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16 Miles of String – Andrew Russeth: The Artist's Institute: Jo Baer, Robert Filliou, and Bread Making

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The Artist's Institute: Jo Baer, Robert Filliou, and Bread Making



The Artist's Institute, 163 Eldridge Street, New York, February 6. Photos: 16 Miles [more]

Looking at the storefront at 163 Eldridge Street, the former home of the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, there is only one, subtle sign that it may be harboring unusual activities inside: its black door is fitted with three doorknobs. Peer inside the bar-covered window built into that door, though, and you will notice another oddity, a Jo Baer diptych hanging on the space's back wall, not a work that one typically sees when making the rounds of Lower East Side galleries.



Installation view of Jo Baer works at the Artist's Institute

The institution housed inside is called The Artist's Institute, an exhibition space that was launched late last year by Hunter College, CUNY, and is run by Anthony Huberman, a former curator at Palais de Tokyo and a curatorial advisor to the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. As Huberman told writer Nana Asfour last month, the space operates as a hybrid form of an "art institute" (a "venue where things happen," he put it) and

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- Thierry de Duve on Joseph Beuys' "awesome and disquieting artistic and political ambition," tonight, 6 pm, at Columbia: <http://bit.ly/eJhnU8> 1 day ago
 - Terence Koh is circling a giant cone of salt at Mary Boone: <http://twitpic.com/3z4sy6> 2 days ago
 - Leaving Christian Marclay's "The Clock" at Paula Cooper is disturbingly difficult. 3 days ago

ABOUT
16 Miles of String covers contemporary art and art history, usually in or around New York City, and is published by Andrew Russeth.

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a think tank, a place where he and his Hunter students can stage both lengthy, continually evolving exhibitions and ephemeral events.



Jo Baer, *Vertical Tiered (Red Line)*, 1969, reportedly on loan from Dan Graham

A single "anchor" artist informs the exhibition program each semester, and this season **Jo Baer** holds the position. A placard in the gallery — duplicated on the Institute's remarkable web site — explains Baer's idiosyncratic art and career with the thrilled excitement of a friend conveying a new discovery: "[H]er early hard-edged abstract canvases seek to remove all hierarchy, all ambiguity, and all illusion from the optical experience of light on a flat surface," it reads, charting her journey from a pioneering Minimalist to a proponent of what she terms "radical figuration." ("She declared abstract art as being utopian, naive, and, worst of all, a legitimized style — it had become decoration. No thank you, she said, and changed her approach completely.") The essay begins simply: "Today we should be thinking about the artist Jo Baer (b. 1929)." Judging by last season's programming, it is going to be fascinating to see where that directive leads.

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You Have Been Here Sometime



The Artist's Institute, 163 Eldridge Street, January 6. Photos: 16 Miles [more]

Last season, for the Institute's inaugural run, that introductory text read, "Today we should be thinking about the work of **Robert Filliou**" — the "French artist and poet [who] placed his faith in the clumsy playfulness of games, misunderstandings, jokes, and time spent with friends." Informed by Filliou, the Institute exhibited work by **Lutz Bacher**, **Oscar Tuazon**, and **Gerry Bibby**, hosted lectures by **Paul Chan** and **Julia Robinson**, staged an evening of ping-pong playing, and facilitated a variety of other multidisciplinary projects that embodied Filliou's famous maxim, quoted in the Institute's text: "Art is what makes life more interesting than art."

I first stopped by the Institute near the end of its first season, on the evening of Thursday, January 6, as a final weekend of activities — a series of gift exchanges between artists facilitated as part of a project that **Ajay Kurian** calls **No More Presence** — was being initiated. It was a refreshingly disorienting experience. The relatively small space was lit with amber-yellow lights and packed with people. An upright piano was being played, and a sticky, doughy substance had been spread across the floor, like an organic, homemade **Lynda Benglis** latex pour. Some unknown device, buried underneath a stretch of it, sent soothing vibrations up through the strange substance.



Dough floor by Ajay Kurian and Anicka Yi

It took some asking (and some help Asfour's article) to piece together the details. The brass doorknobs, inscribed with short phrases — "by balloon," "by bus," "by train" — were the contribution of **Liam Gillick** and **Uri Aran**. The ironing board and joyful **Justin Bieber**-filled cards were courtesy of **Matt Keegan** and **Josh Tonsfeldt**. The doughy floor piece, trampled (and occasionally stroked out of curiosity) by people throughout the evening, really was made of dough, a project conceived by Kurian and **Anicka Yi**. Later, Huberman and company baked the carpeting into loaves of bread using a small oven in the back of the gallery, though then I visited the Baer show recently, artist — and Artist's Institute associate — **Matteo Callegari** explained that they had decided against eating them.



Doorknobs by Liam Gillick and Uri Aran



A painting by Lutz Bacher, based on a 1988 Budweiser ad



Justin Bieber works and ironing board by Matt Keegan and Josh Tonsfeldt

Though the history of contemporary art is, of course, always being revised, it has recently been a particularly fertile time for such reconfigurations. Exhibitions like the **Brooklyn Museum's (University of the Arts–organized) "Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958–1968,"** **Cheim & Read's Joe Fyte**–curated "Le Tableau," and **Exit Art's "Alternative Histories,"** to name just three examples, have upended standard readings of major cultural moments. Meanwhile, **MoMA's** Performance series and **Raphael Rubinstein's** web site, *The Silo*, are welcoming news names and new stories into our understanding of postwar art. The Artist's Institute's championing of Baer and Filliou, artists that have long been underrepresented in museum shows and academic literature (to say nothing of the marketplace) is another, bold example of this practice. But it also differs from the aforementioned projects in one crucial, thrilling way: its direct engagement with the projects of emerging artists, writers, and thinkers. Carefully selecting marginalized elements of the past, linking them with a broad range of contemporary activities, and throwing in an oven for good measure, it seems full of potential. Let's see what happens.



Works by Robert Filliou

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LABELS: ANICKA YI, ARAN, ARTIST'S INSTITUTE, BACHER, BAER, FILIOU, GILLICK, KEEGAN, KURIAN, LOWER EAST SIDE, TONSFELDT

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