



David Schafer Finds Male Hysteria Simmering Beneath the Surface of Art History



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Through immersive, spatial experiments, multimedia artist David Schafer investigates established ideas about history, language, and truth, focusing on eminent modern art figures such as Barnett Newman and Marcel Breuer.

It's helpful to consider Schafer's work—on view in "David Schafer: Models of Disorder" at Diane Rosenstein—with respect to philosopher Jacques Derrida's famous statement, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" ("There is nothing outside of the text"), suggesting there is no meaning outside of context, but rather that context *is* meaning. In other words, when we read a particular text or view a particular artwork, we are also absorbing the inherent biases, insecurities, and beliefs of its maker. Much of Schafer's work deals with deconstructing purported truths and accepted facts by redistributing them visually, spatially, and sonically. He tries to make the black and white more gray.

In *What Should a Painter Do?* (2011), Schafer references Barnett Newman's painting series "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue" (1966–1970), in a bare-bones, painted sculptural installation. The structure is outfitted with a speaker



broadcasting audio of Newman explaining his paintings, excerpted from the film *Painters Painting* (1973). Schafer distorts and divides the audio into different channels, and the resulting sound is garbled, his words indistinct, blending into dissonant noise.

In *What Should a Museum Sound Like?* (2010), Schafer explores Marcel Breuer and his design for the Whitney Museum building, via a voice actor who reenacts Breuer’s words. As the voice matter-of-factly describes what a museum “should” be, it is suddenly interrupted by a jarring noise. The audio continues this way, with a few lines from Breuer interjected with discordant noise that is emitted from a speaker modeled after the Whitney building.

Schafer posits a modern view of male hysteria as a neurosis concerned with power, truth, and control. He literally deconstructs Newman’s and Breuer’s grand visions for painting and architecture, uprooting them from their context as keystones of art history. In doing so he doesn’t discount their contributions; he just inspects them from a different angle, inviting viewers to consider their place in art history anew. While Schafer’s sculptural constructions are overtly minimal, the sound he pairs them with is chaotic and hysterical, disrupting any sense of the work’s formalism. In doing this he encapsulates both an idea as it is widely known, and its lesser-known, human aspect, personalizing artists’ principles and underscoring other psychological elements that may have been at play.

— M.A. Wholey

