

Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

DECEMBER 2012



View of Sarah Oppenheimer's installation *D-33*, 2012, aluminum, glass and existing architecture, approx. 11 by 11 by 9 feet; at P.P.O.W.

SARAH OPPENHEIMER

P.P.O.W.

Sarah Oppenheimer falls into a category of artists whose aim is to make us ponder the previously hidden experiential and perceptual dimensions of our constructed world. Robert Irwin and James Turrell do it with light; Susan Philipsz and Julianne Swartz with sound. *D-33* (2012), at P.P.O.W., was by no means Oppenheimer's most logistically challenging installation ever, but its transformative effects on the space's straightforward white-box architecture were downright dazzling.

Armed with formulas and diagrams that can make your head spin, and at times demanding radical interventions in her architectural field of operations, Oppenheimer manipulates space by means of a formal element that is the absence of solidity: the hole. The paradox of Oppenheimer's holes, which she situates in a typology and accordingly names with a letter and number, is that however empty they are in essence, they are never lacking for substance. Marking the interstices between and among spaces, Oppenheimer's holes—as shaped by a variety of materials—afford lines of sight so unexpected and passages of bodies and light so complex that they wind up calling into question the very stability of even the simplest of rooms.

Erecting just one wall in the gallery, Oppenheimer created for *D-33* two parallel rows of contiguous rooms, three by three, and situated her holes at their points of greatest adjacency, where four rooms meet at the corners. At those two points she cut apertures with raking angles into the walls, such that you could pass through them, but not without being acutely aware of your movement within their narrow confines and sloping sides. She lined the edges with a dark, rather matte aluminum and partially glazed one of the openings with a laminated glass panel (making navigation of that particular hole all the trickier). Having carefully measured and predicted ahead of time the “temperature” of light in each room, artificial and natural,

Oppenheimer adjusted the illumination throughout the gallery so that its uniformly white walls almost seemed to be painted in slightly varied, tinted tones.

Passing between rooms, and standing within, was an adventure, both kinetic and visual. During a panel discussion at the gallery, more than one visitor reported a case of vertigo; the cuts for the holes tended to visually collapse the corners, yet also seemed to open like an accordion as you traversed them—as if you were entering a dimensional gap in a science fiction novel. Once within a room, you could watch people moving about the gallery, their bodies shifting through degrees of partialness. In addition, standing at a distance from the holes in each room, and given the dark aluminum that acted like drawn lines, as well as the glass and voids, which rendered light coloristic, you felt the holes almost coalesce into hard-edge geometric paintings, and the show began to feel as if it consisted of corner-hung abstractions.

I don't know if other people are getting as weary of random-looking installations—unmonumental, provisional, what have you—as I am; they are everywhere, littering the art world. Oppenheimer provided a bracing alternative in her meticulously planned and executed work. This month she opens a permanent hole (titled *W-12*) in the Baltimore Museum of Art, where we will no doubt again be permitted to gaze, agape, at the hidden aspects of our built world, and consequently at our own lives, made not so ordinary after all.

— Faye Hirsch