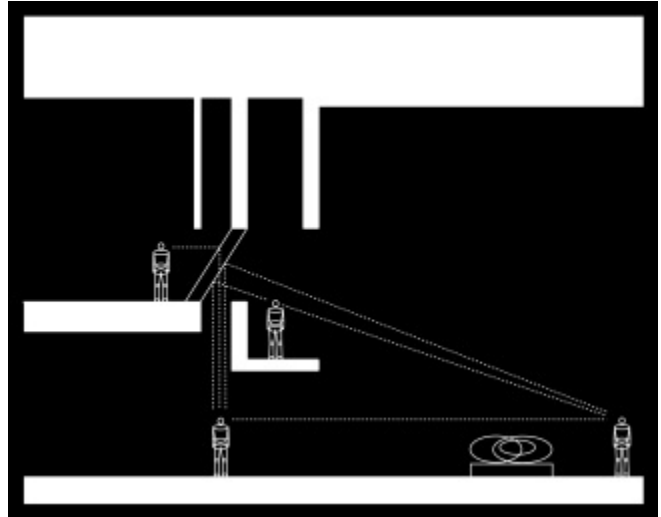


MODERN ART NOTES

Tyler Green
May 18, 2011, 9:11 am

Baltimore commissions Sarah Oppenheimer

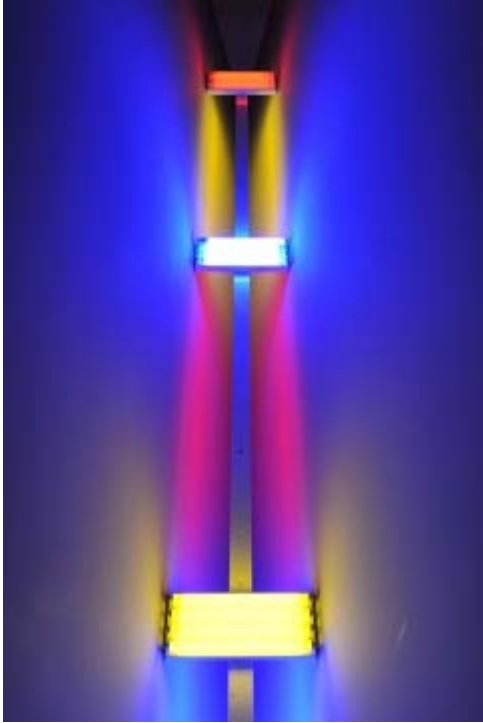
Last night the Baltimore Museum of Art's board of trustees approved the commission of a major, permanently installed Sarah Oppenheimer for the BMA's West Wing for Contemporary Art galleries. The museum is currently renovating its contemporary spaces as part of a \$24 million project that will also include the remodeling of its American and African galleries. The museum expects to debut the Oppenheimer when it re-opens its contemporary wing in spring 2012. [Image: Sarah Oppenheimer, untitled project via the Baltimore Museum of Art.]



Oppenheimer's work typically uses architectural interventions to examine how we perceive space. Her installations often create disorienting or puzzling illusions that lead the viewer to question what s/he thought they knew about their position or orientation within a building. Oppenheimer's work is on long-term view at Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory, a 2008 installation which I reviewed [here](#) and [here](#). Oppenheimer has recently created work for the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and the St. Louis Art Museum. Oppenheimer, who teaches at Yale and who is currently a 2010-2011 fellow at the American Academy in Rome, maintains [her own website here](#).

The Baltimore commission will visually link two parts of the museum that are walled off from each other: The museum's West Wing contemporary galleries and the museum's Cone Wing, where Baltimore's extraordinary collection of Matisse and early modern art is shown. (The two parts of the museum are joined only by two awkward sets of doors.)

Oppenheimer plans to make a cut in the floor of the top level of the BMA's contemporary galleries, spaces in which the museum will show its collection of abstract expressionist and color field paintings. The viewer will be able to look down to the first floor of the BMA's contemporary wing. This part of the piece will likely be made with both an undetermined type of metal and mirrors. (The museum said that a final cost for the project has yet to be determined.)



Oppenheimer will also make a second incision into the wall between the Cone and West Wings, near Baltimore's excellent site-specific Dan Flavin, *Untitled (To Barnett Newman for "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf")* from 1993-94. [Image at left, via Flickr user Paul Brady.] From the contemporary wing, the viewer will see into the Cone wing. At a distance from the Cone wing, the visitor will see a red, yellow and blue geometric on the wall — created by light reflected from the Flavin. That the light is enabled by a cut in the wall will be evident only as the viewer gets close to the piece.

The BMA work will be Oppenheimer's first permanent commission at a major American museum. Instigated by Baltimore contemporary curator Kristen Hileman, the selection of Oppenheimer for a major permanent installation is notable because American art museums have typically given these kinds of commissions to straight white men: Think of the Sol LeWitts and Alexander Calder that dot dozens of American museums. For

example, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has been particularly active in commissioning and installing major works under director Michael Govan, such as works by Tony Smith and possibly by Michael Heizer and Jeff Koons. (Lone exception: A less prominent but site-specific 2008 Barbara Kruger in the elevator and elevator shaft at the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA.) Given the scale at which Oppenheimer is comfortable with working and the way her interventions highlight museum collections and buildings, the Baltimore commission should be the first of many.