

frieze

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PARK MCARTHUR

Essex Street, New York

New York artist Park McArthur's solo exhibition, 'Ramps', was technically her second at Essex Street, following a minimal installation under the awning of the storefront building while the gallery was shuttered at the end of last summer. An austere series of 20 structural readymades – pieces of supporting architecture, both improvised and manufactured – was arranged in a rough grid along the mostly level plane of the gallery floor. The show consisted entirely of a collection of ramps of varying dimensions, shapes, technical specifications and in various states of disrepair – ranging from plywood wedges to gently graded aluminium to laminated chipboard broken into bits. Where a set of telescoping, rust-resistant aluminium ramps (*Apexart*, 2010) might be technically advanced in engineered form, function and user satisfaction, a split, misshapen plank of ply (*warped*, 2011) looked like a piece of board salvaged from a SoHo loft circa 1970. The arrangement was materially charged, socially specific and, because individual pieces remained unanchored, potentially hazardous to anyone trying to cross the gallery.

McArthur titled each ramp after the 'lending institution' it came from, casually reflecting a network of New York and New England art initiatives and educational ventures that support the emerging and not-yet-represented: *AVA* (Audio Visual Arts, 2012); *Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture*, (2012); *Recess*(2012); *TEAM* (2013); *Essex Street* (2013); *Denny Gallery* (2013); *Whitney Independent Study Program* (2013). Those ramps without place-names, which were instead identified materially – *brown with tape* (2011); *metal* (2013); *white with scratches* (2013) – were presumably sequestered from organizations wishing to remain anonymous. While shown at Essex Street, the artist installed compliance signs – in regulation *Yes Klein Blue* – on the site of each participating space to signal the temporary displacement of this particular accommodating feature.

McArthur's portable ramps tell us that the artist – who uses a wheelchair – has →

physically accessed (and presumably benefitted from) the space and resources of each lending institution; evidence of her ability to bypass art world gatekeepers on both conceptual and corporeal grounds, whether able-bodied or otherwise. But what these ramps, which were mostly introduced for her personal use (though also available to others), indicate about their lenders may have less to do with a general availability of assets (from scrappy to state-of-the-art) than with which institutions might have a vested interest in accessing – and being seen to access – a wider public audience. For a small nonprofit institution or educational body, the demonstration of non-discriminatory exclusivity is crucial; for galleries and other boutique commercial ventures operating under less regulated conditions, different conventions might apply. The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed by the US government in 1990, primarily legislates public entities and accommodations and sets guidelines for the workplace – from which the conservative politics of the contemporary art world (particularly in the competitive, market-driven culture of New York) remain apart. The slapdash, inconsistent construction of the ramps reveals the intention to physically connect individuals of varying capabilities with different types of art institutions only as an exception; and so long as these linkages remain impermanent, never as a rule.

McArthur's inclusion of a hyperlink, via vinyl wall text, to the URL of a Wikipedia page she authored on the disability rights activist Marta Russell lent a healthy note of contempt to the cool tone of her floor installation, by alluding to the dangers of 'ableism' and social Darwinism in times of economic austerity, even beyond the confines of the gallery in digitally accessible (if still culturally skewed) online space. On the night of the exhibition's opening, the surfaces of McArthur's ramps were more and less cautiously trodden on, tripped over and stumbled across due to the overflow of by-standers in the gallery; a perhaps unintended yet fitting upset of able-bodied balance. The sight was as unsettling as it was exceptional for a young artist whose personal experiences deeply inform (and do not at all obviate) her serious critical impact.

