

Five Seasons: 2002-2007

A Specific Site

Space is New York's number-one preoccupation. From the mythological square footage of old SoHo to the scarcity brought on by the real-estate boom in the 2000s, staking-out, using, talking about, and giving up space defines one's time and place in city's finite geography. It's a physical and psychological necessity turned into a social fabric.

The desire for it drove a now-familiar story. Beginning in the late 1980s, the pursuit of inexpensive studio space led artists from the increasingly unaffordable East Village across the river to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a backwater of warehouses, working-class neighborhoods, and little else. But by the end of the next decade, studios carved out of industrial sites across the neighborhood would house one of the largest concentrations of artists per capita of any single location in the country. Before a choking demand and unchecked development once again sent artists looking elsewhere for studios, the migration generated exhibition spaces, workshops, screening rooms, artist-run events, a still-growing number of galleries, and many other thriving cultural outlets, all of which have left a lasting mark on the neighborhood.

It was that atmosphere that led Black & White gallery's founding director Tatyana Okshteyn to Williamsburg in pursuit of a site for her first gallery. Although available industrial space in the neighborhood had already become difficult to find, she happened upon a former garage on Driggs Avenue, at North 10th Street that met her needs. Perfectly suited to a gallery, the roughly 1,000 square-foot space was large enough to show ambitiously scaled installations but narrow enough to suit even small works on paper. It also had the unusual addition of an outdoor courtyard roughly equal in size to the main gallery.

Bounded on three sides by gray cinder-block walls with only the ceiling open to the sky, the courtyard is a far cry from a genteel sculpture garden. From the main gallery, sliding glass doors open onto a concrete floor with a drain at the center. The walls rise one stunted but entrapping story and are capped by harsh exterior lights. The whole space feels like a concrete box, very much at one with the rough industrial surroundings of Brooklyn's waterfront neighborhoods.

But for all of its grit, the courtyard is not a street-like space amenable to work that intervenes in public life either. In fact, ignoring the dirt and textured block, it begins to look like an outdoor gallery. It offers all the spatial control of a white cube with—unadorned walls, a straightforward geometry—and as an exhibition space, it functions as if someone had taken the project room at a typical gallery and simply lifted the lid. Since the gallery's inaugural season in September 2002, 15 artists have created 18 site-specific works responding to it.

Unformed Material

In a city where it seems as if every square inch has been codified and spoken for, the outdoor project space is remarkably ambiguous, as if it remains somewhere between the neighborhood's past and present. Not utilitarian enough to be a warehouse and not quite blank enough to be a gallery, it is a transitional and incomplete place—too removed from the street to be a fully contextualized site but not sufficiently detached to lose its connection to the outside.

Rather than giving that under-formed material a shape on its own, the gallery has left it to artists mold the space into legibility, and the interpretations of the 15 who have created work there have varied greatly.

Some projects have faltered, swallowed completely by the incomplete quality of the space. Work installed as if in a conventional gallery is quickly overcome by the industrial architecture and harsh weather. Under snow or bright sunlight and the against cinder-block walls, traditionally installed painting or sculptural work does not hold the eye, let alone draw the viewer into the courtyard, and many projects that may have fit well in an indoor gallery have languished in the space like scattered groupings incongruous material. On the other hand, monumental pieces that treat the courtyard like a sprawling sculpture garden feel constrained and similarly at odds with the architecture.

The most successful projects seize on the amorphous quality of the courtyard—from its structure to its relationship to the surrounding neighborhood—and use it as a medium. Some artists have formed it into a bunker, others, a cathedral, and no fewer than two have presented variations on a suburban swimming pool, but the strongest work sketches a conceptual schema or a focused series of formal maneuvers that give shape to the unruly location while, at the same time, acknowledging its open-ended parameters.

Though the site resembles a gallery, it also has one omnipresent and routinely disruptive variable: the weather. Open to the sky, the sun scorches its concrete floor in the summer and in the winter, installations endure freezing temperatures and struggle to draw reluctant visitors out into the cold. Every project created there has had to contend with the elements, but the best have taken up the weather as a central component, using the work shape its relationship to the surrounding architecture.

Noémie Lafrance choreographed a piece entitled *Melt* in response to the enclosing walls and sun-exposed concrete. Substituting glaring spotlights for an evening performance, dancers pinned to the courtyard's far wall appeared to literally melt under the heat. Rebecca Herman and Mark Schoffner similarly tied the confining architecture to the elements with *Village Green*. Treating the space as a prison yard, they created a pillory at the center, evoking weather-prone forms of punishment and public humiliation.

On the other end of the seasonal spectrum, Tony Stanzione built a series of barrack-style bunk beds that seemed to strive to rise above the surrounding walls, but the piece relied on the winter cold to be completed. Outfitted with pillows made from cast ice, the skeletal frame of the structure was eventually coated in abstract layers of ice as the temperature dropped during the exhibition's winter run.

Other artists have contended with the space by utilizing its unusual position both inside and outside the confines of the gallery, playing its architecture off the character and history of the surrounding neighborhood. Stanzione's first project for the space drew on Williamsburg's past as a landing point for immigrants, while Peter Franck and Kathleen Triem's architectural model provided a counterpoint to the countless new structures that were then just beginning to dominate the neighborhood's blocks.

For her *Pedazos (In Pieces)* installation, Anita Glesta treated the industry-shaped space as an archaeological site, building a collapsing ruin from handmade paving stones that nodded to the neighborhood's history of physical labor. Austin Thomas also drew on the neighborhood's industrial character, but created a contrast to it with her lounge-chair inspired works built for tea parties and other types of leisure.

Future Seasons

On the first day of summer 2006, some four years after the first exhibition in the outdoor project space, Black & White followed the path of many established neighborhood galleries and opened a second location in Chelsea on the ground floor of the Chelsea Terminal Warehouse. Neighborhood fans of the outdoor space, however, feared that, like the many other Williamsburg galleries that made the Chelsea move before it, Black & White would shutter the original storefront. But rather than closing the site, Okshteyn has instead combined the entire gallery—indoors and out—into a large project space, turning it over to a single artist or group of artists.

As the Williamsburg gallery's program changes and artists no longer wrangle with the difficulties and possibilities of creating an installation for the outdoor space alone, this catalogue chronicles the projects that have taken place on the site during the last five seasons. Each work has taken the strange, weather-beaten concrete box in a surprising direction, pushing and pulling its unfinished spatial material into one of the most unique locations in the city.

--William Hanley