David Ireland WORKS

July 25–November 4, 1990
In Hirshhorn WORKS—a special exhibition program—invited artists choose a site in the museum’s building or on its grounds to create a temporary work of art. The Hirshhorn believes that having artists work on site, using the museum as both studio and medium, not only enlivens and transforms this environment but sheds light on some of the motivations and issues underlying site-specific art—an important aspect of contemporary artistic expression.

David Ireland is primarily concerned with architectural interiors. His turn-of-the-century house at 500 Capp Street in the Mission District of San Francisco is both his major work of art and a central, ongoing context for his autonomous studio-generated sculptural objects. This living environment, a combination of historical preservation and archaeological-like digging for vestiges of the past, is an austere yet elegant and eccentrically worked space, filled with remnants of previous residents and poetic found objects remade. A more recent undertaking is 65 Capp Street, several blocks from his home. In contrast to the sense of time and aging present in the Victorian-era house, in the new building, which he designed and built from the ground up, Ireland created an architectural/sculptural space that fuses the modern Minimalist aesthetic with a vernacular vocabulary based on industrial materials. The structure now provides housing for artists participating in the Capp Street Project, a non-profit artist-in-residence program that commissions temporary, site-specific pieces. The following text is edited from an April 1990 interview with the artist.

Ned Rifkin
Chief Curator for Exhibitions

NR: Your house in San Francisco’s Mission District is your largest and most consuming work. What made you decide to create a work of art out of the place where you lived?

DI: Actually, the house, as an artwork, happened with no prior thought. I never intended to create an art piece. After spending a year in New York, I moved to San Francisco in late 1975, bought the house, and started what I guess would be considered a house-cleaning procedure. In the course of getting settled in and cleaning the house, I became involved not only with the process of situating myself but also with some of the things I found. I discovered collections that had been left by the previous owner, for example, the broom collection [fig. 1]. In addition, I came across rubber bands, buttons, and all kinds of things that can become collectibles.

I was also interested in the architecture. When the wallpaper came down, the house’s architectural history became apparent: where doors and windows had been but were blocked up, where some areas had been opened up. These things weren’t evident to me when I bought the house. It was only after I started carving away at it and getting rid of the old, torn, and badly stained wallpaper that I began finding certain things hidden beneath the surface. I became fascinated with these things.

I sort of developed a romance with the cracks and stains on the plaster walls. I presumed the cracks came from an earthquake, perhaps in 1906 since the house was built in 1886. A leaky roof produced water stains on the ceiling that I found interesting. I started to see things I wanted to preserve. So, I covered with urethane all the plaster surfaces containing marks, cracks, and stains.

I wasn’t looking to do any of this, it just kind of happened. I decided I could perhaps extend the house to the art community as a work, even though I hadn’t totally resolved in my mind that it was a sculpture. But clearly, it was. In my eyes, what made this house a sculpture was the fact that I opened it up to the art world and, basically, made a connection between the work and the viewing public. I also thought of my piece as a social work because it contained evidence of the previous inhabitants of the house. And, of course, I brought to it some of my own things. As I mentioned earlier, though, this wasn’t something that was planned with great forethought. It just evolved from the process of cleaning up.

I started to have a series of open houses beginning in January 1978. I called the house “A Maintenance Action.” It has been a focal work. For the next four or five years, I had open houses every six months or so until I became concerned about the number of people coming to see it. As many as 500 people would come through my house in the course of a three- or four-hour afternoon. People were interested in the fact that I was willing to open my door and let them come in. But the issue here is that I chose to make the house available.

Back then, I thought I would spend five or six years in the house, but I’ve been there for almost 15 years. I live there, and it simply expresses some of my idiosyncrasies and interests in certain objects, certain treasures that I find or make. Everyone
Fig. 1. David Ireland. *Broom Collection with Boom*, 1978-88. Brooms, wire, concrete, copper tubing. Installation at 500 Capp Street, San Francisco.

does something to his or her house; a personal sense of placement and sense of choice are inevitably expressed. People choose things that are not necessarily premeditated. My house happens to be an extension of me. It is a work that continues to be important. It has become kind of a laboratory because I can try other, more portable works there, then take them out and perhaps show them in other places. People continue to come every week, but in smaller numbers.

NR: Much of your work has been site-specific. For you, what is the nature of working in this manner and how does it compare to making autonomous objects?

DI: I think galleries tend to be sterile, a little threatening at times and lacking a particular presence. Although I do enjoy creating studio pieces, I think I probably function best in unusual site situations as opposed to the gallery. In site-specific works, an artist often tries to explore and examine a site to see what differentiates it from any other site. I seem to come off better in places that have a character I can examine. I respond more to something I can develop, let's say a quality of the space. And that quality, for me, has something to do with its material. What makes this site different, unique? Occasionally one has to dig fairly deep to find that distinguishing characteristic.

NR: Why did you select the Abram Lerner Room window as a site?

DI: After several visits to the Hirshhorn, I was waiting for something to find me. I was interested in inside-outside communication. I had some other ideas [cover], but the one that seemed most workable was this one—doing something to give viewers inside the Hirshhorn contact with the outside. What I've chosen to do here is to reduce the panorama that exists outside the balcony window. When you look at a painting in a gallery, you are asked by the artist to look very specifically at one particular subject. You look at something chosen by the artist. The artist creates a landscape, a seascape, an abstraction. Whatever it is, the artist makes choices and puts them in front of the viewer. I want to build a wall that basically masks the view out the window. In the wall, which will
parallel the existing window wall, I will insert windows to control what is visible from that particular space. The effect will be much the same as looking at paintings in the gallery. The only difference is that you will be able to look from the gallery into real-time space. It will not be art that viewers are looking at, rather, the piece will deal with the idea of orientation. Because of the height of the balcony’s concrete railing, the choices of views are limited, but I think I can find some way to bring to a viewer’s attention a variety of specific and interesting sites. The windows cut in my wall will have channels that go to the glass. They will allow you to see the Mall, the Archives, the Natural History Museum, things of that sort. I’m taking advantage of something that is specific only to the Hirshhorn in this instance. The panorama will then be kind of reduced, and there will be communication from the inside looking out, not conversely.

NR: Is there a context for your Hirshhorn WORKS piece?
DI: When I was in grade school, my teachers would consistently say I spent too much time looking out the window. It seems to me that has followed me all my life because I continue to look out windows. In other works I’ve done, windows have been important to me.

NR: Is there a particular process you use to generate your work?
DI: I have never recognized that there was a beginning point to the process because I’ve always been interested in ordering, placing, and selecting things and being sort of conscious about it. It doesn’t matter whether I’m camping or taking a boat trip or walking down the street, I see things that aren’t necessarily always amusing. But it all kind of goes into this personal computer. I’ve never had any calling to be an artist. It just shook down as being the thing that I always came back to. I have obsessions and compulsions, and it’s sifted down to be me doing what I guess I’m best suited for. One does something that’s perhaps intuited, something that’s instinctive, and then someone comes along and says, “Tell me what you’ve done.” So then, you try to put it all into words.

BIOGRAPHY

David Ireland (b. 1930) was educated in his native state at Western Washington State University, Bellingham. Having made his living as an insurance broker and leader of safaris in Africa, in the early 1970s Ireland finally gave in to his inclination to the practice of art. He earned his master’s degree in 1974 from the San Francisco Art Institute and almost immediately developed a following, principally among the Bay Area’s Conceptual artists. His awards include Visual Artists Fellowships, National Endowment for the Arts (1978 and 1983), Contemporary Arts Council Artists Fellowship Grant, Oakland Museum (1982), Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award (1987), Adaline Kent Award (1987),Engelhard Award (1988), and Eureka Fellowship, Fleishacker Foundation (1989). Since his first solo exhibition at the Whatcom Museum of Art and History, Bellingham (1976), his work has been seen in many solo shows, including the University Art Museum, Berkeley, California (1988), the Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia (1989), and in New York at the New Museum of Contemporary Art (1984) and the Museum of Modern Art (1989). Among the numerous group exhibitions in which his work has been included is *Awards in the Visual Arts* 7, which began its tour in Los Angeles in 1988. He has made installations and work in the public domain since 1973, including collaborations with Mark Mack at the Headlands Center for the Arts, Fort Barry, California, and with Robert Wilhite at the Washington (D. C.) Project for the Arts. Ireland lives and works in San Francisco.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


