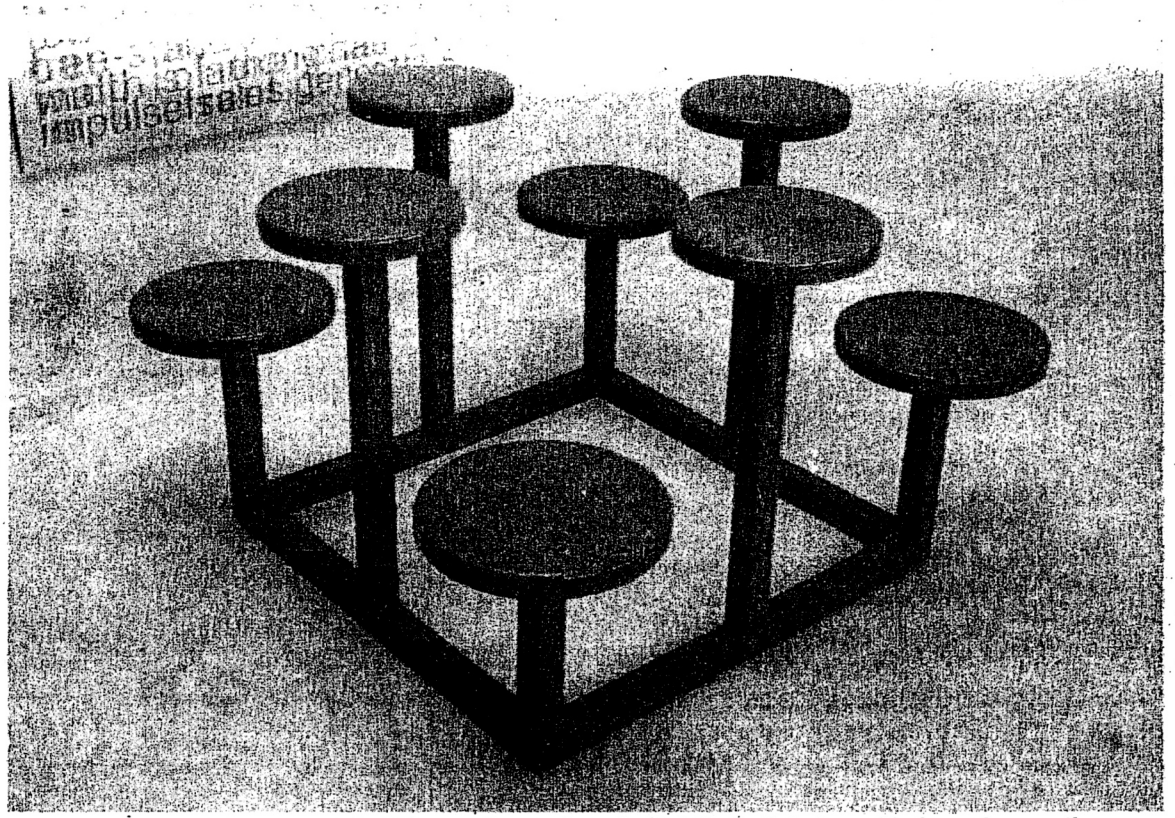
GALLERY

Body and Soul

The BMA Playfully Explores the Relationship Between Art, Gallery, and Viewer

BY MIKE GIULIANO

BodySpace
At the Baltimore Museum of Art through May 27



David Schafer's "Stepped Density I" is one of many pieces in *BodySpace* that plays with viewers' perceptions.

Museum guards spend much of their time telling visitors not to touch the art, but it's impossible to see the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) exhibit *BodySpace* without literally walking through the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres' "Untjtled (Water)." A curtain made out of blue, white, and silver beads, the piece resembles a waterfall. Because it bisects a gallery located about halfway through the exhibit, you must break through its faux-watery surface if you expect to see the rest of the show.

Gonzalez-Torres' deceptively simple artwork redefines the space in which it's installed, and forces you to rethink some pretty basic notions about the meaning of art and how that meaning is affected by its installation within a museum context. You're directly pulled into the equation as you push through that curtain. You see it, you feel it, and you hear it. Some visitors to the show run their hands across the strands of beads, as if playing a musical instrument.

Besides its tactile qualities, the curtain also may strike you as being kind of tacky. After all, it looks a bit like the beaded curtains that added instant flash to many a hippie living room back in the late 1960s. Although this bluish curtain reminds one of abstract and minimal art, it also conjures up more culturally specific references.

Gonzalez-Torres' curtain isn't the only thing that redefines space in the show. Indeed, that's what *BodySpace* is all about. Conceived by BMA curator of contemporary art Helen Molesworth, this mind- and sometimes body-tickling show also features work by Ernesto Neto, Robert Gober, David Schafer, Sowon Kwon, Claudia Matzko, Do-Ho Suh, Cady Noland, and Josiah McElheny—young to middle-aged contemporary artists well schooled in '70s-era minimalist sculpture's emphasis on the relationship between an art object, the space it occupies, and the viewer entering into that space. The exhibited three-dimensional works are installation-oriented and occasionally audience-interactive. You're encouraged to think about the traditional distinctions between inside and outside, public and private, museum space and domestic space. That's a lot to think about, but the show is also just plain fun—not something you could say about some of the more austere '70s minimalist exhibits, which treated the whitewalled modern-art gallery as a space for monastic contemplation.

Among the most playful of these youngish artists is Do-Ho Suh, whose "Seoul Home/L.A. Home/Baltimore Home: Bathroom" is a bathroomlike environment made out of translucent silk. Not only can you see through the entire thing, but looking directly through its narrow door offers a blunt view of a simulated sink, toilet, and other fixtures, all made out of the same silky material as the walls, floor, and ceiling. Perhaps not coincidentally, the sink and toilet resemble the so-called soft sculptures that Pop artist Claes Oldenburg started making in the 1960s. Although working within a minimalist mode, artists such as Suh are also influenced by the playful Pop impulse to confer artistic status on everyday domestic objects (or their simulations). "Seoul Home" is a funny illustration of some of the show's overall curatorial themes: a private space installed in a public space; an artwork that fills gallery space and can be looked through; and, because it's a bathroom, a reminder of the human body and some of its functions.

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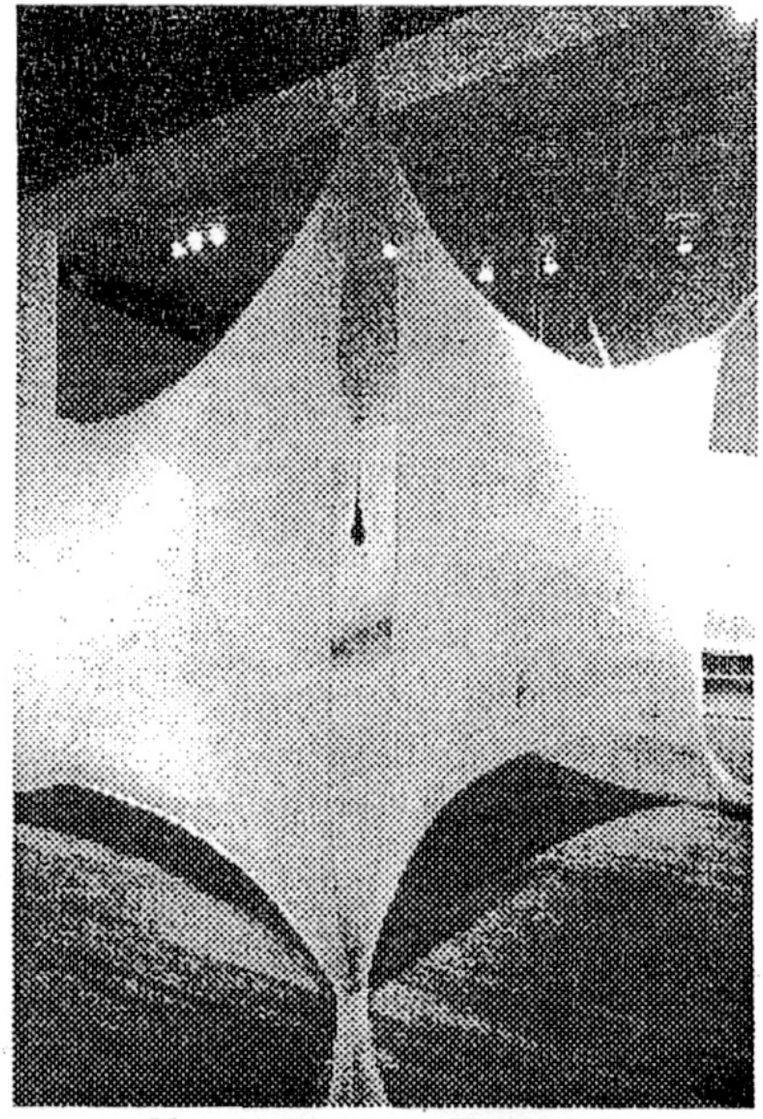
Suh's bathroom installation occupies a bit of gallery space more or less as a conventional piece of sculpture would, but other artists in the show, like Gonzalez-Torres, overturn our usual expectations as to how art relates to the space that contains it. Robert Gober has a cast-pewter "Drain" that has been directly installed into a gallery wall. It's not a functioning drain, of course, but metaphorically it functions as yet another reminder that these artists want to question the conventional notion of the art gallery as a solid "container" for artwork. Now you can think of the enormous white-painted museum wall as if it were the surface of a sink or bathtub. Get sucked inside that drain, metaphorically speaking, and who knows where you'll be deposited?

Gober doesn't actually alter the wall beyond inserting a drain into it, but Claudia Matzko covers an entire gallery side with her "Salt Wall," a grid of small, handmade tiles made of salt and resin. The grid format overtly recalls the impersonal ordering systems associated with minimalist art, and the tiles' monochromatic whiteness also speaks to the purity of such art. However, Matzko updates that minimalist tradition by making tiles in which you can see the ridges, folds, and hand prints that result from her shaping each tile manually.

If several of these artists prompt you to reconsider gallery space, Ernesto Neto's enormous "Sister Naves" is a walk-through environmental installation that takes over the gallery it's in. True to its title—*naves* means vessels in Portuguese—his installation is a vessel- or womblike space primarily made out of Lycra, Styrofoam, and sand. Imagine two rooms and a hallway made with pantyhose walls, floors, and ceilings and you have some idea what it's like to walk through this whatever-it-is. Because you can see through the walls, you'll notice how the interior space, which seems like it should be a private place for you and a few other people to explore (only three people are allowed inside at a time), is actually every bit as public as a cage at the zoo. The reorientation—or is it disorientation?—engendered by such an environment is spiked by having the space permeated by the smell of cloves, which hang in a few podlike clusters inside.

It's amusing to walk through "Sister Naves" and observe how your fellow primates respond to it. Owing to its pantyhoselike surfaces, visitors must remove their shoes be-

fore entering, lest they rip the installation's "skin." This liberates more than your feet; you also set aside some of your inhibitions. I observed a shoeless elderly woman stretching her legs as if doing ballet exercises. She, in turn, observed me placing the most important of all journalistic appendages, my notebook, on the gallery floor so that I took could take an unencumbered walk on the wildly synthetic side.



Ernesto Neto's 1999 installation *Sister Naves*

BodySpace's concept has room for so many artworks that one is left to wonder what the limits might be for what belongs in the show, and what doesn't. Only a single piece seems a bit out of place: Cady Noland's untitled aluminum panel, which leans against a gallery wall. Its shiny surface is covered with silkscreened images reproducing newspaper photographs and captions relating to heiress Patty Hearst in her gun-toting-revolutionary days.

The other artworks in *BodySpace* handle art-and-its-context questions through physical, philosophical, and primarily abstract means, but Noland's Hearst-related piece is more overtly topical in terms of what it has to say about tabloid journalism shaping our perception of the world. On its own terms, it makes a valid statement, but within the context of this exhibit it seems to play too directly off its now-vintage headlines. The exhibit is much better when it allows us to revel in Neto's clove-scented cavern, peek into Suh's bathroom, and push through Gonzalez-Torres' beaded waterfall. ■