



This spread and next: Sarah Oppenheimer, *W-120301*, 2012, aluminum, glass, existing architecture. Installation views, Baltimore Museum of Art. Photos: James Ewing.

CLOSE-UP

Mirror Travel

JULIAN ROSE ON SARAH OPPENHEIMER'S *W-120301*, 2012

BREAKING THROUGH A WALL might have once seemed like a radical gesture, but by now it has become something of a cliché. From the pockmarked cavities of Lawrence Weiner's 1968 *A WALL CRATERED BY A SINGLE SHOTGUN BLAST*, to the open gap in the facade of the Pomona College art gallery left by Michael Asher's now-legendary 1970 removal of its doors, to the ragged cuts through abandoned buildings that defined Gordon Matta-Clark's entire oeuvre, the hole in the wall was a mainstay of pioneering post-Minimal and Conceptual practice. And the basic gesture of piercing an architectural surface continues to appear in many guises today—one could cite Urs Fischer's bravura attacks on walls and floors or Monika Sosnowska's jagged gash in the Museum of Modern Art's ceiling (*The Hole*, 2006), to name just two examples. The recurrence of such breaches and ruptures over a span of almost fifty years is striking, as is their ability to accommodate the shifting meanings and intentions of such a wide range of artists.

But more striking still is the constancy of architecture's role in such works, which typically characterize the discipline according to three general principles. First, it is a priori—a given, found condition—and this order of things means that any interaction between artistic intervention and architectural frame is inevitably unilateral. Second, architecture is thin. It is treated as a skin or a membrane to be cut through like so much paper, a permeable surface on or against which an artist's actions can be read. It is thin conceptually, too, in that it offers little resistance as a medium, not so much influencing the planning or execution of an artwork as simply recording it. It is something to be operated on, not engaged with, and as such a certain robustness is lost—architecture's own complexities and depth, its protocols, intricacies, and processes, become essentially irrelevant. Third, architecture is stable, and again this attribute is both literal, in the sense of providing the material substrate for the work's very existence, and conceptual, in that its boundaries and status as a discipline must be understood as fixed so that it can serve as a reassuring horizon against which to locate radical art practices. The

irony here is that while the idea of interacting with architecture has often played a key role in both the critical reception of such strategies of puncture or penetration and the discourse of artists employing them, architecture can hardly be characterized as an active participant in these exchanges: If slightly more than a straw man, it is still a rhetorical foil.

BUT THIS MAY CHANGE with a new kind of perforation at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Or rather, three of them, all to be found in the museum's contemporary wing: one in the ceiling of a second-floor gallery, one in the wall of a third-floor gallery, and one in the wall of an adjacent rotunda, together comprising the work *W-120301*, 2012, by New York-based artist Sarah Oppenheimer. For visitors to the museum, the first hint that these openings are unusual is their unexpected depth. Each is a precise, four-sided aperture, lined with a black, milled-aluminum sleeve. But in each case, the sleeve extends so far back into the surface it penetrates that from many angles it appears to fill the opening entirely, with the result that initially the punctures look more like inky black planes hovering in front of the wall or ceiling than actual gaps in the building's surfaces. On the third floor, which houses postwar abstraction by the likes of Ad Reinhardt and Frank Stella, it is easy to mistake Oppenheimer's work for another black monochrome. You don't look *through* Oppenheimer's apertures so much as *into* them; rather than directing your gaze, they seem to absorb it.

As you move closer and peer inside, the reason for this depth becomes clear. All three cutouts are in fact openings into a single contiguous volume embedded within the museum's floors and walls. This realization is jarring, largely because the existence of such space is unexpected; it is not an architectural interior, rather a thickness and interiority within the building's surfaces themselves. But such spaces are in fact much more common than we think. Simply put, buildings have guts: the tangle of pipes, wires, insulation, ducts, columns, and joists that hold them up and render their spaces usable and inhabitable. And museums have more than most. Their needs for specialized lighting and precise temperature and humidity

control require elaborate ventilation and electrical systems, all accommodated by thickened floors and walls: The BMA's contemporary wing, built in 1994, has a gap of almost four feet between the third-level floor slab and the second-floor ceiling below.

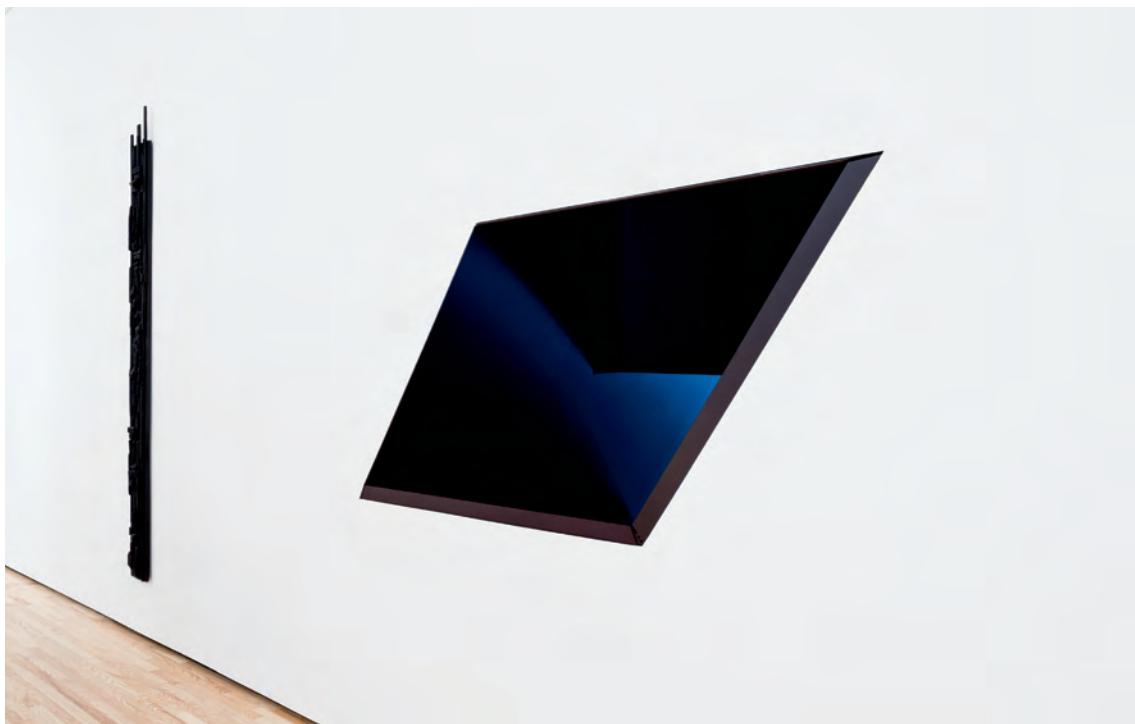
Expansions or renovations tend to thicken buildings, too, as the inevitable mismatches between new and old structures create lumps, bumps, and odd pockets of space. And since John Russell Pope built the original structure in 1929, the BMA has seen no fewer than nine additions. *W-120301*—Oppenheimer's first permanent work in a museum—was commissioned as part of the most recent renovation, which created another gap, this one resulting from the slight misfit between the existing circular rotunda marking the contemporary wing's entrance and a new rectangular gallery added next to it.

Into these two conjoined gaps, one in the floor and one in the wall, Oppenheimer squeezed her work, in a clever exploitation of architecture's thickness. But placing it there was no easy task. She was invited to contribute her piece when the renovation was still in its planning phases, and a lengthy dialogue with the architects (Marshall Craft Associates, based in Baltimore) was required. This give-and-take included countless conversations and exchanges of drawings, as her ideas both tested and responded to the limits of the architecture. Ultimately, compromises took place on both sides—for example, the artist shifted the bottom portion of her piece to avoid a major structural beam, while the architects widened the gap between the rotunda and the new gallery wall to better accommodate her preferred geometry. This fluidity entails a bilateral engagement with architecture, as the spatial complexity of the building itself becomes a crucial part of the work. In some ways Oppenheimer's reliance on architecture is a relinquishing of control, and it requires an admirable courage. But the rewards are obvious: Architecture is no longer a priori, but a dynamic partner in the evolution of the work. And because the exchange is specific and pragmatic, at times almost mundane in its minutiae, architecture can no longer be conceived in abstract or rhetorical terms.

The most salient aspect of Oppenheimer's piece is not that it reveals things about the space you didn't know, but that it highlights the disjunction between what we know about a space and how we actually experience it.

In the end, the site constraints necessitated a volume shaped something like a Y. The bottom of the Y corresponds to the hole in the second-floor gallery ceiling; one arm opens onto the rotunda, and the other onto the third-floor gallery. All the sleeves are different lengths and are angled so as to make it difficult for viewers to actually see all the way through the inserted volume, from one museum space into another, because to do so requires finding a vantage point from which two openings line up.

But oddly, when you look inside, you have the opposite problem: You see through too much, too many times. Take the third-floor opening, a rhombus roughly three feet tall and seven and a half feet wide. If you stand a few feet in front of it and look straight ahead, your field of vision is subdivided almost exactly into four smaller diamond shapes. The upper left and lower right are black, as if you're just looking at the matte aluminum, while the other two seem to be open gaps, through which you can see the space beyond. Strangely, though, in the upper right you see wooden planks, recognizable as a gallery floor just like the one you are standing on, while through the lower left you see cast concrete, clearly belonging to the wall of the rotunda you just passed through. Somehow these two views have been collapsed or collaged onto the same visual plane: You are looking ahead and seeing both forward and down simultaneously. And this disjunction is acutely magnified when other museumgoers pass through your field of view; looking out at the patch of floor at more or less eye level, you are staring straight onto the tops of visitors' heads as they traverse the gallery below. Such absurdities multiply as you walk downstairs to look into the other openings. An open stairway hugging one wall of the double-height rotunda provides the primary circulation between the second and third floors, and the rotunda aperture is located on a landing midway up this stair. Pausing here and looking into the hole, you might see a visitor strolling nonchalantly across the ceiling above you, apparently unconcerned by the fact that he or she has been flipped upside down. On the second floor, gazing up into the hole in the ceiling, you find yourself looking



out through a hole in the wall; a painting you saw hanging vertically in the third-floor gallery now seems to hover horizontally above you.

HOW ARE SUCH DEVIATIONS from the laws of optics possible? When it eventually occurs to you, the answer is almost embarrassingly simple. A single mirror, tilted forty-five degrees from vertical, forms the top surface of the cavity onto which all three apertures open. When you look at it, your gaze is reflected ninety degrees, so that you look ahead and see down, or vice versa. The perplexing juxtapositions result from the coexistence of these reflected views side by side with the views that actually do go straight through the cavity in whatever direction you happen to be looking. There are no visual cues to indicate this arrangement. Oppenheimer has used laminated distortion-free mirrors (complete with low-iron glass to minimize color shift) and carefully manipulated the light levels around her piece to eliminate the obvious differences that might give away the reflected views.

Yet for all its power, this illusion is clearly not meant to be sustained indefinitely. The work is paradoxically almost diagrammatic in its lack of clarity. You eventually puzzle out the actual relationship of the spaces, relying heavily on your spatial memory, deducing what you can from your views of other visitors, recognizing materials and matching them to spaces you remember, and reconstructing the sequential movement that brought you from one viewing aperture to another.

Oppenheimer's work thus offers a kind of counter-intuitive spatial shortcut, linking spaces that aren't typically joined visually or experientially. Yet while it is not difficult to *understand* that the three spaces incorporated into her work are technically adjacent, it is impossible to *experience* them as connected. Even if the openings are all within a few feet of one another in space, they are widely separated in time. The rotunda stairs do not directly connect the second- and third-floor galleries, so depending on the path you take through the contemporary wing, your views of the three openings might be separated by several minutes or more. The most salient aspect of the piece is not that it reveals things about the space you didn't know, but that it highlights the disjunction between what we know about a space and how we actually experience it, a gap often forgotten (even suppressed) in the normal course of occupying a building. Think of the typical apartment dweller or high-rise-office worker, obviously aware of—but rarely really contemplating—the bizarre reality that the feet of a neighbor or coworker might be less than an arm's length above, or another's head the same distance below.

As discomfiting as they may be to confront in real space, however, both the simultaneous existence of multiple spaces in a single plane of vision and the reflection of views from one plane to another are endemic to the logic of architectural representations. These resonances are not accidental; Oppenheimer mentions architectural drawings as a major influence on her work. And yet there are several fundamental



differences between the spatial operations carried out by Oppenheimer's piece and those used to construct an architectural drawing. In the latter, the technique of reflection serves to reinforce certainty; reflecting a given point across the ninety degrees that distinguish a plan from an elevation is what allows that point to be placed in precisely the same location, relative to any other point in the building, in both drawings. This works in the conceptual space of drawing, where "views" are only abstract vectors to be manipulated through the principles of geometry. But in the physical space of Oppenheimer's piece, the logic of reflection is upended because it is carried out on embodied perspectives. Your gaze may shift ninety degrees, but of course the location and position of your body do not shift with it, creating a fundamental uncertainty resulting from the disconnect between the space of standing and the space of looking.

Architectural drawings also have only two possible relationships to points of view: They have none at all, as in a plan, section, or elevation, which provide extra-experiential, at-a-glance understandings of a building's spatial order; or they have a single one, as in a perspective. Either way, time cannot be acknowledged, whether because it is totally foreign to the logic of the drawing or because it has been compressed into a single instant and frozen. As a result, architectural representations have always struggled to address the continuity and duration of spatial experience. New software has promised increasingly

fluid representations by liberating architecture's geometry from the limitations of two-dimensional techniques. But the computer's capacity to work in dimensionless, atemporal digital space is too often used to remove design even further from experience, with the result that the translation of these computational experiments into built objects still tends to produce disappointingly static forms that work only as partial instantiations of the complex operations that generated them.

Oppenheimer is not trying to make an object, however; she is constructing an experience. (The weakest part of the work is also the most object-like, a protrusion framing the rotunda aperture that is awkwardly reminiscent of the kind of faceted geometry that has become a cliché of contemporary architecture, at least since deconstruction. Not coincidentally, this is the only place where her piece had to be fit into a preexisting architectural opening, a rectangular window in the atrium's thick concrete wall.) She has created a paradoxical hybrid: Each of her three spatial shortcuts offers a single-perspective view with the spatial simultaneity of a plan or a section. The same shortcuts establish an equally dualistic temporality. Each individual aperture compresses time, bringing experientially remote spaces together. But it simultaneously expands time, unfolding the building's spatial order across your memory as you mentally retrace your movement through it.

Nor is this spatial order itself unaffected. When you look into one of *W-120301*'s apertures and see

other bodies inhabiting space in impossible ways, the normally stable reference points of floor, wall, and ceiling become unmoored, seemingly open to strange and intriguing new modes of interaction and occupation. This transformation is particularly profound in the case of the floor, which as the inescapable surface of occupation is usually left untouched by even the most radical artistic or architectural experiments. Still, the piece does not produce a total or permanent destabilization: It thoughtfully engages, rather than overwhelms, the complex bodily and mental processes that enable the understanding and inhabitation of space. This approach is particularly relevant today. Within art, *questioning* or *exploring* spatial experience (as in Minimalism, post-Minimalism, and much early video and performance) has been increasingly replaced by *producing* or *manufacturing* it (as in any of that wide range of contemporary practices described as "immersive," "environmental," or "atmospheric"), while architecture itself has shown a desire to move beyond merely producing iconic forms to generating emotions, desires, and spectacular effects on an urban scale. But Oppenheimer, literally working inside architecture, has found a new place for a new kind of subject. She offers a welcome reminder that architecture—and by extension the space of today—need not be experienced in a state of distraction, or worse, an induced fog of affect, but can instead be explored in a condition of uncertainty and attention. □

JULIAN ROSE IS A SENIOR EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*.