

In Search of Expo 67 distinguishes itself thanks to the simultaneous focus and capaciousness that its archival premise enables. Cheryl Sim's *Un jour, One Day* (2017) is an intimately compelling three-channel video installation that effectively opens the exhibition. It portrays the artist-as-protagonist dressed in a gender-ambiguous 1960s-reminiscent flight attendant uniform standing alone amongst the sculpture of Île Sainte-Hélène. Singing the theme song from Expo 67, she flips through a photo album of her parents' visit to the fair. Her assertive voice fills the headphones while the video shifts between close-ups of the protagonist looking directly into the camera, scenes of her on the shore of the St Lawrence taking in the landscape that surrounds her, joyous family snapshots from the fair, and clips of the flowing river. The work negotiates multiple temporalities and affective ambivalence. Yet it is firmly geographically situated. *Un jour, One Day* – like the exhibition to which it belongs – picks a place and offers it up in a multiplicity of readings of Expo 67 for the present.

References

- Bishop, Claire and Perjovschi, Dan (2013), *Radical Museology, or, What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?*, London: Koenig Books.
 Gagnon Kin, Monika and Johnstone, Leslie (2017), *In Search of Expo 67*, exhibition didactic, Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

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SARA BERMAN'S CLOSET

The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, 6 March – 26 November 2017

Reviewed by Charlene K. Lau, Parsons School of Design

In the Met Fifth Avenue's American Wing, a recessed closet appears in a length of plain wall. Its contents belong to the late Sara Berman, a New Yorker by way of Belarus and Palestine. Originally shown at grandson Alex Kalman's Tribeca Mmuseumm space in 2015, Berman's closet – part of a modest exhibition including photographic reproductions from her life and a child's chair – presents a self-portrait of a woman who, after divorcing her husband in the late 1960s, embarked on a process of reinvention. The exhibition sits in conversation with a decidedly grander and more opulent dressing room from 100 years earlier, belonging to

Arabella Worsham, second wife to railroad tycoon Collis P. Huntington. Worsham's 'closet', while extravagant in comparison to Berman's relatively humble wardrobe, also speaks to transformation, albeit to a woman of great means as opposed to Berman's paring down following a marriage of upper-middle-class comfort. The differences between these two women could not be starker in the display of their chairs adjacent to Berman's closet: Worsham's ornate custom-made side chair (one of a pair) by George A. Schastey and Co. (1873–97), crafted from satinwood, purple-heart, brass castors and a navy and gold floral silk brocade, sits in opposition to Berman's mint-green-painted wood and metal 1960s school chair that was one of five found at a flea market and used at the dining table. The former symbolizes prosperity, a carefully carved and constructed artefact of the Gilded Age; the latter, a mass-manufactured product of industrial might, connotes frugality with its secondhand status.

As a tiny museum within a museum, Berman's closet effectively encourages the act of looking without touching. The visitor must exercise great restraint in stopping themselves from tugging on the light bulb pull or flipping through a box of recipe cards on one of the shelves. In this sense, the viewer becomes immersed, enveloped by the wonder of the realness and accessibility of the display and its life laid bare. The closet serves as a meditation on a history of the self through objects, a personal and quotidian cabinet-of-curiosities-turned-precious-museum-display of artefacts. A selection of workaday things arranged neatly on the shelves delights the eye: a counterfeit Louis Vuitton jewellery case, cooking pot, cookie press, Israeli potato grater. These items sit alongside Berman's tidy and almost entirely white apparel, undergarments, accessories and linens. In their installation, the otherwise unassuming objects gain greater significance, their thing-ness underlined and importance magnified as stand-ins for Berman herself, where the shelves and clothing rails function as pedestals and frames for their sculptural wares.

Carol Duncan has written about how the very structure of the museum provides a context in which any or all of its contents are available for contemplation:

One could take the argument even farther: the liminal space of the museum, everything – and sometimes anything – may become art, including fire extinguishers, thermostats and humidity gauges, which, when isolated on a wall and looked at through the aestheticizing lens of museum space, can appear, if only for a mistaken moment, every bit as interesting as some of the intended-as-art works on display, which, in any case, do not always look very different.

(1995: 20)

In this way, Berman's store of possessions achieves elevated status as an otherworldly and deeply meaningful collection of artefacts in the museum, aestheticized and isolated from their original function. However, can it not be argued that personal belongings, cherished as they may or may not be, attain some kind of monumental importance in the life story, especially after death? Berman's closet serves as a reminder to appreciate the ordinary, and prods the viewer to consider their relationship with



Above: Maira Kalman and Alex Kalman, Sara Berman's Closet (2015), installation view at The Met Fifth Avenue. Below: George A. Schastey & Co., Worsham-Rockefeller Dressing Room (1881–82), installation view at The Met Fifth Avenue. Photos: © and courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

things and the reasons why such things are chosen. As an inherently private space, closed-off from the outside world, the closet can be seen as a physical manifestation of the psyche, its organization (or disorganization) a reflection of what lies beneath. Lovingly and meticulously hung, stacked, shelved and arranged, Berman's unassuming accumulation of 'stuff' embodied a life consciously well-lived. It is clear that even in life, her possessions – regardless of their exchange value – were highly prized, beloved and embedded with great sentimental value. As such, the life within Berman's closet animates the hushed and funereal museum space, a context normally seen as being the final resting ground for objects of cultural heritage. While the exhibition is indeed a memorial of sorts, its celebratory spirit pays tribute to a woman who continued to live fully even late into her life.

Far from staid, the closet reveals a slightly mischievous energy. The objects balance orderliness and play in their arrangements: neatly folded garments, shoes lined up on the closet floor, and three M&Co watches laid in a row are punctuated by a red pompom that serves as the closet's light bulb pull and which simultaneously brings to mind a cat toy. An inflatable globe beach ball sits on the top shelf, one of thirteen that covered the floor of Berman's Greenwich Village apartment and that family members would kick around on their visits. In contrast to Worsham's luxurious but claustrophobic room, Berman's closet is an idiosyncratic and ebullient study of liberation, resilience and strength alongside sartorial adventure and aesthetic exploration. Berman redefined the self in her new life through a Woolfian closet of one's own. Yet within the focus of the museum, both Worsham's and Berman's wardrobes are private-entities-turned-public, and readily manifest the conflation of art and life as material self-portraits in the outer world. Despite the disparity between them, each closet serves as a testament to the archetype of the independent woman in the city. In revealing installations such as these, exhibitions demonstrate how the stuff of everyday life is ripe for profound contemplation, a mirror held up to the inner being.

Reference

Duncan, Carol (1995), *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London and New York: Routledge.

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