

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

## ARTFORUM

### *CLOSE-UP: James Merle Thomas on an untitled 1979 work by Maria Nordman*

By James Merle Thomas (October 2011)



Maria Nordman, untitled, 1979, mixed media. Installation view, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA.

**SOME YEARS AGO**, Rosalind Krauss used Frank Stella’s and Ad Reinhardt’s black paintings, respectively, to discern “two different minimalisms,” the latter of which amounted to a Zen-like examination of perception, “an expanding, pulsing awareness of the visual process itself.” In short, Krauss carefully distanced Stella and the New York Minimalism he influenced from the work of Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and others who, as she saw it, acknowledged Reinhardt’s metaphysics, privileged an atmospheric California sublime, and embraced an unmediated sensory plenum. Published in 1991, Krauss’s essay (“Overcoming the Limits of Matter: On Revising Minimalism”) reinforced what virtually every history of Light and Space has seemed to emphasize since the late 1960s. Today, the Light and Space corpus is positively striking in its homogeneity. One finds endless recitations of experiments in sensory deprivation, chronicles of hours spent in Ganzfeld chambers and the perceptual phenomena of one’s own pupils dilating in hazy, “molecular” light—the stuff of perceiving oneself perceiving, of dematerialization and disembodiment. It seems all the more necessary now to more accurately discern the subtle range of differences and practices that have been collapsed into this “second minimalism,” which associates Irwin and Turrell, as well as Doug Wheeler, Eric Orr, and, invariably, Maria Nordman.

For decades, Nordman has remained elusive, difficult to contextualize or even, for that matter, to locate. Born in the former East Germany, she attended the University of California, Los Angeles, worked for architect Richard Neutra, and established a studio practice in Santa Monica. Despite creating a series of legendary installations based on ambient sunlight, two-way mirrors, or darkened spaces in the late 1960s, Nordman has steadfastly and justifiably refused connections to Irwin, Turrell, and other artists who similarly engaged with perception under

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confining or isolated conditions. How, then, might we reconsider Nordman's practice on its own terms, as a singular enterprise? One place to begin might be with an elegant exhibition at the close of the 1970s, precisely because it established some of the salient distinctions that serve to contextualize Nordman's work in relation to that of her contemporaries.

On June 21, 1979, visitors began lining up at 4:30 AM to enter the Berkeley Art Museum. From 5:00 AM until 9:00 PM, the building was host to a steady stream of guests, many of whom had camped outside the museum in anticipation of the event. Timed to occur on the summer solstice, Nordman's untitled contribution to "Andre, Buren, Irwin, Nordman: Space as Support"—a succession of four solo exhibitions—lasted only one day. The artist covered the surfaces of the museum's first and second levels with a white, matte, vinyl-adhesive covering, which reflected the light normally absorbed by the dark concrete. She then removed filters from the skylights and covered the glass doors in red, blue, and green gels. All artificial lights remained off for the entire day, such that the only source of illumination was shifting ambient sunlight. The first visitors found themselves wending their way through dim, shadowy galleries; as the sun rose, the museum's massive, cantilevered concrete balconies slowly revealed their edges and contours. By midday, direct sunlight illuminated the interior, and by sundown, the transformation had completely reversed itself. The few extant photos documenting the exhibition are mesmerizing, capturing the museum in rarely seen conditions of over- and underexposed natural light. Firsthand accounts suggest that walking across the floors elicited Ganzfeld-like perceptual effects: intermittent visual flickering and a disorienting uncertainty as to one's own position in space. With an absolute economy of means, Nordman temporarily transformed Mario Ciampi's gray modernist bunker into a vast, luminous expanse. Most discussions of the work emphasize how sunlight effected the slow, sensuous transformation of the museum's interior; the cover image of the March 1980 issue of this magazine, accompanying Germano Celant's essay on Nordman's work, suggests the mesmerizing quality of this process, as the lambent gels faintly illuminate an expansive darkness. But equally important is that all museum doors, including emergency exits, remained unlocked for the duration of the show. So while the artist imposed a new (or rather, quite old) sense of time on the institution, her granting of unimpeded passage subtly transformed the typically closed space of the museum into an open, and therefore truly public, domain. In the accompanying catalogue, Nordman emphasized this via a series of logical, prooflike statements defining her "work"—which included the actions of those visiting the museum—as a condition of co-presence: "I propose to give the unknown speaker the first word. The work could be of any person who is present. Any person in the presence of any other person. (The possible presence of one or more unknown persons is a public instance.)"

Here, Nordman diverges considerably from her California-based colleagues, as well as from the other artists in "Space as Support." In each of those three cases—Irwin's lattice of fluorescent lights, Buren's axial stripes, and Andre's modular redwood blocks—the artist used a focused study of materials to produce an iterative, sequential logic, which structured the space of the museum. Nordman instead intended her piece as a foundational experience, one conjuring Husserl's lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), a world not yet defined by scientific measurement or "objective" time. It is in the lifeworld—a subjective world, a kind of natural attitude or

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immediate experience that is pretheoretical, an experience not beholden to knowledge—that Nordman’s public encounter situates itself. And reading Nordman’s work as such a ground or foundation brings us into contact with the politics of perception. “Any person in the presence of any other person”: This co-presence is the foundation not only of the lifeworld but of a corresponding publicness—not one that manifests itself through the granting or withholding of access, but one that is an inalienable, always already existing condition of experience. In this way, the work functions as a prism, enriching phenomenological readings of her art from the ongoing multiple *Cloth-House* (brightly colored, monochromatic felt cloaks that, in Nordman’s own words, allow people to “give housing to each other”) to the fugitive studio pieces of 1967. These, like Turrell’s darkened rooms, involved entering a closed space and noting both perceptual change and a dialectics of inside and out. But Nordman has always crucially used such porosity to suggest a social valence. Instead of privileging solitary or confined experience, she has consistently explored a dynamic realm of intersubjectivity where subjects accrue meaning just as figures in the optical field do: both against their backgrounds and in relation to one another. Nordman has explicitly designated these “prepared places,” to use her term, not only for “persons” but for “the next person,” suggesting a perpetual condition of co-presence.

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