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Douglas Crimp Says Curating MoMA PS1's Greater New York Was 'The Last Thing I Wanted to Do'

Ben Davis, Tuesday, October 13, 2015

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Douglas Crimp.
Image: Courtesy Kracauer Lectures in Film and Media Theory.

"If you'd asked me a year ago if I would have any interest in being involved in the once-every-five-years survey at PS1, I would have said it is the last thing I wanted to do," curator Douglas Crimp said during the press conference for "Greater New York" at MoMA PS1 in Queens.

However, the stamp of the well-known critic, teacher, and historian is all over the 2015 show, which has an unusual gravitas. What has customarily been an "emerging artist" survey with the jocular dorm party vibe to match has been rethought as an event that reflects more broadly on the past, present, and future of New York art.

Crimp's curating has always been in concert with his criticism; his 1977 "Pictures" show at Artist Space made appropriation art the center of the New York conversation. In the 1980s, he was also involved with AIDS activism via the LGBT direct action organization ACT UP, a background that, as he discusses below, found its way into "Greater New York" in ways both direct and indirect.

Back in 2010, Crimp curated "Mixed Use, Manhattan" at Madrid's Reina Sofia with Lynne Cook, a show that dealt with how artists have used the city as their medium. At Friday's press conference, PS1 curator Peter Eleey explained that at the time, the Long Island City institution had fought unsuccessfully to get the show to New York. What tempted Crimp, at last, to take on the task of helping to curate "Greater New York" was the possibility of continuing the conversation around that earlier show.

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I spoke to Crimp about how he approached his task, and what he thinks the survey's focus on New York's recent past means for artists working today.

Ben Davis: What specific works are important to you in this show? Are there parts of it that are more yours than Peter's?

Douglas Crimp: Inevitably there are. Each of us could claim, "I brought this to the show." I mentioned the Henry Flynt photographs to Peter when we had our very first conversation.

I did almost all of the film program, actually. There's one program per week, so on any given week you'll see a feature film and maybe a pair of films. And that is the part of the show that really covers the history of New York. All of the films are about New York, whereas there's a lot of work in this show that isn't about New York, of course.

Since the show that Lynne Cooke and I did in Madrid was about how artists have used the city, there's work that was in that show that I brought here, like the James Nares pendulum, the [Alvin] Baltrop photographs—though not exactly the same selection—and the [Roy] Colmer photographs, as well as a number of the things in the film program, such as Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* or Joan Jonas's *Songdelay*.

One of the historical aspects of this period that was most essential to me was AIDS, because I was very involved, of course, with AIDS activism. Gregg Bordowitz is in the film program. There's Donald Moffett, and Fierce Pussy. There are a couple of artists who were in Fierce Pussy like Joy Episalla, Carrie Yamaoka, who are in the show—people I know from that activist work, whose non-AIDS activist work I have come to know subsequently and I admire.

Joy had a very beautiful show [at Participant, Inc.](#) this year and we were all struck by it. Susan Cianciolo, I saw her show [at Bridget Donahue](#), as we all did, and we were all smitten with it. I was the last to see it, and I ended up calling and saying, "We have to have Susan." And we did.

BD: Are there younger artists that you connected with?

DC: A lot comes through leads given to me by friends. There's a very young woman named Stefanie Victor who makes these jewelry-like sculptures. I learned about her, went to her studio, and was taken with the work. There are younger artist who are not really "emerging" like Sadie Benning, whose work I am extremely happy to include.

BD: How do you read the show? It feels as if it is about closure, the closure of the New York scene since it's increasingly difficult to make new work here; there's a retrospective feel to it.

DC: I would put it in a different way. If you see the way artists seized the opportunity to use the city in a particular way in 1976—for instance in that James Nares pendulum piece—you can certainly see that on the one hand, there's no space in Manhattan where you could do anything like that now. But you could also think about how this is an artist who is an inhabitant of the city in a particular way, and about how to seize an opportunity when it presents itself.

I think there is less opportunity now, for sure, for all of us—unless we are very, very wealthy and want to buy \$100 million apartments in the sky. But we all always have to find ways to make do.

No matter how much the city has been appropriated by the wealthy, all of

us are still here... Including artists. And I think that a lot of the younger work in the show is showing how artists are making do now. I feel that the question of New York is an open-ended question.

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