Hans Scheib, Wedding, 1987;
Raymond Pettibon, *$4,00 (I always peruse a Chaucher, a Cervantes or a Milton with delight, and ever sit down to my ledger with a sort of disgust)*, 1991

Some Notes on the Collection Interventions / Curation Projects at Bern and Aachen

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Being invited to curate from a museum's collection is a daunting and thrilling thing to do. You don't want to just pick "highlights of the collection" – that's a project for a coffee table book, not an artist's curated show. You want to tell a new story, arrive at a new plot twist, make something of the collection that hasn't been seen or intended already, and use the collection to make a living artwork out of artworks. From the beginning, I knew that I would need to approach these two venues, Kunstmuseum Bern and Ludwig Forum Aachen, with different logics, because in Bern I would be selecting a tiny fraction of work from a vast public collection built over centuries, while in Aachen I was looking through the very personal choices of two people and a few advisors, with a collection started as recently as the 1960's. So how to select and organize in two different places, but equivalently in a new way? That was the task at hand. First, there were asymmetries between the two collections to deal with. In Bern, the collection goes back to the Late Middle Ages, and there were physical limits to viewing all of the museum's holdings in person, since many are held in storage deep in the mountains. By contrast, in Aachen, I was happily able to spend days with the Ludwig Collection overseers, who could pull out works in person. But I also had to limit my choices to not more than approximately 60 works from each venue, so I decided quickly that both shows would be built from works starting in the 20th Century, as this is the work I already know best.

Igor Obrosov (Игорь Обросов), *Bildnis von V.M. Šukšin*, 1980;
Gerhard Richter, Teil 1 von Permutationen 1 – 1024, 1973/74;
Gottfried Helnwein, Susan Sonntag aus / from 48 *Portraits*, 1991;
Roy Lichtenstein, *I Know How You Must Feel, Brad…*, 1963

Then came the question of exhibition design. For Bern's architecture, I first asked that all the walls of the upstairs floor be removed, so that instead of a sequence of smaller rooms, the show would occupy the full length of the building in open hallways where the work could be arranged like horizontal sequences, or like long sentences, with chains of visual association that unfold as one walks along these spaces. (Sequence is also a visual logic that I often use in my own work, so it seemed fitting.) In Bern, I also wanted to establish another logic in the rectangular layout of the building, forming a kind of Mondrian-ish structure in plan. For example, in the southwest corner of the floor, I put Franz West's white box containing objects to be manipulated by hand; across from it is Leidy Churchman's black box, another kind of performance of objects, this one a video of objects being arranged on top of people's nude bodies. From Churchman's black box, one moves toward the northeast corner of the building, which culminates in a sequence of stark color/shapes by various women: Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Etel Adnan, and Suzan Frecon. From there one traverses a silver-and-yellow installation by Thomas Hirschhorn, and crosses to the southeast corner, where a group of black and white female figures gaze out, unblinkingly: a huge linear female by Jutta Koether, a small, prone, linear drawing by Louise Bourgeois, and a sculpture of an upright female mannequin clad in black by Mai-Thu Perret. In brief, in Bern I arranged modern/contemporary artworks (with a LOT of women included) forming links across hallways, spaces, decades, genres, and artists of wildly different levels of recognition, trying to make a show that perused and disrupted normal narratives in art history by throwing out "importance" or "highlights of the collection" type-ideas, and looking instead at horizontal genealogies of form and affinity arranged (hopefully) in a more eccentric way.
In Bern, I also made a new decision on the first day of installation: I decided spontaneously to paint the walls. To do this, I asked for buckets of leftover paint colors, and just climbed up the ladders with these colors and an extra-large sponge and started painting, with no plans or sketches—in fact, abandoning my earlier, simpler plans for large blocks of color on various

Aleksandr Sitnikov (Александр Ситников), *Studentinnen*, 1972; Maksim Kantor (Максим Кантор), *Лицо*, 1987; Inga Savranskaja (Инга Савранская), *Olja*, 1974; Uwe Pfeifer, Neustädter Frühling, 1974; Ivan Čujkov (Иван Чуйков), Ohne Titel, 1969/70

Brigitta Malche, *Flötenmundstück*, 1974; Rissa, *Fettprobe*, 1967

walls. This turned the work in Bern into a kind of wonderful challenge: the thrill of a tightrope walk, to make a giant building-size painting in a huge space and a short time, without referring specifically to any of the works chosen from the collection. Once these works were brought to the painted walls, a situation of greater surprise and a kind of clashing occurred between artworks and walls—the painted museum walls became, in a sense, "figures" upon which were placed the other "figures" of the artworks themselves, making a figure-on-figure situation, instead of the usual figure/ground binary involved in making a painting. This giant artwork of combined art and walls, this kind of risky activation of the walls themselves, foregrounded the process of improvisation and using your wits and your sense of humor.
Then came Aachen – what to do here? Well, I definitely wanted to continue improvising on walls themselves, and I made another architectural decision first, to add something awkward and temporary to the clean white cubes that mark the Ludwig Forum galleries. I decided not to paint directly on the walls this time, but instead to build a series of huge double-sided temporary walls on wheels, which could be wheeled into the existing rooms as diagonals, walls long enough that their ends would stick out into LFA's giant foyer, awkward painted walls that (I hoped) would beckoning the viewers to enter.
Meanwhile, I was not familiar with all the artists in the Ludwig Collection—while the works from the West were canonical (Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Johns, etc.), the Ludwigs in part collected artists from the former Soviet Union, and as an American who grew up in the Cold War, a large number of the collected artists were formerly off limits to me, "behind the iron curtain."

Therefore, on contrast to Bern where I started with what I "know," I decided in Aachen to make *unknowability* part of the game, and I decided to select from the collection with a system devised to cut into the collection at an oblique angle. I named certain criteria taken from my own studio painting process, and used five such "filters" for looking through the collection: (1) color, (2) pattern, (3) a search for the figure (often a fragmented one, or one who confronts the viewer), (4) a sense of ruin, nothingness, a sense of a void or destruction, and (5) a wild card, where something might just delight me completely irrationally. After narrowing down the works to these categories, I once again arrived in Aachen and just started painting, spending my first two+ weeks in Aachen in a small tight room crowded with the giant walls on wheels that the carpenter had made, working from morning 'til the guards kicked me out at night. Again I had no plans, so the work on the walls mirrored the way I usually start paintings: instinctively and blind—by feel—by hand—by the seat of my pants.

It's always a tightrope walk to make a painting—but improvisation doesn't mean that "anything goes." It has nothing to do with "free expression"—in fact, improv means that you are keenly aware of both composition and construction, that you know the rules of a formal game, but are responding instinctively to present conditions, with an open eye, ear, mind and hand. It means you have to keep paying attention all the time, be in the present, at every moment, with every mark, with all your senses. And you have to both act and edit, move and think, speak and listen simultaneously, weighing critically in the moment, responding from the hip—and it sometimes comes out awkward, ugly, ungainly, embarrassing—and these are qualities that I prize in art. I work both analytically and totally spontaneously, but here I didn't have the usual long time to languish on endless fiddling and editing. I had to make these ten surfaces work in two weeks, and leave spaces open (to fit works on them), to build up layers of difficult, ungainly, strange, even "ugly" or "funny" colors, patterns, forms, with the intention to mess up the clean white logic of square white cubes, and build something surprising and energetic. It was a blast.

I also want to say that these walls I've painted will be destroyed when both shows are over. In Bern, they will paint the walls white again; in Aachen they will destroy the big walls I painted on and inserted into the rooms. And here comes the part where I regard these shows and the characteristics of art that I believe in as having a kind of politics: I regard it essential to value the work and the process above and beyond the value/sales/commodity/everlastingness/ or truth claim of artmaking. I value taking a risk, constructing things from what you have at hand, as a kind of *arte povera* or dare, being willing to cut through mountains of scholarship and reasoning with your instincts and your smartness. This is not exactly about "skill" or "expertise"—but it's not without skill either. You have to keep your game tight, and let things fly, to swing freely, to let what isn't comfortable come out, to allow for mistakes and ugly feelings, to respond to the emotions of a situation, to use what you've got, to make something strange, funny, maybe ironic, cutting, destructive and pleasurable, all at once. It's partly about getting the harmonies, ratio and timing right, like in music; it's partly about feeling the weight of the material in your body. You have to be tough, a stickler, not pompous, and both really critical and passionate at the same time, to not obey, to shoot from the hip, to be dialogical, to learn, to stretch, to not just KNOW all the time, to not think you must succeed, and above all to be courageous and adventurous. The curators of Kunstmuseum Bern and Ludwig Forum Aachen abetted me by giving permission to take on such a task, to make something weird and wonderful, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Richard Hamilton, *My Marilyn*, 1965; Andy Warhol, *Jackie III*, 1966