



World

Nancy Selvin, *Looking Through Glass*, detail of installation, 10' x 60',
at 2020 Addison St., Berkeley.

Artweek

Review Shorts

Nancy Selvin

Through March 15 at 2020 Addison St., Berkeley.

During the past two decades, artists have utilized a variety of strategies to reach broader audiences. Many have turned away from the galleries to take their work directly to the public—in the form of public art. By presenting work in a context other than that to which we are accustomed (a museum or gallery space), our attention is immediately drawn to the very power of context, and its ability to transform both art object and viewing subject. Nancy Selvin's recent sidewalk installation, *Looking Through Glass*, was a case in point. Located on Addison Street, in the heart of downtown Berkeley, it occupied eight adjoining storefront windows on the first floor of a four story, city-owned parking garage. The installation was in full view of pedestrians, who were transformed by context into a viewing public.

The ten-by-sixty-foot installation was mixed media on glass, and combined elements of image and text. Rectangular frames with gold leaf borders were painted on the back of each piece of glass, with one word of text in the center. The eight frames taken together read: *Through the Viewer Art Enters the External World*. Upon closer inspection, an additional layer of text was visible

through three of the frames. Much of this was taken from Marcel Duchamp's "The Creative Act," an essay in which Duchamp addresses the collaborative and symbiotic relationship between artist and viewer. Selvin's own text echoed these thoughts, a demonstration of Duchamp's axiom that the viewer's perception constitutes an integral part of the artistic process.

The success of a public piece rests in its ability to articulate and distill a site. In *Looking Through Glass*, attention was drawn equally to the piece and its unlikely surroundings. Like much of Selvin's earlier work, the paint had been applied loosely, with broad gestural strokes and a deliberate lack of precision, and the rough technique seemed especially appropriate along this industrial block.

While the esthetics were well-integrated into the site, the conceptual component was confusing. Both Selvin's text (*Through the Viewer Art Enters the External World*) and the references to Duchamp were generic and didn't specifically address the demands of the site. Duchamp's conviction that a work of art is incomplete until a viewer responds to it applies to any context in which work is shown, typically a museum or gallery; Selvin presented the ideas but didn't address means of application to the particulars of this site. This might have included an exploration of how the relationship between artist (or art object) and audience changes in a public art context, where art comes to the viewer instead of the other way around. And Selvin might also have addressed in some way the audience who encountered the installation—the pedestrians who crossed paths with the piece unexpectedly. But it proved to be an intriguing piece nonetheless—and especially at night, when the lighting and the reflective quality of the paint seemed to emanate a glow from within.

—Simon Attie