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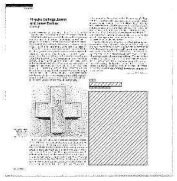
MIAMI

Sarah Oppenheimer

PÉREZ ART MUSEUM

"Would you like to interact with the sculpture?" A guard greeted me with this question immediately after I entered the room at the Pérez Art Museum in which Sarah Oppenheimer's new work *S-281913*, 2016, is installed. The invitation at first struck me as oddly redundant. All of the artist's works that I had encountered previously were interactive by default, consisting of razor-sharp transformations of gallery architecture—usually a series of cuts through floors, walls, or ceilings in combination with planes of reflective glass—that collectively effected a complex and continuous reshuffling of viewers' experience of the space they inhabit. The fundamental theme of this work is the feedback between architecture, movement, and perception; it can be understood only through wholesale haptic engagement.

But as the guard began to issue a stream of orders, apparently having taken my confused silence as a form of consent, I realized that she was referring to interaction of a much more literal kind: She wanted me to touch the sculpture, which consisted of two massive glass boxes suspended in midair between thick steel tubes anchored to the gallery's floor and ceiling. At her insistence, I pushed on the edge of one box and found that it could gently spin in place. In the meantime, the guard had recruited other visitors and, choreographing our movements as though she were the ringmaster of a circus, she proceeded to show us how the sculpture worked. As each box rotated in space, a sequence of dramatically displaced views appeared in its reflective surface. In the climactic moment of this performance, the guard coordinated my efforts with those of a fellow visitor manning the second box. We pushed and pulled according to her direction until both boxes were oriented just so. Suddenly the two boxes aligned to create a periscope effect: The vista of Biscayne Bay offered by the gallery's lone window was bounced back and forth across some seventy feet of space to suddenly become visible from the doorway in the opposite corner, eliciting appreciative oohs and aahs from the audience gathering around the gallery entrance.



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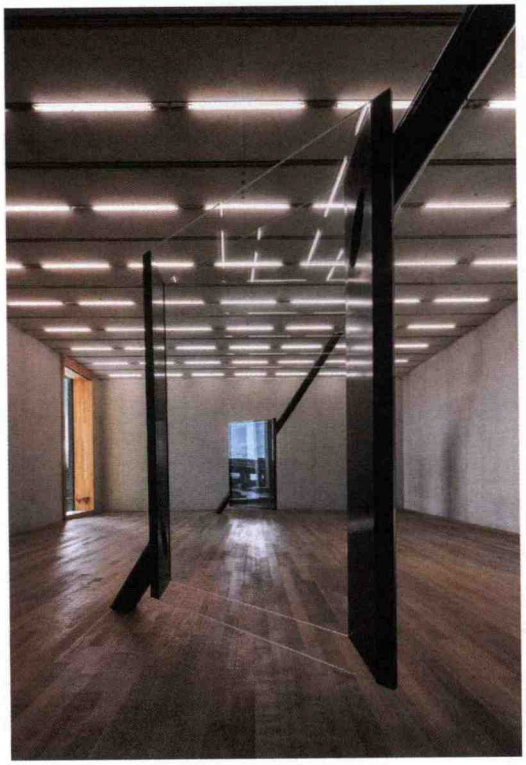

Sarah Oppenheimer, *S-281913*, 2016, aluminum, glass, two components, each 16' × 17' 9" × 1' 4". Installation view. Photo: James Ewing.

"Aha" moments like these have an obvious appeal, but they can be troubling, too. Standing in the gallery with Oppenheimer's piece, I could hear the distant clamor of some of the more obnoxious gadgetry installed in the Julio Le Parc retrospective on the same floor of the museum—a portentous reminder of kinetic art's checkered history. In work like Le Parc's, movement is deployed not to construct experience but to produce special effects, and the viewer is less engaged than robbed of agency, transformed—in a striking reversal of subject and object—into the submissive spectator of increasingly dazzling artworks. Ironically, the gallery in which it is installed seems to push *S-281913* in a similar direction. Oppenheimer has spoken often of her interest in the elements used to regulate moments of spatial transition—thresholds, hallways, windows, doors—and much of her work is strategically integrated into existing buildings so that it ingeniously disrupts, subverts, or redoubles the visual and somatic patterns catalyzed by such architectural devices. But in the middle of an empty gallery, whose single door and window suggest little in the way of specific patterns of occupation or experience, *S-281913* is easily reduced to an all-too-active object, its viewers becoming correspondingly passive.

Yet the work succeeds thanks to the sheer abnormality of its movement, which allows it to defy and ultimately escape the bland logic of the normative architecture surrounding it. The large rectangular glass boxes, after all, do not simply turn in space; they rotate around a diagonal axis, which means that their orientation flips from horizontal to vertical in the course of a 180-degree turn. This kind of simultaneous transformation in two planes of motion is unlike anything in architecture, where doors or windows hinge along a strictly horizontal or vertical axis, their movement thus limited to one plane. Moreover, a strict division between the horizontal—the plane of the floor, of occupation—and the vertical—the plane of the wall, of division—is fundamental to architecture's construction of space. By inviting our touch and implicating us in this other kind of movement, *S-281913* recalls another legacy of 1960s kinetic sculpture, that of works that use movement to explore the spatial construction of social relationships—Lygia Clark's "*Bichos*" (Beasts), rather than Le Parc's *Continuels-Mobils*—and promises the possibility of future interventions in which the invitation to interact need not be so explicit.

—Julian Rose