

Projects 72 : Piotr Uklanski, John Armleder : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 1-August 1, 2000

[Lilian Tone and Anne Umland]

Author

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72

piotr ukłański
john armleder

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The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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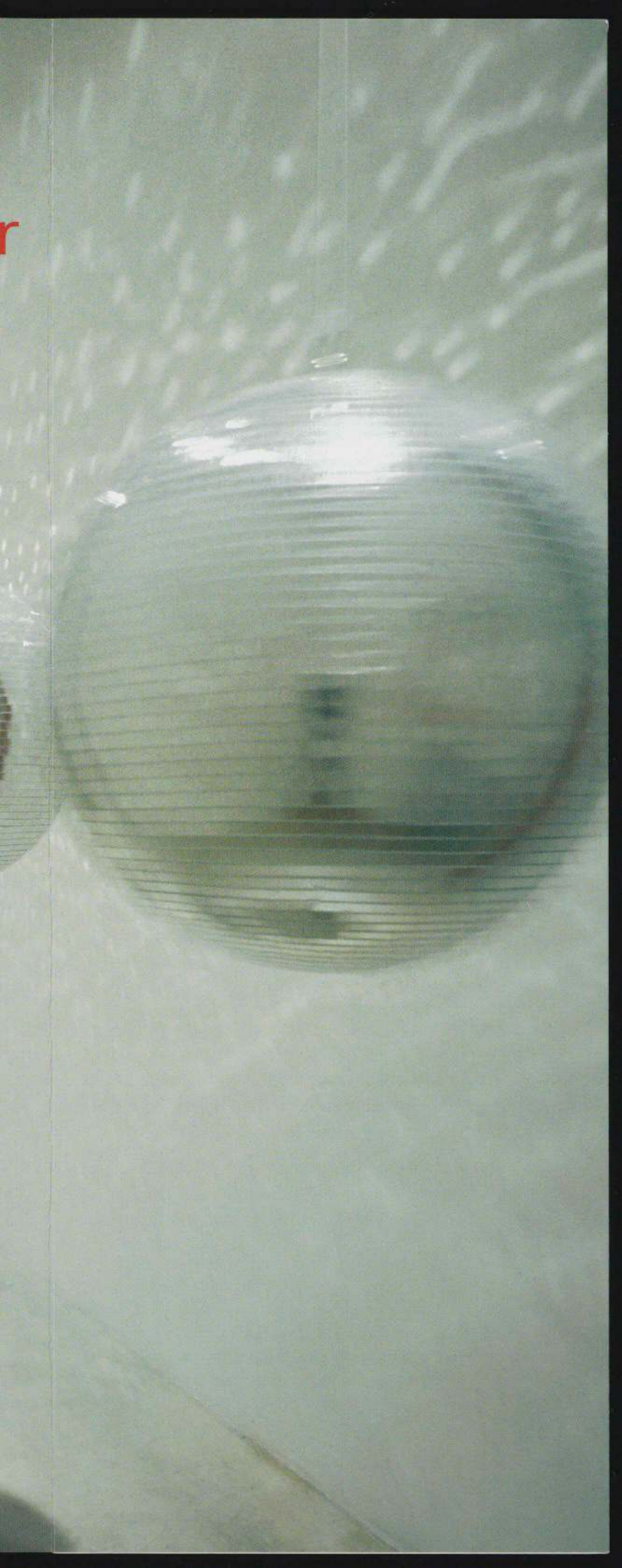
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John Armleder. *Untitled*. 1982. Silver (mylar) mirror wall; *Untitled*. 1996–98. Wall painting. Installation at Casino Luxemburg, 1998. Courtesy the artist

In the work of **John Armleder** and **Piotr Ukiński**, form follows function into the realm of fantasy. Austere geometries take the shape of glittering disco balls and pulsating, illuminated dance floors, and museum spaces evoke associations of nightclubs and discotheques—social arenas in which people meet, greet, dance, and lose themselves.

For *Projects 72*, the artists have created entertainment zones within the Museum, Armleder designing a disco-ball installation and a wall painting for the entrance to the Museum's Café/Etc., and Ukiński inserting a gridded, sound-activated multichromatic dance floor in The Abby Aldrich Sculpture Garden's east pool. Playing on the social connotations of museum spaces that are not exclusively devoted to the display of art, both artists conflate art with entertainment, proposing that "feel-good" aesthetics can be serious fun.

A generation separates **John Armleder**, born in the late 1940s, and Ukiński, born in the late 1960s. Armleder has created work that has often been understood as event-oriented. He was involved with Fluxus, the international network of artists who staged performances, created Conceptual art pieces, and perpetrated a variety of events in the 1960s and 1970s, and who are principally known for their irreverent attitudes toward art making, culture, and life. From the tea party Armleder staged at the Paris Biennale in 1975 to the works combining painted canvases with pieces of furniture, his work has particular resonance for the present moment. He presaged the current interest of many younger artists in socially interactive, hospitable, audience-engaging art and in works that blur the boundaries between art and design. Armleder once ironically remarked that he thinks of his art as "furnishing," and he has long been interested in ornament and decoration, and in the issues of visibility and invisibility, allure and overfamiliarity, that are implicit in them. His wall paintings, made since the late 1960s, can be understood in this context.

The wall painting he has created for the Museum repeats the shape of a found motif, specifically that of a decal popular in Europe during the 1970s that imitates a spontaneous splat of paint or other liquid substance. The artist relishes the ironies inherent in this motif, and in his treatment of it: a "haphazard paint event is designed and then printed as a sticker that in turn is reproduced in actual paint media on a wall, and neutralized by its repetition in a regular grid." A purportedly spontaneous, unique mark, once a signifier of serious painting, is thus transformed into a reiterated, all-over motif, a decorative pattern.

Armleder has incorporated disco balls into his work since the late 1960s. However, the first piece that intentionally exploited the cultural signification and visual effect of these objects was a work produced in 1992 that consisted of a constructed sofa covered with a mirror mosaic, with motorized, illuminated disco balls hanging from both sides like suspended lamps.

For the Museum, Armleder has designed an installation of twelve oversized disco balls hung in two rows of six and roughly at eye level, with each ball lit by a pair of spotlights. As the artist has noted, "The disco ball is a combination of pure forms and motion, a sphere covered with a multitude of square elements, a spinning movement of a steady object, creating by its reflections an unsteady spatial setting." The viewer is enveloped in a disorienting, flickering, whirling atmosphere that dissolves the finite features of both the surrounding architecture and the audience into a constant play of reflected light. By hanging the balls at eye level, and by repeating them, Armleder dislocates and recontextualizes these popular objects. Evoking the disco ball's "natural environment of stage and dance halls, of glitter, spectacular masquerade, and camouflage," Armleder suggests that we consider these objects simultaneously as sculpture and as ready-made props combined to create a strangely silent party room.

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John Armleder

Swiss, born Geneva 1948

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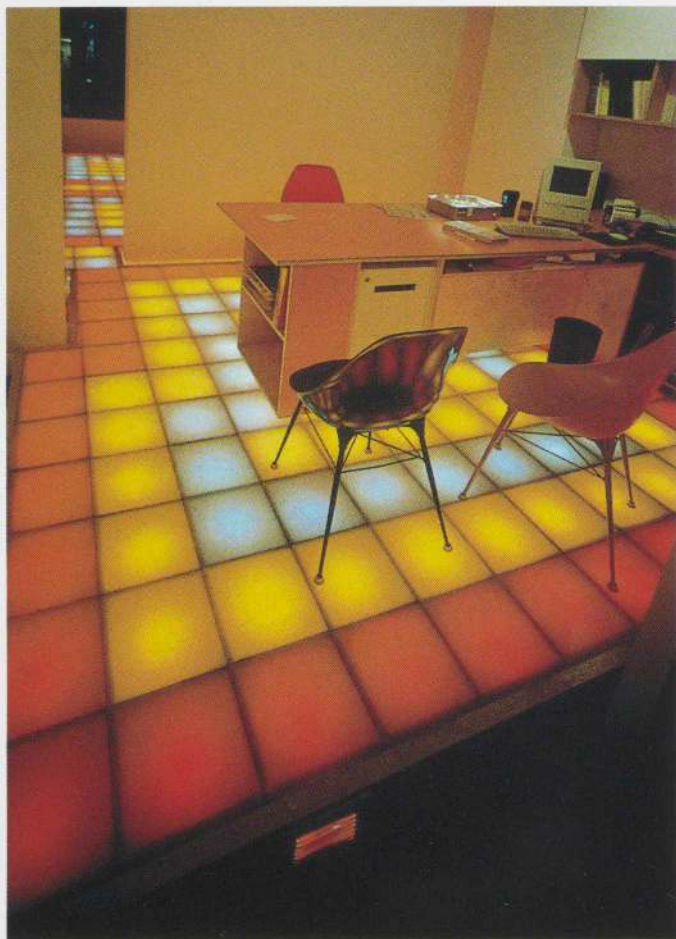
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John Armleder. *Mondo Tiki II*. 1999. Installation at Holderbank, Aargau, Switzerland, 1999. Courtesy the artist



Piotr Ukiński. *Dance Floor*. 1996. Installation at Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, 1996. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise

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Conversely, **Piotr Ukiński's** illuminated *Dance Floor* is anything but silent. Comprising over five hundred colored plexiglass panels, lit from below with lights hooked up to a sound system so that they pulse in patterns that traverse the floor, Ukiński's work is visually and acoustically loud. Employing (like Armleder) strategies of dislocation and recontextualization, Ukiński inserts an alien, artificial, architectural structure into the Museum's sculpture garden, replacing the tranquil waters of the garden's east pool with a dance floor that invites not contemplation but social interaction. Bleached out during the daytime by the garden's natural light, the floor is a creature of the night that fully reveals its spectacular potential only after sundown, when its references to Minimalist modern sculpture become functional and festive. What is, in one sense, an innocuous floor sculpture becomes a dazzling platform for social events.

The *Dance Floor* was first installed in a gallery in New York in 1996, extending over not only the gallery's exhibition space but also its office area, blurring the boundaries between work and pleasure, and between the gallery's public and private zones. Since then, Ukiński has redesigned his floor to fit a variety of different contexts including a museum cafeteria, a bar, and a staircase. In each instance, preexisting architectural coordinates determine the floor's parameters; the work is

Left: Piotr Ukiński. *Dance Floor*. 1996. Installation at Passerby, New York, 1999. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise

accommodating in every sense of the word. Uklański's aim in designing *Dance Floor* was to create "an object that would be all generosity and no ideology. An object that would give and give and give, but that would, at the end of the night, be unknowable, as its true nature resides in our own pleasure. It is a perfect object. It is a floor and wishes only to disappear. It has none of the grandiosity of a sculpture demanding your attention. It is an object truly of our own making—all technology. All light bulbs and transcendence. I have almost nothing to do with it. It belongs to us all."

Ukłański's fundamental, savvy romanticism separates him from Armleder, as does his foregrounding of *Dance Floor's* social and functional dimensions. When all is said and done, the work is nothing more and nothing less than a fabulous site for a party. For Armleder, on the other hand, formal and decorative concerns are as important as social character in his work; all are qualities that are welcomed as felicitous "side effects." Key for both artists is the theatrical highlighting of the role or status of the viewer. In this way and others—the use of serial repetition, commonplace principles of order, and industrial manufacture—they share a deeply ironic relation to Minimalism that borders on parody. By inverting relationships between quotidian objects and art objects, and by placing bits of pop culture in new contexts, Armleder and Ukłański actively engage and play with the taboos that traditionally separate art from entertainment, messing with the common associations of entertainment with triviality, lack of substance, and pleasure for pleasure's sake. As Ukłański puts it, "Entertainment/art—please tell me what the difference is."

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Piotr Ukłański

Polish, born Warsaw 1968

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Dance floor structure provided by Tate Access Floors, Inc.

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