



SEMBLANCES

- Jennifer Danos
- Natasha Pestich
- Marcus Young

October 21, 2011,
through January 1, 2012

Minnesota Artists
Exhibition
Program Galleries

Jennifer Danos, "Semblances,"
installation detail, 2011

Perhaps the
mystery is a
little too plain...
a little too
self-evident.

—C. August Dupin,
from Edgar Allan Poe's
The Purloined Letter

semblances

Jennifer Danos, Natasha Pestich, Marcus Young

By Christopher Atkins, MAEP coordinator

As a **word** that describes the
superficial affinities among **objects**,
yet doesn't dig deeper to

understand the ways things actually
work, "semblance" is insufficient.

Semblances are **specious**
because they only get part of the picture;

they have **limits**.



Perhaps because they are superficial, semblances are easily manipulated, and this is where it gets interesting: By being “good enough” yet failing to pass for the original, semblances uncover the ways in which people and objects are interpolated as subjects of recognition, value, and mediation. When they are discovered, especially convincing currency forgeries and art counterfeits make it easier to see the blind spots in financial systems and how the market for precious commodities is driven as much by desire as by supply and demand. To further stretch the concept of semblances, observe how they overlap with postmodern art practices. In these cases, where artists play with the fallibility of semblances as insubstantial copies of something or someone else, they become a means for critiquing the concept of originality.

Above: Natasha Pestich, “Semblances,” installation views, 2011

Using semblances as the starting point for their Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program (MAEP) exhibition, Jennifer Danos, Natasha Pestich, and Marcus Young have taken a wide-angle view of the term and how it can be deployed, as an art practice, to uncover how art is mediated by museums. In his essay, *The Function of the Museum*, Daniel Buren used the word “frames” as a metaphor for how museums have engineered physical and virtual limits around artists and artwork. In their respective sections of the MAEP exhibition, Danos, Pestich, and Young have replicated the many sets of overlapping, visible, and invisible frames that add up to a museum experience. Drilling down into specifics, they are interested in, among other things, how curators and galleries mediate visitor experiences; how exhibitions create art historic characters that have been bridled with a museum imprimatur; and how an artist can insert himself or herself into the museum’s system of collection and display, then re-imagine gallery spaces to include mobile public performances.

Jennifer Danos

Danos has always been a sharp **observer** who accentuates architectural **nuances** such as flooring **imperfections**, lighting details, and wall repairs that are quite **visible** but are, nonetheless, just outside of our conscious **vision**.

Jennifer Danos, *Untitled (Architectural Obtrusion 1)*, poured concrete, installation detail, 2008 Photo: Rik Sferra

HIGHPOINT EDITIONS DECADE ONE

In its first ten years, Highpoint Center for Printmaking has become a vibrant part of the Twin Cities art scene. Increasingly, Highpoint is gaining national and international stature as a publisher of exquisitely made prints. "Highpoint Editions—Decade One" celebrates its professional collaborations with fine artists of many stripes. The diversity and the quality testify to HP's Artistic Director and Master Printer Cole Rogers and his talented staff's ability to work with artists to realize their visions.

Rogers and his wife, Executive Director Carla McGrath, founded Highpoint in 2001. The non-profit's first home was a storefront at 2538 Lyndale Avenue, just a few blocks from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. In 2009, Highpoint moved into a newly renovated 10,000-square-foot facility at 912 West Lake Street. There it continues

to serve the community with educational programs, a cooperative workshop for local artists, and a gallery offering prints for sale. This exhibition focuses on the editions that have emerged from its flourishing program for visiting artists.

The artists invited to Highpoint may come from near or far, and the working process is customized for each individual artist. Rogers prefers that the artists—especially those without extensive printmaking experience—come without fixed ideas of the finished prints so they can open their horizons to new ideas as they gain deeper understanding of the possibilities of printmaking. The artists, in turn, challenge Rogers, for they drive him to attempt audacious, demanding projects.

The MIA salutes Highpoint and we look forward to future collaborations.

Jennifer Danos, "Semblances,"
installation detail, 2011

An extensive researcher who works on site, Jennifer Danos is a careful gleaner of details, who creates physical and environmental doubles. At the root of this practice, which she explains in "Semblances," is an interest in the complexity of architecture and how small, barely perceptible cues within spaces work together to create a museum experience.

Working closely with the MIA's Department of Prints & Drawings and Highpoint Center for Printmaking, she has created a semblance—not a replica—of "Highpoint Editions—Decade One," the exhibition in the adjacent gallery. By carefully accentuating pieces and portions from the artwork and gallery next door, she is prompting visitors to consider in what ways "...the museum makes its 'mark,' imposes its 'frame' (physical and moral) on everything that is exhibited in it, in a deep and indelible way. It does this all the more easily since *everything that the museum shows is only considered and produced in view of being set in it.*"¹ In other words, museum displays are not passive supports creating a presence for artwork. Since artworks are accompanied by labels and extended information, these display strategies also have epistemological and pedagogical goals. Danos's work peels back the physical components of the exhibition so that she, and audiences, can better see what Daniel Buren calls the "physical and moral" frames that artworks are surrounded by when they are displayed in a museum.



Jennifer Danos, *Untitled (On the Ideology of the Museum)*, chromogenic print, 2011

In the same way that Detective Dupin in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* argues for a variation of principle in order to see that which is right in front of us, Danos does not "consider only [her] own ideas of ingenuity."²

By looking with rather than at the authority of the museum, she more clearly discerns galleries as mediators of artwork. In *Untitled (On the Ideology of the Museum)*, Danos has photographed the wall space between two prints by Chloe Piene. It is what it is; a blank space of wall between two works of art. But to Danos, this framed piece of wall (duplicating the prints' frames) is important for two reasons. First, the artwork asks, What about the space between the two prints? Is there logic to how curators and artists measure the space between works? Second, how does the space between works make it possible (or not) to concentrate and focus on each piece of art before moving on to the next? Is this space for our benefit



or for the visitors', or for the art's? Not all of Danos's works in this exhibition are based on formal semblances with the artworks in the adjacent gallery. She has also installed identical baffles and reformatted the wall text that accompanies that exhibition. She is intrigued by these physical properties of the space, and the ways in which they affect the selection of artworks and lead audiences through the space to set a tone for reading and understanding the exhibition.

While she is interested in the labor and process of printmaking, Danos would be equally interested in any type of exhibition in the adjacent gallery. She is more interested in asking questions about the nature of museum installations than indicting the gallery space for all of its "frames" and limits. "This is first an appropriation and then a subversion," Judith Butler wrote. "Sometimes it is both at once; it remains caught in an irresolvable tension, and sometimes a fatally unsubversive appropriation takes place."³ And she has done so on the museum's own terms.⁴ Even though there is lifespan built into the exhibition, once the Highpoint show closes doesn't mean that Danos's work loses its validity. What remains will be a set of lingering reminders on how to read museum exhibitions here and elsewhere.

Left: Jennifer Danos, "Semblances," installation detail, 2011

¹ Daniel Buren, *The Function of the Museum*, 190. Author's emphasis.

² Edgar Allan Poe, *The Purloined Letter*, 743.

³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, New York: Routledge, 1992, 128.

⁴ Butler, 125.

EXPEDITION:

THE EARLY WORKS OF JAN XYLANDER



LITTLE GREEN
GALLERY

JANUARY 26 - APRIL 24, 2006
OPENING RECEPTION
THURSDAY, JANUARY 26, 2006

Natasha Pestich

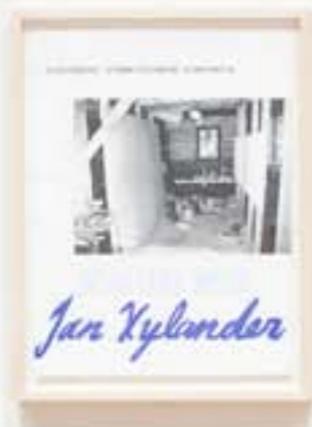
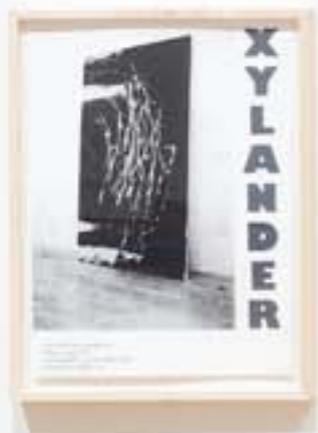
Pestich's work is a combination of printmaking and social engagement.

For her contribution to "Semblances," Natasha Pestich has created a fictional artist named Jan Xylander. Using this character and his life story as a theme, she has screen-printed a series of posters that chart the trajectory of his exhibition career over the span of approximately 10 years. On their own, the individual posters are beautiful accumulations of her historical knowledge of illustration, typography, and poster design. Pestich has added another layer to her fantasy by thinking through how galleries might have visualized and promoted Xylander's successive suites of new work. Looking at all of the posters in the show and following the visual cues, visitors may see that the posters are a complement to, but don't give away, the exact tenor and thrust of Xylander's work. Yet somehow they do add up to a persona that is Jan Xylander by positing clues to his identity. For example, he was an outdoorsman and an ascetic who went on sojourns to isolate himself from his peers. Even as visitors infer this information from Pestich's posters, the exhibition is not a biography.

Left: Natasha Pestich, *Jan Xylander Exhibition Poster*, screenprint, 2011

THE OPENING ACT

A Survey of Jan Xylander Exhibition Posters

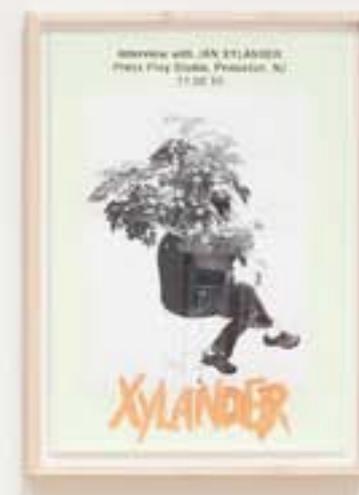


FOR THE FIRST TIME, JAN XYLANDER GALLERY POSTERS—made by artists and designers from across the design scene—are collected here for study. These graphic works open the breadth of Xylander's art background, most providing meaningful promotional pointers to the major themes and concepts of the artist's work.

A series of inquiries as these posters assess the life and work of the man. On the one hand, Xylander was a painter and performance artist deeply influenced by his spirit in the northern Minnesota wilderness. On the other, he has acknowledged that part of his career came from selling his work as interior window art. Like a game of hide-and-seek, or what words or phrases are broken into parts, these exhibition posters offered to bring disparate elements of the artist's life and work together to form a cohesive picture. Moments and images include formal scores and musical drawings, typography, patterns of letters with colors, and the artist himself. The creative drawing of these intriguing works is very interesting and open-ended questions. How does Xylander connect his artistic interests completely out of his people, with his participation in the hyper-communication of social media sites? What influences, if any, do you wish to lay bare on the direction of an artist's work?

These posters, some printed posters, have had a direct and lasting impact on the problems of today's gallery advertisements. They emphasize the hand-made, rather than mass-produced commercial printing techniques that applied greatly to the total experience that engaged Xylander's key supporters and visitors.

—Julia Park, *intermediation.com*



Is the artwork and memorabilia in the exhibition enough to “know” Xylander? In creating this fictional character, Pestich has complicated visitors’ ideas about the author of the work; it is both by Pestich and by Xylander. Caught between the credibility of the museum and a spurious biography, Pestich’s semblance of an exhibition asks, How does the museum participate in the identity formation and legacy of an artist through one-person and retrospective exhibitions?

Above: Natasha Pestich, installation view, 2011



Like other artists who have created fictional characters, her art is "...designed to create an experience that is innocent of the categories and expectations that often hamper our encounters with contemporary art."⁵ In creating, then elaborating on the persona of Xylander, Pestich is piqued at how museums and exhibitions narrate the life of an artist, take part in shaping his or her career, and ultimately provide the imprimatur of art history. With all of these details, documents, and traces of a person's life, Pestich is "signaling how the display of art within its walls is the product of a complex web of politically informed acts of inclusion and exclusion."⁶ She shows there are blind spots that get in the way of research. And in these moments of blockage, where do we turn to fill in the blanks with reliable and authoritative information? This exhibition provides an opportunity for viewers to fill in the blanks and project their own narratives onto the artist, involving them as participants in the exhibition of Jan Xylander's work and



Above: Natasha Pestich, "Semblances," installation view, 2011

career. And when Pestich asks us to suspend our disbelief, it becomes easier to reconsider the emphasis on factual information and think about fiction as a way to spur new questions, such as, Do museums contain reliable and accurate information? If that information is fiction, is the exhibition less authentic? Does it adversely affect viewers' experiences?

⁵ Cecilia Aldarondo, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, 35.

⁶ Aldarondo, 36.

Marcus Young

Young is an **artist** but he is not
an **object maker**.

Trained in theater and music, Marcus Young has made work that relies on the participation of others, to create what he calls “behavioral art.” Behavior—physical, mental, conscious, or unconscious—is coded by actions that have broad personal and social dimensions. More than finding meaning in behavior, Young’s work is also about processes. Often working in public, he observes how organizational systems and sociological norms enforce behavior. He wants to be part of and participate in these systems, tapping into them without undermining their efficiency. For some of his most recent projects, including *Everyday Poems for City Sidewalk*, *The Lullaby Experiment*, and *Pacific Avenue*, he worked with artists, volunteers, and the general public to create public behavioral art situations. When Young walks and smiles at passers-by in super slow motion in *Pacific Avenue*, he creates a memorable event that also encourages people to slow down themselves. The common denominator in his work is testing the elasticity of what is permitted in public spaces.

Left: Marcus Young, *Pacific Avenue* (Bristol, England), performance, 2008–present

Marcus Young,
With Nothing to Give, I Give Myself,
performance, 2011

Young has responded to the exhibition opportunity of "Semblances" by giving his full self to the museum. During the exhibition, Young will live on site for a period of time. He is collaborating with MIA staff to create a situation in which he will temporarily become part of the museum's galleries and collection, including the procedures an object goes through to be placed on display, maintained, and protected. Yet Young is careful to avoid the spectacle that such a project can create. He asks: What is at stake for an artist when he gives himself over as a work of art? If the artwork isn't considered good, what does that say about him as a person and as an artist? Young wants to prompt visitors to be more aware of artworks, how they are viewed, and how this scrutiny can be applied to their own lives.

Based on Mierle Laderman Ukeles's performance, in 1973, *Hartford Wash*, Young will be working with MIA janitorial staff on regular cleaning rotations during open hours. It takes a lot of time and energy to maintain the museum, including cleaning floors and windows, recycling garbage, replacing light bulbs, and painting the walls. In the footsteps of Ukeles's *Maintenance Art* manifesto, Young's piece is invested in "sustaining the change" his work has created. That is, he is interested in working with museum staff as staff not as an outside interlocutor. And in repeating Ukeles's *Hartford Wash*, as a semblance of that performance, Young rekindles an argument that has been waged for decades about performance art: With a medium that doesn't leave any tangible or physical record, is it ever possible to accurately duplicate or repeat a piece of performance art? What is being repeated when an artist such as Young repeats a performance such as *Hartford Wash*?





Marcus Young, *With Nothing to Give, I Give Myself*, performance, 2011

It is impossible to avoid physical terms and metaphors to describe Young's contribution to "Semblances." On the one hand, his series of behavioral art pieces will be performed in various spaces in the museum. These performances begin and end with the artist's body. On the other hand, his work is about an artist entering into the machinations of an encyclopedic art museum. Buren wrote, "We must admit that no museum ever totally adapts itself to the work; pretending to defend the uniqueness of the work, the museum paradoxically acts as if this did not exist and handles the work as it pleases."⁷ Young will be finding ways to maneuver within the operational DNA of the museum without disrupting it, and finding his own way of working within those

limits. As an artist who is working so closely with the MIA, Young makes work that is like a viral art infection.

What does all of this add up to? "Semblances" generates rhetorically interesting questions. Whether one is an artist, a visitor, or even a work of art, he, she, or it is both the subject of and subject to the museum's display routines. Or, borrowing an idea from Butler, the traditional museum is involved in "...the simultaneous production and subjugation of subjects in a culture..."⁸ whereby art is brought into a desirable relationship among collection, display, and narration.

⁷ Buren, *The Function of the Studio*, 54.

⁸ Butler, 124.

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**MINNESOTA ARTISTS EXHIBITION
PROGRAM**

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