

ARTFORUM

"Public Fiction: The Conscientious Objector"

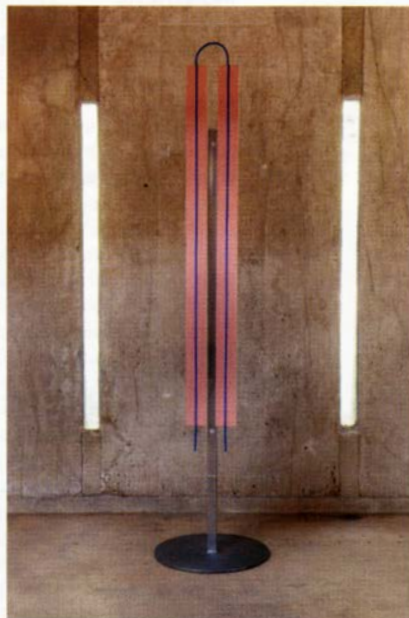
MAK CENTER FOR ART AND ARCHITECTURE,
SCHINDLER HOUSE

Curated by Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey and Lauren Mackler, "The Conscientious Objector" burrowed into Public Fiction's host institution, the Schindler House—an erstwhile modernist's home and studio in West Hollywood, the heart of the culture industry—as an apt setting for an exhibition about the role of refusal. Works by Sam Gilliam, Anthea Hamilton, Suki Seokyeong Kan, Lucy McKenzie, and Dianna Molzan constituted models of the organizers' call for "acts of resilience through 'nonparticipation' and elliptical routes, in contrast to more blatantly sociopolitical forms of resistance." To this end, one first encountered in the foyer Hamilton's *Leg Chair (John Travolta)*, 2010:

a translucent sculpture of bent legs on tiptoes, splayed like a vaginal Rorschach. That the Perspex limbs encased, as if in amber, postcards of the work's namesake only added to its surreal erotics of abjection: The work offered a body to be consumed and another on which to sit. Furniture and prop, it was an apt segue to Dianna Molzan's untitled clique of stick paintings, 2012– (here reunited for the first time). Elongated into tall, thin rectangles, the paintings were scaled to the erect human body. Standing upright on rods that extended from circular bases, they evoked easels with the paintings still on them as much as protest banners without declarative content.

Nonparticipation, then, is understood as the occupation of space on one's own terms, with the expectation of finding the possibility of alternative modes of dissent: confusion, anecdote, humor, and abstraction. This methodological heterogeneity extended to the structure of the project beyond the work installed for its duration,

Dianna Molzan,
untitled, 2012,
oil on canvas,
artist-designed
Plexiglas-and-steel
stand, 62 × 10½".
From "Public Fiction:
The Conscientious
Objector."



since the venue was also a backdrop for an unusually wide-ranging series of intermittent events and satellite projects, including a dialogue about the show in American Sign Language directed by Todd Gray; a publication edited by the Serving Library and Public Fiction (the titular roaming project space and journal, hosted temporarily by MAK); and a series of artist-made commercials for public television and other accessible platforms. A supplementary set of programs involved public conversations in which the artists shed their performative pretenses and directly engaged the audience. This latter series was willfully out of sync with the more oblique commercials, which refused narrative and sold nothing. Rosalind Nashashibi's, for example, depicted a man getting dressed from the legs down while children bicker offscreen; Martine Syms's was set in a beauty shop, its camera trained on a workstation crossed with a lock of synthetic blonde hair.

Each of these opportunities for engagement or entertainment proliferated points of entry to the exhibition itself and insisted that one not be the secret decoder to any other. To be sure, there were a lot of contributions—words and pictures, still and moving—concretized into rounder things, which intersected but didn't cohere into a single message or outcome. Some components, like Gray's performance, might have gone by unseen even by those in its midst; he intended for it to disappear into the other unscripted (if no less ritualized) conversations being had around it. Others hung proudly and prominently while saying nothing; among these was Gilliam's *Bounty*, 2016–17, a giant horizontal painting on two panels. Covered with broad, monochromatic swaths of Kelly green and faint citron, and crowned by two contiguous gray triangles, it is geometric abstraction at its most assured and also its most reticent, eschewing imagistic or didactic politics for something uncompromisingly obdurate in its aesthetics and ideology. If public address was at the project's core, these and other pieces posed relevant questions for our time: How and to whom does articulation travel, and what might its effects be once it arrives? If the show suggested a return to civil disobedience, it never settled on one strategy but rather kept open the possibility for mutiny, wherever it might materialize.

—Suzanne Hudson