



Disobedient Objects: John Armleder's Observatoires



Written by Camille Moreno

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John Armleder is a pacifist. In the late 1960s, when Switzerland still enforced compulsory military service, he refused to serve, opting instead for prison over art school. Seven months inside an institution built on discipline and obedience sharpened his lifelong allergy to fixed positions, hierarchies, and orders. That experience also shaped the way he would later think about art: as something that resists command, refuses to behave, and hands responsibility from its author back to the viewer.



At the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva, the program *Carte Blanche* commissions an artist to curate a comprehensive exhibition on the museum's ground floor, drawing freely from a collection that extends from contemporary art to ancient artifacts, encompassing florology, watches, coins, and painting. The challenge is to show the breadth of objects on the same plane without enforcing traditional hierarchy.

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Now in its sixth iteration, Armleder approaches this challenge with natural fluency, almost as though the format had been designed with him in mind. His playful and transformative selection succeeds in fulfilling what museum director Marc-Oliver Wahler envisioned with his notion of a "multi-frequency museum": make the museum fun again.

Visitors are greeted by a colossal mirror ball over 15 feet tall, scattering dappled light across all corners of the ornate Beaux-arts entrance hall as it turns in a gentle, steady rotation. This is the first gesture of *Observatoires* and its opening thesis. Armleder has used the mirror ball repeatedly throughout his later practice, drawn to its paradoxical objecthood: conspicuous – gaudy even – yet endlessly reflecting its surroundings back onto themselves, animating the space with its own presence. As he puts it, "you look at it but are also placed inside it." There is no single position from which to see it properly. It has no center, because it distributes itself across the walls, the floor, and bodies moving through the room.



Armleder has said of his practice that he is, "interested in all the ways it's possible to make works disappear," or in this case, dissolve into their context. The exhibition title stems from his close study of the museum's collection: why objects are there, how they arrived, and how they might be shown differently. The works do not disappear entirely so much as they displace themselves from their usual position in the canon, and therefore from a familiar set of expectations, display conventions, and neighboring objects.

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He is especially drawn to broken or fragmented artifacts, discarded materials no longer fit for their original use, and outdated presentational modes. He likens these orphaned or defunct objects to dismembered fingers whose origins are unknown and has a fondness for empty exhibitions, such as Yves Klein's shows which displayed nothing.

In fact, homages to other artists appear throughout. Marcel Duchamp is evoked through Armleder's copious use of readymades, while Salvador Dalí emerges in a bespoke wall treatment of lobster decals in the animal room: a veritable parade of taxidermied creatures standing proud on a runway, installed alongside Armleder's own cat trees and cat beds. Behind them hangs a collection of broken Byzantine bowls salvaged from a shipwreck and encrusted with barnacles. In keeping with his penchant for soundtracks, a version of Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals* (1886) plays prominently overhead.



The exhibition unfolds across a series of themed sections, including Entrance, *Peinture Abstraite*, *Mobilier*, *Fleurs*, *Musique*, *L'uvre Multiple*, *Transparence*, *Luminaires*, *Animals*, *Autoportraits*, *Vide*, *L'Observatoire*, *Livres et tampons d'artistes*, and *Debris*.

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A recurring motif is the elaborate staging of an arrival that leads nowhere: a large scaffolding spans the length of the entire gallery, a collection of display glasses lies vacant, frames frame nothing.

For Armleder, the notion that everything equals nothing is central, and absence becomes a way of rationalizing the conundrum of infinity. As he once remarked when describing the challenge of painting onto a blank canvas, "nothing is a blank sheet until you become the blank sheet. You don't start from zero; you become zero. You empty yourself out until everything can happen."



Carte Blanche artists are typically not permitted to use their own artworks, but this rule was quietly bent. Of the museum's 800,000+ objects, more than 500 are by Armleder. While it would have been possible to exclude them, he instead turned the exercise into a kind of oblique autobiography, allowing the exhibition to function as an unintended retrospective.

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This logic extends to the museum's weapon room. As a pacifist, Armleder chose not to foreground its contents but to place reflective mylar and chrome in the adjacent room, appropriating the metallic language but also clouding the view. He describes the gesture as a way to "not celebrate the weapons, but maybe to understand why they are there, and how they work."

Armleder uses his point of view to create a collection that is political without being didactic. This matters now because the exhibition insists on a form of attention that is neither passive nor obedient. The curator becomes a connector rather than a classifier, which changes the museological presets from taste and knowledge to perception and experience. The visitor becomes responsible for meaning, and in a time when images are pre-packaged and even art media tells audiences what to value, Armleder proposes something radical: uncertainty as a method.

In the end, the mirror ball is not only the opening but also the closing as well. It leaves us with something unstable. Like the exhibition, it continuously shifts its reflections, folding objects, architecture, and human beings into the same field of attention. What begins as a spectacle becomes a proposition: art is not a thing but a method: a posture attuned to the partiality of vision and the provisional nature of order.
