

Downtown Exhibit Looks at Money in the Art World, From Kickstarter to Michael Ovitz

By Catherine Wagley Thursday, Jun 27 2013

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“Perhaps it was artistic inspiration or just sheer stupidity,” artist Adam Mason writes of the time in 2009 when a small stone somehow got lodged into his shoe as he climbed an unpaved Beverly Hills driveway. He opted to leave it there despite the pain.

Mason was at the in-progress, soon-to-be-perforated-steel-covered home of Michael Ovitz, the founder of Creative Artists Agency, former head of Disney and committed collector of contemporary art, to install a Sol LeWitt drawing. Once purchased, LeWitt wall drawings arrive as instructions. Teams, often made up of just-scraping-by young artists, then are hired to execute the instructions. This has been the case since 1969, when LeWitt decided to make systems his main material so that, in his words, the “visual work of art is the proof of the system.”

Mason, then just out of college, was immersed in a system: Aspiring artist helps execute famous artist’s work and receives access to a higher-class environment as a result. He didn’t resent this situation, but he noted it.

He took the stone out of his shoe when he arrived home. He let it sit for a few days, then took it to a foundry where he had it cast in bronze, so that it changed from something insignificant to something that was at least expensive. He was still working on the LeWitt and decided to put the bronze pebble in his shoe one morning, wear it to Ovitz’s, and then slip out during lunch to a lower level of the house and leave the stone there, so that it would become a secret, relatively unimpressive part of Ovitz’s impressive collection.

Mason describes all this in “An Open Letter to Michael Ovitz,” which vacillates between sounding uncomfortably formal and entirely at ease. The letter doubles as the press release for “The Privilege Show,”

a group exhibition about the specter of elitism and financial disparities in the art world, now on view at Control Room, an artist-run space in downtown’s industrial district.

“So why are you receiving this letter?” he writes. “All pretenses aside, I was concerned that this could be interpreted as some hyped metaphor of artistic grandeur. Or just come across as the classic scenario of an accusatory ranting of a cynical artist.” He mainly wanted to share his perspective, he explains, and thanks Ovitz for giving him an opportunity to think about how certain strata depend on each other.

Ovitz, who received a copy of the letter, sent a bottle of Champagne and a note to Control Room. His note — pinned to the refrigerator where the beer was stored on opening night, June 8 — says he found the pebble and will put it in a large vitrine. “Although I really don’t think he was serious about having a vitrine built solely for that purpose, it’s an amusing response,” Mason says.

Ovitz also included a postscript, a “correction,” in which he

says he has collected art by hundreds of young artists, including Math Bass, an artist in “The Privilege Show.” It’s not entirely clear what he is correcting — perhaps Mason’s suggestion that he is elite?

“The difficult thing about doing a show like this is that it draws lines in a community that is actually really beautifully unified,” says artist William Kaminski, who started Control Room in 2009 with his friend, artist-curator Eve Ruether. “I don’t want this show to come off as an attack but something that clarifies how incredibly awkward it is to sit on the boundary we are on — so many of the opportunities that we go out and enjoy come from somewhere outside our economic bracket.” This could include a gamut of things, from a performance event with an open bar to an afterparty at a collector’s home.

In April, three months before the show opened, Ruether and Kaminski sent an email with the subject line “Artforum or Bust” to their mailing list, asking people to help cover the cost of a full-page ArtForum ad. Artforum, known for its serious art criticism, also is the magazine whose plentitude or lack of glossy ads signals the general economic health of the art world. “[W]e plan to employ working-class promotional aesthetics and recontextualize them within the pages of the commercial art world’s premier contemporary publication,” read the email. They needed \$6,380 and raised a bit more than \$7,000 in only a week. The ad itself, which appears near the middle of the summer issue, looks like the sort of dance-party flyer you might find on your windshield if you’ve parked near a thoroughfare. It has the nighttime L.A. skyline across the back, fake flames behind the shiny gold lettering of the show’s title and the names of nearly 200 contributors spread across it.

The artists in “The Privilege Show” mostly know each other, or know Ruether and Kaminski, and had been thinking and talking with each other about the strangeness of being creatively free but financially insecure in a world where just participating feels like something of a privilege.

In the front room, Michael Parker’s *From Hand to Mouth* reimagines a sculpture artist Bruce Nauman made in the 1960s, casting his wife’s hand, arm, shoulder and mouth out of wax. The title referred to their relative poverty at the time. Parker, whose art often references or involves some social activity, cast the hands-to-mouths of Kaminski, Ruether and Jonathan Fields, another artist who helped organize and contributed to the show, and then reinforced the resulting forms with concrete. Their fists hold up a heavy disc of bulletproof glass, discarded by a bank, which Parker salvaged from a demolition company.

On the wall behind the table, Math Bass’ resoled Timberland

boots sit on a white-framed, Plexiglas shelf. Bass had the shoes resoled after wearing them almost beyond saving — now they’re working-class and extravagant at the same time.

Artist Christine Wang’s digital collage, printed large, landscape-style, and hung near the back of the space, merges images of iconic *Last Judgment* paintings — Michelangelo’s blond, buff, almost-nude Christ figure is at the center — with images of items Wang has purchased, like perfume and novelty socks, and records of donations she’s made to certain causes, like the Youth Justice Coalition.

Back in the front room is the film Kaminski shot at an Alhambra Heights home he rented for \$490 with actors who agreed, with goodwill that Kaminski found remarkable, to play the parts of affluent, carefree teens in return for a reel. On opening night, the film’s infectiously optimistic soundtrack, which musician Tucker Robinson helped Kaminski to compose, filled the gallery until about 9:30, when a trio of performances began.

Devin Kenny did a free-roaming set in which he played DJ and rapper, ending by nearly screaming, “Silence is golden... golden... golden.” Wang and Sally Spitz performed sort of a stream-of-consciousness, abject comedy routine. Their raw, sing-songy brattiness belied the careful structuring of their rants, and campy, raunchy videos played behind them as they passive-aggressively attacked each other for having certain social or racial advantages. “She went to University of Caucasians lost among Asians,” Spitz said of Wang, before complaining that “fresh off the boat” Wang already has gallery representation. “She is so white and it’s like white girls just have this idealized image,” Wang said of Spitz.

Bass ended the night with a 20-second performance. Wearing Timberlands like the ones on the wall, she threw down a flat “footbridge,” as she’s begun calling it, made of slats of wood connected by blue canvas. It made a clunk, and then clunked a little more when she walked across it. A few days later she explained the act as “this knotty positioning of privilege,” as “throwing out the amount of space that you’re allowed to take up.” She was performing limitedness, but not in an accusatory way, just in a way that lays out the situation.

THE PRIVILEGE SHOW | Control Room, 2006 E. Seventh St., dwntwn | Through July 14 | control-room.org