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Hands-On Reassembly in Stripped-Down Gallery

By ROBERTA SMITH AUG. 9, 2010



An installation view of Charlotte Posenenske's "Series D Vierkantrohre (Square Tubes)," from 1967, configured by Stefan Kalmár, at Artists Space. Daniel Pérez

There is much for New York art institutions of all sizes to learn from the extreme makeover lately visited upon [Artists Space](#), the small and venerable, if long-moribund, pioneer of the downtown alternative art scene. Basically the place has been literally and spiritually swept clean by the new broom of Stefan Kalmár, the German-born former director of the Munich Kunstverein, who took over as executive director and chief curator in June 2009.

And its transformation is thrown into sharp focus — celebrated, really — by a supple, infinitely adjustable summer show, on view through Sunday. This is the first American exhibition of a series of factory-made sculptures in raw galvanized steel by the little-known German Minimalist Charlotte Posenenske (1930-1985).



Ms. Posenenske's "Series D Vierkantrohre (Square Tubes)," consisting of 50 metal units, has gone through four orchestrations: above, the performance artist Ei Arakawa's take. Daniel Pérez

Mr. Kalmár, who is 40, began last summer by instigating a ground-up redesign of Artists Space — its physical plant, Web site, stationery and program — to make it more clearly and aggressively what, he said in a recent telephone interview, its name implies: “a space for artists.” Mr. Kalmár arrived at something that might be described as early SoHo meets late Bauhaus , greatly aided and abetted by the architects Institute for Applied Urbanism and Jesko Fezer, in Berlin; their New York counterparts, [Common Room](#); and a renovation grant from the Louise Bourgeois Foundation.

Mr. Kalmár essentially stripped Artists Space and left it almost bare, revealing as never before the beautiful bones of the big square corner loft in SoHo that has been its home since 1993. The space's two long rows of windows are splendidly visible; the office area is demarcated by studs, but no drywall. The effect is of light, transparency and approachability. The mood of lean coherence is furthered by Florence Knoll-like desks, vitrines and broad benches (for the window corner) designed by Mr. Fezer and fabricated by Common Room. It occurred to me that if Alfred H. Barr Jr., founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, were dropped into Mr. Kalmár's shoes, he would have come up with something similar.

The coup de grâce is the floor, which was sanded and left raw, à la Tate Modern. Devoid of yellowish shine, the resulting plane of gray-brown wood seems ready for anything: art, dance, performance, parties.



The relational-aesthetics sculptor Rirkrit Tiravanija's configuration. Daniel Pérezrez

The new Artists Space recalls some of the architectural interventions of the Post Minimalist Michael Asher (who had a show at its West Broadway location in 1988), and also the lofts of SoHo's early artist-dominated days, when most renovations were minimal for reasons of taste and budget and the need to evade the notice of building department inspectors. Mr. Kalmár rightly sees SoHo loft architecture as part of Artists Space's history and something to be emphasized. (I can guarantee that the transformation will resonate with anyone who ever walked into a gutted SoHo loft with a freshly sanded floor around 1975 and thought, "Just leave it this way!")

While the redesigned space was stunning from the get-go, it has taken Mr. Kalmár slightly longer to get his exhibition program up to speed. But it seems to be operating on all cylinders with the Posenenske show. The 50 metal units, which are a trifle close to air ducts in appearance, come in six basic shapes, including rectilinear chutelike sections, triangular and V-shaped units (that double to form X's), which enable the combinations to form corners or branch out. The individual elements can be screwed together or simply stacked, and are intended to be arranged and rearranged by "the consumer," a catchall it would seem for future owners or curators that Ms. Posenenske used in a manifestolike statement from 1968.

In this document Ms. Posenenske claims, accurately, that her objects are “decreasingly recognizable as ‘artworks,’ ” and laments that art’s “social function has regressed.” Within the year she would give up art making, and begin work on a doctorate — fittingly — on assembly-line production and then became a union organizer.



An interpretation by staff members at Artists Space in SoHo. Daniel Pérez

Ms. Posenenske’s objects concretize Duchamp’s idea that the viewer completes the artwork. They function both as toy blocks for adults, or, if you prefer, vehicles for expression. Mr. Kalmár took the participatory directive to heart, dividing the show into four two-week installations — one orchestrated by himself, two by artists and the final one by staff members. There are problems with Ms. Posenenske’s art and some contradictions in her thinking — the pieces’ bulk isn’t exactly user friendly, for example — but my appreciation of both have risen steeply after seeing (in photographs or in person) how her work has been rethought and rearranged by Mr. Kalmár and his cohort.

Mr. Kalmár's installation, the first, seems to have been a relatively classical one; photographs of it evoke a collaboration between the Minimalists Tony Smith and Donald Judd. Next, the performance artist Ei Arakawa covered the floor with heavy paper dotted with different translations of a key paragraph from Ms. Posenenske's manifesto in press type. During the opening Mr. Arakawa and his friends dragged the sculptures across the floor, wreaking havoc with paper, words and meaning, and left it all for the viewer to decipher. The third installation (and the first I actually saw) was by the relational-aesthetics sculptor Rirkrit Tiravanija, who expanded Ms. Posenenske's premise by putting the metal units on dollies, so that they could be wheeled about by visitors. Mr. Tiravanija countered the potential for disorder with an array of parallel and perpendicular lines of tape in different widths and colors on the floor. These turned out to chart the sprinkler and electrical systems visible on Artists Space's pressed-tin ceiling, emphasizing more of old SoHo while also suggesting intersecting, amplifying lines of energy.

While Mr. Arakawa and Mr. Tiravanija worked with pieces of one, two or three parts that Mr. Kalmár had screwed together, the Artists Space staff members — Mirelle Borra, Elizabeth Hirsch, James Hoff, Stephanie Howe, Amy Lien and Austin Willis, along with the interns Carmen Billows and Ian Wallace — took everything apart and started from scratch for the current and final installation. The main form is a long single conduit that again suggests energy flow: it connects the office space to the exhibition area, arcing through the wall-stud structure and then traveling across the floor. Other arrangements, placed close to windows and outer walls, emphasize utility. Still others, including one that wittily uses a bench as a pedestal, skew toward art. The play of light and shadow across their simple repeating forms can evoke a poor man's versions of Judd's 100-box milled-aluminum magnum opus in the big sheds at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Tex.

The Posenenske exhibition introduces New Yorkers to a body of work they haven't seen before, and with the new information comes an especially valuable lesson: use becomes it. Similarly, Mr. Kalmár is demonstrating on different levels how use becomes Artists Space. Using its architecture and its history, he also shows us something that is, sadly, more usual in European museums and exhibition spaces than in American ones: a breathtaking no-frills logic that makes sense, and in making sense, makes a statement. In essence, vision — especially when followed through to the last detail — matters much, much more than money. Above all, it enables you to know fully and to use and make the most of what has been there all along.