BLOUIN ARTINFO

February 1, 2013

Curator Jens Hoffmann on Harald Szeemann's Legacy and Today's Neo-Conceptualism

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In 1969 Swiss curator Harald Szeemann organized a ground-breaking exhibition on the up-and-coming movements of the time for the Kunsthalle Bern called, "Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information." The show brought together young artists whose work was highly process-based, out-of-the box, and fit within today's notions of post-minimalism, Arte Povera, land art, and conceptual art. Inspired Szeemann's legendary exhibition, curator Jens Hoffmann, is staging a modern-day sequel. "When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes,"includes over 80 international contemporary artists whose work belongs to the direct lineage begun by Szeemann. After first opening at the Wattis, the show opens today at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit and will be on view from February 1 – March 31. En route by taxi, Hoffmann took the time to talk to ARTINFO about his the line-up for his neo-conceptual sequel, highlights from the show, and why Detroit is the perfect experimental venue for his vision.

What made the original show so groundbreaking?

I think one of the reasons is certainly Harald Szeemann as a figure, who was the curator of the original exhibition. He has been mythologized over the last 40 years, and he's really the father of modern curating – or creative curating, if you will. It was really the beginning of his career; it made him a famous curator, and the show itself has been mythologized just as much. There have been so many articles written about it and people in curatorial programs all over the world study

that exhibition, I felt that I wanted to look into it further. Since I make exhibitions as a curator, I wanted my investigation to take that form.

I met Szeemann in 2002 when he was doing the Venice Biennale, and we talked about the original show from ’69 a lot. I have a particular relationship with a lot of artists in their early-to-mid-thirties, similar to the ages of the artists’ in the first show. I look at this period in ’69 as the last moment when real radical change and expression could happen in art. It is that period that has inspired a lot of younger artists of my generation, and I wanted to collectively look back at that with them.

What inspired this sequel exhibition to the original 1969 show? How did you go about choosing the artists?

I was interested in looking at artists who had been influenced by not only the artists that were in the original exhibition, but also inspired by the discourse that emerged from it. A lot of things were introduced through the original exhibition in Europe: American conceptual art, post-minimalism, arte povera, body art, land art, and all sorts of other things that emerged in the moment and were also quite radical but hadn’t been explored as much. So, there was a huge amount of material for artists to work with, and engage in a dialogue with. I was looking for exactly those kinds of artists.

Why did you choose MOCAD for this show?

I was very interested in having this exhibition tour, and MOCA Detroit is one of the more experimental places in the country. I noticed that a number of artists I selected for my show have previously shown at MOCAD. I felt they had the right understanding for what we were trying to do.

What are some pieces in the show that stand out to you?

One of the pieces that I like a lot is by Fernando Ortega, and it’s a piece that consists of a crate that he placed a digital recording device inside of, and then sent to San Francisco from Mexico City. During the transport, the recording device was recording all the noises that around it. It’s sort of like the noise of the transport becomes the work of that piece. The device plays the sound inside the crate and as you walk past you hear rumbling, the sounds of drills trying to close the crate, and various other noises.

That sort of references a piece by Robert Morris that was a box with sounds of its own making. He built a little wooden box, and recorded the sounds that were made in the process. Then he placed a speaker inside so you could hear the sounds of the making of the box.

Any others?

One of the interesting things about Szeemann’s show was that the artists were not very international. That show consisted mostly of artists from Western Europe and North America. I included a lot of Latin American, Asian, and even a few artists from Africa.

That is the biggest difference in the way that we experience the art world today. Now it's extremely global, information flows very quickly, and it moves around very fast. At that point, in the late 1960s, information traveled much, much slower. To get a sense in Europe of what was going on in America was already an enormous task.

One of the artists that I invited to participate is Abraham Cruzvillegas from Mexico. He made a piece where he scratched a very large map into the wall that outlines where the original artists came from. He made a diagram of that, and it became this extremely abstract wall drawing of lines and little dots that represented the cities and places where they were coming from.

Would you say that the artists in the show represent any new, specific artistic trends?

I would say that over the last 10 years there has been an extreme move towards what I would call a neo-conceptual trend. A lot of those artists found their way into this exhibition, and I feel the show is a bit of a summary of that process. Of course, it's really difficult to say "ok, that's neo-conceptual" or "that isn't," but I think that all the artists who are in the show relate to that term in one way or another – even if their work is itself quite different. But what they all have in common is that it's all very idea-based.

Who are some artists we should keep our eye on in the future?

One of the wonderful things that I noticed when I was about to finish it up, I went to the opening of documenta13 and many of the artists that I had chosen for our show were presented there, so I noted that there was clearly recognition of this particular generation of artists. I'm thinking of Ryan Gander, Adriana Lara, Allora and Calzadia, Cevdet Erek, Roman Ondak, Mario Garcia Torres, Tino Sehgal, who all work really conceptual, and who all made stand out works for last year's documenta.

Are there plans for the show to travel anywhere else?

Not right now, but I hope that we'll still be able to bring it to Europe. I spoke to the Kunsthalle Bern, where the show was originally held in 1969, and the director said that he really liked the idea, but his problem was that everyone who comes and talks to him always wants to talk to him about Szeemann and that show. He's actually working on some form of exorcism to get the ghost of Szeemann out of the building so he can actually establish a program that finally moves on – even though that exhibition took place over 40 years ago. I wanted to have him write about it for the catalogue because I thought it was pretty hilarious.