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A Conceptual Art Pioneer Who Doesn't Mince Words

Mel Bochner, who has spent half a century making art, revisits one of his early shows for his latest exhibition at Dia:Beacon.



The gallery is hangar-size and vacant, seemingly poised to receive a monumental sculpture or house an epic-scale theatrical production; a commuter train would fit quite snugly. But, on an early November morning inside Dia:Beacon, the Hudson Valley, N.Y., museum known for its exhibitions of Minimalist art, none of that awaits. In fact, the work is already installed: Thick lines of red tape course along the sunlit walls, accompanied by numbers that reflect their respective measurements (3', 16'8"), like a blueprint come to life. "Measurement Room: No Vantage Point" by Mel Bochner, which opened at the museum this month, is the artist's latest effort in making our thought processes visible.

Often mentioned alongside Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt as a practitioner of American conceptualism, Bochner was born in Pittsburgh and lived in San Francisco, Mexico and Chicago before arriving in New York in 1964, at the age of 24. Two years later, at the School of Visual Arts, where he was teaching art history, Bochner presented the show “Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art” — a set of office binders that contained Xeroxed versions of notes by Robert Smithson, Dan Flavin, Judd and others for their own art, placed on plinths — which is now considered to be the first exhibition of conceptual art. Bochner is perhaps even better known for his word paintings, portraits in text form of his fellow conceptualists, which he made in the '60s. In those works and his more recent “Thesaurus” series — in which Bochner depicts exuberant collisions of formal, colloquial and vulgar synonyms — the artist examines words’ ability to muddy meaning (“blah blah blah” is a recurring motif).

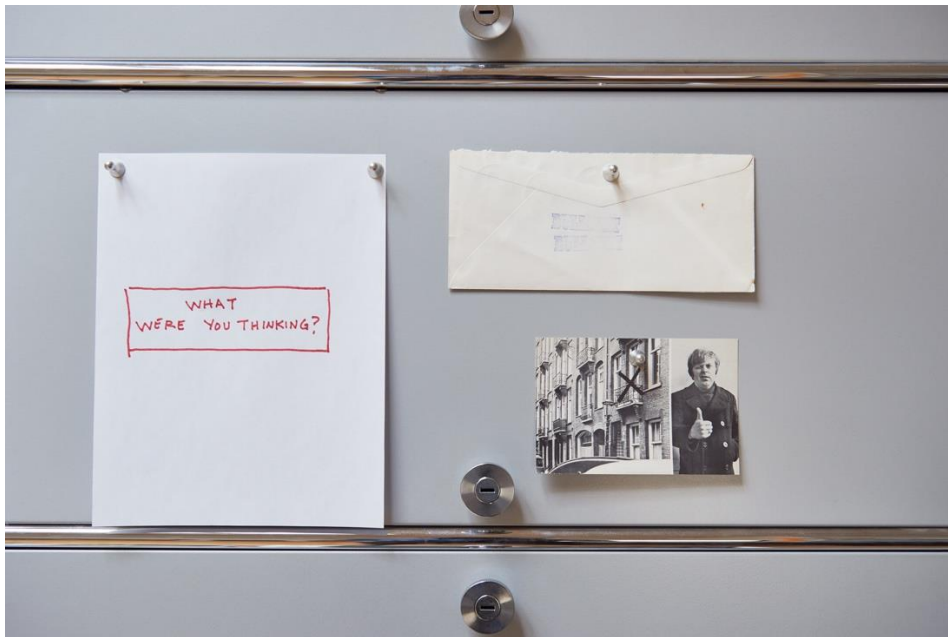


For Bochner, one of the strangest phenomena of getting older is institutional hindsight. “The things that I did in the '60s didn’t even get reviewed, and suddenly it’s a historical work,” he says. “What I realized was, at least in my own terms, history is what happens behind your back when you’re not looking. You set in motion a chain

of events and you try to follow them to their conclusion, wherever they take you. Sometimes it's something really interesting. Sometimes it's nothing. You don't know until you take the trip."

"No Vantage Point" revisits one of Bochner's early exhibitions, "Measurement: Room," from 1969, in which he meticulously recorded the dimensions of the art dealer Heiner Friedrich's Munich gallery across the surface of its walls. Bochner had spent the previous fall as a resident at Singer Laboratories in New Jersey as part of Robert Rauschenberg's E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) program that encouraged artists to collaborate with scientists and engineers; Bochner would leave small measurements in Letraset around the lab (the length of a floor tile, say) to poke fun at his hosts' unshakable devotion to quantifiable metrics. Soon, he found himself measuring everything — pieces of paper, the distances between them, his own hands — culminating in the room-size work. He later conceived of a follow-up to "Measurement: Room" (tentatively titled "No Vantage Point: Eye Level Cross-Section of a Room" and conceptualized for the same space), but Friedrich, who would go on to start Dia with Philippa de Menil and Helen Winkler in 1974, wasn't interested, so Bochner shelved the idea.

Half a century later, "Measurement Room: No Vantage Point" is a spiritual homecoming for a deeply layered conceit. The tape that runs along the gallery's walls sits about six feet from its floor and corresponds to Bochner's eye level, what he refers to as his "horizon line." The art is arguably what happens in between and what provokes the viewer to question and corroborate their own perception. All this empty space can be unexpectedly uncomfortable, the tape wrapping around your sense of self like a searing curl of existential dread — a public-pool-size uncanny valley. There's a prophetic tinge in seeing the work now, as though Bochner's 1969 design anticipated the ubiquity of screens in our lives, and the fact that direct physical perception is not valued in the same way as it was, or at all. How can we know that what we're looking at on our phones all day is real, and do we even care? "When I first saw the space, it was like, 'What can you possibly do in here that can compete with this?'" Bochner said. "And the answer is: nothing."



One thing about “Measurement Room: No Vantage Point” that might not be immediately perceptible is its absurd humor. Being made to stand in an empty room and contemplate your own mortality is a heavy order, but once you get past that, you can laugh about it. “I think all of my work is premised on humor in some way, if you take humor as a way of challenging convention and perceptions as they exist,” Bochner says. “Not like Joe Pesci says, funny ha-ha, but ironic. I think we’re living through a period where maybe that’s not valued as highly, but I do think that the human mind seeks a kind of expansion of itself, which, for lack of a better word, you could call ‘something new.’” Bochner insists originality can’t be sought out, because there’s no way to define it. “You have to discover it,” he said. “And nobody can tell you where it is.”

For the past four decades, Bochner has worked out of a tidy studio in TriBeCa (while living next door), the top floor of a walk-up building that has remained more or less the same, even as the neighborhood around it has changed dramatically. In somewhat of a contrast to his emphatic paintings, he tends to work neatly, with supplies arranged on two tables pushed up against a wall. Seated across from a small painting in progress — a drippy “Blah, Blah, Blah” — Bochner answered T’s artist’s questionnaire.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

I don't have a schedule. I work when I feel like it.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I don't remember.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

I once took a space on East Broadway, not realizing that the back was directly under the Manhattan Bridge, right where the subway screeched out of the tunnel.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

A drawing was stolen from my first show at Sonnabend [in 1971]. I received \$75 insurance money. The gallery was so excited, they threw a party.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

No beginning. It's all a continuum.



How do you know when you're done?

The story goes that the old Artist's Club had a panel to discuss this question. After everyone had finished answering, the moderator noticed that an elderly, Lower East Side painter hadn't said anything. "So, Morris, how do you know when you're finished?" In a thick Yiddish accent he replied, "When my wife says, 'Morris, that's enough already, you'll ruin it.'"

How many assistants do you have?

One. But "assistant" doesn't begin to define him.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

Never. Professionals (like doctors and lawyers) answer other people's questions. Artists answer questions they ask themselves.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

Watch a Yankees game.

What do you usually wear when you work?

Whatever I have on.

If you have windows, what do they look out on?

The building across the street.

What's your worst habit?

Impossible to single one out.

What embarrasses you?

Answering personal questions.

What are you reading?

Mostly biographies.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

The Sistine Chapel.