

Sarah Oppenheimer

English



Pérez Art Museum Miami

It is the soul that sees, and not the eye. So goes the maxim by which René Descartes (1596–1650) famously summarized his revolutionary analysis of human optics. The philosopher’s musings on vision were part and parcel of an overarching proposition, which holds that a vast chasm exists between the mind and the external world. This chasm is bridged by the stream of information that we receive from our senses, but because this stream is narrow and our senses inherently unreliable, all we can be completely certain of is the content of our own minds. Taking the prospect of this uncertainty to a rhetorical extreme, Descartes doubted whether we can really know that the outside world exists at all.

It would take three centuries for Western thinkers to undo the knot of Descartes’s skepticism. For philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) and perception psychologists like James J. Gibson (1904–1979), a person is never merely a static observer who passively receives environmental stimuli, as if he or she were watching a film of the world projected on the backs of his or her retinas. Perception instead involves an active process in which the mobile subject registers the features of his or her environment as they become pertinent while stitching them together cognitively so as to create a unified impression of the world. As the mind perceives the world, the world brings the mind into existence, in physical space and in real time. Under this conception, consciousness is as inextricable from one’s body as it is from one’s environment, a condition that Merleau-Ponty described as the “flesh of the world.” How is this idea of an integrated relationship between oneself

and one’s environment complicated when the environment in question is a constructed one? How is it complicated further when that constructed environment is an art museum, a type of structure designed precisely to induce a particular way of seeing? Bereft of nearly any features that might divert our glances away from the objects we are meant to look at, the “white cube” gallery space that emerged around the mid-20th century as the primary architectural tool for the presentation of contemporary art represents a coming to fruition of the techniques of artificially engineered viewing, a kind of machine for focused perception. Over time, as the architecture for art began to change, the art within it continued to evolve as well, taking on new forms, functions, and theoretical positions while demanding more from the museum than what the white cube alone has to offer. Forward-thinking architects have responded in kind, devising new design strategies with which to rethink art’s containment, display, and activation. This coevolutionary interplay—the call and response of art and art space—prompts another question: How should we understand the perceptual dynamics of the 21st-century museum, in the face of newly forged artistic, curatorial, and architectural paradigms?

Sarah Oppenheimer’s work operates amid this thicket of questions. Oppenheimer probes what she refers to as the “feedback loop between constructed spaces and pedestrian motion,” using physical alterations of the gallery space to deconstruct and lay bare the museumgoer’s visual/kinesthetic experience, always with dramatic effect. Oppenheimer’s point of departure involves what she terms “the array”: a series of



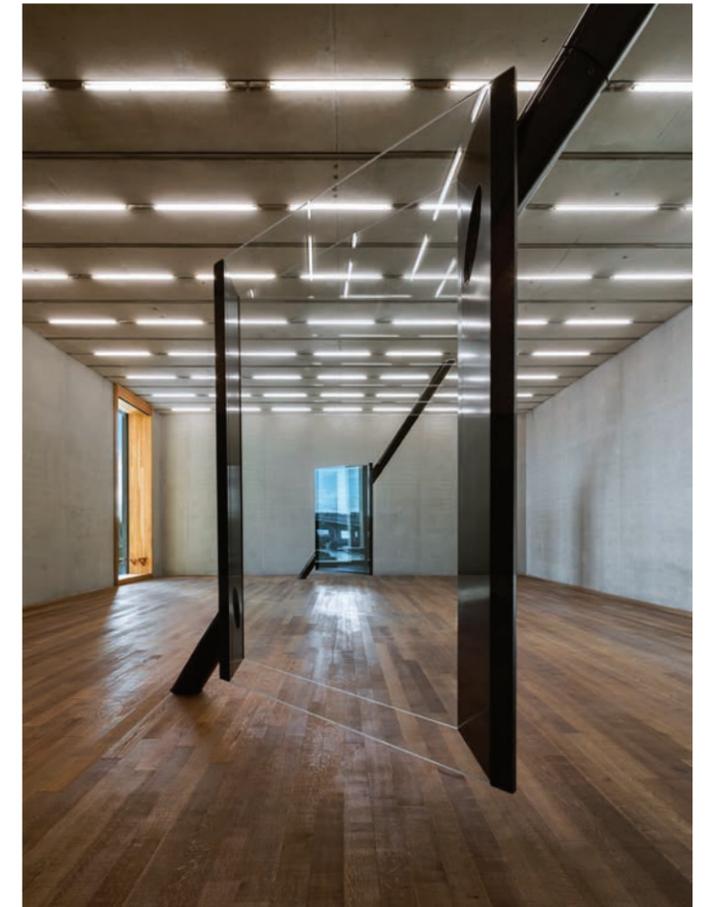
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separate spatial zones that individuals formulate in their minds, at both conscious and unconscious levels, as they make their way through a particular built environment.¹ Walls, doors, and the materials used to articulate a given interior represent the most obvious factors that determine these zones, but the division and subdivision of space within one’s consciousness can be enacted just as powerfully by factors as immaterial as variations in the quality of light, acoustics, or temperature. Though comprised of distinct spaces and temporal phases, the array is experienced by the building’s inhabitants as a cogent, cohesive sequence. For Oppenheimer, this cogency—and particularly the fact that it goes by and large unnoticed—presents the opportunity to generate moments of heightened sensory dissonance, of rupture.²

Oppenheimer has achieved this rupture strikingly in works like *W-120301* (2012). Commissioned as a permanent installation by the Baltimore Museum of Art and developed during the design phase of the institution’s recent renovation and expansion, the project exploits an odd pocket of interstitial space sandwiched between the museum’s existing structure and a new wing. Oppenheimer inserted a sprawling, Y-shaped periscope into this “secret” space, with one end perforating the ceiling of the second floor of the new wing, another piercing a wall on the third floor, and a third puncturing a wall in the airy, concrete rotunda of the original building. From the second floor, viewers looking upward catch an unexpected glimpse of a painting installed on a wall in the third-floor gallery. Viewers on the third floor come across a window that opens out into the rotunda

they have just passed through, alongside another aperture that reveals an overhead view of the wood floor of the gallery one level below. Oppenheimer’s intervention is most disconcerting when visitors positioned at opposite ends of these “wormholes” encounter one another: what may appear at first to be a flat, abstract composition turns out to reveal a living tableau, with one set of viewers watching as bodies seem to float laterally across the ceiling while the other set gazes at the tops of their counterparts’ heads (figs. 1 and 2). The effect scrambles our cognitive x- and y-axes, as if a small section of the earth had somehow rotated.

Beyond the M. C. Escher–like surreality produced by this simultaneity of forward, downward, and upward vistas, *W-120301* elicits a curious realization: though it takes a fair amount of time to traverse the path to each opening, the spaces that the project weaves together are actually directly adjacent to one another. In this sense, Oppenheimer’s intervention does not create an illusion so much as it dispels one. “Think of the typical apartment dweller or high-rise office worker,” writes Julian Rose in a review of Oppenheimer’s work, “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.”³ Oppenheimer makes this sensation vivid while highlighting a basic aspect of how we experience buildings: as a person makes her way through a structure, the various phases along her trajectory become joined together in her memory, creating the impression of a spatial map in



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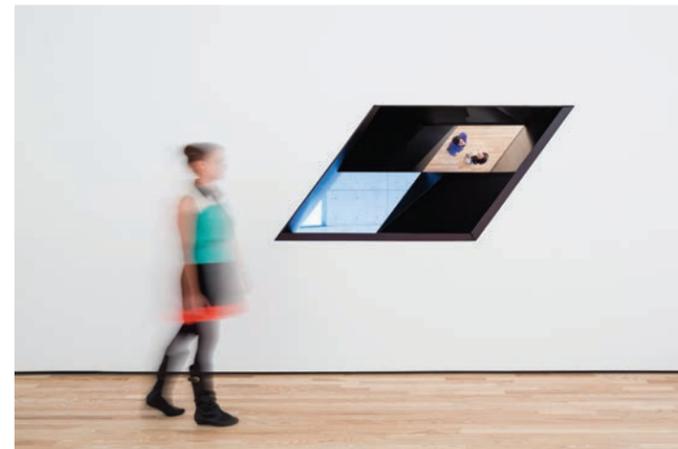
¹ See Sarah Oppenheimer, “The Array,” *Art in America* (May 2014): 40–41. ² Oppenheimer, “I want to make evident those perceptual edits that allow us to maintain a sense of the seamlessness of perceptual experience.” Interview with Alex Galloway, *BOMB*, no. 137 (Fall 2016). ³ Julian Rose, “Mirror Travel,” *Artforum* (April 2013): 242.



which each observed feature rests at the intersection of a defined set of coordinates. And yet, recent research in the field of perception psychology has shown that these cognitive cartographies tend to be wildly inaccurate. Our minds are quite good at establishing networks of regions, at understanding the order in which things lie relative to one another, but our ability to gauge the distances between them proves to be consistently flawed in experimental studies. Somewhat alarmingly, researchers have found ample evidence that our minds not only gloss over, but actively suppress these perceptual glitches; we are hard-wired to feel confident in our mental maps. The spatial discontinuities produced by Oppenheimer's interventions can be destabilizing precisely because we are unaccustomed to being reminded of the extent to which we hurl ourselves through space on the basis of little more than blind faith.

For *S-281913*, Oppenheimer's newly commissioned project for Pérez Art Museum Miami's Meyerhoff Greene Focus Gallery, the artist designed two identical, large rectangular glass boxes that seem to hover in space, each suspended between a pair of dramatically slanted black metal shafts anchored into the gallery's ceiling and floor. Outfitted with a complex system of hidden joints, the shafts allow the glass elements to pivot gracefully on their axes with a gentle push, enabling a variety of configurations. The effects produced by these elements differ greatly depending on the interplay between their positions relative to one another and to the viewer's body. From certain angles, they appear perfectly transparent, their substantial mass belied by an apparent sense of weightlessness and delicacy. From other vantage points, they present an overload of visual information in their reflections. Each element is capable of producing a dizzying reorientation of the museum's distinctive lighting grid from the horizontal plane of the ceiling to the vertical plane of the upright spectator. When arranged just so, the elements function in tandem with one another as a visual relay system, displacing the stunning vista of Biscayne Bay provided by a floor-to-ceiling window situated at the gallery's far right corner so that it meets head-on the gazes of visitors approaching the space from an adjacent gallery (fig. 3).

S-281913 arose in large part from Oppenheimer's fascination with the idea of an architectural "switch," which she defines as any element that intervenes in or modulates the flow of either things (objects, people) or non-things (air, light, temperature,



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sound) across and through a given space.⁴ A switch participates in the composition of the perceptual array, but it does so without physically subdividing space into separate zones with the use of walls or built-in architectural barriers. Switches are flexible, not fixed or static. In *S-281913*, the switch is primarily nonphysical in nature, modulating light above all; yet its dynamic potential is fulfilled through physical interaction. Paralleling Merleau-Ponty's idea of the "flesh of the world," this physical dimension, which represents a recent development in Oppenheimer's production, resonates with the active, bodily aspect of sensory perception.

One of Oppenheimer's many theoretical touchstones on the subject of switches is a 1909 essay by Georg Simmel (1858–1918) titled "Bridge and Door," in which the German philosopher describes his titular subjects as "the forms that dominate the dynamics of our lives."⁵ For Simmel, the bridge represents human efforts to connect the natural with the natural (e.g., riverbank to riverbank), and more generally, the impulse to unify. The door stands for the human urge to "cut a portion out of the continuity and infinity of space"—that is, to separate ourselves from or to divide the world by means of architecture—while still preserving the ability to step back out of this constructed zone at any moment.⁶ Simmel contrasts this freedom to cross back and forth across spatial thresholds with the properties he ascribes to the window, which is akin to the door except that it exists for the sole purpose of looking out, not looking in. With *S-281913*, Oppenheimer embodies Simmel's formulation, proposing the switch as a means to harness at will the individual associations of the bridge, door, and window, or to combine them into a single perceptual experience. When the glass elements disappear into transparency, they function as an open door that redoubles the emptiness of the gallery. When they reflect the lighting grid, they function as a set of closed doors, optically slicing the visitors' experience of the entire southeast sector of the museum into three distinct areas—the gallery in which Oppenheimer's work is installed, the adjacent gallery, and the cityscape outside. When they align to relay the view, the intervention acts as a window that intensifies the building's relationship to its picturesque surroundings while bridging the east-facing view from Oppenheimer's gallery and the south-facing view from the curtain wall that lines the gallery space that the visitor has just passed through.



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Beyond any textual resource, the switch aspect of *S-281913* is also informed by the theoretical underpinnings of PAMM's architecture, which Oppenheimer engaged through site visits and by carefully studying the facility's floor plans. Designed by the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron, the building vigorously encapsulates a fresh proposition regarding the relationship of museums to their surroundings, functioning in its own way as a switch and as a composite of Simmel's bridge, door, and window. The traditional museum model is associated with large, imposing structures, often elevated from street level and rendered in a classical, Greco-Roman style that detaches it from the urban fold. More recent museum buildings (such as Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao) tend toward highly sculptural, aestheticized exteriors, which draw attention at the same time that they reinforce a sense of otherness with respect to the world beyond their allotted parcels. The PAMM building, in contrast, is designed to harmonize with its environment: its broad, stepped, wraparound platform and hanging gardens function together with its numerous glazed passages to draw its surroundings into itself, softening the boundaries between inside and outside, nature and culture, the urban world and the "world of art."

Oppenheimer's notion of a switch that functions as a bridge-door-window hybrid also resonates with the conceptual approach that Herzog & de Meuron applied to the interior layout of PAMM's galleries. The most archetypal typology of museum interior involves what is known as the enfilade system, in which uniform galleries are arranged in linear fashion and separated by aligned thresholds, creating a series of self-

contained spaces that viewers pass through in a preordained sequence. This arrangement is conducive to the presentation of linear art historical narratives, with artworks displayed chronologically and/or according to certain formal categories. Especially in combination with classical architecture, this taxonomic approach serves to convey a sense of the institution's unassailable authority, even as it tends to arrive at a closed-off succession of great men sharing formal influences. PAMM's interior—particularly its six collection galleries—resists such master narratives architecturally. The museum's spaces are arranged not as an enfilade but as a network of open areas of variable size. In lieu of thresholds, most of the entrances entail smooth transitions articulated by staggered walls, resulting in a heightened sense of flow—a kind of sliding from one space to the next. Visitors are free to choose among several possible trajectories through the building—to close one metaphorical door or the other. This aspect of the layout lends itself to displays of art that are organized thematically rather than chronologically, implying a web of interrelated conceptual proposals rather than a linear progression of hard art historical truths. In the way it regulates the division and flow of the spectator's sightline, *S-281913* parallels the patterns of division and flow that animate PAMM's interior architecture. Indirectly, it points to how this architecture wrestles with the ideologies implied in synchronic versus diachronic approaches to art and art history.

It is when we consider Oppenheimer's work against the tacit ideological programs of the architectures it engages that we arrive at its fullest implications. Oppenheimer's interventions prompt us to examine the relationship between art institutions and the civic contexts that sustain them, at the same time that they tease out the ways in which broad sociohistorical patterns can become inscribed into bricks and mortar, concrete and drywall. Oppenheimer achieves these revelations not through illustration or verbal argumentation, but by harnessing the preverbal experience that is sensory perception. At a moment in history when this experience is increasingly mediated through the blue light that emanates from our phones, computers, and TV screens, her work reminds us that even our most fundamental impressions of the world we inhabit require constant, critical questioning.

René Morales
Curator

⁴ The "S" in *S-281913* stands for "switch," while the "W" in *W-120301* stands for "wormhole." The numbers in Oppenheimer's titles refer to a set of variables—including light transmission, circulation, and the orientation of the element relative to the viewer's body—keyed to a chart devised by the artist. ⁵ Georg Simmel, "Bridge and Door," in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 174. ⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

Sarah Oppenheimer
September 30, 2016–April 30, 2017

Sarah Oppenheimer
b. 1972, Austin; lives in New York

S-281913, 2016
Aluminum, glass, and existing architecture
Two elements, 192 x 213 inches each
Courtesy the artist; Galerie Von Bartha, Basel; and
Annely Juda Fine Art, London

Sarah Oppenheimer: S-281913 is commissioned by Pérez Art Museum Miami and organized by PAMM Curator René Morales. This exhibition is presented by JP Morgan Chase & Co. with additional support from FENDI and Funding Arts Network. In-kind support is also gratefully acknowledged from Agnora Glass; All American Floors; AP Precision Machine, Inc.; and Thornton Tomasetti Engineers.

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Biography

Sarah Oppenheimer received an MFA from Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Solo exhibitions of her work have been presented at multiple institutions, including Mudam, Luxembourg; Kunsthau Baselland, Muttenz, Switzerland; Baltimore Museum of Art; Saint Louis Art Museum; Queens Museum of Art, New York; and the Drawing Center, New York. A major solo project by Oppenheimer will be presented in 2017 at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, and in 2019 at MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts.

Her work has been included in group exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; SITE Santa Fe; the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; the Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; and White Columns, New York. Oppenheimer is the recipient of a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Cover Installation view: *Sarah Oppenheimer: S-281913*, Pérez Art Museum Miami, 2016. Aluminum, glass, and existing architecture. Courtesy the artist; Galerie Von Bartha, Basel; and Annely Juda Fine Art, London. Photos: James Ewing. ©Sarah Oppenheimer

5–6 *W-120301*, 2012. Aluminum, glass, and existing architecture. Dimensions variable. Installation view: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2012. Courtesy Baltimore Museum of Art. Photo: James Ewing. ©Sarah Oppenheimer



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