which charts parallel trends in museum and prison construction as well as population growth in these industries.

Fraser’s project is non-retinal; however, she did capitalize on the institutional imperative to look: her intervention prompted spectators to study their fellow museumgoers

and the room, with its gridded ceiling, top-of-the-line climate control system, and spectacular views. By broadcasting sound into the space, the artist cast new inflections on the experience. She infected the empty floor with the spirit of the prison yard, rendering uncanny the rarefied gallery air and prime real estate vistas. The modular ceiling came to evoke prison bars. The movements of slowly circulating guests became haunted by those of the inmates confined to the upriver institution. Nevertheless, there were many instagrammers and selfie-seekers who blithely took photos—seemingly untroubled by the connections Fraser laid out. For visitors to whom the work gave pause, her moves catalyzed a process of reflection. How did Bluhm, whose name captions the wall, amass his fortune? How do incarcerated bodies and those that flitted and sauntered through the heights of lower Manhattan compare in terms of socioeconomics and race? Do the prisoners ever glimpse similar views of the Hudson coursing past? How do vision and mobility relate to privilege? Whom do our institutions serve?



Fig. 2. Lucy Dodd (b. 1981). Installation view *B.O.V.*, 2016. Spirulina, black lichen, sumac tea, wild black walnut rind, kombucha SCOBY, foss leaf extract, East River water, Hudson River water, sea snail (*Murex trunculus*) dye, raspberry leaf tea, yerba mate, mica, powdered iron, hematite, graphite, sand, and other materials on nine canvases. Collection of the artist; courtesy David Lewis Gallery, New York. Photograph by Bill Orcutt.

For the briefest phase of *Open Plan*, Lucy Dodd conjured a sea change with *B.O.V.*, 2016 (an abbreviation for Birth of Venus). As William Shakespeare suggests in “Ariel’s Song” (from *The Tempest*), which describes this kind of aquatic transformation, Dodd’s inflow of objects and bodies yielded “something rich and strange.”³ She filled the gallery (instead of its walls) with raw canvas sails—upon which she had splashed, swirled, and splatted wavy organic browns, greens, and whites. Formally, they recalled another canvas named for the aforementioned section of *The Tempest*, Jackson Pollock’s *Full Fathom Five*, 1947. Dodd’s shaped canvases were arranged similar to hedges in a public park. Here too, modern institutions converged. The paintings segmented the cavernous space into loose courts, each with its own grouping of color-coordinated, comfortable, faux-modernist furniture designed by the artist.⁴ While her project dialogues with the history of painting, it is better understood as a whimsical, social environment for breeding “ritual action . . . [and] demanding a longer and broader engagement on the part of the audience.”⁵ For the spatial production, she tacked and jibbed with a crew. Dodd scheduled four performances each day of the exhibition. The press release asserts that she brings the studio into the museum.⁶ As she did not paint in the performances, the precise type of studio is not clear: she variously acted as landscaper, choreographer, decorator, and set designer.

Willem de Kooning described art as a “stew,” with uniquely flavored bits and pieces; while Dodd’s cuisine is different, the elder painter’s comment resonates with her methods.⁷ She achieved magnificent hues with “fermented walnuts, kombucha SCOBY, hematite, yerba

mate, and pigments she has collected in her travels.”⁸ Dodd playfully reminded the viewers that art is a question of taste. Although the shades of matte green and walnut brown are striking, her ingredients smacked of foodie-ism. Her palette surely aligns with those of many of the museum visitors. Nonetheless, her poetic use and abuse of a bourgeois diet slightly altered the protocols of the “bourgeois” institution: individualistic, totally silent contemplation of auratic inert objects was not the order of the day.

In the final forty minutes of the exhibition, Dodd, Dawn Kasper, and Sergei Tcherepnin staged a kind of “wild rumpus”; the untitled performance was equal parts Maurice Sendack’s *Where the Wild Things Are* and Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The trio entered at staggered intervals, seemingly from different directions, announcing their presence with musical utterances. Garbed in patchwork, multicolored dream coats, they pranced, artfully flicked their trains, played music, and snuck around the almost-sculptural or architectonic abstractions. Creeping circles of spectators—many brandishing cell phones for photos—responded to their movements and were drawn around the same stage. Although the audience did not become primary performers, the project lulled them into minor roles. The work concluded with a tour de force piano improvisation by Tcherepnin, recalling the compositions of Philip Glass. Finally all three sleepily huddled beneath the piano-cum-fort. Watching adults engage in childlike, whimsical activities enabled spectators to remember the magic of play. Like the castles built of cushions in childhood living rooms, Dodd’s dreamy ecology made the Whitney gallery become more than the materials arranged within it.

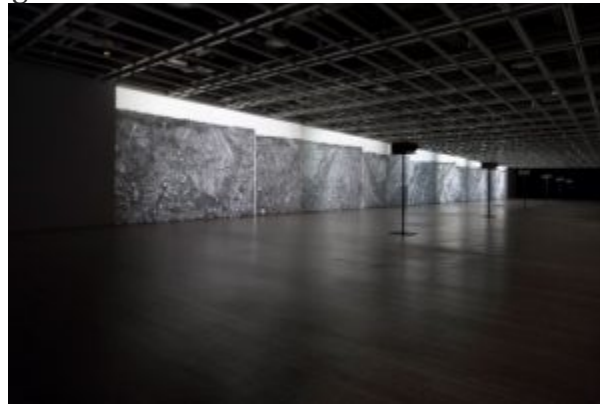


Fig. 3. Michael Heizer (b. 1944) Installation view of *Actual Size: Munich Rotary, 1970*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph by Ron Amstutz.

In the next act of *Open Plan*, dark curtains covering three sides of the gallery—which obfuscated the view of the New York and New Jersey skylines—greeted patrons as they exited the elevators. Skirting these shrouds, spectators found Michael Heizer’s *Actual Size: Munich Rotary, 1970*: six custom projectors fitted with photographic glass plates projected static images of *Munich Depression, 1969*, a no longer extant, circular earthwork necessarily beyond the museum. *Actual Size* saw a static gray-tone, horizon “screened” on the white walls.⁹ Albeit in a distinct fashion to Dodd and Fraser’s efforts, Heizer’s project also dug up the past with a deferred translation. His installation maps documentation onto the architectonic support. For the 1969 concavity, the artist displaced one thousand tons of soil; *Actual Size* displaces this displacement across time and space.

Heizer states that his works reflect our world’s condition of being “technological and primordial simultaneously.”¹⁰ Today the analog projectors and black and white images seem almost primitive. The bespoke equipment in the museum was once highly innovative.

Commercially available equipment was not capable of yielding images that were actual size. Heizer enlisted the inventor Maris Ambats (the developer of another 1970s staple, the mood ring) to design them. Furthermore, a significant amount of room is necessary to place the projectors—one after another—at the correct distance from the wall. Because of this, the Whitney’s Marcel Breuer building could not accommodate the artwork. The press release affirms that the museum has only now caught up with the industrial—or alternately prehistoric—scale of the work.¹¹

In the galleries, the 360-degree referent turned into a nearly lunar panorama. The dramatic pseudo-cinematic exhibition recalls a longer history of spectacular landscapes. Nineteenth-century artists like Frederic Edwin Church presented paintings, brightly illuminated in otherwise dark spaces, to paying customers. *Actual Size*’s vistas are pure illumination. Moreover, it constitutes a kind of slide presentation, the sort of domestic show and tell that represented vacations of upper- and middle-class Americans, especially in the last century. When framed in the context of a museum of American art, the projected earthwork connects to longer traditions of tourism and visual culture.



Fig. 4. Open Plan: Cecil Taylor installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art. Photographs © Paula Court.

In some sense, the ten-day show by Cecil Taylor was the most radical choice. As a poet and jazz musician, his work falls outside the purview of the art programming of the Whitney Museum. While he had not exhibited before, Taylor performed in the museum’s Breuer building in the 1960s and 1970s. The installation featured videos, audio recordings, handwritten drafts of poems, and assorted ephemera—all of which was fairly traditionally arranged on walls and in vitrines. Here it seemed the curatorial hands manifested themselves most forcefully. Their decisions about presenting the information impelled visitors to consider the contents with the same seriousness as works of art. Particularly successful in this regard were the wall-mounted posters and albums, which highlighted their appeal to vision. Conversely, if visitors were not convinced, they at least witnessed an expansion of “American art” to fit contents that might belong in a Jazz Hall of Fame.

Furthermore, a festival of performances brought such notable figures as Hilton Als and Fred Moten to the Whitney. In addition to the curated content, Taylor acted as manager and determined his own regime of sold-out shows to great fanfare. He collaborated with dancer Min Tanaka and percussionist Tony Oxley in two improvised sets. The free jazz pioneer (and the public) enjoyed his residency at the museum so much that he added an additional appearance.



Fig. 5. Steve McQueen (b. 1969), Installation view of *End Credits*, 2016. Photograph by Ron Amstutz.

Steve McQueen, *End Credits*, 2012/16, provided a strong conclusion. Dual projections of declassified FBI documents, culled from agency files on Paul Robeson, scrolled on screens placed on either side of the massive gallery. A soundtrack of two voices read fragments out of sync with the visual materials, which disrupted a smooth chronology. As the title suggests, the structure of a cinematic parergon forms the entire work. In contrast to the light font on dark ground that characterizes the final minutes of commercial films, McQueen’s moving images are striking in their whiteness and run for nearly eight hours. The work was expanded for the Whitney presentation, where McQueen’s *Moonlit*, 2016, a pair of rocks covered in silver leaf, accompanied it in a neighboring gallery.

The idea of centering (or recentering) the marginalized undergirds the content as well as the form of the work. Robeson is a figure of limited renown in the United States. A star football player, a Columbia University-trained lawyer, a celebrated actor on the stage and in Hollywood, and a world-class baritone, Robeson was also a committed socialist and civil rights activist. Because of his political activities, particularly his efforts to maintain friendship between the United States and Soviet Union, he was placed under constant surveillance by the FBI. The government harassment became so intense that he was forced into exile. As a result, Robeson is better known abroad. McQueen takes the FBI files readymade, rendering them pedagogical to recuperate their subject. At the time they were recorded, Robeson’s actions were deemed sinister. Today, the reports on his “unpatriotic” activities read like an amazing curriculum vitae.

Though driven by an “archival impulse,” McQueen’s work is not pure didactic information; spectators alternate between reading and gazing.¹² *End Credits* cleverly trades on the legacy of Conceptual art: the “aesthetic of administration” that bureaucratic papers necessarily possess has come to hold artistic value.¹³ As in the other parts of *Open Plan*, a scalar translation produces new significance. Handmade scrawls and crossings out of redaction turn into marks worthy of Franz Kline when expanded to the silver screen.

This final phase of the series wedded aesthetics and politics. The museum became an amplifier, broadcasting Robeson’s numerous achievements (this went beyond the galleries; the bookshop even stocked his biography). Although belated, it is fortunate that a British artist can employ the frame of the Whitney Museum of American Art to repatriate Robeson, who was once seen as “un-American.” Not a terminus, *End Credits* marks a new stage in the activist-performer’s afterlife.

Open Plan importantly asked audiences to rethink exhibitions as productions in time and not just in space (or place). The multi-platform, performative show was the result of a multitude of contributors and collaborators. The one-work installations would have seemed

insufficient as stand-alone exhibitions. With the framing, they operated in concert; the shared elements of the apparently disparate practices came into focus. Although *Open Plan* was a diachronic exploration of space, the programming was also coterminous: the memories of prior iterations haunted each subsequent installation. Each facet, whether by contrast or similarity, illuminated the others. In this sense, Fraser’s sensory deprivation and Dodd’s overload were particularly strong—productive foils to one another. Similarly, Heizer’s quiet, still landscape projections appeared all the more antiquated and gray in comparison with Taylor and Dodd’s color and live, musical numbers. McQueen’s Robeson files were at once an entrée into history and an austere fortnight-long conclusion.

The serial show resisted singular curatorial or artistic authority in a way few do. Under the sign of production, it ushered in a blurring of the labor of art-making and that of curating. On one hand, the breakdown of traditional roles and collectivity suggest a democratization of the museum. On the other, the shift to producing could be less charitably read as a kind of corporatism, a neoliberal decentralization of mounting an exhibition. Indeed, the five rapid transformations highlighted the Whitney Museum’s capacity for performance and the flexibility of the open-plan Bluhm Family Galleries—elements that reflect the values of the new spirit of capitalism. Nonetheless, the ground-breaking show cannot be flattened out and charged with merely reproducing dominant economic logic. As I have attempted to prove, in distinct fashions, every iteration used the museum as a platform for the sometimes antagonistic artistic ideas it introduced. Working to destabilize monolithic institutional identity, each reprogrammed the Whitney Museum. Ultimately, with projects that compellingly explore the time of painting and cinema as well as the space of sound, *Open Plan* demonstrated new ways to perform the museum.

Notes

¹ See *The Building*, <http://whitney.org/About/NewBuilding>, accessed August 6, 2016.

² See Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditation on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 70.

³ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.399–407.

⁴ *Open Plan: Lucy Dodd*, March 17–20, 2016, <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/OpenPlanLucyDodd>, accessed August 3, 2016.

⁵ Dodd as quoted in *ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Willem de Kooning as quoted in Mark Stevens and Anlyn Swann, *Willem de Kooning: American Master* (New York: Albert A. Knopf, 2004), 129.

⁸ *Open Plan: Lucy Dodd*, March 17–20, 2016.

⁹ Michael Heizer, *Actual Size: Munich Rotary*, 1970, <http://collection.whitney.org/object/10937>, accessed August 5, 2016.

¹⁰ Michael Heizer as quoted in Adam Weinberg and Dana Miller, *Whitney Museum of American Art: Handbook of the Collection* (New York, New Haven, and London: Whitney Museum of American Art and Yale University Press, 2015), 173.

¹¹ See media alert for *Open Plan: Michael Heizer*, http://whitney.org/file_columns/0009/7450/open_plan_media_alert_michael_heizer.pdf, accessed August 7, 2016.

¹² See Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (fall 2004): 3–22.

¹³ See Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (winter 1990): 105–43.