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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art Review | 'theanyspacewhatever'

Museum as Romantic Comedy



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Maurizio Cattelan's "Daddy Daddy" is part of this show at the Guggenheim Museum. By **ROBERTA SMITH**

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A few minutes into "NY. 2022," a performance piece at the Guggenheim Museum last Friday night, a young man and woman stripped naked, stepped into a frosted-glass shower stall and started pouring water on each other. As if on cue, two audience members got up and left the museum's theater, huffily.





Librado Romero/The New York Times

Philippe Parreno's marquee.

Too bad. They missed 45 minutes of ineffably touching, occasionally sentimental vignettes, music and seemingly mundane yet profound life lessons, culminating in the joyous first movement of Beethoven's Sixth. It was played by an orchestra whose members rose, one by one, and disappeared into the wings as the music progressed, until the last few bars were played by a lone bassist. Suddenly, the sweetness of art, life and even death seemed rolled into one.

The performance — a collaboration between the French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and the musician Ari Benjamin Meyers — was performed twice last weekend and, sadly, won't be repeated. But it provides valuable viewing advice for the exhibition that occasioned it: the Guggenheim's barely there, sometimes invisible exhibition, "theanyspacewhatever." Namely, don't leave early. And take it as a romantic comedy in six levels. After all, the show begins with a bridal-white movie marquee and ends with a revolving hotel room, complete with double bed and black silk sheets.

In between await works that may initially seem trifling, glib or unpromising, when you can find them. There are non sequiturs to read, jokes to get, videos to watch, shoes to kick off, colored lights to see, recorded sounds to hear and, yes, the bed, part of a hotel room by the German artist Carsten Höller. For a price and with a reservation, up to two people can spend the night. (Like so many must-dos in New York, it is sold out.) Yet as you move up the museum's great spiraling ramp, just about everything here sneaks up on you in some way, expands in pleasure and meaning and also starts overlapping and ricocheting with everything else.

The exhibition "theanyspacewhatever" takes its title from a cinematic term coined by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze to describe anonymous shots of things you look at every day but don't see, used as transitions in movies.

However, the Guggenheim's rotunda, a Frank Lloyd Wright masterpiece, is not exactly "any space." If you're going to make elusive art that often looks like life, it certainly helps to do it inside a powerful work of art. You also could question the decision by Nancy Spector, the museum's chief curator and the show's organizer, to reconvene a group of usual suspects, who are also something of a clique, to represent a widespread, complex phenomenon sometimes put under the scary chapter heading "relational aesthetics."

The 10 artists here — Angela Bulloch, Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillick, Douglas Gordon, Pierre Huyghe, Jorge Pardo, Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija, along with Ms. Gonzalez-Foerster and Mr. Höller — have exhibited and sometimes collaborated together since a show that Mr. Gillick and Mr. Parreno organized in Dijon, France, in 1995. In Ms. Spector’s defense, if you give 10 artists the run of the place, at least relatively speaking, perhaps they need to know one another and already have a working relationship.

The goal of “relational aesthetics” is less to overthrow the museum than to turn it upside down, wreaking temporary havoc with its conventions and the visitor’s expectations of awe-inspiring objects by revered masters. The larger point is to resensitize people to their everyday surroundings and, moreover, to one another in a time when so much — technology, stress, shopping — conspires against human connection.

The artists in this show and others like them extend a tradition of museum subversions that began with Conceptual Art in the 1970s and gained savvy and momentum with the institutional-critique phenomenon of the late 1980s. Emerging in the mid-1990s, the relational artists favored a more carefree approach that featured ephemeral situations, functional objects (often involving seating), architectural follies, amusing signage, elegant or arcane graphic design, performances, freebies (including food) and loosely planned group events.

At the Guggenheim relations begin with Mr. Parreno’s emblem of romantic comedy above the museum’s entrance: a gorgeous white-on-white movie marquee of neon and fluorescent lights hanging from white, lighted chains. It blinks wildly, like an excited crowd, but has no message and is open to interpretation. It suggests you are entering a palace of pleasure and purity, art and life, aesthetics and entertainment.

Once you’re inside, the next thing you may notice is a sculpture by Mr. Cattelan, tinged with his usual sarcasm. It is a large, full-color figure resembling Disney’s beloved Pinocchio, floating face down in the Guggenheim’s elliptical pool. Next comes the first phrase of an elaborate word piece by Mr. Gordon that winds its way up the ramp, exploiting every twist and turn in different fonts and type sizes. The opening salvo, in enormous letters on the rotunda floor, is “Are We Evil,” with a period rather than the comfort of a question mark. This may not be the movie the dazzling marquee prepared you for, but soldier on. Things start to add up. Mr. Gordon’s words in particular coalesce into a web of shifting emotions, intimacies and pronouns.

Also winding up the ramp are barn-red, S-shaped benches designed by Mr. Gillick, along with hanging metal signs that may refer to their locations, the show or the building. The benches provide respite and echo the spiral, especially if you are listening to the show’s half-hour audio guide, another work by Mr. Parreno. On the audio guide Boris Konrad, a world-champion memorizer, recites something he read just once: a selected chronology of works and exhibitions by the artists in this show. He pauses often, as if retrieving data from some nether part of his brain, and the alternating sound and silence become a kind of metaphor for the show.

Ms. Gonzalez-Foerster, who is represented by a light-and-sound installation using the dwindling Beethoven performance from “NY. 2022,” has also walled in one level of the ramp with a canvas screen, creating a white, tunnel-like space where you hear the sounds of flowing water. (This evokes another Wright masterpiece, the weekend house Fallingwater, built above a gushing stream.)

Mr. Pardo has turned one level into a labyrinth by erecting cardboard screens perforated with circles that echo the rotunda’s curves and create an elaborate porthole effect. The screens are hung with prints by all the show’s participants and strange little shapes, some lighted, that are actually the outlines of a plucked chicken.

Mr. Tiravanija, who started his career with installations that consisted of his cooking and serving large pots of Thai curry to gallery visitors, has teamed with Mr. Gordon in a work titled “Cinéma Liberté.” It consists of a dozen films once banned in the United States, starting with “The Red Kimona,” directed by Walter Lang in 1925, in an area customized with beanbag chairs and a functioning espresso bar. Even if you don’t join in, you may find yourself reflecting on the way art creates freedom by overcoming, sooner or later, the opposition it first meets.

A parting caveat: the claims by these artists and advocates that their work can help heal human relations and create a sense of community, any more than any other art does, are hard to prove. Do I really need to take off my shoes and plop down on white pillows strewn on an orange carpet to watch “Chew the Fat,” Mr. Tiravanija’s surprisingly engrossing interviews with his co-exhibitors and other artists?

Or don a little miner’s light along with hundreds of other visitors while the museum turns down the lights for an hour for a group event by Mr. Huyghe (repeated on Nov. 17 and Dec. 8)? It was fun for the first few minutes, but the concept looks better in a book of smoky drawings of works in the show commissioned by Mr. Huyghe. The book sells for \$10 in the gift shop, and the images can be ironed on to T-shirts. Definitely relational, this effort constitutes one of the best and most hidden visual moments in “theanyspacewhatever.”

It is invigorating to see a high-profile New York museum submit to such an experimental form of institutional loosening up, and in its premier, signature space. It feels like change. For the show’s duration those big letters on the front of Wright’s rotunda should read, “The Guggenheim Museum, Temporarily an Alternative Space, Inclusive and User-Friendly.”