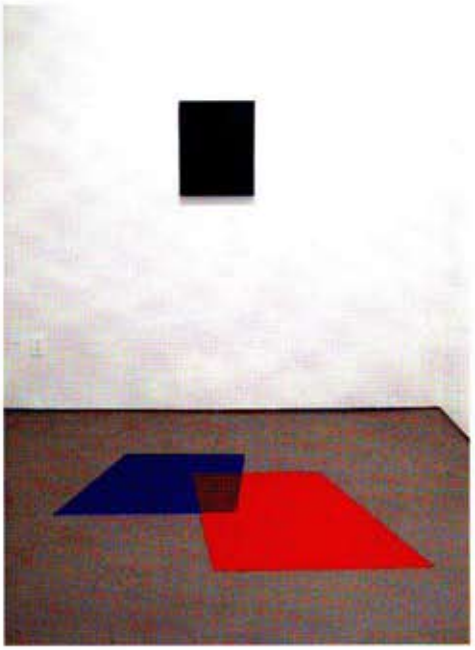
White Columns Annual

WHITE COLUMNS

For the opening only, a video made in conjunction with this past summer's exhibition "Mirror Me" at Dispatch in New York's Chinatown was the lodestar of the fourth iteration of "Looking Back: The White Columns Annual," curated by James Hoff and Miriam Katzeff of the publishing collective Primary Information. The fugacious video, which selectively documented a night of performances organized by Kai Althoff and Brandon Stosuy on July 30, 2009, offered a compact metaphor for the analeptic angle that constitutes the exhibition's premise: Works for the annual are chosen by guest curators based on their own experiences of "looking at art in New York in the previous year."



View of "Looking Back: The White Columns Annual," 2009. From top: Joshua Smith, *Untitled*, 2009; Peter Coffin, *Untitled (Blue and Red)*, 2009.

That summer's evening had been a mess: a tangential, abstruse concatenation of macho and masochistic events (a live concert by Liturgy, pee drinking, a tattooing session) taking place inside the gallery's claustrophobic confines. Most of the viewing could only be done haphazardly, looking in from the sidewalk through the plateglass windows. The video, by contrast, was the director's cut, the intimate narration of an intractable accumulation. It offered a heavily edited (and prettified) "inside" perspective that also rendered the original performances legible: chaos transmuted into a dense, affecting psychological drama, including memorable scenes of a bemused Althoff seemingly undergoing a cathartic ritual compelled by the demands of some sort of clandestine, queer donnée.

But the day after the opening, that chimerical document was gone, replaced by a pile of Xeroxed pages from a zine related to the performance, stacked upon the same A/V cart where the monitor once sat. The video's disappearance underscored the transience not only of performance but also of the record. The viewer's attendant frustration also spoke to the inevitable incompleteness of "Looking Back" as a summary of 2009 in New York.

The show was not all in this key, however. It included moments of simple visual poetry, such as the "shadowing" of Joshua Smith's blue monochrome *Untitled*, 2009, with Peter Coffin's sand floor piece *Untitled (Blue and Red)*, 2009, or the dishabille alliteration of Albert Oehlen's *Ice*, 2008, and Anya Kielar's 2008 assemblage *Black Lines*. There were also quixotic aspects, such as a record player set up with a reissued 1980 twelve-inch No Wave album by then twelve-year-old-singer/songwriter Chandra (who happens to be the daughter of artist Dennis Oppenheim). And could there be a choicer foil for the flat affect of Steven Baldi's painterly reproduction of a 1932 Museum of Modern Art catalogue and Liz Deschenes exhibition announcement than a neighboring, salacious, early-'70s Dorothy Iannone?

But the après view is always a kind of narrative, and this one gave prominent roles to artists who engage with traditions of appropriation or other forms of critical referentiality. (The checklist began with Matias Faldbakken and ended at Cyprien Gaillard, with Seth Price, Lutz Bacher, and Elad Lassry in between.) Such a grouping might seem to align the exhibition with one of New York's multiple, overlapping (and factious) "scenes," but Hoff and Katzeff managed to allegorize and complicate the inherent danger of privileging context over the works themselves. Still, a light box by the collective Reena Spaulings, which itself also runs a downtown gallery, offered an enjoyable, convoluted *mise en abyme*. Plopped self-consciously at the White Columns entrance, it pictured several figures connected to the professional and social networks within which the artists in the show are embedded.

As a sort of coda to the exhibition, Hoff and Katzeff produced a simple photocopied-and-stapled zine comprising "negative" *New York Times* reviews of thirty-eight exhibitions during 2009. The omnibus apparently began as an exercise to see if *Times* reviews had influenced their own impressions. None of the artists in the annual appear in the compilation, which suggests that the curators share some criteria with whatever elusive program animates the *Times*. The pamphlet concludes with a cheeky-seeming but in fact bona fide advertisement for *Artforum*, an emblem, of course, for a very different yet necessarily related project. The apparent transparency of the zine offers an ambiguous comment on the show's own legibility/illegibility; it is a gambit that simultaneously twits and reifies the whole meta-apparatus of critical reception.

—*David Velasco*