

whitewall

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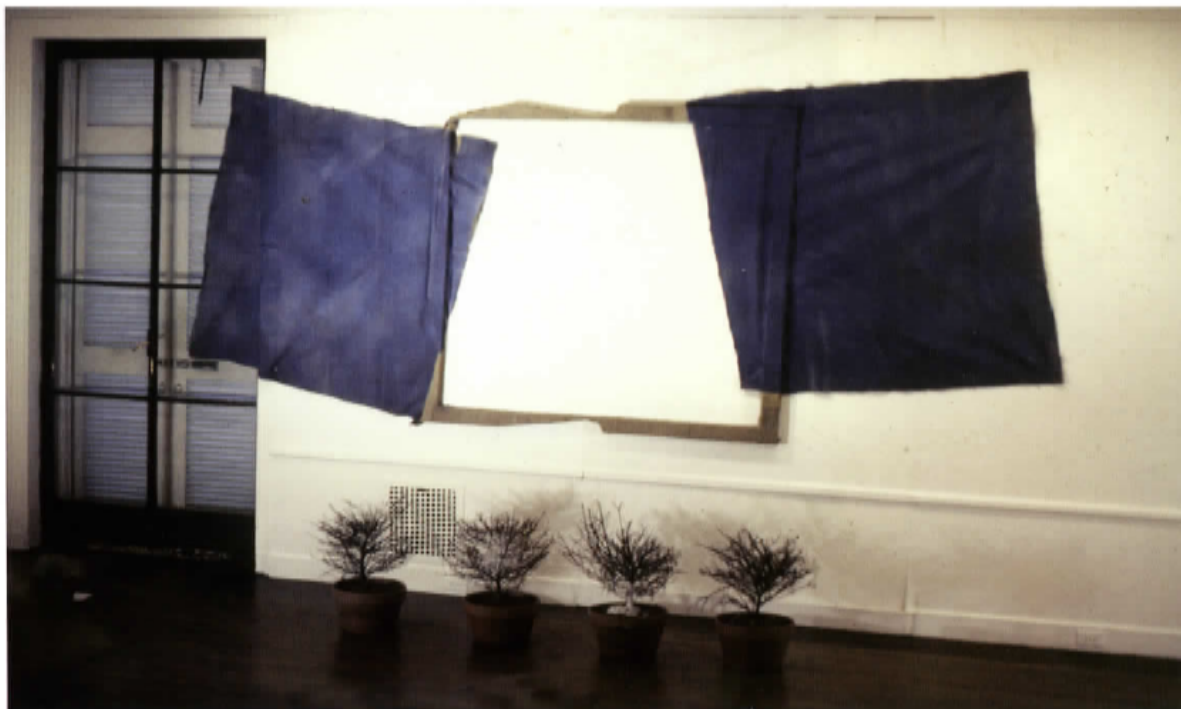
THE DESIGN ISSUE

HANK WILLIS THOMAS - OLAFUR ELIASSON - PIOTR UKLAŃSKI - ROB PRUITT

Jordan, Eliza. "Bill Beckley," *Whitewall*. Summer 2015.

albertz benda

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TO WATCH

BILL BECKLEY

BY ELIZA JORDAN

Bill Beckley's studio in SoHo has his own creations and scattered bits of art hanging on every wall, including an original signed Andy Warhol work and a traded drawing from his pal Sol LeWitt, alongside stacks upon stacks of books. Beckley is known for pioneering "Story art" (later, and now known as "Narrative art") and he was meeting with us to discuss his work from the seventies and his forthcoming exhibition "The Accidental Poet," which opens this September at Albertz Benda in New York.

The show focuses on his time at 112 Greene Street in the 1970s. According to Beckley, the art world was on the cusp of postmodernism, art-world friendships evolved around the thought that "there's this thing called *art*, which is this ambiguous, nebulous kind of thing. Somehow, that's what we're going for, and that's what bonds us. That's what keeps us together." And together they were. Beckley spent many days at 112 Greene Street with close friends who participated through sculpture, performance, and video, including Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Alee Aycock, Joseph Beuys, Mel Bochner, Trisha Brown, Louise Bourgeois, Philip Glass, Mary Heilmann, Joan Jonas, Richard Nonas, Joel Shapiro, and William Wegman.

He described 112 Greene Street as completely organic. "There wasn't one person that organized it," said Beckley. "It was revolutionary. It was not a collective, or a commercial gallery. It evolved out of a friendship, I believe, first with Jeffrey Lew (who owned the building and the

ground floor and basement space at 112), Gordon Matta-Clark, and Alan Saret. I met Gordon and Jeffrey through my friend Rafael Ferrer. It opened in October 1970, a time in New York when there was a deep recession, and a time when artists were working their way out of the constraints of Minimalism. Peter Schjeldahl wrote about the first show in the *New York Times*. It was also a time after Minimalism and Pop art where women were a significant part of the art world, and where the focus was on new and different materials rather than the traditional ones of canvas, paint, marble, and bronze."

There, he worked on many performance-based pieces that formed the groundwork for Narrative art. He hired a tenor from Julliard who did a pull-up, sang a low C, a high C, and a low C again, and then let himself down; trained a turtle to walk down a miniature ramp to the sound of a musician playing the flute; created fully functional silent Ping-Pong tables, and displayed a caged, live rooster atop a mattress. All of his performances were based on metaphors while keeping functionality at the forefront. And all of these performances were documented in photographs.

The role of photography and documentation began to be questioned. "A lot of artists, including me, were taking photographs of what we were doing. And that's kind of what reached the culture in a way because that's what *lasted*. But collectors at the time, they just weren't sure about photographs being art either, and for two reasons. One, what's the limited edition, and how is that

controlled? The other thing is that they fade. And the third thing was that photography is always a second kind of 'lower' thing that wasn't hung on the walls in museums beside paintings and sculptures. It has totally changed," said Beckley. "I just didn't want the secondary photograph—documentation—being what was, then, finally the piece. Even though I really respected it."

So Beckley took a different direction with his photography. "Instead of making photographs that were documentation, I made photographs that were fictional. They weren't true in the first place, so they weren't trying to prove something that existed in the world." During a car ride to Art Basel in 1972, alongside the Conceptual art dealer

This page: Bill Beckley Installation Gallery at Tyler School of Art, 1969.

Opposite page left:

Painted Bushes for Sol LeWitt, 1969.

Right: Painting with Blue Squares, 1969.

All images courtesy of the artist

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John Gibson and a few others, Beckley discussed an upcoming show featuring what they decided to call "Story art" and later in 1974, "Narrative art." As Beckley puts it: "Narrative art" (or "Story art," as it was first named by gallery dealer John Gibson), evolved out of early Conceptual documentation of Earthworks and Body works in the late sixties. It consisted of photographs and texts, but the texts were fictional and the photographs did not prove or validate the texts as photographic documentation did. The first show in 1973 included John Baldessari, Peter Hutchinson, Roger Welch, William Wegman, and myself." For the first time, Beckley and his artistic companions were able to show their art form with a name behind it. "And then some other people, actually did realize that maybe it's not all about *documentation*; maybe it is about the *photograph*," said Beckley.

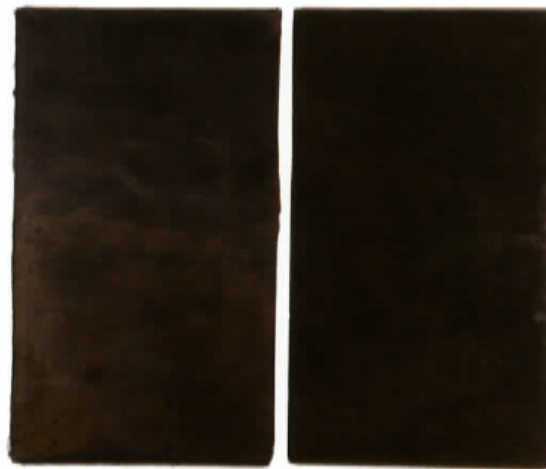
From there, Beckley went on to create "Raven Recitations," for example—a series of up-close photographs that showed his raven, which he trained in his SoHo dining room to speak the word "dark." Referencing Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*, Beckley also paid tribute to Bruce Nauman's show at Leo Castelli Gallery, where Nauman etched a word "dark" on the bottom of an immovable, extremely heavy piece of steel. The fact that you had to trust it was there, and that if you lifted it to see the word "dark" fascinated Beckley. Tying these two ideas together, Beckley's raven recited the word "dark" over and over again and Beckley photographed it. "There were tape recorders, but I didn't tape-record him. The documentation was

like a joke. I was photographing the position of the beak when he said it, and so it wasn't a proof of the raven saying 'dark,' it was almost like a dig on documentation or something like that," he said.

On display in this fall's "The Accidental Poet" show at Albertz Benda in New York will be works like *The Raven*, along with drawings and photo works that led up to his 1969 piece *Myself as Washington*, his later and large-scale photographic works including *Hot and Cold Faucets with Drain* (made in 1975, in MoMA's collection), *Deirdre's Lip* (the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. collection), and his *Silent Ping-Pong tables* (1971).

"We're calling it 'The Accidental Poet' because at the moment of the time that I came out as an artist, I did come out by writing things, but I never thought as myself as a poet or a writer; I thought of myself as an artist. And that's the term I'm most comfortable with," he said. Examples of his wall writings appear in *The Elevator* (1974), *Mao Dead* (1976), and *Deirdre's Lip* (1978)—his poetic narratives pieced together thoughts of what the pictorial piece could possibly be about. "I started making up short fictional stories without plots, in the past tense as stand-ins, perhaps elegies, for the death of modernism's narrative, the grand story that I grew up in. But I wasn't conscious of this at the time," he said. "I was writing things and putting them on the wall, and people that I knew really well were believing and calling them poetry," he said.

And he still insists it was all "definitely accidental."



From left to right:

Bill Beckley
Myself as Washington
1969
Black-and-white photograph
20 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Right:
Bill Beckley
Door: Julia
1969
Two painted panels, oil on linen
88 x 58 inches each
Courtesy of the artist

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