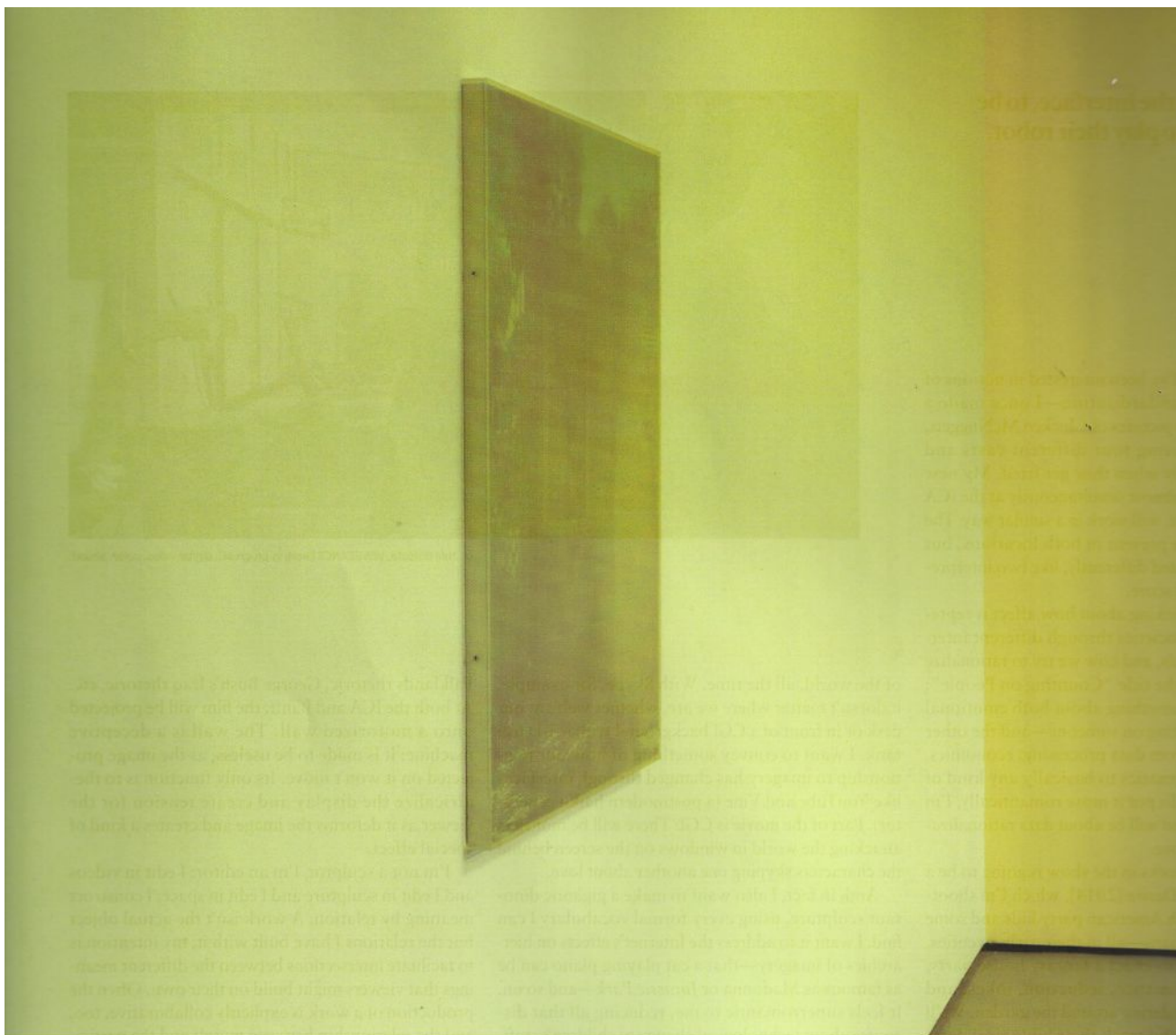


Gaylen Gerber
Soft Touch, Beau Rutland on the Art of Gaylen Gerber
By Beau Rutland, Artforum, October 2014



Soft Touch

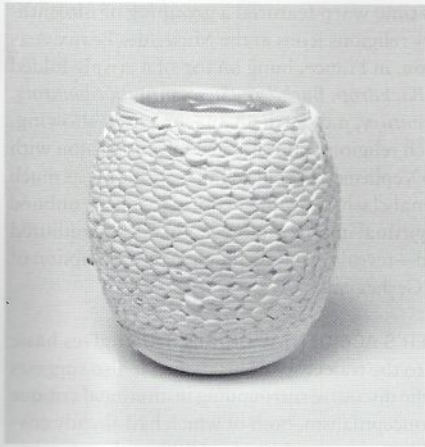
BEAU RUTLAND ON THE ART OF GAYLEN GERBER



Opposite page: Gaylen Gerber, *Clear Sky/Garden Addition*, 1997, Cibachrome print, charcoal, Plexiglas frame, 31 x 31". Installation view, White Flag Projects, Saint Louis, 2009. Photo: Gaylen Gerber and Tom Van Eynde.

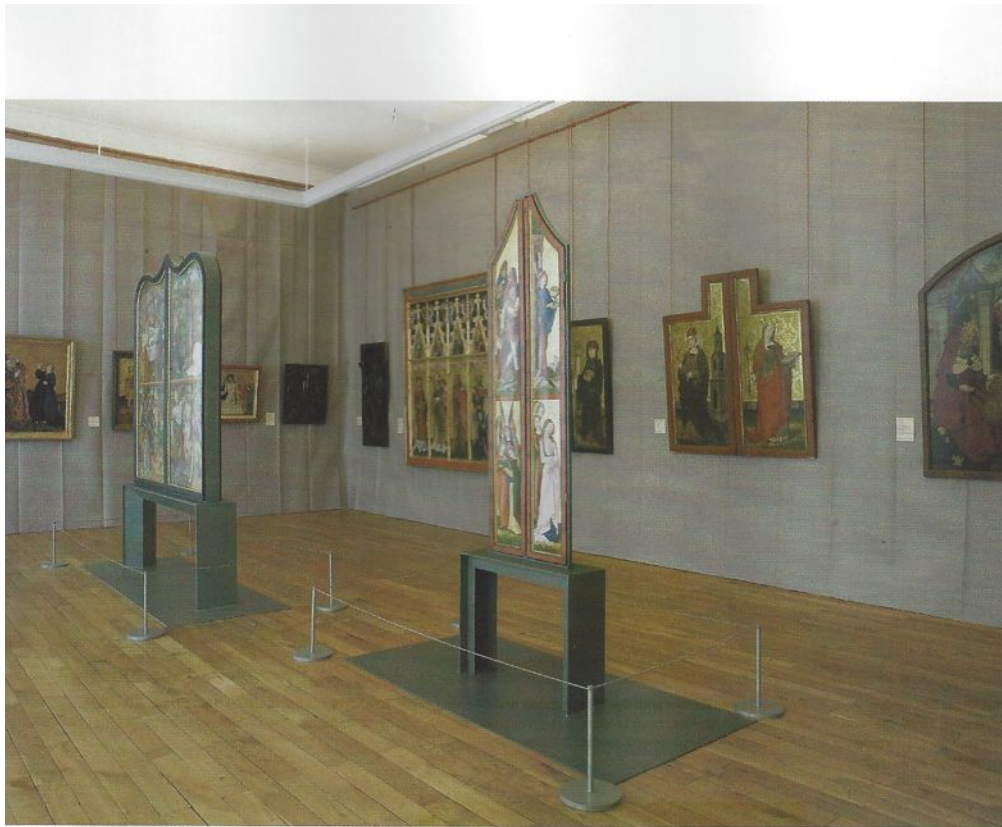
Above: Gaylen Gerber, *Backdrop/Clear Sky/Green Area*, 1998, *Clear Sky/Loft Conversion*, 1998, latex on canvas, Cibachrome print, graphite, Plexiglas frames, flowering fruit trees (forced). Installation view, High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Photo: Gerber Studio.

Below: Gaylen Gerber with David Hammons and Sherrie Levine, *Backdrop/Untitled*, 2010, *Thin Stripe: 10*, 1986, n.d., latex on canvas, mixed media, casein and wax on mahogany. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2014. Photo: Gerber Studio.



Gaylen Gerber, *Support*, n.d., oil paint on Cowrie Shell Basket (Currency Basket) (Yoruba, Nigeria, vegetable fiber, cowrie shells, and leather, twentieth century), 10 x 10 x 11".

WHO HUNG the Sherrie Levine next to a David Hammons? If this curatorial decision seemed intuitive in one sense—which two artists since the 1970s have made greater strides while ignoring convention?—the pairing still left many visitors to the 2014 Whitney Biennial in New York perplexed or provoked. And most viewers were likely oblivious to the looming presence on the same wall of a third artist: Gaylen Gerber, under whose auspices the entire arrangement quietly took place. Indeed, such thoughtful but startlingly simple hangings are integral to Gerber's now-signature "Backdrop" series. Each individual *Backdrop*, a very large gray monochrome of sorts made of folded paper or painted canvas, is constructed in situ according to the exact measurements of the intended wall in a given gallery, seamlessly blending into institutional architecture and oftentimes altogether vanishing from the viewer's sight. By placing the work of artists more familiar to museums and markets than himself on top of his own (indistinguishable) work on a major sight-line wall, where his identity might otherwise ring loudly, Gerber has made clear his high esteem for art itself. A seemingly selfless gesture, this artistic declaration quietly unravels our conception of the contexts of display and identity. Gerber's signature gray can be seen as a form of neutrality, a point frequently noted. Yet by now we know that neutrality is a futile gesture, a zone containing a spectrum of preexisting shades.



Gaylen Gerber, *Backdrop/Swiss primitive painting, 15th century, n.d.*, background paper, oil, gilding on wood and canvas, various frames. Installation view, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon, France, 2005. Photo: Gerber Studio.

The ability to elicit a wide array of responses is one hallmark of Gerber's practice, which encompasses more than three decades of artworks, the arrangement of other artists' works, and reinterpretations of the boundaries of collaboration, as well as curatorial outings that blur the roles governing our lives within and relationships to contemporary art. To participate in any exhibition is to take a stance, yet by claiming so many varied positions throughout his career, Gerber has continually confounded notions of agency and authorship: who gets to claim each, how so, and how much.

Spotting a Gaylen Gerber can be tough going. Though his artworks are often discrete objects, they are not always easily discoverable. Take, for example, *Backdrop/The Berliner, 1994, Lovers, 1995, n.d.*, an empty gray wall near recognizable paintings by bold-face name John Currin. We might be tempted to call this a staged disappearing act (backdrops, supports), but Gerber is ever present, whether through his name on a wall label or via the unseen labor involved in securing loans of artists' pieces for his own artworks and exhibitions.

Gerber's *Backdrops* do not necessarily require another artist's work, but, since the late 1990s, Gerber has been inviting artists to show their work on top of his more often than not. According to Gerber, this

collaborative aspect of his practice—he has stated that the term *cooperative* more accurately describes these projects—began with an accident of sorts, when, in 1997, artist Helen Mirra happened on one of Gerber's *Backdrops* in a Chicago gallery and knowingly hung her work on top of his. Yet to describe Gerber's oeuvre in relation to any clear beginning point is a difficult task, as he rarely dates his artworks. They are chronologically ungrounded until they engage with an artwork whose history they assume. These other artists' works are incorporated into Gerber's own, such as *Backdrop/Lit du chat, 1988*, attributed to "Gaylen Gerber with John Armleder" and ostensibly made in 2000, though its title bears the date of Armleder's work. If you commission a Gerber piece (for instance, in this year's Biennial), there is an implicit understanding that it may ultimately involve several other artists you did not initially have in mind. An editioned paper *Backdrop* produced for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago plays with this fluidity: The purchaser can rearrange her collection on top of her Gerber however she wishes.

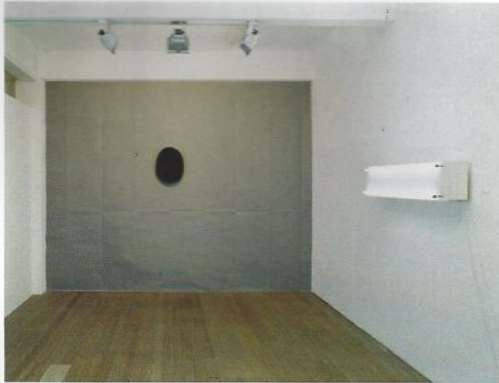
Art produced by other artists is ensnared in another prominent series in Gerber's oeuvre, the "Supports," which comprises gray paintings that he has handed over to an artist to do with as he or she pleases. Each artist is then credited for the work (and

By claiming so many varied positions throughout his career, Gerber has continually confounded notions of agency and authorship: who gets to claim each, how so, and how much.

fairly remunerated if it sells). This may come across as apathetic or calculating, yet a practice so deeply entwined with art made by others requires a level of emotional commitment. One can imagine Gerber sitting down to write letters to artists he admires or whose art he finds intriguing, hoping they will agree to participate in his work and be willing to enter into his universe, promulgating the kind of warmhearted Conceptualism for which he has become known. Perhaps this is why, walking into a Gerber room or exhibition, one experiences a distinct feeling of the uncanny—a constantly oscillating familiarity. After all, there is nothing out of the ordinary about a Hammons painting hanging on a gray wall, until one notices that the wall itself is a painting.

Most "Backdrop" and "Support" pieces are accompanied by an official statement when illustrated or featured in print: "Gaylen Gerber's work is not dated itself but carries the date of the work with which it is realized." (There are rare exceptions, such as when a *Backdrop* is considered a stand-alone work, void of other hangings, and receives its own date in the title.) One particularly stunning example of this time warp featured a grouping of fifteenth-century religious icons at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon, in France, hung on top of a crisply folded paper *Backdrop: Backdrop/Swiss primitive painting, 15th century, n.d.* Such an anachronistic showing, in which religious icons are in constant tension with Gerber's ephemeral background—an auratic as much as formal clash of deeply historical objects imbued with spiritual import on top of a blank yet authored ground—reveals just how fungible the description of art by Gerber can be.

GERBER'S ACCIDENTAL ORIGIN STORY gives basic shape to the trajectory of his career; it also suggests a specific discourse surrounding institutional critique and Conceptualism, both of which had already covered a lot of ground by the 1980s, when Gerber began working. After graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1980 (where he has taught since 1987), Gerber began painting still lifes, each depicting the same softly rendered section of his studio in one particular shade of brownish-gray oil paint—a unique blend of complementary colors—on uniform thirty-eight-inch-square canvases. Completely flat, the surfaces of the paintings fluctuate depending



Left: Gaylen Gerber with John Armleder, *Backdrop/Lit du chat*, 1988, n.d. Installation view, Galerie Susanna Kulli, St. Gallen, Switzerland, 2000. Photo: Galerie Susanna Kulli.

Right: Gaylen Gerber with Stephen Prina, *Untitled/Push Comes to Love (Untitled)*, 2002, n.d., oil on canvas, the entire contents of one can of enamel spray paint, 38 x 38".



on the conditions of their viewing, their depicted forms and figures barely registering as flickers. While bringing to mind the limited visibility of Ad Reinhardt's late-career Black Paintings, they are also aligned with a different sort of painterly provocation: This Gerber Gray, if you will, a continued feature of the artist's practice, gently echoes Yves Klein's exploration of corporate branding through International Klein Blue.

Unsurprisingly, the readings that clung to Gerber's work in the '80s and early '90s were either dully theoretical or soberly formal: Critics stuck the gray paintings under voguish umbrella terms including *New Chicago Abstraction* and *illusionist*. Not just a one-off gesture, Gerber's push against legibility and visibility is found in other early series as well. Drawings of a variety of images, from a photo booth to a kiss, were made using a 9H pencil, which boasts a lead so dense that the only mark left behind is a whisper of an indentation. One must contort one's body to catch just the right light to see what Gerber drew.

If Gerber's gray paintings were being read individually as postmodern monochromes, his first solo museum exhibition clarified his concerns. For his 1992 show at the Renaissance Society, Gerber brought twenty-five of his murky, sight-disabling paintings together to form one long, anonymous horizontal band of gray, evoking historical precedents such as Robert Rauschenberg's multipaneled *White Paintings* of 1951, those "airports" for light, shadows, and particles, in the words of John Cage. The Renaissance Society is known for its singular, deep-reaching gallery, which artists have employed to wildly different ends. Yet Gerber cut the space far short, building a long wall perpendicular to the gallery's entrance that left just enough room for viewers to see the paintings hung on the wall, closing off access to the rest of the space. Fitting somewhere between Michael Asher's reveal of the inner workings at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles via the removal of a wall separating the "exhibition" space and the back office

Below: Gaylen Gerber, *Untitled*, n.d., constructed partition, twenty-five paintings, oil on canvas, each 38 x 38". Installation view, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1992. Photo: Gaylen Gerber and Tom Van Eynde.



during his 1974 show there, and Jutta Koether's gallery-straddling screenlike painting in her 2009 Reena Spaulings Fine Art exhibition in New York, Gerber's paintings and their attendant wall literally interfere with the structural framing of the institutional space. Whether painting nearly invisible monochromes of the studio where he works, cutting off the exhibition space, or inserting his own *Backdrops* into a museum's fifteenth-century collection, Gerber plays with the concept of access—of the ways in which a viewer can access a work (and thus process it as art), and the ways in which we cannot access the subjective creative process (an artist's studio becomes a monochrome).

Gerber would continue to map out and reassign the boundaries of the institution without assembling (or dismantling) museum galleries. His ongoing "Backdrop" series turns gallery walls into paintings, replete with canvas, stretcher bars, and latex paint. This shift to a barely visible yet towering painting was coupled with more poetic actions and works. The *Clear Sky* photographs, begun in 1991, mimicked the gray paintings by using silver printing to render shots of picturesque blue sky into a shimmering monochrome. (Gerber later reframed many of the photographs in near-neon Plexiglas boxes made from translucent Daniel Buren "souvenirs," remnants of Buren's 2006 exhibition at the Arts Club of Chicago.) In a 1998 exhibition featuring the *Clear Sky* photographs at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Gerber dotted the gallery with orange trees, majestically flowering and fruiting out of season. He thus enlivened his admittedly spare exhibition with the world outside, nudging natural beauty into the conversation, perhaps an offering of sensory pleasure for the viewer.

While Gerber's work has connections to practitioners of appropriation such as Levine, its consistent dismantling of authorship, ownership, and control brings us back to the very foundations of institutional critique. One can sense an inherent reverence in Gerber's work for those who paved the way. Gerber saw ambitious projects mounted in Chicago by Asher and Buren, including Asher's landmark 1979 project that transported a twentieth-century cast bronze of Jean-Antoine Houdon's eighteenth-century statue of George Washington from the front

Gaylen Gerber, *Clear Sky/Flower*, 1997, reframed 2009, Cibachrome print, Plexiglas frame fabricated from a souvenir from Daniel Buren's *Crossing Through the Colors*, a work in situ, 2006, 31 3/4 x 31 3/4".



steps of the Art Institute of Chicago to a gallery inside. By shifting attention away from the author of the action and to larger questions of institutional responsibility and categorization of an object's "appropriate" presence in a museum, Buren and Asher served as the kind of guideposts Gerber must have delighted in finding.

Subtle acknowledgment of other artists' work represents another kind of collaborative energy in Gerber's oeuvre. A 2002 exhibition of his work at the Art Institute—with Stephen Prina—utilized the same stairwell space, Gallery 135, located near active train tracks, as Buren's fleeting and transportation-dependent work, *Watch the doors, please!*, 1980. Gerber recently noted, "I never looked up to [Buren] for inspiration, but I see him as a fellow traveler." And in Gerber's 2013 solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, he reprised the gesture of Asher's 1979 artwork commissioned by the museum, in which the artist removed panels from the exterior of the museum to be displayed inside and replaced after the exhibition, with the proviso that whenever the work was shown the panels would be again removed—a work that was famously deacquired shortly after it "entered" the museum's collection. Gerber thus often collaborates in tandem with museum politics as much as with other artists.

Gerber's "cooperative" practice can be seen as an act of either generosity or megalomania—the *Backdrops*, for instance, take up as much physical space as possible while visually receding into the background. Some spectators have even cast a skeptical eye on his "solo" exhibitions. Kathryn Andrews's diptych *Gaylen Gerber*, 2010, which was included in a Gerber solo show, offers one possible reading of the artist's practice: Two handpainted signs read, IT'S ALL ABOUT . . . GAYLEN GERBER! One can't help but envision a sense of competition between artists when they are brought into each other's practices, though Gerber, it seems, quite earnestly just wants to see and learn: "I've used other artists' work as a way to approach certain ideas, and in the process my work has sometimes been interpreted as a kind of Huck Finn-ism." Gerber's gargantuan paintings and *Supports* simultaneously exist as independent artworks, promote other artists, and are credited for being affiliated with the artists they display. Considering Bernadette Corporation's all-consuming interpretation of collaboration, and all the kinds of youthful collectivism that have sprung up in its wake, Gerber's "cooperations," by contrast, appear deeply personal in nature, posing the group endeavor not as a critical call to arms nor as a coolly anonymous brand but as a string of psychological

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relations entangled with generosity, envy, compliance, competition, and friendship.

Gerber may invite an artist to show with him, but there's a choice involved that's multidirectional—will he or she accept? To date, no one has outright declined, which speaks not only to Gerber's background research before approaching an artist to "collaborate" but also to the appeal of a new set of negotiations regarding production and profits. For instance, when a *Support* such as *Support/Untitled*, 2004, n.d., with Heimo Zobernig, is sold, the price of the work is structured in two halves: One half is the market value for a Zobernig, and the other half is the market value for a Gerber. And for the sake of being pragmatic, when working with younger artists to produce "Support" paintings, Gerber would occasionally "buy" the younger artist's portion of the work: In altruistically paying them for their labor in advance, he was able to factor their work into the cost of production. Value difference is readily spelled out. In his work, the assigned labor roles found within contemporary art become negotiable: artist, critic, historian, preparator, collector, and, most prominently, curator.

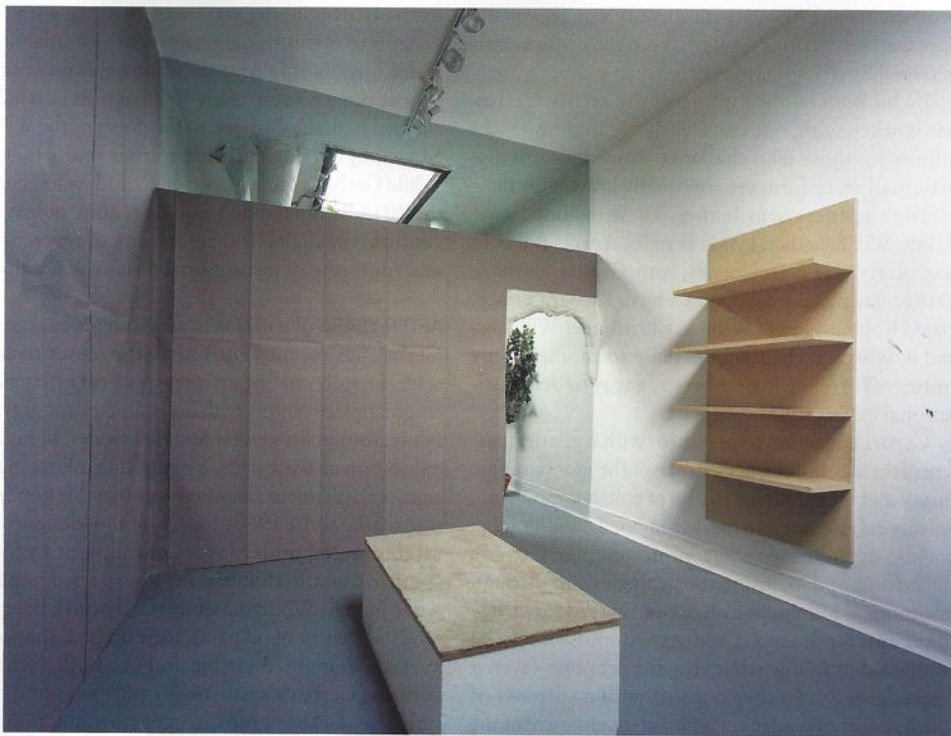
Looking back to Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*, 1935–41; the Andy Warhol–curated "Raid the Icebox I" of 1969–70; Fred Wilson's seminal "Mining the Museum" of 1992–93; and, more recently, Robert Gober's heartrendingly moving curatorial projects at the Whitney, to name only a few iconic examples, one sees that the role of artist-curator is now a common and encouraged one. Yet rarely does the artist-curator bring actual works by peers into his or her individual work or exhibitions. (While "A Cosmos," Rosemarie Trockel's 2012–13 antiretrospective, aligned with Gerber's practice of using other artists' work in a monographic show, her art is less reliant on this conjunction.) What connects other artists to Gerber is not just the invitation to collaborate but the word that joins Gerber's name to that of each of his collaborators in announcements and didactics: *with*. What kind of power relationship is conveyed by this preposition? Does it imply that the individual contributions are difficult to suss out; or does it imply a spatial alignment, that two things are connected but can never fully be joined into one?

The notion that many hands "made" a Gerber at the artist's behest, a concept more slippery and multiplicitous than the idea of Rauschenberg's openness to participation, for example, lends Gerber's practice a sense of the social: His works often come together in large part because of his ability to network, which may involve reaching out to artists he knows only from afar or asking Rhona Hoffman whether he can intervene after her Chicago gallery's Sol LeWitt show by putting up a *Backdrop*, on which artist Kehinde Wiley can then install *his* show. Gerber ingeniously

uses the very premise of LeWitt's ephemeral wall drawings to his own ends, painting over LeWitt's colorful work with his own monochrome white in order to show the work of a third artist. That piece, from 2010, helps us to consider what it means when one artwork is "on top" or "in front of" a Gerber: He has a keen ability to hold both viewer and artworks at a slight remove.

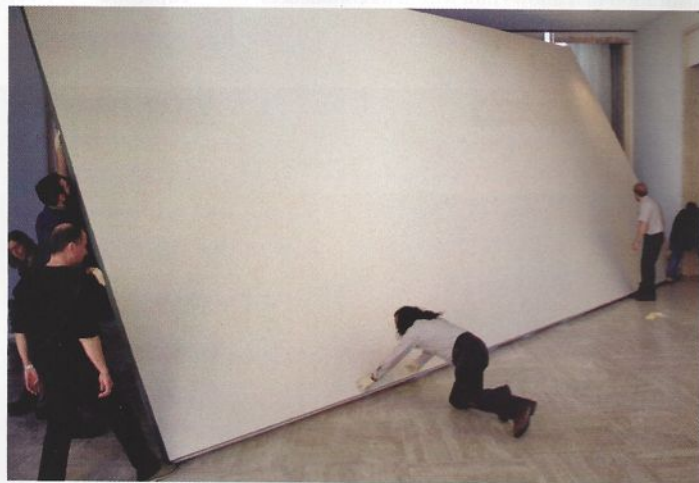
An amalgam of artists also can be found in the works' media lines (as in the recent works that repur-

pose Buren's remainders). Gerber's *with* seems philosophically akin to a particularly trenchant work by Louise Lawler—whose practice aligns with Gerber's in a multitude of ways—staged for her 1982 solo show at New York's Metro Pictures: an "arrangement" (the term itself loaded with both financial and curatorial implications) of five works by gallery artists to be sold as one unit, with Lawler slated to receive a commission on sale, privileging her as art consultant over artist. Lawler repurposed artworks into a "prepackaged



Above: Gaylen Gerber with Heimo Zobernig, *Backdrop/Untitled*, 1990, n.d., background paper, particleboard, Styrofoam, carpet. Installation view, General Store, Milwaukee, 2004. Photo: Gaylen Gerber and Tom Van Eynde.

Right: Installation of Gaylen Gerber and Stephen Prina's *Backdrop/Galerie Max Hetzler (detail)*, 2002, Art Institute of Chicago, 2002. Photo: Gaylen Gerber and Tom Van Eynde.



product,” yet her own artistic identity was also on the line; Gerber’s actions similarly keep the commercial/personal binary spinning perfectly in place.

By looking to a sampling of the artists Gerber has worked with, one can clearly see that he has an affinity for those who challenge conventions of display, market, or form yet are equally known for their pleasing aesthetic sensibilities. These include Diane Arbus, Will Benedict, Lynda Benglis, Angela Bulloch, DAS INSTITUT, Liz Deschenes, Amy Granat, Barbara Kruger, Zoe Leonard, Albert Oehlen, Richard Prince, David Robbins, James Welling, Christopher Williams, and B. Wurtz. Such groupings point to another canny strategy: Traveling in numbers as a way to defy institutional expectations.

Gerber continues to pressure (with a gentle insistence) the astonishing persistence of the monographic survey *and* the continued frisson of collaboration—not only its easy detour into market-minded hand-holding but also its tense, even antagonistic interplay. Gerber’s *Backdrops* and inclusionary strategies slip through institutional loopholes by banking on the knowledge that contemporary art venues will most likely be compelled to follow what an artist proposes (even if begrudgingly). Gerber does so with a softness of touch, a sort of tender yet ambivalent embrace of the institution that allows him within its confidences. His

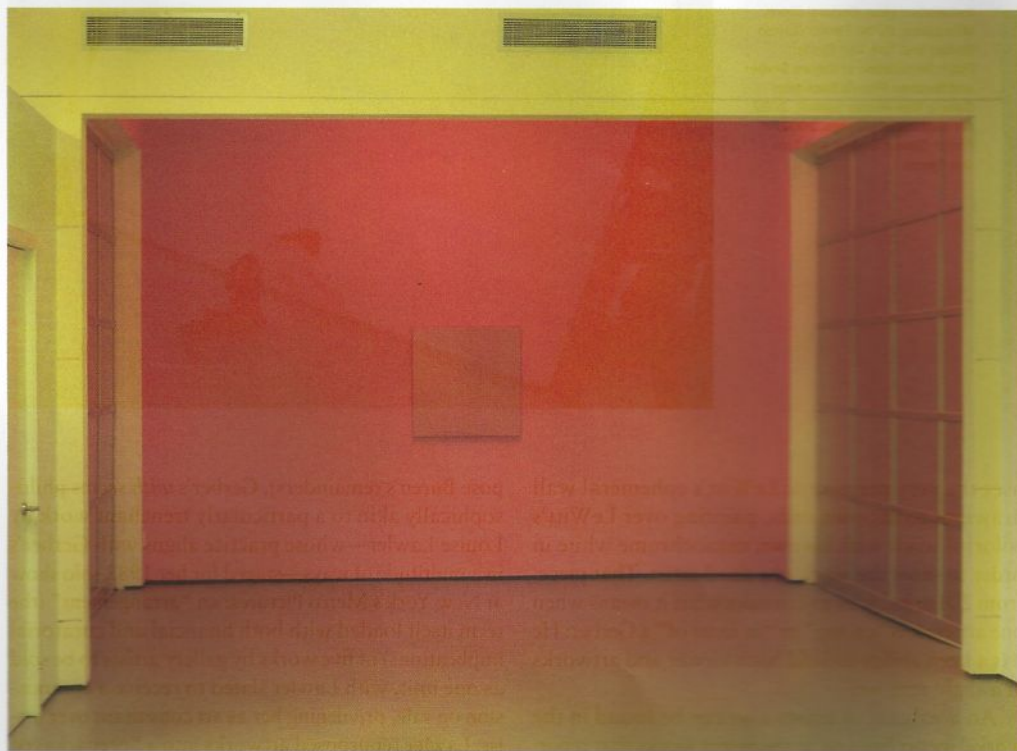
methods are a subtler version of “making visible” the systems of institutional power when compared, say, with Christopher D’Arcangelo’s anarchic provocations of soft power, such as his 1975 action in which he chained himself, shirtless, to the doors of the Whitney Museum, barring entrance to that year’s Biennial. While Gerber’s quiet gray canvas and its hangings at the 2014 Biennial didn’t exactly require police intervention, the dialectical enmeshing of reverence for and rupturing of institutional display was palpable.

AFTER YEARS of working in and with the background, Gerber has recently moved a little closer to center stage, literally coating artworks, ancient artifacts, and commonplace objects with his characteristic gray (and white, too) in his newest *Support* works. In his 2012 exhibition at Wallspace, a petite Lucio Fontana edition, a resplendent twentieth-century Makonde helmet mask, and a 1960s Joe Colombo–designed pipe all interacted under layers of oil paint to form a somber scenario that had the unexpected impact of a gut punch. While the objects may have been covered in a veneer of oil paint, their original shapes and surfaces remained visible and even *otherworldly*, befitting Gerber’s aesthetically pure yet multivalent universe. Gerber’s most recent turn functions as a capstone—perfectly stabilizing what he has been

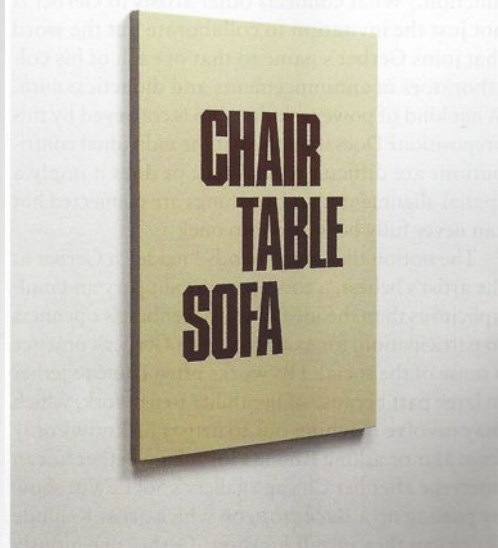
building for the past thirty years, subtly stacking on the history of the readymade, appropriation, identity politics, and Conceptualism.

Tellingly, there is more of Gerber himself present in the work than ever before, whether through his careful coating (which in some cases, quite literally holds the object together), the overhead paid for these collectibles, or the selection of the objects themselves—a series of transactions that has transformed Gerber into a quasi connoisseur of antiquities. Though seemingly random, these areas of interest (Assyria, imperial Japan, early-twentieth-century America) are united by each object’s unique claim to thingness—why something is shaped the way it is, how it has aged, what purpose it originally served. Some of these objects, such as leftovers from a Rirkrit Tiravanija installation, reveal where Gerber has been and what he’s been up to. The *Supports* each contain a specific cultural value, underscoring the various intended functions of the original objects, which include such curiosities as Americana memory jugs, faux Nazi scalps from the set of the movie *Inglourious Basterds*, a Lobi three-legged figural stool from Burkina Faso, an Egyptian burial mask, and a headless rubber chicken found in an alley behind Gerber’s house.

Though the works may appear to be the product of cultural and temporal displacement (one might



From left: Gaylen Gerber, *Untitled (Clear Sky)*, 1991, reframed 2009, gelatin silver print, Plexiglas frame fabricated from a souvenir from Daniel Buren’s *Crossing Through the Colors*, a work *in situ*, 2006, 31 1/2 x 31 1/2". Installation view, White Flag Projects, Saint Louis, 2009. Photo: Gerber Studio. Gaylen Gerber with Kay Rosen, *Support/Room A*, 2004, n.d., oil and enamel sign paint on canvas, 28 x 20".



even be tempted to sound the “artist as ethnographer” alarm here), Gerber levels culture indiscriminately, employing these many objects, primarily tools and instruments, in concert with his layers of paint. By covering what we might recognize from movies, museums, and thrift stores in opaque gray or white, Gerber creates enough distance to allow room for personal introspection and a reimagined viewing experience—even at the risk of iconoclasm or disrespect. Here one begins to get a firmer grasp on Gerber’s nuanced touch, his prodding of objects until their meanings become fugitive.

Gerber’s challenge to the conventions of individual production might seem at odds with his own production of discrete objects. Yet his dual endeavor is perhaps a true reflection of the fate of the critique of authorship and institutions today: Critique always seems to lapse into wanting to have one’s cake and eat it, too. Any oppositional gesture—as Theodor W. Adorno and, more recently, Andrea Fraser have reminded us—is inherently and inevitably co-opted. Gerber’s highly specific cultural objects, seeming to pulse within their skins of gray paint, appear to be the perfect incarnation of this paradoxical bind. By

addressing how we receive art, whether by melding two paintings one on top of the other or giving new purpose to hallowed artifacts, Gerber has pushed the ways in which we understand artistic collaboration and cooperation, so that anywhere one looks within his oeuvre, one is surrounded by many voices, techniques, movements, locales, and, unsurprisingly, artworks. In 1970, Gilbert & George famously declared, *TO BE WITH ART IS ALL WE ASK*. You get the sense Gerber feels the same way. □

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Above: Gaylen Gerber, *Support*, n.d., oil paint on toy car (unmarked, wood, twentieth century), 5½ × 3½ × 3".
Below: Gaylen Gerber, *Support*, n.d., oil paint on *Siège (three legged figurai sto)* (Lobi, Burkina Faso, twentieth century, bronze), 10 × 20 × 8".



Above: Gaylen Gerber, *Support*, n.d., oil paint on Joe Colombo’s *Optimal, Model 121*, (1969, produced by Butz Choquin, Saint-Claude, France, 1970), 5½ × 1½ × 1½". Below: Gaylen Gerber, *Support*, n.d., oil paint on rubber chicken (unmarked, United States, latex and pigment, twentieth century), 3 × 17½ × 4".

