

# Exhibition 157

## Morgan Fisher

### Portikus Looks at Itself

01/30/09 - 03/15/09

The American artist and filmmaker Morgan Fisher (born 1942 in Washington, DC, living and working in Los Angeles) first appeared at the end of the 1960s with film works such as *The Director and His Actor* and *Look at Footage Showing Preparations for an Unmade Film (2)*, *Documentary Footage or Production Stills* (1968 and 1970). In the early 1970s, these works were already shown at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

While studying art history and film, Fisher worked as a film editor for Hollywood productions, and his first film projects were clearly shaped by these experiences. In 1984 he produced his well-known 35-minute *Standard Gauge*, in which found footage was compiled according to a precise formal model. With these conceptual approaches, Fisher reflects on the parameters of cinematographic depiction. In 2005 the Whitney Museum of American Art dedicated a large retrospective to Morgan Fisher's film works: *Standard Gauge: Film Works by Morgan Fisher*.

At the end of the 1990s, Fisher expanded his work to include painting, drawing and spatial installations. His most recent exhibition, *Pendant Pair Paintings*, at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in 2007, for example, presented a spatially expansive concept of painterly works. Monochrome, square canvases kept in the colors of the chromatic circle commented on the architectural features of the gallery space through the special way they were hung. In another show at Neuer Aachener Kunstverein in 2002, *To See Seeing*, monochrome grey paintings were shown that in an angular form partially framed the windows of the space.

Today, Morgan Fisher ranks as one of the best-known and most influential artists of the American West Coast who has decisively influenced an entire generation of young artists. For many years, he was professor at UCLA and the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. His open, cross-media working approach, however, was repeatedly accompanied by difficulties in classifying him. This is perhaps one of the reasons why for a longer period of time, from the end of the 1980s until the late 1990s, Fisher's works enjoyed little public attention – quite unjustly. With the show, *Portikus Looks at Itself*, Portikus now contributes to making Fisher's works visible again. To underpin this endeavor, Portikus will publish a retrospective catalogue that with texts by Thom Andersen, Sabeth Buchmann, Rainer Bellenbaum, Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, and Morgan Fisher himself pay tribute to the oeuvre of the artist and filmmaker.

With *Portikus Looks at Itself*, Morgan Fisher shows a spatially expansive installation at Portikus that could hardly be more site-specific. He deals with the architecture of the exhibition space in a direct manner. Portikus exhibition space, which is strongly characterized by its very special height and various architectural elements in the upper half of the space, is reflected across a horizontal line imaged at mid-height. Morgan Fisher's comment on his initial impression of the space explains the idea of the show: "The space was made for the exhibition of work, so it was, so to speak, perfect, without features comparable to those I had relied on in the past to determine the paintings. At least this was true for the lower part of the space. The upper part of the space was another matter. The space at Portikus is very high in relation to its floor area. This height was to me already unusual, and within this unusually high space there were details that to me seemed equally unusual, a catwalk that went around four sides of the space and above that, a row of small windows that went around three sides of the space. It was not evident to me what use all this height and the details within it might have. (...) In thinking about what I could do for a show, it seemed pointless to ignore the upper half of the space when it so dominated the lower half. My reaction to the architecture suggested what I should do. The thing to do was to acknowledge and emphasize this fact by

giving in to it, and the way to do this was to duplicate the upper half of the space in the lower half. As the title of the work suggests, the relation between the upper half and its duplicate in the lower half is that of reflection. It would be as if the upper half were looking at itself in a mirror. But the reflection, instead of being an image, would be as material as its original." And Fisher continues on the formal gesture of reflecting the architectural elements and the content-related meaning of this idea: "Inversion, turning something upside down, is a formal operation that in this instance produces a spatial symmetry, and moreover a spatial symmetry that is vertical. The work is not the just duplicated elements, it is the totality of the relations between the original elements in the upper half of the architecture and the elements in the lower half that are their duplicates. (...) To me the origin of the work was in a critique of elements in the architecture that I had thought were not useful, and what's more, imposed themselves on the space. Duplicating these elements was a way to emphasize them and so draw attention to them. But this duplication transforms elements in the architecture the purposes of which had mystified me into elements that are generative. A simple formal operation produces a work that comprehends the totality of the space."