

## EMPTY SET, or The Thing and the Social Naught

Ask the writer about the anxiety that he experiences when faced by the blank sheet of paper, and he will tell you who *is* the turd of his phantasy.

It is to this object that cannot be grasped in the mirror that the specular image lends its clothes. A substance caught in the net of the shadow, and which, robbed of its shadow-swelling volume, holds out once again the tired lure of the shadow as if it were substance.

—Jacques Lacan, *Subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire*

### Titles and Marquees

A title, as the artist Scott Lyall has pointed out in his unpublished notes to *A Dancer Dances*, often functions as a founding or “empty set” required for the constitution of a body. This is the opening ruse of display. The title that authorizes a display organizes production along the lines of an empty sign. ‘Untitled’ provides no shelter from this necessary condition of meaning. Analogous to Jacques Lacan’s grammatical concept *point de capiton*, literally ‘quilting point,’ a title punctuates the otherwise endless sliding of signification. Within the context of art this means the endless process of production of objects and discourses that are on occasion exhibited. It can be said that there are a minimum of necessary *points de capiton* required for the “illusion of a fixed meaning.” This for now then is *Empty Set*. I’ll return later to this

concept of the ‘quilting point’ and how it relates to the encounter staged in the exhibition *Gallery Social*.

I have come to think of certain aspects of *Gallery Social* in terms of theatrical metaphors. This is not an arbitrary import. It is immanent to the form of the exhibition itself, recalling the classical opposition between theater’s living reality and representation’s distancing mimetics. This opposition has its origins in Greek thought and still determines the parameters of even the most resistant artistic practices. I will also draw loosely on some concepts in Lacanian psychoanalysis, as well as a few ideas theorized by the philosopher Alain Badiou. One wouldn’t know it if one were to review the art of the past forty years but, contrary to the notion that artworks exemplify philosophical truths, a work of art resists absorption into existing discourses even as it steals from them. Broadly speaking, the concerns and terminologies of philosophy and psychoanalysis, while sometimes running parallel to art, are often contrary to the goals of artists. What these disciplines provide is a means of shifting one’s habitual ways of thinking while offering an exterior language through which to understand the consequences of already established works.

The spatial and temporal aspects of *Gallery Social* are best framed in terms of sets and scenes. The notion of a theatrical set has also led me to Alain Badiou’s use of set theory to elaborate on a theory of the subject and of his concept of the ‘event.’ I will return to what set theory’s basic axioms might contribute to an understanding of critical reflexive art. For my purposes I use ‘set’ to designate those spatial, material, or conceptual conditions established at a specific site. In other words, it is a rigidified state of things that precedes one’s arrival. I realize that this definition makes it nearly synonymous with context, but the difference in inflection is crucial for me. Where context links to a philosophical tradition in which the world was understood as a text to be deciphered, the metaphor of the set, and its slippage into mathematics, allows me to reconsider that framework in terms of effects, variables, scenarios, and provisional structures. To overlook a set of conditions is merely to conventionalize it

as a natural element of the scenery, or to attempt to repress its irrepressible influence.

The scene, as opposed to the set, designates the spatial and temporal elements that the set frames. It is an obvious fact that artistic production now occurs across a broad array of surfaces, from publications, to artist's multiples, performances, guided tours, urban interventions, historical reenactments, entrepreneurial ventures, fictitious personas, conversations, and electronic archives. This is not to mention the various disciplines artists have come to burlesque and hybridize—artist as sociologist; artist as sanitation worker; artist as prostitute, docent, dance instructor; and artist as artist in the case of Gareth James. Each of these scenes borrows a part of its identity from the others such that no one can be said to stand alone as its own founding set. In that case, this writing marks another scene for *Gallery Social*, an opportunity to recast its parts under another marquee.

If there are two figures *Gallery Social* calls onto the scene, they are (1) the specific and presumably latent conditions of the site of display, and (2) the possibility of a limited social engagement.

### The Scene Obscene

Entering the exhibition the viewer encountered two walls occupying the center of the gallery, one wall originally designed and built by the architect John Zissovici, the other a duplicate, one face of which was left uncovered revealing its steel framework. The original wall was constructed to rotate around a support column making the gallery amenable to a variety of uses by the architecture department. Hartell Gallery, where the exhibition took place over the course of five days, is a multi-use space, at times a gallery, a showroom for student models, a classroom, or university event space. It also serves as a hallway linking the two wings of Sibley Hall and as the only access to the college dean's office. So the audience potentially included interested parties who had come specifically to see the art on display, and those who were

merely passing through on business. The gallery's centrality to the School of Architecture provided an opportunity to destabilize the disciplinary identity of the display. Some placed it as architecture, others art.

As a side note, the moveable wall's functionality *for* other purposes is precisely what allows it to disappear into the architecture of the space. It is only when the wall ceases to act like a functionary that it becomes noticeable as a part of the setting. This poses an interesting problem (for some an opportunity), as any artist exhibiting in this gallery must first decide what attitude he or she will display toward the wall.

To be specific, the existing wall is attached to a support column by a 9-foot-long steel bar. This bar is located off center, allowing it to roll on two wheels to separate the gallery into two spaces or to block off the exterior windows to create an undivided, square gallery. The model wall that I constructed with the aid of assistants measured 24 feet by 4 inches by 8 feet, and rested 10 inches above the ground on cinder blocks. Like the existing wall it was attached by a black steel bar fixed to an existing structural column, in this case by clamps and metal plates. I scored the steel frame at points along its length to allow for a controlled break. Once cut, the wall appeared to be in a state of half-collapse as if it had been under pressure or struck by a great weight. The height of the cinderblocks left the wheels dangling less than an inch from the gallery floor, so the construction retained a certain distance from the architecture of the site. Consequently, the wall was differentiated from the architecture, appearing to be *in* the space without necessarily being *of* the space.

This distinction was also achieved through some other very practical decisions that appeared as if they could have been executed by a stagehand. A few clamps and cantilevered supports held the whole tenuous construction in place. Nowhere did the work pierce the architectural skin of the gallery. It was vital that every element exhibit a certain provisionality that not only related to the rather limited run of the exhibition, but also to the potential instability of the structure, of the gallery as a

guarantor of 'social' exchange. By analogy, it was also emblematic of the viewer's own precarious status within the scene. The stage lights supported by the original wall were also attached by clamps in the same manner. A small, freestanding assembly was positioned between the two walls. There was a sense that the entire set could be struck and carted off at a moment's notice without leaving more than a trace of plaster dust.

The two walls formed a parenthetical set, lit as if for a theatrical performance. In the center of the lit area was to be found the relatively small assemblage of objects whose status, like the wall, was forced into an irreconcilable tension between stage prop, sculpture, and architecture. The prop forms a comical object-lesson in built structure—a heuristic device for architects. Ten bottles of German lager supported a large gray cinder block on which were placed two beer coasters and a half-full or half-empty pint glass (depending upon your general outlook in these matters).

This tableau was arranged to indicate a space of potential and retrospective action without the demand or even expectation that any action needed to take place. No text was provided to direct the viewer's actions and no explanation offered elsewhere in the gallery. If the viewer decided to enter into the glare of the lights, she was left without a script, gazing down on a beer coaster whose photographic insignia returned her attention to the original conditions of the site, Zissovici's wall and an empty gallery. She, or another viewer watching her, might have then noticed her shadow cast in multiple onto the surface of the wall. The overall effect suspended the space between the terms of 'exhibition' and 'performance.' As in any opposition, one term reproduces and legitimizes the identity of its other. For every scene, there exists an offstage, or *obscene* element, which the scene excludes but nevertheless marks.

theanybodywhoever

I want to return to the little obscene elements of exhibitions often overlooked by those seeking the real scene of meaning—titles and ephemera. As I suggested above, the name *Gallery Social* was intended to function as a certificate of credit that the exhibition itself couldn't possibly deliver on. It might have appeared ironic to those who observed that each 'certificate' contained the unique imprint of a 'zero' in the form of a beer stain. A monoprint on each card! It may also have been noted that the post card-size screen prints were not cut and distributed to individuals in an egalitarian manner but were hung uncut as full sheets, thwarting their collectibility as unique tokens.

The circular stain was the first clue to the critical reservations the show might exhibit toward the often positivist presumptions of social art. I should note here that my contention with the concept of the social doesn't stem from a suspicion of it as such, but as it functions under the current rubric of neoliberalism. The term is widely debated, but I refer the reader to the definition given by the critic Isabelle Graw: "a social order in which nearly all social relationships and aspects of life are regulated by market mechanisms." (Graw 127) Like Graw, I would extend this notion of 'market mechanism' to encompass the production of cultural, and symbolic, as well as monetary capital. As Graw points out, trade in cultural capital is also a trade in bodies: A celebrity has little else to offer besides her self.

The concept of the social has become the token of a number of large-scale exhibitions over the past few years, the most recent being *the anyspacewhatever*, curated by Nancy Spector at the Guggenheim in New York. The title of the exhibition is a quote, chosen by Liam Gillick, from Gilles Deleuze's book *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Deleuze describes the 'any-space-whatever' as a "perfectly singular space which has lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connections of its proper parts, so that the linkages may be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible." (Spector 16) Here Deleuze was writing specifically about cinematic space,

but he might just as well have been describing market conditions in a neoliberal society. Deregulation and the shift to a financialized marketplace of pure transaction offers the speculator an infinite number of opportunities to participate. Those opportunities not only include investments in goods and labor, but in individuals as well. Investors have been able to purchase stock in David Bowie since 1997. Captions can be very instructive. The collapse of the distinction between product and body under neoliberalism is expressed in miniature in Spector's own observation that Rirkrit Tiravanija, one of the artists participating in *theanyspacewhatever*, often includes "lots of people" in the medium line of his works. (Spector 17) While I am not accusing Tiravanija of latent neoliberal sympathies, this represents a detail view of the risks art runs in potentially converting social value into exchange value, something virtually unavoidable when committed art engages a socio-moral imperative *without reservation*.

### Empties

I'll borrow for a moment Alain Badiou's own appropriation of the concept of the 'empty set' from mathematics. It is axiomatic in mathematics that pure zero be singular and non variable. In set theory there can be only one empty set; one does not say "an empty set," but "the empty set." This naught is required for there to exist the multiplicity of all other elements and sets. Put another way, it is the condition for all identity, for all *multiples*, of a set.

As I implied at the beginning, this pure zero is already implicated when one assigns a title to a body. Here is where Badiou's conception of individual subjectivity can shed some light. He states, "The subject of an artistic process is not the artist (the 'genius,' etc.). In fact the subject-points of art are works of art. And the artist enters into the composition of these subjects (the works are 'his'), without our being able in any sense to reduce them to him." (Badiou 45) In other words an artist functions much like a title; he is, properly speaking, the founding void that generates the works. The

works refer back to him as a shadow masquerading as substance. The artist-subject is thus conceived as the effect of the ongoing process of self-production and negotiation rather than as a preexisting entity, or even a *one*, fixable at any point.

The zero stains on the printed matter occur as the result of a mechanically repeated activity with a rather pub-lick medium for the communication of ideas. The artist, like a title stamped onto a collection of heterogeneous objects, gathers everything into the semblance of harmony called the subject. This paradox that the circular stain poses to the material concreteness of the block is indicative of that subject.

Let's do the numbers. If we assume a twelve-pack, two bottles are missing, presumably the two imbibed in the process of making the publicity. Elsewhere in the installation there is a flat-footed mathematics, an accounting for 0s and 2s. Two missing bottles, two coasters, a stain, two holes in the cinder block, two walls, two columns, an artist, et cetera. The 2s could be counted as two identical 1s if it weren't for the missing pint glass. The same could be said of the two walls if the differences between them weren't made so evident. This is what keeps them from being twins; rather, they are a pair.

The relationship between the element of block and that of the new wall could be expressed so,

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{not} \\ \{ \} + (1 + 1) \\ \text{but} \\ \{ \} + 1 + ) \end{array}$$

The numbered pair (1 + 1) slips from the domain of information into a graphical mark [ ] ), which is to say that numbers and bodies (graphic, material, or biological) condense in a drama of the virtual and the actual, between naughts and pairs. This

‘drama’ (which in the Greek is ‘to do’ or ‘to act’) of information describes a kind of provisional state that decompletes the set as an “illusion of fixity” in any singular scene. Recognizing the naught in the apparent immanence of phenomena, of things as they appear to us, assigns *another scene* to the set. In the production of a social space (in a gallery or otherwise) this shared, obscene lack is precisely what is often lacking, or more accurately, what is repressed in the process of adding to the stockpile of identities and differences. Indeed, for social collectives to function they must collectively forget this lack. This other scene can be understood as a “discontinuity with the real,” which serves as one of Lacan’s more succinct definitions of the subject. (Lacan 299) I intended this encounter with *Gallery Social* to be a true, perhaps collective, *mise en abîme*. The very moment in which a viewer leaves the position of spectator and enters the stage as a participant she encounters her shadow cast onto the wall. At this ‘quilting point,’ a *nothing* happens.

### Wall-eyed Realism

Michael Asher’s 1974 exhibition at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles is exemplary of a critical theater that took as its goal the admittedly didactic strategy of revealing the apparatus of exchange lurking behind the dispassionate display of objects. His intentions were clearly in the service of disclosure, “The dealer’s prime function is to commodify the work of art, to transform the work’s aesthetic use value into exchange value.” The abstracting process of financial exchange, or at least one site of those processes, was made visible, shifting the attention from the objects to processes.

Asher’s work is an example of a critical tactic aimed at removing the ideological veils that distort a true view of the world. The idea is that underneath the layers of social and cultural interaction there lies an even deeper abstracting and instrumentalizing economic base. If the gallery space is taken literally this seems accurate—these transactions were being conducted behind a wall—but the topological language of

the critical realist leads him to an impasse. The work assumes an audience for whom this operation would be revelatory, presupposing in them a collective false consciousness. Marx's phrase to describe ideological consciousness was, "They do not know it, but they are doing it." What perhaps was at the time a surprising gesture that pulled back the curtain on the concealed aspects of financial transaction underlying the art world has now become an exercise in what Slavoj Žižek calls, after Peter Sloterdijk, cynical reason. Žižek accuses the Left of holding onto this "constitutive *naïveté*," arguing that illusion is not on the side of knowledge, but rather "on the side of reality itself, of what people are *doing*." (Žižek 32; my emphasis) In other words, it is on the side of *action*, or drama, precisely what social practices are claiming to support as 'living theater,' where the illusion occurs. This makes impossible the overcoming of the "separation which existed between the artist and the audience," and demonstrates the dubious nature of this lapsarian logic. (Stephen Willats in Kester 100)

Dominant culture will always find a way to retain its veils. In Žižek's reconstruction of the structure of belief, "the moment we see [something] 'as it really is,' this being dissolves itself into nothingness or, more precisely, it changes into another kind of reality." (Žižek 28) Consider here the neo-conservative's language of transparency and accountability appropriated from the Left. By removing the wall Asher simply resets the stage.

Rather than illuminating the underpinnings of abstraction and commodity fetishism, the realist gesture of removing the wall that separates the illusory site of artifice from the real underpinnings of art's commodity status actually creates another kind of illusion, one of closure. The audience supposed in such an artwork is one whose false consciousness requires correction by a trained expert, but in fact is one "who knows very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it." (Žižek 29) This cynical subject has in effect seen it all.

## Cues

Before *Gallery Social* I had been searching for a language to work beyond the impasses represented by such oppositions as passive/active, engaged/autonomous, social/aesthetic, virtual/actual, on which so many artistic edifices have been built. My works *Missing Information* and *Multiples* were highly instructive and might be considered the point at which my thinking shifted from depicting the relationships between facts and their apparently immaterial other, information.

I wrote at the time:

The technical capacity to reduce bodies and events to information manufactures the ideal of an epi-world in parallel to the physical. Qualities such as our perception of scale collapse under the weight of this quantitative world of information, unmoored as it is from material experience.

This statement doesn't do enough, I think, to differentiate itself from the positivist argument that virtual technologies are usurping the influence formerly held by material objects over consciousness. While I can agree with the statement's moral diagnosis—that contemporary culture is ruled by the trade in and flows of abstract information that has distorting effects on consciousness—it relies on the essentialization of the virtual and the material to make its case. It is not difficult to show that the virtual is always accessed through some material supplement, and that any encounter with a material form is governed by imaginary (or virtual) projections not to be found *in the thing*.

The photocopies and prints (all digital and silk-screened images) called *Missing Information* were the first works which successfully introduced a productive doubt as to the oppositional status of an image in relation to the real. *Missing Information* is the story of a knife taken from a wall in which it had been embedded hilt deep, skewering a nearly illegible business card. The title, photographed into the image,

along with the clock face created by the knife handle and its shadow, marked the arrest of time in the fixed image, and the passage of time crucial to the unfolding of the story. A kind of drama developed out of the irresolvable question as to whether the work was a hoax or had its basis in fact. To my surprise, the work produced a small community founded on a doubt, rather than on a truth or a lie. Any answer I offered those demanding to resolve their doubts failed to suture the cut left by the absence of the object. Neither a Yes nor a No satisfied. The extraordinary thing in this drama of absence was that, in discussing the work with others, the 'missing information' sometimes appeared dressed in the costume of the real thing.

Two works followed, *The Beast with Two Backs* and *Financial Relation*. The former is a heterogeneous ensemble constructed from two rough wooden frames and two digital prints on clear film. An image of a man or woman in a long coat, back turned toward the camera, is printed onto the film, one positive and one negative, covering the two faces of the wooden support. The prints restrict access to the shelves of the structure but are transparent, allowing one to see the objects resting inside: two empty bottles of beer, a silk-screened print, and an old postcard depicting the Austrian military uniform worn by Napoleon when he was sent off in exile to Elba. The assemblage is a kind of rebus, a grouping of clues lacking a single code. What does an empty bottle of Rogue beer have to do with a postcard showing the empty uniform of a failed conqueror? Is this object the marker of a rogue statesman run amok, used up, and shipped overseas? Why this collection of empties? Where do we enter the work? All these questions. The History Channel would never turn its back on us like this.

*Financial Relation* is more forthcoming. A standard shipping pallet has been half-coated in gaudy gold glitter and resin, a greenish digital print showing a 12-inch ruler surrounded by a checkered grid rests on its surface. The image of the ruler is enlarged to just over 17 inches, thus the print emblemizes a separation of scale from all physical determinants. Paradoxically, the ruler's standard size is undermined through its re-standardization as information in a digital format. One understands

the digital print as merely one in a potentially infinite series of products whose ideal form exists as information somewhere else. Both *Beast* and *Financial Relation* materialize a commitment to provisionality; they denominate a spectator capable of translating aporia into a productive desire to decode the real abstractions of social relations.

### Trading in Art Social for Social Art?

Here is an obscene question. What if the moral imperative for an active, social art practice is in fact the alibi for its repressed other? Precisely, artistic practice as a highly social form of *life*. This logic would align with the discoveries and constructions of psychoanalysts in which the repressed inexorably returns as a symptom. In this case, hidden in plain view. I say symptom because the social in art has moved into exhibition venues at a historical moment that has seen the successful demolition and dispersal of artist communities outside of them. And the museums and kunsthalls are hardly helping matters. Perhaps this seems counter intuitive, but it is as if the globalization of art markets has only exacerbated the matter. Artists constantly fly from residency to residency meeting for short periods of time while enjoying the frantic appearance of sociality. With the overabundance of venues for social networking comes the incapacity to sustain a localized community in which boring social things happen, such as asking the artist down the hall to watch the baby while you hit the openings. The demand for a social, active art is perhaps then the symptom of a loss on another scene, a wish image that has at best been relocated indoors, and that at worst obscenely speculates in its own protestations.

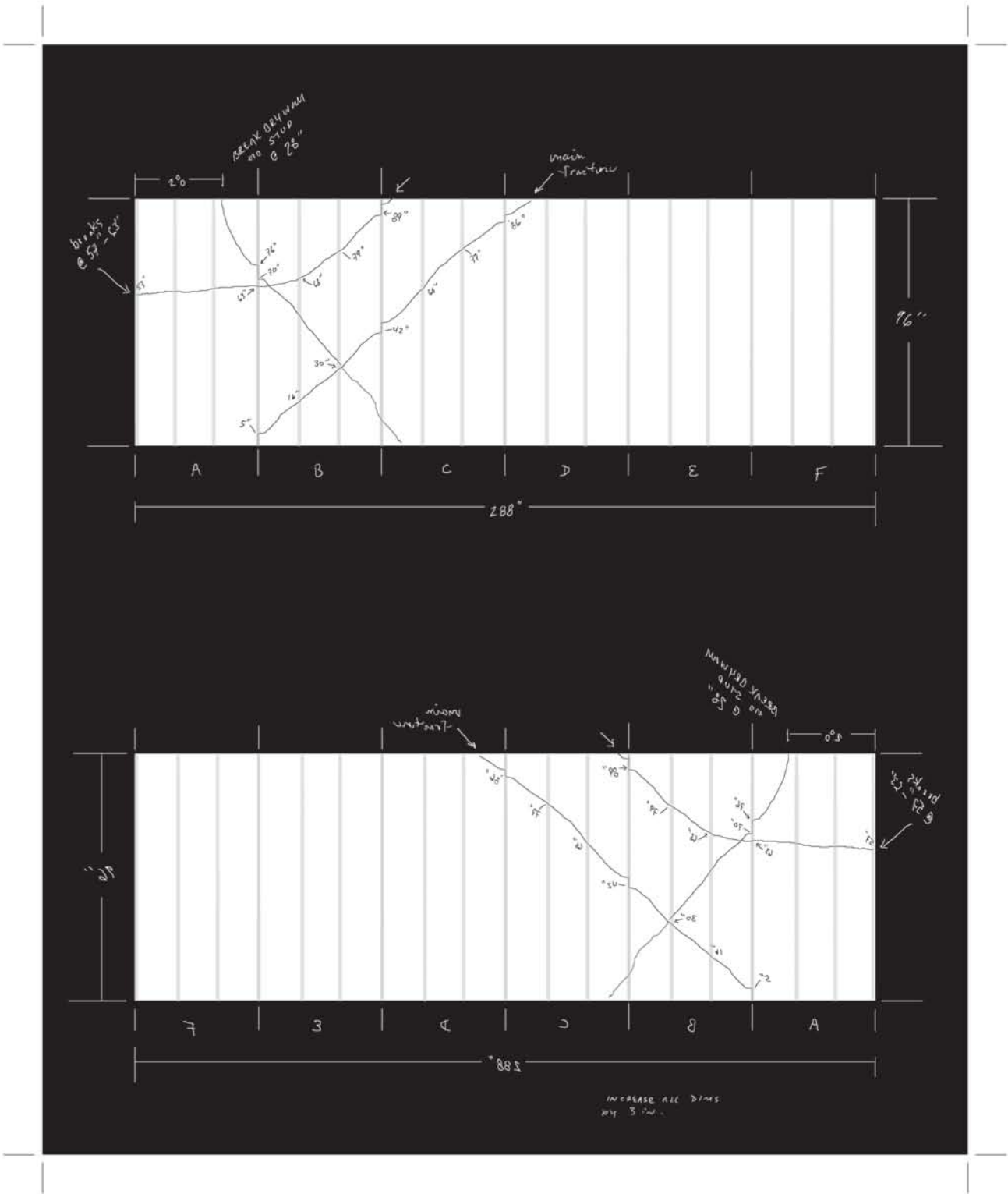
I think of the obscene in relation to *Gallery Social*, both in terms of what is physically exterior to the space created by the installed wall (i.e. backstage) and also in terms of the surplus of meaning resistant to appropriation. An artwork's resistance to interpretation precludes the possibility of its wholly serving as an instrument of political or social identity. Such identities are often taken as the totalizing grounds of

all human relations, as if we couldn't imagine anything else. Rather than suppose a subject as the instrument of a goal whose name is politics, the exhibition offers another point of egress, or better, it offers a nothing for the subject. Namely, that the demand for the political or social in art—in other words for a “living theater” that transcends the division between artist and audience—is in fact a desire for a dramaturge to authorize a *raison d'être* to cover a fundamental lack. This lack is not a gap that, as Jacques Rancière writes, “calls for an expert in suppressing it.” He argues that there must be some mediating material thing productive of a distance between author and audience, understood as equals, that prevents stultification. (Rancière 275–78) A politics of presence stands in contrast to a conception of art whose refusal of presence is precisely what allows it a social and political role, transforming artist and audience into a collective able to appropriate a “forest of signs” for themselves. Lack, when it comes to art and aesthetics, is surplus of meaning. It leaves some *thing* to be desired.

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Exhibition poster for *Gallery Social*, 2009.



Plan for wall construction, *Gallery Social*, 2009.



Installation view, Hartell Gallery, *Gallery Social*, 2009.



Installation view, Hartell Gallery, *Gallery Social*, 2009.



Small assembly, Hartell Gallery, *Gallery Social*, 2009.



Light and small assembly, Hartell Gallery, *Gallery Social*, 2009.