

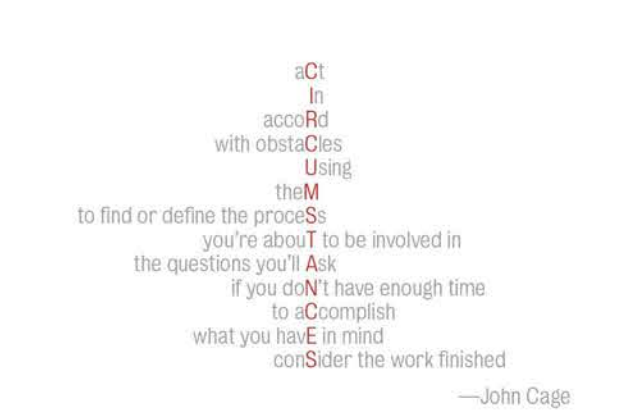


New Work: Felix Schramm



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June 29–September 30, 2007



Music, for John Cage, was an abstract, malleable form, infinite in variety and at its best when punctuated with intervals of silence and subjected to chance operations. Performing in Cage's seminal work *4'33"* in 1952, the pianist David Tudor sat in silence at the piano in an auditorium in Woodstock, New York, allowing the ambient sounds of the room to give the composition its shape, texture, volume, and scale. With the space partially open to the elements, audience members could hear the wind and rain outside as well as the noise they generated themselves inside. Moments of such tension—wherein an ostensibly negative action proves itself a generative one—pervade Felix Schramm's sculptural practice. This practice might also be described as a method of counteraction, whereby the artist weighs the limitations attendant in any given site against any potential form, utilizing the distinct conditions present in the space as a conduit to produce a work of art. Indeed, Schramm has likened his process of working within a set of parameters predetermined by a site to a game of "making a positive out of a negative."¹

For his *New Work* exhibition at SFMOMA, Schramm has been given a set of parameters within which to construct an ephemeral piece: the existing architecture of the galleries and the limited resources of space, time, money, and labor. Within the restraints generated by these conditions he has constructed *Collider* (2007), a site-specific—or site-responsive—sculpture spanning two bays on the north side of the Museum's fourth-floor galleries. Working here for a period of roughly

three weeks, Schramm, with the help of several assistants, has built a sculpture of epic proportion: more than eighteen feet high, fifty-five feet long, and twenty-six feet deep. The materials used to create this construction range from standard building materials such as Sheetrock, plaster, plywood, paint, metal brackets, and miscellaneous bits of hardware to recycled wallpaper and various oddities found on-site. While working on *Collider*, Schramm also mined the Museum's collection of leftover wall paint, which he applied to portions of the sculpture.

Schramm begins with foundational elements and primary shapes—rectilinear walls, framing lumber, and dynamic angles—and then endeavors to undermine these, incorporating chance as a vital tool throughout the process. When beginning a new installation, he first builds a maquette in his studio in Düsseldorf, Germany; this serves as a starting point for the piece, loosely informing the framework it will eventually assume. As disordered as the completed work may seem, it is coaxed into realization with preparative studies made before the on-site building ever begins. Once in the actual space, however, he works spontaneously and organically, continually reconfiguring the piece as he builds it, encountering and overcoming new obstacles that arise during construction. For instance, pieces that accidentally break off existing walls might later become integrated into the sculpture. Schramm describes his method as an additive process, wherein everything is linked and interrelated. If he hits a conceptual barrier while building, he begins breaking away portions of the sculpture in order to create "new possibilities."² This tactic echoes the words of Dada artist Jean (Hans) Arp, an important reference point for Schramm, who wrote in a 1932 diary, "We must destroy in order that the lousy materialists may in the ruins recognize what is essential."³

A Schramm installation can never be seen at once in its entirety, but rather reveals itself gradually, in fragments.⁴ Viewers first glimpse *Collider* through a narrow corridor, where they immediately notice architectural fragments piercing what appear to be the gallery walls. The walls, however, are themselves a component of the work, built by the artist and part of the very structure that penetrates them.



Schramm challenges the viewer to discern where the artwork ends and the Museum's architecture begins. This abstracting of a given architectural space produces an immersive sculptural environment that recalls Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, the allover, grottolike construction built in his Hannover, Germany, home between 1923 and 1936. Like Schwitters, Schramm's construction erodes categorizations of space, obfuscating the opposition that would seem to delimit architecture and sculpture, thus demonstrating new "structured possibilities."⁵

In the gallery adjacent to the corridor, one passes beneath a tilting lateral wall spanning the width and length of the room and slicing through the corridor and far wall. One must walk under this seemingly precarious plane of Sheetrock in order to pass into a third gallery. As threatening or weighted as this structure appears to be, it also seems to defy gravity, producing an effect of fragility and weightlessness. The wall bisecting the second and third galleries acts as the fulcrum of the piece, anchoring it structurally and visually in space. In the third gallery the viewer encounters the last fragment, monumental in scale and appearing to balance at a teetering right angle. This section cantilevers down from the wall to the floor, pivots upward at a ninety-degree angle, and rises up toward the Museum's skylights through the beams in the ceiling. Though securely tied into the walls, the planes of Sheetrock appear suspended, as if caught in a moment of flight.

In order to fully experience this work, one must move through it, under it, and around it, continually changing one's perspective and position; each viewer experiences the work through her own negotiation with time and

space. Time reveals itself as a prevailing "material" in Schramm's work, underscored by the fact that the piece will be demolished at the end of the exhibition. The installation could perhaps best be understood as existing in a "choreographic space of art, [where] meaning is contingent on the 'here and now' of its relation with the viewer as a spatiotemporal event."⁶ Schramm's presentation allows the audience to experience *Collider* as an unfolding and unfamiliar event. Walter Benjamin discussed this kind of encounter with art in reference to Bertolt Brecht's epic theater: "The truly important thing," Benjamin says, "is to discover the conditions of life. . . . This discovery of conditions takes place through the interruption of happenings."⁷ Schramm's work offers a similarly fleeting aesthetic interruption, having evolved out of the conditions from which it was made while at the same time drawing attention to the context in which it exists.

In addition to being an intrinsic material element, time is also a primary subject of the work. *Collider* simulates the natural course of entropy, making the Museum's architecture appear to be undergoing a process of degradation. The second law of thermodynamics, which defines entropy, proposes that "the material world moves from orderly states to an ever-increasing disorder and that the final situation of the universe will be one of maximal disorder."⁸ Robert Smithson, another key artistic precedent for Schramm, likened entropy to a loss of perceptual clarity. To explain the concept, Smithson employed the analogy of a child running clockwise (and then counterclockwise) in circles in a sandbox, one side of which is filled with white sand and the other with black. The more energy the child expends, the less we are able to discern the two sides of the sandbox, as it all eventually becomes a murky gray.⁹ The art historian Rosalind Krauss

has suggested that for Smithson, entropy was a "structural blindness brought on by a simulacral riddle that perplexingly has no place in space at all."¹⁰ This idea also has implications for Schramm's work, which enacts an illusory structural blinding as the work slips in and out of the institutional infrastructure, posing a simulacral riddle for the viewer to decode.

The illusion of a rupture in the existing architecture upends the stability we tend to associate with the institution of the museum. Schramm limns the rarified interior space of the museum and the devastation often witnessed outside it, rendering the gallery a would-be disaster site. The art museum, a place subjected to rigorous climate control, surveillance, and security, is a carefully regulated, neutralizing atmosphere that defies the passage of time, a place where precious objects are housed and cared for in perpetuity. Schramm's intervention destabilizes this pristine, hermetic environment, revealing the museum to be a vulnerable, permeable structure while calling to mind images of buildings ravaged by bombing raids or natural disasters—visions all too prevalent in the recent and distant past (consider the war-torn landscapes of the Middle East and postwar Europe or the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina and the



Soft Corrosion, 2006

2004 South Asian tsunami). In effect, Schramm constructs an arrested moment of entropy, a moment poised between reality and fiction, order and chaos, construction and destruction, permanence and impermanence.

A series of photographic collages related to *Collider* are also on view in a nearby gallery. To make them, Schramm tears photographs he has taken of his past installations and rearranges the pieces to form abstract compositions. These works recall Arp's *papiers déchirés* ("torn papers"), created by arranging torn pieces of paper (sometimes fragments of Arp's own drawings, prints, or gouaches) on a larger support and fixing them with glue. Like Arp, Schramm reconfigures his torn photographs, finding new forms and arrangements in the process. In *Untitled* (2007) one can identify portions of the installation *Irreversible* (2003) on the left and of *Revealing the Pinnacles* (2002) on the right. Schramm's three-dimensional abstractions of space merge in his two-dimensional collages, where he continues his search for new structures.

The exhibition also features *Soft Corrosion* (2006), a sculptural assemblage. Unlike Schramm's architectural interventions, *Soft Corrosion* is a discrete object. A circular abstraction, it is made from found fragments of wood and plaster. The black plaster structure dividing the tall, hollow curve from the solid, low one is a remnant from two previous site-specific installations: *Revealing the Pinnacles*, made for his gallery in Munich, and *Skaptor*, built at Lokaal 01 in Antwerp, Belgium, in 2004. As in Schramm's larger works, there is never a singular experience or vantage point; *Soft Corrosion* too becomes a kind of shifting landscape. It is only as the viewer circumnavigates the sculpture that its individual elements are revealed. Inside the sculpture's core, a turntable plays *Guitarenträume in Gold*, an instrumental record of popular guitar melodies that Schramm found in a flea market in Düsseldorf. The songs, however, are no longer recognizable, as the artist has punctured the record so that it rotates on an irregular ellipse and plays at the slow speed of 16 rpm. The sound is a distortion, an abstraction of the music that renders an experience of spatial disorientation that is central to Schramm's overall practice. Over time, the sound quality of the record will naturally deteriorate, increasing the sense of distortion. Schramm has also added a customized time

Untitled collage, 2007



relay that intermittently stops and starts the record, punctuating the sound with Cagean intervals of silence. As in the site-specific works, where time is seemingly suspended within the gallery walls, it is these interrupted, constructed moments that alert the viewer to the contingencies of the here and now—to the order, chaos, stillness, and noise, and, most importantly, one's own experience of time and space.

Apsara DiQuinzio

Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture

Notes

- ¹ Felix Schramm, conversation with the author, March 16, 2007.
- ² Schramm, conversation with the author, December 4, 2006.
- ³ Quoted in Carola Giedion-Welcker, "Arp," in *On My Way: Poetry and Essays 1912–1947*, ed. Robert Motherwell, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), 119.
- ⁴ Much has been written on the subject of fragmented experience, typically associated with Postmodernism. See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (1987; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 208–31. Giorgio Agamben writes of the need "to reach a new point in the relationship between time and history—that is, first and foremost, a new and more primary experience of time and history." See *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (1993; repr., London: Verso, 2007), 165.
- ⁵ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979), in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 1996), 43.
- ⁶ Jean Fisher, "Conversation Pieces," in *Carnegie International 1999/2000*, vol. 1, by Madeleine Grynsztejn (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1999), 140.
- ⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1973), 162.
- ⁸ Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 7.
- ⁹ See Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 74.
- ¹⁰ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 77.

Felix Schramm was born in 1970 in Hamburg, Germany. He studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence in 1993 and then completed his graduate studies at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf in 1997. Next summer he will have a residency at the Accademia Tedesca Roma, Villa Massimo in Rome, Italy. He is the 2006 recipient of the Piepenbrock Förderpreis für Skulptur, and in conjunction with this award was given a solo exhibition at the Ham-burger Bahnhof in Berlin the same year. Schramm has received three grants from the Kunststiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen, as well as a DAAD fellowship in Tokyo. He has had solo exhibitions at Project Space, NADA Art Fair, Miami, Florida; Konsortium, Düsseldorf; Ausstell-ungsraum 25, Zurich; Grimm| Rosenfeld, New York and Munich; and room 64 of the Chateau Marmont, Hollywood, California. Among Schramm's recent group exhibitions are *Umbau/Modification* at the Neue Kunst Halle St. Gallen, Switzerland; *Four* at Anna Helwig, Los Angeles; *Eigenheim* at the Kunstverein Göttingen, Germany; *Schöne Aussicht* at the Museum Schloss Benrath, Düsseldorf; and shows at Lokaal 01, Antwerp, and the Palazzo delle Papesse, Centro Arte Contemporanea, Siena, Italy.

Works in the Exhibition

Soft Corrosion, 2006
Wood, plaster, paint, turntable, and vinyl record. 49 1/4 x 97 1/2 x 126 in. (125 x 247 x 320 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase

Collider, 2007
Wood, paint, drywall, and mixed media. Dimensions variable
Untitled photographic collages, 2007. Torn ink-jet prints. From 5 3/4 x 6 7/8 in. (14.6 x 16.3 cm) to 18 3/4 x 14 1/4 in. (47.3 cm x 37.8 cm)

All works courtesy the artist and Grimm|Rosenfeld, Munich and New York, unless otherwise indicated.

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Mesostic by John Cage, from "Composition in Retrospect," reprinted by kind permission of the John Cage Trust. First published in *John Cage Etchings 1979–1982* (Crown Point Press, San Francisco, 1982).

Reverse: *Misfit*, 2005/2006 (installation views at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin). Wood, drywall, wallpaper, and paint. 240 x 360 x 180 in. (600 x 900 x 450 cm). Photos by Knut Kruppa and Felix Schramm.

All images courtesy Grimm|Rosenfeld, Munich and New York, and Galerie Thomas Fior, Düsseldorf.