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John Armleder

Institute of Contemporary Art

'It starts here,' said the museum guard at the entrance, pointing visitors towards the right side of the first-floor gallery. As the ICA's John Armleder retrospective was (per the gallery notes) installed in 'roughly chronological' order, her advice seemed helpful – good to know the proper route to take through 40 years of the Swiss artist's work. If viewers seemed particularly interested, she intervened further, offering a check list. Yet such gestures ultimately seemed designed to frustrate an attempt to approach the exhibition as a conventional survey. Neither direction nor documentation was much use in sorting out the show, and any idea of linearity was instantly overwhelmed by the work on display. Armleder's drawings – mostly spare geometric abstractions, at times approaching invisibility – ringed the cavernous, undivided gallery space. Hung in demented, salon-style excess on the tallest walls, row after row of framed pieces ascended to the ceiling, far beyond sight lines. The check list itself turned out to be rather hilarious in its useless precision: pages of numbered charts provided dates and materials for the 500-odd works on display, almost all of them identified as 'untitled'. Flipping through the document, you couldn't help but feel a little silly, wondering what exactly you'd hoped to gain by consulting it.

Perhaps the best move was to give in to the giddy absurdity of the experience – forget organization and take it in all at once, as if it were a single installation. Which was clearly part of the point of the project. 'About Nothing' seemed designed, for the most part, as a parody of the whole idea of a 'proper' survey – a conceptual put-on, with all the museological apparatus overlaid on it as a comic dodge. Even the dates in the show's title, '1962–2007', played games with the idea of chronology. There was, in fact, a piece that had its origin in 1962, when Armleder was 14 years old: a mountain landscape that years later was turned vertical and repurposed into an abstract Newman-esque 'zip'. But actually the show went back even further, to doodles in grade-school notebooks (labelled 'Johnny! Armleder!'), preserved in a glass vitrine. The final work in the show, done on site and dated 2007, was, according to the artist, 'a piece I'm doing next year'.

Yet despite the sprawl and the occasionally absurdist dating, the show functioned as more than a stunt. It was a 'real' retrospective – certainly thorough, if not precisely sober. The drawings on display represented a great deal of what Armleder has spent the last four decades doing. You could, if you were dedicated enough, hang on to the exhibition check list and dutifully try to track the development of the artist's style, methods and motifs. Yet here things fell apart again, owing to the nature of the work itself. 'Development' is entirely too teleological a concept to apply to Armleder's casual, on-the-fly borrowings from art-historical sources. And 'style' seems too ego-laden a term for the effect he achieves in his slight, impersonal drawings. An 'economy of the hermit crab' is the artist's own description of his approach. In practice, this means treating the range of 20th century abstract movements as a collection of ready-mades, to be chosen (and abandoned) without much regard for the programmes to which they were originally attached. The works on display – those that were readily visible, at least – variously recalled De Stijl design, Suprematist composition, Minimalist pattern, Op-ish decoration and aleatory squiggles. Yet all these familiar ways of making marks on paper suggested nothing as self-conscious, and self-congratulatory, as 'appropriation': he is simply using available models as a way to keep working and producing.

Despite the enormous volume of work displayed here, drawing actually represents only a small slice of Armleder's eclectic, magpie-ish activities: he has done everything from Fluxus-inspired performance to publishing and showing other artists' work through his Ecart group. So it is a rather perverse limitation that 'About Nothing', his first major American exhibition, used this particular facet of his work to represent his career. (A more wide-ranging, but perhaps equally perverse, retrospective is currently on view at MAMCO in Geneva.) His reputation in the US is much more likely to depend on the furniture, sculpture and psychedelic canvases he produced in the 1980s (which earned him an association with the Neo-Geo boomlet) or on recent installations featuring neon and disco balls. Yet this partial, deliberately excessive and essentially self-negating retrospective manages to capture much that is crucial about Armleder's aesthetic: his refusal to be pinned down, his deep scepticism about 'importance'. 'Extremely radical positions in art are in some ways always cheap and shabby', he has said. 'No matter how cultured you are, how special and particular and how correct you are as an artist, it's always somehow cheap. I like that.' Cheerfully undermining both himself and the museum at every turn, the show functioned brilliantly as institutional critique – although the artist himself would probably reject so earnest and 'special' a title.

Steven Stern