

# Forcible Remove

ANNIE OCHMANEK ON CHRISTOPHER D'ARCANGELO

In an attempt to find alternatives to "curatorial control" I am making the following proposal to you the reader:

A. You will find that the following page of this journal has been left blank. That page is yours.

B. You can remove that page from this journal and do anything you want on it.

C. You can then install the page anywhere in the viewing space of LAICA, at any time and in anyway you want.

I am aware of the fact that this proposal is a product of "curatorial control." In any case it is my hope that, through these kinds of activities from inside and outside the art world, we may find alternatives to the systems that control our lives.

**THE BLANK SPREAD** that appeared in a 1977 issue of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art's *Journal* was a characteristic contribution from Christopher D'Arcangelo—an open invitation and an instrument of exposure that delineates its own boundaries. Maneuvering among the structures of the art world, D'Arcangelo worked within certain blind spots where inside and outside meet, or where distinctions are erected between the art institution and its larger social and economic context. "It is not the paradox but the space between the two parts of the paradox that is important," D'Arcangelo wrote in a 1975 notebook, and it is these spaces to which he committed himself. Building walls and refurbishing loft spaces and calling these jobs "functional constructions," he and fellow artist Peter Nadin conflated manual and artistic labor, noting in their contracts that this was done "as a means of surviving in a capitalist economy." And in solo actions and demonstrations, D'Arcangelo inserted uninvited material into exhibition spaces while employing tactics of surrender and self-arrest, in order to put latent apparatuses of control on view. An assistant to Daniel Buren and a pupil of Ian Wilson, D'Arcangelo enlisted Conceptual art's established strategies of language-based production and dematerialization for acts of vandalism and direct confrontation. If by then performance work and the event score had allowed for a propitiously open-ended instruction, and if Lawrence Weiner had established that the piece need not even be built, D'Arcangelo would shackle any such liberatory propositions to their institutional capitulation. His was a mode of resistance that attempted to shift the relationships governing our existence, even while acknowledging that his hands were tied.

Within a span of five years, ending abruptly when he committed suicide in 1979 at the age of twenty-four, D'Arcangelo staged unannounced interventions in six different museums. At the Whitney Museum of American Art, during the Biennial of 1975, he chained his wrists to the front doors' handles, causing traffic to build up on either side of the institution's point of entry.

The following statement was stenciled on his bare back: WHEN I STATE THAT I AM AN ANARCHIST, I MUST ALSO STATE THAT I AM NOT AN ANARCHIST, TO BE IN KEEPING WITH THE ( \_ \_ \_ ) IDEA OF  $\Psi\Omega\Omega\Omega\Omega\Omega\Omega / \Psi\Omega\Omega\Omega\Omega\Omega\Omega \text{ \textcircled{A} I T \text{ \textcircled{A} N O T}$ . The sentences would accompany all of his actions and most of his correspondence from then on. Presented here in its full complexity, like an object being viewed from all sides, anarchism was introduced like a foreign body to an ecosystem, bringing with it an awareness of the possibilities kept out by the museum's doors.

In the rotunda of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum later that year, D'Arcangelo lay facedown with this statement printed across his back, his hands and feet cuffed, leaving the keys in an envelope nearby. With the help of a frantic docent, the quizzical cops discovered the parcel and freed his hands—an unusual reversal about which the artist was reportedly thrilled. In 1978, he "reinstalled" a Gainsborough painting at the Louvre, unhinging it, resting it on the floor, and pasting a text in its place that asked, WHEN YOU LOOK AT A PAINTING, WHERE DO YOU LOOK AT THAT PAINTING? WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PAINTING ON THE WALL AND A PAINTING ON THE FLOOR? In each case, D'Arcangelo reacted to the authorities' response with calm compliance, allowing the system to work over him. At the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California, he spray-painted his calling-card statement onto the plastic sheet covering a painting's surface before getting tackled by a guard and carted off by the police. These panels, used to protect the collection's paintings from defacement and natural decay, "fundamentally altered" each work, D'Arcangelo claimed, by imposing on their surfaces a "reflection of the viewer,



Film documentation of Christopher D'Arcangelo's action at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, May 3, 1975. Photos: Cathy Weiner.

the room, other paintings, and the museum. Now in the frame we have . . . a painting not painted by an artist but painted by the museum. This situation clearly shows one of the many problems existing in the structure of the art world and raises the question. What is vandalism?"

A crucial strategy of well-engineered indeterminacy ran throughout these actions and is figured perhaps most explicitly in the bracketed ellipsis modifying the "idea of anarchism" in D'Arcangelo's statement. Here, the emancipatory aleatorics of John Cage (who himself introduced anarchism into postwar art production) appear decidedly enclosed, in a designated and delimited space. As in the functional constructions, blankness was deliberately presented within existing boundaries, surrender of agency was a means of articulating confinement, and the open call was a method by which to

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From top: View of "Anarchism Without Adjectives: On the Work of Christopher D'Arcangelo (1975-1979)," 2011, Artists Space, New York. Photo: Daniel Perez. Christopher D'Arcangelo's 1977 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art *Journal* project in a still from a video interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh conducted by Dean Inkster and Sébastien Pluot, 2010.

expose principles of exclusivity—even those to which artists themselves subscribed. When asked to participate in a group show at Rosa Esman Gallery in New York in 1978, D'Arcangelo first requested a formal invitation in writing, before proposing that his allotted portion of the space be opened to any contribution from the public. After another artist rejected his idea, he arrived, unauthorized, at the opening to sell apples at the entrance. His initial request for a letter of invitation has been cited as evidence that the possibility of rejection was built into the piece, anticipating the questions in his accompanying text: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE INVITED? . . . WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE UNINVITED?

Participation through arrest or removal is one of the factors that kept D'Arcangelo's work out of sight for many years. His negation of promotional circuits—in one case, for a 1978 Artists Space show, he left an empty space in place of his name in all materials circulating outside the gallery—effectively omitted him, in turn, from the art-historical record. D'Arcangelo's reputation lived on by word of mouth, inspiring the occasional artist tribut throughout the ensuing decades. But the combination of temperamental logistics, his opposition to convention, and the brevity of

(which debuted at CAC Brétigny, France, and will travel to Extra City, Antwerp, Belgium, in the fall). A month afterwards, New York gallery Albus Greenspon opened an "Homage" to the artist, organized by Cathy Weiner (who was D'Arcangelo's partner in the five years before his death) and the D'Arcangelo Family Partnership with gallery owners Mitchell Albus and Amy Greenspon. These shows—the first "solo" D'Arcangelo exhibitions ever hazarded—foregrounded interpretations through responses by those who had visited his archives at Fales (in the case of Albus Greenspon) and retellings through interviews with figures personally involved with his work (in the case of Artists Space). At Albus Greenspon, seven reader/viewer submissions, as well as contributions by any gallery visitor who was so inclined, shared a space with facsimiles of a binder of documentation that D'Arcangelo had kept during his lifetime. Video transfers of Cathy Weiner's films of each museum piece were also on view. Though the exhibitions signified the work's renewed presence and visibility in contemporary discourse, their overall effect was to position the original content at a remove and to display instead the diffusion of the meaning of an artist's work over time.

When witnessing the process of historical assimilation in these exhibitions, one gets the impression that something of D'Arcangelo's choreography is being played out, or that the work's mechanisms of concurrent exposure and surrender have extended to the present moment. The same feeling wells up at Fales while reading the artist's Norton Simon text through archival plastic sleeves or turning over his handcuffs with sterile white gloves—these implements for externalizing the artist's implication in systems of control now framed as relics.

In an art market and academy constantly in search of work it can wrest from obscurity, the exposition of cult artists, especially those whose purity of thinking appears particularly vulnerable to simplification, is often met with wariness from fans who dread the diluting wave of recuperation. But in the case of D'Arcangelo, we may give more due credit to the work if we consider the ways in which its revelatory capacities can be seen as continually unfolding. As Benjamin H. D. Buchloh reminds us in an interview included in the Artists Space show, D'Arcangelo must have been aware of the process of conventionalization that inevitably befalls any radical practice. And his actions' complex combination of painstaking precision and indeterminacy, self-arrest and the open call, would suggest no less. Whereas Bas Jan Ader (with whom D'Arcangelo has been compared in the past, in part because each died a tragic and early death) arguably prefigured his own posthumous mythification by engaging obliteration, planned accident, memory, and forgetting, Ader's romantic withholdings differ in significant ways from D'Arcangelo's furtive insurgence. Detailed explanations of intent almost always followed D'Arcangelo's appearances, and muteness, when deployed, allowed for the self-articulation of surrounding systems.

In a film from 1974, shot from the window of D'Arcangelo's apartment, we see him walk across the street, deposit a suitcase on the curb, and run back home. This brief and sudden action is followed by a long period of observation as the object sits silently, abandoned and prone to forces of nature, at the awkward threshold between the sidewalk and the street. Traffic passes, kids scamper by, buses stop and unload, until someone finally ventures to open the suitcase. Today, the experience of watching this footage (transferred partially to DVD) in the hushed atmosphere of Fales has a doubling effect, the film itself being an object that D'Arcangelo, in his concerted and fleeting interjection into the course of art history, deserted and left in our hands. □

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