

Escape from Bunker Hill

John Knight
at REDCAT

April 9–
June 12, 2016

“Whoever bends on him/herself the rays of contradiction becomes not a hero but the vanishing point in an old picture.”

Brian O’Doherty
Inside the White Cube

From its institutional charter to its corner space underneath Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Concert Hall, the whole of the Roy and Edna Disney CalArts Theater (REDCAT) supposedly meets the scrutiny of John Knight’s *A work in situ* (2016). The artwork’s threshold is therefore hard to name. Knight’s show could start with the glass doors and undulating, Gehry-esque awning of REDCAT’s 2nd Street entrance. It has certainly begun when, entering the lobby and looking across yards of gray carpet to another set of glass doors and the parking deck beyond, you notice the gallery’s modular wall is drawn shut and labeled “Level 3.” Inside, the space has been styled in the lavender of the building’s P3 parking level. The gallery’s two prominent structural

columns are marked “Row G.” Indeed, if the columns didn’t always give it away, Knight’s dressing-down of the concrete-floored and white-walled box confirms our suspicions: REDCAT and its gallery were once a parking lot.

Is a gallery an architecture? An idea? An afterthought? A caramel-colored baseboard hems the entire REDCAT space from lobby to lounge; Knight has removed it from the exhibition space. Meanwhile he has unfurled the grimy Airwall system that typically only serves after hours or between shows. Knight’s tweaks of the gallery’s awkward details do more than underscore that REDCAT came late in Gehry’s plans; they satirize the space itself.

Across from the gallery entrance, a wall text sites REDCAT within Grand Avenue’s lineup of world-class museums and performance venues—a burgeoning cultural district that, while heralded by Gehry’s Disney Hall in 2003, it took the recent opening of The Broad for Angelenos to notice.¹ Projected above the doors to P3 are slides for REDCAT’s upcoming and past events. For April 9, the day of Knight’s opening, appears only an archival photo of Bunker Hill c. 1970, scraped clean of houses and ready for development. Knight complicates the notion that REDCAT was nothing more than a well-intentioned addition; after all, it’s not philharmonic orchestras that are the vanguard of gentrification, but artists.

It’s artists, too, that remain the petulant critics of their own patrons. A few punny phrases embellishing the gallery point a mild insurgence upstairs to Disney Hall and beyond. Under a fire extinguisher’s obligatory

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red icon, white vinyl on the white wall reads “Additional Foundation Support”; the word “Occupied,” painted on the recessed ceiling’s fascia, recalls Occupy Wall Street and portable toilets in turn. Abutting one of the columns the words “Curb Appeal” evoke parked cars and chintzy flips. Across one wall, in the font that would read “Elevator,” is the phrase “Take It From the Top,” as if to rehearse a band courtesy the wealth of the 1% that floats both Disney Hall and REDCAT. The font Knight uses throughout, A Font Called Frank (the proprietary typeface developed for Gehry’s building), is itself telling: REDCAT, the Disney Hall’s scrappier downstairs tenant, normally isn’t allowed to use it.² So much for trickle-down philanthropy. Yet wherever you cast around—The Broad is too humorless, MOCA too polite, and Disney Hall too controlling—only REDCAT and its CalArts underwriters would invite Knight’s particular self-reflexion, and thereby volunteer as the institutional conscience of the whole district.

REDCAT has been here before. In 2005 the gallery hosted *Facing the Music*, a show curated by Allan Sekula (then a professor at CalArts); the belated and expanded catalogue arrived in 2015, a year before Knight’s show.³ Through commissions from a cadre of local documentarians, *Facing the Music* situated Disney Hall within a range of broader contexts—from the long and sunny history of California boosterism to the construction workers who built Gehry’s project to the storm drains that connect REDCAT to the river. Suffice it to say that the questions of gentrification, civic improvement, and historicism (and the erasure thereof) are treated by *Facing the Music* in much greater depth than Knight’s cursory revelation can manage. Nor is Sekula the only

critic of Disney Hall. The back cover of the catalogue, for example, bears blurbs from two other prominent Los Angeles intellectuals who have contributed to the discourse around Bunker Hill: filmmaker Thom Andersen (also of CalArts) and historian Mike Davis. Knight will not have had to look far for this precession of institutional criticism delivered, as with *A work in situ*, from within the institution itself. Yet for a work ostensibly concerned with restating the forgotten past of a manicured civic center, Knight’s exhibition prefers its own cleverness over the discoveries of others.

Given only the superficial intimation of *in situ* engagement, how are we expected to engage? On the rightmost wall, another ambiguous directive: “Another Way Out” and an arrow indicate an emergency exit in the gallery’s corner. Like the columns, the door is obvious, and ignored. Perhaps Knight means to highlight another architectural redundancy. Perhaps his joke also suggests a conceptual exit, another way out of the hermeneutics of institutional critique—that is, another way out of John Knight.

Pushing open the door, I find myself staring at a brace of drainage pipes in a bright white hallway. To my left, the hallway splits into a stairwell: downward are a few offices, further halls; upward, another set of stairs, utility access, a slop sink, the improvised paint and equipment storage of an impromptu gallery; a freight elevator, a loading dock, and eventually Lower Grand, lit by shafts of light through Grand Avenue above. I know this not because of John Knight, but because between 2010 and 2011, after graduating with an MFA from CalArts (where I was Sekula’s TA), I worked at REDCAT as a gallery preparator. Now, though, I am a critic reviewing Knight’s show. I walk

1. Diehl, Travis. “Veil & Vault.” Frieze Sept. 2015: 27–28. Print.

2. See Bruce Mau Design, <http://www.brucemaudesign.com/work/walt-disney-concert-hall>.

3. Diehl, Travis. “Facing the Music - Allan Sekula.” Objektiv 19 May 2015. Web.

a bit deeper into the building; the staircase is watched over by the prominent acrylic bubble of a security camera. There are more cameras higher on the wall. I wonder if I could in fact follow these hallways around the back of the REDCAT theater, or perhaps over it, to find the parking deck. Instead, I get nervous and turn around.

The door to the gallery is locked from the hallway side. Nearby a second door opens out beside the ashtray near the main REDCAT entrance. I reenter REDCAT, walk through the lobby, down a few stairs, through a set of double doors and into the P3 parking level itself. If REDCAT is an afterthought in Gehry's design, the parking structure is integral. I ride the building's central escalators up to the Disney Hall, then down to P7. The parking levels roll by through big interior windows. A man jogs past me, up the ramp, perhaps to the parking office. I recall trying to reason through bulletproof glass with a clerk at the parking window who eventually told me, flatly, "There is no such thing as a six-dollar refund." A second perturbed attendant finally threatened to have "County" tow my car. What does Los Angeles County have to do with it, I asked. It turns out they own the lot. And the Classic Parking Inc. whose bland monogram graced my salmon-pink gate ticket is a contractor. The scales fell from my eyes. The remorseless pillars of Row G that plunge through REDCAT into indifferent depths were revealed as what they have always been—the very *Pillars of the Institution!*

But where is John Knight? His show perhaps prompts a certain reverie, but the work of restructuring REDCAT's history has been done ahead of *A work in situ*. His gesture is simple: to illustrate the congruency of the sacred gallery and the profane

garage; to direct the viewer to the margins of his show's context. Once there, however, *A work in situ* is only as banal as the world it presumes to reveal. In a city of cars, it should come as no surprise that power takes an interest in parking lots.

Another truism: so long as there are institutions, there will be institutional critique. Still, as the show begins, it must also end—if not in the hidden hallways and colonnaded switchbacks of Disney Hall, if not on June 12, 2016 when the exhibition closes and the gallery is repainted white, then perhaps in the moment its bare minimum of criticality is itself revealed to be as dull as dimly lit concrete. Passing back through the lobby toward 2nd and Hope Street, I step into the gallery one last time. As I examine the width of a purple stripe, painted on the floor like half of a parking spot, a woman carrying a lunch bag walks in the Airwall door, between the columns, out the emergency exit and, without pause, hooks left down the hall.

1

John Knight, *A work in situ*
(Installation view) (2016). Image
courtesy of REDCAT, Los Angeles.
Photo: Brica Wilcox.

2

John Knight, *A work in situ*
(Installation view) (2016). Image
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