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Gober, Texts by Gregg Bordowitz, Nancy Spector, Harald Szeemann.

Robert Gober, Paris, Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1991. Texts by Catherine David, Joan Simon.

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Sherlock, Maureen P., "Arcadian Elegy: The Art of Robert Gober", *Arts*, September 1989, pp.44-49.

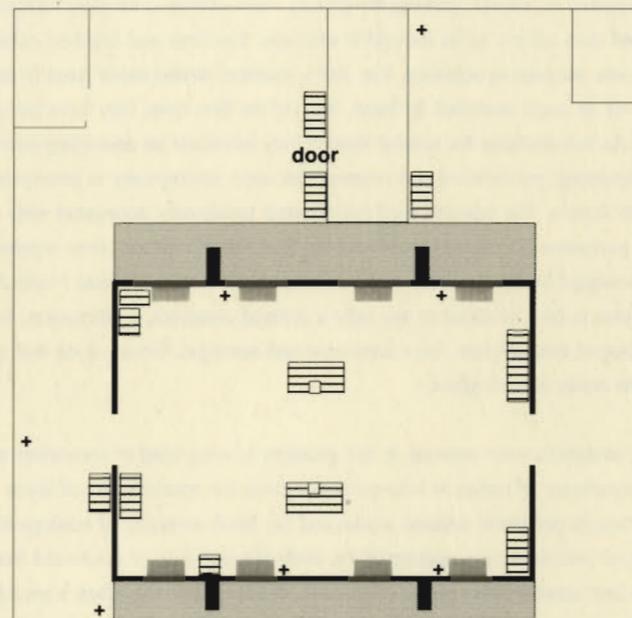
Robert Gober was born September 12, 1954 in Wallingford, Connecticut. He currently lives and works in New York City. Since his first show in 1984 he has exhibited widely, in numerous exhibitions in North America, Japan and Europe.

Major funding for this project has been received from the Lannan Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, Washington D.C., with additional funding from the Dia Art Council, the major annual support group of the Dia Center for the Arts, and the Dia Art Circle. Support for the 1992-93 exhibitions program has also been provided through a generous grant from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

A book documenting the installation is forthcoming.

Maureen Sherlock, Associate Professor of Critical Theory in the Film Department of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, will give a lecture on the installation on Thursday, January 14, 1993 at 6:30pm.

Site Map



- scenic painting
- + rat bait
- prison windows
- sink
- ▢ newspapers

Scene Painting: Quinn-Rockwell Studios



Photo credit: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York

DIA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

September 24, 1992 - June 20, 1993

548 West 22nd Street New York City

ROBERT GOBER

"Most of my sculptures have been memories remade, recombined and filtered through my current experiences", Robert Gober once stated.¹ Asked on another occasion whether his works originated with "a formal sculptural concept", he elaborated: "It's more a nursing of an image that haunts me, ... letting it sit and breed in my mind, and then, if it's resonant, then I'll try to figure out formally, could this be an interesting sculpture".²

The seeds to his new site specific installation at Dia might be traced back to one of Gober's earliest mature works, *Slides of a Changing Painting*, of 1984. Gober photographed the paintings he made and remade over a considerable period of time on a single small board, paintings with a wide variety of motifs, ranging from a cropped male torso in close-up through its gradual permutation into a diseased or wounded body, an interior setting and a woodland scene. Very often the metamorphosis from one to the next carried with it an imprint both psychological and compositional that informed the subsequent iconography. Ultimately, the relationships between these numerous paintings were preserved only in the form of a slide-work which, in a much abbreviated form, mapped parts of the terrain covered in the painting project. Even retrospectively, the sequential unfolding of images in time in this work did not provide a narrative. Rather, the anthology reverberated in such a way as to evoke a set of concerns without specifying direct connections.

In Gober's recent installations, of which this is the most monumental to date, occupying as it does the whole floor of what was formerly a warehouse, the principles by which meaning is constructed are similar except that temporal sequencing is replaced by spatial contiguity. The artist establishes a *mise-en-scène*: passage through it, and the connections made en route, are the prerogative of the spectator-become-participant.

Hesitation is almost inevitably the initial response to this work given that on opening the door one is confronted with a darkened space. Having ascertained that this is indeed the site of the work the viewer is then faced with another dilemma: whether to try the closed door opposite, under which light seeps, or to take a sharp turn right to seek the source of the more brilliant light spilling from out of the looming freestanding structure. Either way one's initial doubt soon resurfaces. For the locked door is in fact a false door, though since it matches others in the building this is difficult to determine with certainty. In addition, the room that one can enter, is, notwithstanding its *trompe l'oeil* woodlands scene, also a prison: the barred windows high in the walls reveal glimpses of a sky beyond, an illusionistic sky, not that concealed by the barricaded windows in the outer

walls of the building. The woods, painted by professional scene painters working from photographs taken by professional photographers acting under the guidance of the artist, do not constitute a single coherent vista. Close scrutiny reveals that at least one section has been repeated in reverse, making the totality more akin to a location recalled in memory, and thus subject to its inevitable overlaps, blurrings and falsified coherences, than to a scene scanned in actuality. The sinks, another familiar motif from Gober's repertoire, are as usual modelled by hand, but, for the first time, they have become functional. As substitutions for natural brooks they introduce an unsettling note into the theme of cleansing, purification and renewal that such iconography is conventionally employed to denote. The pastoral idyll has become insidiously permeated with echoes of constraint, puritannical hygiene, incarceration. The solace, release, even regeneration, normally promised by this arcadian myth as it has been transmuted into North American cultural idioms is here revealed as not only a cultural construct, a fabrication, but the site of misplaced romanticism, false sentiment and nostalgia. Boxes of rat bait are placed at the ready in each space.

All simple, straightforward answers to the question of what kind of immediate and authentic experience of nature is now possible, given the spuriousness of these outmoded though persistent cultural myths and the bleak actuality of ecological and environmental pollution also, appropriately, enter the province of doubt and become subject to close scrutiny, and hence scepticism. Whilst affirming, albeit ironically, the hollow rhetoric that currently informs this illusionary myth Gober does not altogether discount it: the seductive pleasures once bestowed by its verdant prospects are ambiguously acknowledged.

A diorama depicting a utopia inextricably wedded to its inverse - dystopia -, this scene provides the setting for a *tableau vivant* in which the principal props are piles of newspaper. In concert with the general tenor of this work they reveal on close scrutiny a highly questionable identity. The papers in each bundle are not actual pages but photolithographic simulacra. Sometimes pages have been reproduced as actually printed, sometimes they have been tampered with: in the latter cases the degree of manipulation varies from the re-editing of images and/or texts to the substitution of completely new articles and illustrations. Ascertaining which are genuine and which not soon gives way to the melancholy realisation that all are at the least plausible. For what this compendium collectively reveals are countless cases of oppressive sexual stereotyping, discrimination against homosexuals, maltreatment of children, premature death

(often of artists), and the willful neglect of the health crisis and AIDS pandemic by government and official bodies set amidst the banal and more innocuous events of everyday life and commerce. Precisely because it is accepted as normal and familiar, such a juxtaposition serves to render the general level of indifference which prevails in contemporary American society all the more grievous.

As in Gober's earlier work these issues are not presented didactically. Nor is a narrowly specific identification made between the contemporary socio-cultural malaise and those abiding values which have long underpinned American (white, middleclass, male) society. Instead, a dialectic is set up between the specific and actual, and therefore contemporary, and those metaphysical values and ideals of a bucolic existence that until recently have prevailed largely unchallenged in the society at large. Yet since conveyed by reference and allusion, by association rather than explicit statement, the elements that comprise this dialectic resonate in the mind only to reconnect in newly suggestive ways in one's memory as one seeks with hindsight to recapture the experience, to penetrate its mystery as well as its charge.

L. C.

1. quoted in Karel Schampers, "Robert Gober", *Robert Gober*, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1990, p.33.

2. quoted in "Robert Gober: Special Editions, An Interview", by Richard Flood, *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, March-April 1990, p.6.