FRAGMENTED MEMORY:
WILLIAM OLANDER AND THE EXHIBITION AS CRITICISM

by

Gladys-Katherina Hernando

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Acknowledgments

I first encountered William Olander’s text “Fragments” (1985) in a class called “Methodologies of Art Writing.” Olander’s critical essay was compelling and revelatory to my thinking about art. I did not anticipate the extent to which William Olander’s work would inspire and impact my consideration of critical curating. I am indebted to my professor and mentor, Rhea Anastas, who introduced me to Olander and *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History*. Thanks are also due to Anastas for taking the time to direct the early stages of my research and for her patience in allowing my writing to develop in the direction that it did.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the curatorial practice of William Olander (1950–1989), a prolific curator, writer, and scholar, over a short but full period of ten years before Olander’s death from AIDS in 1989. Olander’s work as a contemporary curator in the visual arts addressed the issues of his day as a form of criticism and even activism. Specifically, his work directly addressed and acted within a vital field of debate about the fraught aesthetics and politics of representation within the cultural discourses of postmodernism and the discourses of the politics of gender and sexual identification and of gay and queer identity after the Stonewall rebellion of 1969. This thesis explores the exhibitions *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History* (1985), *Homo Video: Where We Are Now* (1986), and *Let The Record Show* (1987) as a series of responses to now established ideas and issues in the field of contemporary art history and theory. This thesis seeks to reinstate Olander as a fearless participant in the complex political reality of the eighties and as a voice that can inform curatorial practice today.
Introduction

During the 1980s, William Olander was the curator of many significant exhibitions that are today little, if at all, recognized. He was the curator of the Oberlin College Allen Memorial Art Museum in Ohio from 1979–1984 and at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York from 1985–1989. He was a prolific writer and scholar for a short but full ten year career, before his death from AIDS in 1989 at the age of 38.¹ As a contemporary curator, Olander developed a practice that was unique for its engagement with the social and political conditions of artistic production as they evolved in the 80s. Olander was involved in the critical discourse of contemporary exhibitions and in the theoretical language being deployed to challenge dominant systems of thought. This thesis will examine several instances of Olander’s critical curatorial process as an outline for organizing exhibitions with an astute awareness of art as connected to social progress. His exhibition The Art of Memory/The Loss of History (1985) added political nuance to the theory and practice of postmodern art, an expanding field of artistic practices after modernism, by presenting artworks with agendas that were socially reflexive and addressed issues that continue to be relevant in art discourse today. The second chapter will examine the critical responses that prompted the exhibitions The Art of Memory/The Loss of History, but also Homo Video: Where We Are Now (1986) and Let the Record Show (1987), which engaged in an activist critique of subjectivity and oppression. The latter work took an activist position that sought to expose dominant ideologies, specifically with regard to homosexual difference, and eventually the AIDS

crisis. Olander’s work remains an example of curatorial work that considers how the real discourse of social culture is inextricably tied to, and impossible to separate from, artistic production.

Rather than analyzing Olander’s work through the discourse of curatorial practice, the methodology of this thesis looks specifically at the critical and theoretical responses produced by Olander in order to reinstate another approach to current curatorial thinking. The title of this thesis, “Fragmented Memory,” references not just the exhibition The Art of Memory/The Loss of History, but signifies the interruption of Olander’s work by his untimely death. As a curator who was well-known in his time, yet is now overlooked in the consideration of the period of the 80s, what remains of his career are fragments of his writing, lectures, and notations, pieced together again to form the portrait that follows. Olander’s practice was inspired by a critical, theoretical outlook, and serves as an unconventional model to the discourse of curatorial work. In the contemporary context, Olander’s practice was a response to social and political context, rather than the larger discourse of curating, a production that would be valuable to the purview of curating today.

In order to situate William Olander’s participation in the discursive realm of exhibitions requires an earlier starting point, prior to his arrival in New York. In 1979, after spending two years in Paris doing field research for his doctoral dissertation in art history, Olander decided to take the position of Curator of Modern Art at the Oberlin College Allen Memorial Art Museum. As a small liberal arts college, Oberlin supported contemporary art and gave Olander the freedom to exhibit young artists and an
opportunity to learn, by doing, curatorial work. He was responsible for the revival of the 
*Young Americans* show, an ongoing project series that showcased emerging artists.

Olander’s first event, however, was the production of an early performance by Adrian 
Piper called *It’s Just Art* (1980), a piece about the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.²

During his time at Oberlin, Olander would simultaneously organize exhibitions and write 
his dissertation, titled *Pour Transmettre à la Postérité: French Painting and Revolution, 
1774–1795*, which he completed in 1983. In his dissertation, Olander described how a 
“major redefinition of what was appropriate to the field of artistic activity was developed, 
and how this new alignment of activity of art and contemporary history occurred and 
affected the practice, production, and character of French painting in the late eighteenth 
century.”³ That same year, Olander curated an important exhibition called *Art and Social 
Change, U.S.A.*, in which he conceptualized the role of artistic production as *social 
aesthetics*. The exhibition first pronounced Olander’s commitment to politically oriented 
artwork, and was one that established a framework for his future exhibitions.⁴

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²William Olander interviewed by Marcia Tucker, transcript, Christopher Cox Papers, *Series VII, Box 43, 
Folder 682*, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. New 
Haven, Connecticut.

³ Olander’s dissertation examined the problems surrounding the representation of contemporary events in 
late-eighteenth century French painting, and culminates with an examination of the great *Concours de l’an 
II*, (an anonymous competition held by the French government). His discovery was of the full list of entries 
and artists who competed, the result of which was “the final and successful attempt of government to 
redirect French painting and to enlist all of the arts into its service.” The major chapters from his 
dissertation on the *Concours* was posthumously edited and published by his friend and colleague, Udolpho 
van de Sandt for a publication on French Painting. See, Udolpho van de Sandt, “In Memoriam,” and 
During the Revolution*, (Colnaghi USA Ltd., 1989), 27 - 45.

⁴ The exhibition “Art and Social Change, U.S.A” was held on April 19–May 30, 1983. More information 
Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, 1983.)
In his catalogue essay for *Art and Social Change, U.S.A.*, titled “Social Aesthetics,” Olander formed a synthesis of criticality and representation that meant to disarm modernist distinctions of “pure” taste and style. Supporting diversity and heterogeneity, *social aesthetics* meant to hinder the pluralistic, neutralizing effect of institutions on that which does not conform. Exuding a strong, almost polemical tone, Olander’s essay demonstrated the three issues that would preoccupy him for the length of his career: pluralism, the pseudodiversity maintained under an umbrella of acceptance within institutions, which flatly stomps out the true nuance of its disparate voices; oppositional practices aimed at critiquing dominant ideological structures, usually from within; and ideology, of the fascistic kind, which dictates one’s mind and correct position in relation to difference. When he arrived at the New Museum two years later, Olander continued to navigate similar interests and methods of inquiry, solidifying an engagement with art and politics in his academic writing and curatorial practice. After his death, the term “social aesthetics” would be repurposed to either positive or negative ends by other writers to describe a similar type of work. 5

Olander had a particular interest in the group-show curatorial model, an interest supported by the founder and director of the New Museum, Marcia Tucker. As an institution, the New Museum was known for its socially conscious exhibitions and for challenging the paradigm of the traditional museum establishment. In an interview between Tucker and Olander conducted in January 1989, Tucker complimented Olander’s unconventional methodology, stating that Olander’s arrival to the museum allowed for

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her to “move away from the more conventional ideas [she] had about museum practice.”

Not only was Olander a talented art historian, but his awareness of the broad scope of publics and the multiplicity of social histories brought a sensitivity to the way he contextualized artworks within institutional space. However complicated, art and experience were inextricably tied together, and Olander was not afraid to expose the contradictions, the politics, or the aesthetic development of ideas as they progressed.

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6 This quotation is from an interview between Marcia Tucker and William Olander that is undated in archive files at both the Yale Beinecke Library and the Getty Research Institute library. In a Master’s Thesis written by Gayle Rodda Kurtz in 1991, a former intern for William Olander, Rodda Kurtz states that she was given personal access to the interview by Marcia Tucker, who dated the interview in January 1989. After Olander’s death, Rodda Kurtz compiled all of Olander’s written manuscripts and documents for the New Museum’s Soho library, which later became her thesis. It also included Olander’s curriculum vitae, which has been partially transcribed in the bibliography portion of this document. See William Olander interviewed by Marcia Tucker, transcript, Christopher Cox Papers, Series VII, Box 43, Folder 682, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. New Haven, Connecticut, and Gayle Rodda Kurtz, “William Olander: The Practice of an Activist Curator,” (M.A. Thesis, Hunter College, New York, 1991.)
Chapter One: Fragments of Art and Politics

During Olander’s transition to the New Museum, the New York art scene experienced substantial changes as artists and curators were informed by the politicization of culture. By 1985, artists were responding to the visual landscape of media and television with another layer of saturated imagery. Artistic production came to be dominated by the use of photography, appropriation of images, and new forms of technology. A hybridity of aesthetics, historical reference, performance, and language came to directly replace political work with layers of interpretation reflected back onto society itself. Early formulations of newly heralded “postmodern art” were categorized as investigations in the “production of representation” in Douglas Crimp’s *Pictures* show at Artists Space (1977), and as an aesthetic “return to allegory,” as explicated by Craig Owens’s text “The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism” (1980). Such interpretations aligned artistic production on two theoretical planes: Crimp’s *Pictures* situated representation as grounded in the theatrical strategies present in the work’s conception, while Owens’s essay theorized a return to historical allegory as a method for reading art works through a layered effect that inbuilt references to the past and present in the work’s fundamental form. But by the mid-80s, these theorizations were problematized by critics such as Hal Foster, who found that the quick associative qualities of historical and mass-cultural images navigated a fine line “between the

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exploitative and the critical.” Questioning the strategy of appropriation was the second turn for postmodern art discourse, and Olander saw the inquiry as a development of a different kind of social aesthetics, of a different kind of politicized work.

Concerned with oppositional practices, and the dwindling interest in art with a political message, Olander organized The Art of Memory/The Loss of History. It was a reaction to the changing field of aesthetic production and the increasingly politicized language of aesthetic ideology explored in Art & Ideology (1984), an earlier exhibition at the New Museum which I will discuss in the second part of this document. When Olander arrived at the New Museum, he immediately sought to reposition the ideas of postmodern practice circumscribed by Crimp and Owens into more subtle critical context – that of memory and history. Moreover, Olander sought to distinguish another avenue for understanding the meaning of postmodern art, aligning its evocative and ambiguous strategies with the social tissue of culture, and as indeed unable to be disentangled from its implications.

Organized in an ambitious format, The Art of Memory/The Loss of History exhibited fourteen artists in the New Museum’s main gallery. Among the artists included were Bruce Barber, Judith Barry, Troy Brauntuch, Sarah Charlesworth, Louise Lawler, Tina Lhotsky, Adrian Piper, Stephen Prina, Richard Prince, Martha Rosler, René Santos, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Christopher Williams, and Reese Williams. An additional eleven artists/filmmakers were shown in a documentary-style video program titled Re-Viewing.

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History: Video Documents with works by Peter Adair, Nancy Buchanan, Downtown Community Television, Dan Graham, Vanalyn Green, Ulysses Jenkins, Miners Campaign Tape Project, Paper Tiger Television, Dan Reeves, David Shulman, and El Taller de Video “Timoteo Velasquez.” A concert by the artist Stephen Prina was held on December 4, 1985 at Symphony Space in New York – Olander represented the performance in the exhibition with an image of the publicity poster. The exhibition was held from November 23, 1985 to January 19, 1986, and concentrated its scope into a modest but scholarly catalogue. In an interview with Lynne Tillman recorded prior to the show’s opening, Olander framed the documentary section of the exhibition as seeking to “attract an entirely different audience . . . people who might be interested in [political or documentary] issues but don’t think about going to an art museum. Or who don’t think of art as a conduit or venue for those issues.”

For Olander, activating more public realms of access and expanding the dialogic reach of the institution was a means to disrupt the hermetic tendencies of art museums and therefore art’s own discourse with the viewer.

The art and critical theory on display in The Art of Memory/The Loss of History navigated representation as a space to critique, analyze, and deconstruct culture and society. Their underlying context took aim at a variety of institutions – media, historical, artistic, political, and otherwise – that complicated the function of postmodern art as a shift in political art practices. Realizing that the public’s interest in works of art with a political message had been exhausted was a cause for Olander to rethink how to engage with work in a politically meaningful way. In the Tillman interview, Olander framed his

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10 William Olander interviewed by Lynne Tillman, transcript, Lynne Tillman Papers, Box 27, Folder 43, Fales Library and Special Collections, Bobst Library, New York University, 7.
motivation for the show as a desire to challenge the whole notion of a political position in art. By the same token, Olander would not shy from exhibiting oppositional practices and concepts that sustained an engagement with sociopolitical realities. Prompted by these changes, Olander interpreted memory and history as points of access between representation and culture. By weaving the instability of memory as a fragmentation of human experience, the subjects of memory and history could reside in the individual consciousness of the viewer. Therefore, memory and history in an artwork could render meaning through the perceptual space of analysis, as a method of cultural inquiry that duplicated the urgency of activist or issue-based art.

A close look at the exhibition as a curatorial model can reveal some of the ways in which Olander attempted to revise concepts of a socially-engaged artwork in its conceptual approach. Olander’s essay “Fragments” situates the artworks in the exhibition as representing a departure from the aesthetic values of modernism. The first page of text in the catalogue is a photograph by Adrian Piper, *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma* (1978), reproduced at nearly a full page. Piper’s photograph was the visual component of a piece that combined with a taped monologue in the form of an acoustiguide – an interactive museum guide for visual display. The image depicts a group of mostly black men and women, descending a staircase, with two central figures looking (one, indeed, pointing) squarely at the viewer. Although *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma* was not itself included in the exhibition, Olander began his catalogue essay with an excerpt of the image’s accompanying address:

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11 Olander, interview; Lynne Tillman Papers, Box 27, Folder 43, Fales Library and Special Collections, Bobst Library, New York University, 3.
You want to have an aesthetic experience: to be fulfilled, elevated, irritated. You would like to have your criteria of good art confirmed or disrupted or violated by the art you see here?

and,

How do the images in this picture relate to each other? Are these the right questions to ask about this work? What exactly is the aesthetic content of this work? And what is it trying to tell you?¹²

Returning the reader to the notions of aesthetic experience, Olander used Piper’s text to frame the subjective experience that is carried by the viewer into the work. Piper’s acoustiguide comments on the viewer’s expectation of having an aesthetic experience while viewing her photograph, harkening to the classic supposition that an encounter with art can produce a metaphysical or transcendent experience. Piper’s commentary on such an aesthetic encounter serves to demonstrate how the ideas in a work could be realized or challenged by a person’s ideals. Olander uses Piper’s piece to reference the ideology embedded in the social and institutional structures of the art world. His reference to Piper’s piece, which itself was absent from the exhibition, directs the viewer into a self-reflexive space of mediation on their own role in the work.

Focusing on the critical reception of the work, Olander’s text situated memory and history as a theoretical binary. The two combine into a realm where multiple trajectories are dispersed: memory as a space to be located, examined, and represented; history as a space that is constructed, interpreted, and experienced. In Olander’s next example, Malevich’s black square, memory and history are counterposed to modernism’s pursuit of sublime, self-referential ecstasy. Olander describes Malevich’s square as “a revolutionary ¹² William Olander, “Fragments,” in The Art of Memory/The Loss of History (New York: The New Museum, 1985), 7.
act of forgetting,” that revealed modernism’s autonomy and total separation from society’s concerns. In their contrasting positions, memory and history make apparent the fragmentation of art from its fundamental connection to society, one that existed before modernism’s formal aesthetic break from it. Olander’s theorization of aesthetic production in these terms ran counter to the notion of a “purely academic” pursuit of a medium, such as traditional painting. Olander’s argument placed a renewed focus on an evolved version of social aesthetics, which Olander defined in 1983 as aesthetics that function to “call a halt to the flow of information which is homogenized as culture.” In other words, supporting these aesthetic transformations was the return of the artist to the social fabric in which the art was produced. Attempting to exist outside of that social fabric would perpetuate a traditionalist, conservative view detached from a forward-thinking, progressive trajectory of art making. As Olander wrote in both “Social Aesthetics” and “Fragments,” these shifts in artistic production brought the object into the foreground – any object that has been previously excluded, repressed, misrepresented, or rendered invisible. Stating that “what we see today is not what was seen even a decade ago” and beyond what we can imagine to exist in any artwork, Olander argued that constant progress in art was movement towards the “future,” and that art should not just recycle past traditions ad infinitum.

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Perhaps a foray into the physical attributes of the exhibited artworks can clarify some of the complexity of Olander’s position. To begin, photographic documentation of the installation shows a clear juxtaposition of work, for instance a horizontal row of eight paintings by René Santos across from a vertical layout of four large photographs by Richard Prince. Another area organized a grouping by Hiroshi Sugimoto in dialogue with a Troy Brauntuch painting. Leading the audience through the space via long pathways of work, the viewer would have navigated along the walls, around circular columns and corridors, and up the stairs to a small annex with video installations by Martha Rosler, Bruce Barber, and Judith Barry.

Martha Rosler’s video installation Global Taste (working title) (1985), later retitled Global Taste: A Meal in Three Courses, was featured prominently in the entry of the annex. Rosler presented a three-sided structure, each with its own red, blue, or white geometric shape framing the televisions inside each panel. The structure, with its odd shape, obscured the viewer from seeing all three videos at once. In her statement on the work for the exhibition, Rosler stated that the central theme of the piece was the “colonization of the self and of other countries by media and advertising.” Not only did the piece seek to reference the homogenization of culture, but it attempted to emphasize the necessarily composite (i.e., composed of fragments) nature of a world picture, and thus referenced the disparate forces that keep a viewer removed from the larger context of


Figure 1. Installation view of Martha Rosler, Global Taste: A Meal in Three Courses, (1985), three-channel video installation. Courtesy the New Museum Digital Archive.

Returning to the main gallery, many of the works used photography and textual elements to unravel the effects of media on the human psyche, what Gary Indiana would call “the presence and absence of contextualizing language” in a review of the exhibition. One literal example of this is Sarah Charlesworth’s Herald Tribune, September 1977 (Modern History) (1977). A series of twenty-six photographs, each piece in this work shows the front page images and corresponding masthead of the International Herald Tribune newspaper for almost every day of September 1977, with all the copy text removed. The photographs take on a minimalist appearance, produced by the void of
absent text consuming each page, alerting the viewer to the images’ contents. Activating
the absence of context, the photographs reveal the way images might exist in one’s own
consciousness – floating in an oblivion of days, weeks, or months, asking what it means
for history to be interpreted for us through the deconstruction and reconstruction of
images as events or memories.

The next example of an artist working with the absence of contextual language
would be Christopher Williams. Williams’s On New York II (1985) consisted of three
photographs, matted and framed with high-quality framing materials. One image was a
glossy, stylized photograph of New York City, a close-up image of skyscrapers with a
blast of red light emanating from within the building’s windows. The other two photos
were duplicate images of a Pulitzer-Prize winning Faas/Laurent photograph depicting the
bayonet execution of Biharis from the Bangladesh War, one printed very large and the
other scaled to a more intimate size. Visually the works do not reveal the complex nature
of their material qualities. Williams did not shoot any of the photos himself, but rather
appropriated the images to be re-presented in the specific context of the museum as
highly aestheticized objects. The tourism photo was selected specifically for the work’s
presentation in New York, positing a site-specific relation that recalled its own
distribution inside the museum. The journalistic photo, removed from its context as an
actual event – an execution that was staged as a photo opportunity for journalists –
becomes a fragmented image that alludes to a recognition of mediation and the political
subversion of its citizenry. As a system of representation, On New York II utilized the
identifiers of “high” art – lavish frames with highly executed photographs – to make the
presentation equally as important as the content. Deliberately made to be presented in an art context, Williams layered techniques that established a critique of photographic dissemination, distribution, and presentation, while revealing the impulse of institutional neutralization.

Through deconstruction\(^{18}\) and recontextualization, the artworks in *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History* questioned the authority of images and the language of representation as they were constructed through culture. Though these images were highly mediated by the artists, they remained the same images that confronted even the most unlikely viewer living in a media reality. In her catalogue essay for the exhibition, Abigail Solomon-Godeau contextualized the terrain of photographic production of the 80s as functioning between Walter Benjamin’s meditations on photography as a form of historical retrieval, and Guy Debord’s dissection of photography as a spectacle of consumerism and social control. Solomon-Godeau proposed that the artworks in the exhibition were involved in a struggle for the “control of meaning, the meaning of images, and the meaning of the history to which it [related].”\(^{19}\) For Olander, memory and history stem from a similarly decentering narrative, established in Robert Smithson’s multiple sites, one that abstracts the author and the object from a singular trajectory of meaning to a proliferation of different positions. Where Smithson shifted the site of the

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artwork away from its origin, Olander proposed a representational method that would further this distance through the use of mass-culture images. As the origin of the work was dispersed through language, image, and reference, the investigation of memory and history as a succession of sites and signifiers activated the interpretation of the present moment as history while it happened.

Figure 2. Cover of the catalogue for *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History*. 
Evidence of Olander’s focus on discourse, and the contextualization of this shifting moment was built into the catalogue for *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History*. The catalogue is a modest sixty-page paperback with two-color printing, images appearing in black, white, and gray. The front and back cover of the catalogue feature images by Louise Lawler, two plaster casts of a sculpture of Hermes and a copy of the Roman Doryphoros undergoing restoration at the Queens Museum. Olander organized the catalogue to function as both a resource and reference. Under the heading “Selected Bibliography,” beginning with 1980, one can find an extensive list of books, exhibition catalogues, and articles collected from the show’s participating artists. The catalogue thus presents a rich pedagogical resource and history in the space generally reserved for the promotional space of artist biographies. It also experimented with the publication of texts by artists Tina Lhotsky, Reese Williams, Louise Lawler, Stephen Prina, René Santos, Judith Barry, Martha Rosler, and Adrian Piper, disseminating the artists’ writings while presenting the discursive context that inspired the work. An assortment of reproductions are scattered throughout the book, including an addendum to the works included in the show.

For his catalogue entry, the artist Stephen Prina was listed as “arranger” for two texts superimposed onto a faint gray reproduction of *Der Blaue Reiter* by Vassily Kandinsky. In anticipation of the performance, Prina used an untitled short essay by Franz Liszt from 1865 to declare:

I shall be well satisfied if I have succeeded in my task and proved myself to be an intelligent collator, conscientious [sic] reproducer and one who has fully grasped
the meaning of the composer, and thus helped to popularize the great masters and inculcated an appreciation of the beautiful.²⁰

Most likely selected in the early stages of the production of the catalogue, it is as if Prina was already interpreting his response to the performance. The second text in Prina’s “arrangement,” a translation of Ode to Joy by Friedrich Schiller and L. van Beethoven, presented lyrics with a strange conflation of chaotic reference to imperialist arms and patriotic religiosity.

Another unique inclusion in the catalogue was a photo spread by Louise Lawler along with a text that directly addressed the show’s title (and was also one of the installations featured in the exhibit). Lawler pointed to the title of the exhibition, remarking on its originality, relevance and on the aspects of production involved in its organization. Lawler’s text revealed the authoritative eye of the institution in the figure of the curator that selects, thematizes, and connects artists, in what she named a “cumulative enterprise.”²¹ Juxtaposed to this is an interior image of the Rude Museum, a museum dedicated to the French sculptor, François Rude. Inside the room pictured is a plaster reproduction of La Marseillaise (1833-36), Rude’s contribution to the Arch of Triumph in Paris, among myriad other sculptures. In the text that accompanied the image, Lawler implicated institution, artist, and curator alike as the products and producers of culture, revealing another layer of mediation that enters the detailed curatorial selection process. Further, Lawler stated that her “desired history depends on a new literacy,”


acknowledging or perhaps implicating herself in discussing *The Art of Memory*, and thus revealing a rare instance in which the artist engaged in the reception of her work.²²

![Image of installation view](image.png)

Figure 3. Installation view of *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History*, showing works by Louise Lawler, one part of *Two Wall Displays: Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Atamore Pope or their daughter Theodate, Farmington, Connecticut*, (1985), and Sarah Charlesworth, *September 1977 (Modern History)*, (1979). Courtesy the New Museum Digital Archive.

Olander’s second essay, “Point of View,” written for the video portion of the exhibition, situates the importance of documentary approaches. *Re-Viewing History: Video Documents* shared a similar title with another exhibition, *Re-viewing Television: Interpretations of the Mass Media, Parts I and II* at the Whitney Museum of America.

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²² In a conversation between Andrea Fraser and George Baker, they discuss how Lawler has chosen to not write about her own work as a strategy towards a more open interpretation of the work’s reception. George Baker and Andrea Fraser, “Displacement and Condensation: A Conversation on the Work of Louise Lawler,” in George Baker, et al. *Louise Lawler and Others* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 117.
Art.23 Olander’s video program focused on the importance of documentary approaches to the retelling of events through memory and as records of history. Videos by Paper Tiger Television, Peter Adair, Dan Reeves, Nancy Buchanan, and Dan Graham, among others, were situated as socially invested and more socially productive in their subjective narratives and storytelling functions, particularly because they were either originally aired on television, or simply due to their documentary format. As documentary-styled videotapes, not all necessarily artworks, they were selected for their forceful ability to express a point of view in a way that countered the loss of history produced by corporate media. Acknowledging the construction of history in the medium of video and disrupting the conventions inherent in it allowed for the work to be retrieved from the neutralization of television. Olander’s work thus attempted to re-inscribe documentary as a retelling of history and as a participant in the “remains of the consciousness industry rather than the culture industry of the late twentieth century.”24 This sentiment would soon define the shifting discourse of documentary practices as they developed as part of the culture industry.

As the show navigated many realms of aesthetic production and distribution – the exhibition, video program, performance and catalogue – all its elements served to extend the show beyond the walls of the museum, to indicate as Robert Nickas noted in his

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23 This exhibition is listed in the bibliography at the end of Olander’s catalogue. Re-viewing Television: Interpretations of the Mass Media, Parts I and II was held on December 14–30, 1984 and January 15–February 17, 1985 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

review of the exhibition, “the limits of the museum-as-container.”

25 The various levels of discourse engaged in the space of The Art of Memory/The Loss of History contextualized what David Deitcher, a contributor to the catalogue, described as a “departure from the aesthetic and curatorial practices that coincided with modernist art,” into a space now recognized to extend outside the museum. Though the show only received two critical reviews, its reception was later noted to have had a lasting effect, for Olander was an early champion of the artists who would later come to be heralded as formative image artists.

26 William Olander’s curatorial work during this period was attempting to return the audience to an artistic production born from mediation. In his expansion of the discourse of art back into society, Olander advocated for art that realized aesthetic progress and challenged art institutions to be motivated by the production that exists in the world. But his insistence on the image retaining its social function was connected to history as a subject seeking to progress. To set a wider context for Olander’s reaction, a brief reference to another exhibition from 1984, ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, shows just how distinctly divided the trajectory of aesthetic production was becoming at the time.

27 With memory and history as his subjects, Olander was attempting to reveal and also unbind...
what Walter Benjamin notably described in his “Thesis on the Philosophy of History” as a retrogression of society:

Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers... The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.29

The fragments of art and experience detailed in The Art of Memory/The Loss of History were the stepping stones on a path of divergent views on art that strengthened as the 80s continued. What remains significant is not just Olander’s unique framing of artistic production as integrally linked to its own culture, but also that many of these issues are still relevant in the art world today.

The Art of Memory/The Loss of History demonstrates the extent to which William Olander’s curatorial work was developing into a critical – and eventually an activist – practice. Prior to joining the New Museum as a curator, Olander wrote a review of the exhibition Art & Ideology in reaction to the narrow frame of aesthetic ideologies unfolding in various levels of discourse in the field. Art & Ideology took place on February 4–March 18, 1984 at the New Museum in New York, and showcased five guest curators/critics, including Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Donald Kuspit, Lucy R. Lippard, Nilda Peraza, and Lowery Sims, who each selected two artists whose work was politically motivated or held an ideological point of view. Aiming to renew the discourse with the ideological debate on art making, the exhibition thematic examined how works of art with social, cultural, and political dynamics could be perceived, especially with regard to race, class, and gender. But in its actual execution, the framing of ideology was complicated by the exhibition format: the curator’s pairing of established artists, dealing with the specificity of 70s activist practice, with one younger artist, exposed a changing field of production around issue-based work.

In a pair of texts written during 1984–1985, “What’s Wrong with Criticism” and the review “Art-as-Ideology at The New Museum,” Olander positioned himself to define the conditions of artistic production in relation to this ideological frame. In these texts, Olander took an active stake in defending his core value that art should have a position in

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society and that its capacity to speak about meaningful issues should not be smothered by producers of aesthetic ideology. One of Olander’s phrases, the “producers of aesthetic ideology,” implicated the supposed authorities of art, whose championing influence of traditional aesthetic production became increasingly contentious at the midpoint of the 1980s. A prominent term in this section, *ideology* was the concept that came to define the decade as a pernicious battle between opposing visions of what constituted “appropriate” versions of traditional values. With the firm grasp of conservatism in society under President Reagan, the ideology in question was aptly described by Adrian Piper in 1981, as the kind that treated all its own conservative “pronouncements as imparting genuine information but treating those of other people as mere symptoms of some moral or psychological defect.”

Though Piper’s phrase could accurately describe a variety of contemporary dynamics, her words were a comment on the tone of the debate around practices with any complexity of content – and specifically political content. The critical territory of aesthetic ideology lay in determining the “pure” subject and content of art, guided by the belief that one could possibly be an objective fact, or exist apart from society.

In his review, “Art-as-Ideology at The New Museum,” Olander thought that several elements factored into the narrow failure of the *Art & Ideology* exhibition. To start, the combination of politically-oriented works from different ideological periods of art making – the middle to late 70s and the 80s – problematized their specific reactions to and relations with the issues of the period. The works in the show represented a wide

range of topics and viewpoints, including feminism (Hannah Wilke and Kaylynn Sullivan), factographic art, a term used by curator Benjamin Buchloh (Fred Lonidier and Allan Sekula), socio-conceptual art (Alfredo Jaar and Ismael Frigerio), and community-based practices (Suzanne Lacy and Jerry Kearns), among others. Olander stated that the categorization of all the artworks under the single term “ideology” flattened their disparate meanings into a contradiction. For Olander, locating the work under the rubric of “ideology” allowed for almost any artistic practice, from Neo-Expressionism to “meta-art,” to be deemed as ideological based on the viewpoint of its organizers and viewers. This logic manifested the subjective component of ideology as inherently immersed in all art. By association, Olander condemned even the venerated abstract expressionist movement for its relation to American imperialism in the 1950s, as well as Pop art’s relation to the postindustrial consumer society of the 1960s. By Olander’s account, even advocates of such modernist aesthetics were implicated in aligning with the ideologies these styles were complicit with. In his conclusion, Olander proposed that the ultimate outcome of the exhibition was that it provided a space to rethink and examine the specificity of social, ideological issues, and their changing relations to art.

This critique of *Art & Ideology*, while negative towards the curatorial and theoretical methodology of the exhibition, was intended to counter the language of another review from April of the same year. Olander was responding to the critic Hilton

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34 Olander, “Art-as-Ideology,” 392.
Kramer and a larger context of discourse around these issue-based practices. Kramer, who resigned from his role as art critic of the *New York Times* in 1982, had eagerly attacked *Art & Ideology* and several other “politically oriented” exhibitions in the pages of his new publication, the *New Criterion*. According to Kramer, the exhibition hinged on a statement made by one of the curators whom he described as a militant activist, Lucy Lippard. Lippard had begun her catalogue essay with the statement that “all art is ideological and all art is used politically by the right and the left.” Kramer countered that this “abandon[ed] artistic criteria and aesthetic considerations in favor of ideological tests that would . . . reduce the whole notion of art to little more than a facile, preprogrammed exercise in political propaganda.” Kramer further disparaged the participants in the exhibition by calling them “a dedicated alliance of artists, academics and so-called ‘activists’ [seeking] to politicize life in this country.” With a swift mention, Kramer predicted the early stages of the culture wars when he stated that a sizable part of this blatant political activity is funded, precisely because it claims to speak in the name of art, by such public agencies as the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York – yet another example, I suppose, of supplying the rope to those who are eager to see us hanged.

With his review, Olander was attempting to diffuse this extreme characterization of a *liberal art world* and its “ideological” art as working in opposition to political conservatism. For Olander, the presentation of work under these terms exposed the

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37 Kramer, “Turning back the clock,” 68.
rigidity in which “political” practices could be quickly labeled or dismissed as such, for it shut down the possibility of the work speaking on its own terms. In the context of Kramer’s aggression, the critic’s distaste confused the reality that other ideologies and other ideas of aesthetic quality existed in an ambiguously defined and increasingly diversified American culture.

Olander’s own review, written in August before Reagan was reelected to his second term, states that his concerns were related to the potential of another four years under the president. Olander added his own call for artists, critics, historians, and curators to “promote, encourage and provide a sympathetic and coherent context for the production and distribution of alternative and oppositional artistic production,” and also to “attempt to change the institutional structure so as to defuse its own ideological power . . . and to abandon the liberal notion of pluralism” supported by even the most “avant garde” institutions. This was an agenda that Olander himself would realize in his next curatorial project, *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History*.

In 1984, before Kramer’s review had appeared, the editor of the Ohio-based journal *Dialogue* asked Olander to write a commentary on “art and social issues.” This vague request was answered by Olander with an essay titled “What’s Wrong With Criticism,” in which he addressed the “current idea of ‘political art’” through the authoritative position art history and criticism played in restraining politics in art. Using a similar rhetoric to the one he later deployed to disarm the discourse between Lippard and
Kramer, Olander stated that his desire to improve how art was read in relation to art history was to encourage a critical art history:

To recognize not that all art is political (an equivalently skewed aesthetic version of the equally misleading 70s credo of the personal is political) but that all art is a carrier of political ideology and, that by labeling certain art ‘political,’ we then imply that there exists an art which is apolitical (impossible and untrue). An abstract or figurative painting hanging silently and complacently on the walls of the museum is as much a construct of ideological decisions as a street performance invading our space, disrupting our daily lives, and confronting us with information that we might prefer to ignore.  

While Olander’s critique of criticism recognized the continuing object-based approach to evaluating works of art, it exemplified the subtle nuance of political content. Placing value on certain types of artistic production and securing them as commodities to be objectified was a process that Olander problematized by considering the social conditions inherent in all art.

Moreover, these critical texts and exhibitions corresponded with a sea change in the art market: the 1980s were a moment when art reached a new level of commodity status. As economic conditions shifted during the Reagan years, the art market began to benefit, and the institutional structures of art were transformed. Private collections began to outpace the traditionally slow collections of museums with hot new art, while galleries positioned themselves to sell art, a financial decision that became more popular than supporting art that was making statements about the world. These economic conditions supported a return to painting and simultaneously, a break with practices like the

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minimalism and conceptualism of the 60s and 70s that were considered to represent radical progress. In the same interview with Lynne Tillman cited in the first part of this thesis, Olander described this moment as a shift “that changed the nature of artistic production back to a much more conventional mode of buying and trafficking in art.”

For Olander, the economic shifts of the 80s art market represented a return to convention that manifested a rejection of progressive practices – most notably, progressive modes of presentation and distribution that intervened in art’s social and institutional environments, the making of work aware of its social and political contexts, and the exploration of works that were ephemeral to the point of being unsaleable.

To lend more context to this tumultuous polarization of artistic practice, another article from 1984 serves to situate the moment. In a scathing response to the burgeoning East Village art scene in New York, Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan published their article “The Fine Art of Gentrification” in the winter edition of the journal October. It implicated a litany of art world players for rejecting radical artistic practices in favor of


commercialism and opportunism in alliance with the art market. Deutsche and Ryan’s sentiment was echoed in Lucy Lippard’s essay “Intersections” of the same year, in which Lippard reflected on the historical importance of the 1960s and 70s for radical institutional opposition. Lippard noted that despite the “expansionism” of the minimalists and conceptualists, the progress of art led “not to change but back to the artworld, from which bastion artists [could] remain safely ‘critical’ of society without having to worry about being heard.” The retreat from political art practice manifested itself as part of a larger picture of sociopolitical conservatism of the eighties.

All of these events transpired previous to Olander’s move to the New Museum. Olander’s response to these circumstances was not just to address them with tactical reviews, but to incorporate his ideas into action. The discourse of his curatorial work at the New Museum would attempt to convey the shifts taking place in artistic practices by relating them to a broader background. Olander’s exhibition *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History* opened one year after his review of *Art & Ideology* and his commentary piece “What’s Wrong with Criticism.” The same sense of call-and-response timing would motivate his work over the course of the next four years.

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43 The full quotation describes the turn from radical artistic practices: “Throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s significant art, beginning with minimalism, was oriented towards an awareness of context. Among the radical results of this orientation were art practices that intervened directly in their institutional and social environments. While a number of artists today continue contextualist practices that demonstrate an understanding of the material bases of cultural production, they are a minority in a period of reaction. The specific form this reaction takes in the art world is an unapologetic embrace of commercialism, opportunism, and a concomitant rejection of the radical art practices of the past twenty years.” Deutsche and Ryan, “Gentrification,” 105.

The next dialectical response that Olander would pursue was motivated by the major international exhibition, *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, held on December 8, 1984–February 10, 1985 and organized by Kate Linker and Jane Weinstock at the New Museum. Olander’s response defined a personal investment in the critical language of homosexuality and its representations in art that were developing a critical discourse. Its catalogue contained important essays by Craig Owens, Lisa Tickner, Jacqueline Rose, Peter Wollen, as well as the curators. The traveling show included twenty artists with works in all media that centered on representational practices that engaged with the complex issues of sexual difference. Significant for its use of poststructuralist theory, the exhibition espoused a curatorial framework that revised the
conventional biological categories of masculinity and femininity.\textsuperscript{45} The \textit{Difference} exhibition was exemplary of the trans-Atlantic impact of psychoanalytic theory and its entrenchment into academia. This theoretical writing had been activated by pioneering feminists of the 70s for its critique of the sexual difference inscribed in ideological structures. Second-wave feminists of the 80s continued to draw upon Continental theory, using Lacan’s rereading of Freud to analyze and negate the ordering of “woman” as the negative of man.

The \textit{Difference} exhibition found much traction in such feminist territory. In his catalogue essay “Posing,” Craig Owens described this critical artwork as driving a wedge into the cracks of psychoanalytic discourse. Charting what he called “the discourse of the Other,” Owens explained how the mimetic strategies of art and theory cast doubt onto the authoritative model of official discourse.\textsuperscript{46} Similarly, a review by Aimee Rankin in the Australian journal \textit{Art-Network} reiterated the slippage of female representation as an extension of the feminist movement. She described this position as a “splitting of subjectivity” that failed to articulate the diverse forms of representation and spectatorship that comprised the visual arts, calling for new strategies and new theories.\textsuperscript{47} Jacqueline Rose, in her own essay, was one of the few to acknowledge the desire to discover “an artistic practice which sets itself the dual task of disrupting visual form and questioning

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\textsuperscript{45} The exhibition began at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, then traveled to The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Illinois, March 3–April 7, 1985, and to the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, July 19–September 1, 1985.


the sexual certainties and stereotypes of our culture.” Moreover, the “difference” represented in the exhibition, or the “other” in Owens’s essay, reveals the patriarchal order through the use of the constrained terms of “sexuality,” “sexual difference,” “masculinity,” and “femininity.” It was precisely the specificity of its critical interpretation that exposed an exclusionary fact for Olander, the absence of homosexual difference.

Three months after the *Difference* exhibition closed, in a letter dated May 28, 1985, Olander detailed an intense frustration with the exhibition stemming from its lack of homosexual presence and criticized the six participating critics and historians for the marked exclusion of the term “homosexual.” According to Olander, the organizers made only a partial reference *not* to homosexuality itself, but to AIDS – a disease Olander described as “having assumed representational status with regards to male homosexuals.” Olander’s letter proposed a symposium titled *The Politics of Exclusion: On Difference*, and outlined a plan not simply to critique *Difference*, but to recast the absence of gay presence in the exhibition as the basis for a new set of problems. The issue for Olander fundamentally pivoted on an insufficiency of appropriate critical language and understanding of homosexuality as a state of difference requiring its own set of distinctions and meanings.

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Olander’s letter described three points which served as the springboard of his critique. The first was the failure of poststructuralist, feminist-psychoanalytic contemporary criticism to account for radical sexual difference (homosexuality) in favor of a singularly-constructed male-female, masculine-feminine sexuality. Second was the problem of a scarcity of a “gay/lesbian meta-critical art,” acknowledging what did exist labored with representation in culturally-constructed ways that were similar to those used by artists in *Difference*. Citing Michel Foucault, Olander advocated for discourse conceived

as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform or stable. . . [not] a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.\(^51\)

He went on to argue that contemporary attitudes towards homosexual sensibilities were distorted by images of gay life that were deployed as graphic symbols of *so-called* gay liberation (Olander’s emphasis) by the entertainment and the media industries. He argued that the art world was also guilty in perpetuating those stereotypes – symbols he referred to as “closer to camp than to critique.” Olander stated that even the hypothetical inclusion of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, whose work had disrupted the visual field in its perverse power, would not suffice for its lack of theoretical and political content. Work like Mapplethorpe’s could only replace the notion of difference with the fetishization of it – sexuality as a luxurious or expensive commodity.\(^52\) Olander’s final point was a call to find artistic production made by gay men and lesbians that contained the same rigor and


intensity of the work presented in *Difference*. These criticisms became a stake for Olander to locate artwork that would imply a rejection of the representation founded by earlier countercultural sexual-liberation movements. At the least, the work would begin to distinguish the margins within difference, which for Olander meant a “search [for] politics that [could] more efficiently link gay and lesbian concerns with the broader issues of patriarchy, discrimination and ideology.”

The proposal outlined in Olander’s letter was not realized as a symposium, but came to be an exhibition one year later, titled *Homo Video: Where We Are Now* and subtitled *A program of Videotapes by Gay Men and Lesbians*, which ran in the New Museum’s Workspace gallery from December 11, 1986–February 15, 1987. Much of the core content from the three-page letter to Saslow anchors the exhibition essay, which in lieu of a proper catalogue, was printed on the exhibition brochure. Amplifying the ideas from his letter, Olander illuminated the specific subtleties of difference located in homosexuality as the basis for his exhibition. He also disclosed that in fact he was responding to two exhibitions by the New Museum, critiquing his own institution from within, a radical position to take even now. Though *Difference* was Olander’s main concern, he also pinpointed a 1982 exhibition titled *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art*, organized by Dan Cameron. His trouble with *Extended Sensibilities* was its emphasis on a “gay sensibility,” notably of camp, kitsch, and gay cult; all representations that figured homosexual life as a “sordid underworld.”

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Sensibilities had been the first exhibition on homosexuality in art, and its framework had already become dated. For Olander, *Homo Video: Where We Are Now* was a reclamation of homosexuality on critical terms, a concept that Olander attempted to literally translate into its almost vulgar title, perhaps by imbuing a certain amount of shock value meant to state this *specific* difference.\(^{55}\)

The show of thirteen videotapes, two of which were independently produced for broadcast television, presented new artistic production by artists such as Gregg Bordowitz, Jerri Allyn, and Suzanne Silver, along with public service announcements on AIDS and documentary-style films by Stuart Marshall, Peter Adair and Robert Epstein, John Greyson, and Lyn Blumenthal.\(^{56}\) Structurally, *Homo Video* did not attempt to articulate the reductive gesture of a “homosexual aesthetic,” conflating an aesthetic style as typical of gay or lesbian art, but recognized the value of the work through its stake in politics and history, and its engagement with theory. But Olander’s comments were not taken lightly, and his deriding of the *Difference* show as a “stunning failure” would be quoted back to him on several occasions, including in a review by Martha Gever. Gever, a lesbian artist, criticized the show for not effectively linking gay and lesbian concerns to each other. The show was oriented too heavily on gay men talking openly about sex and relationships, while their lesbian counterparts were represented as still dealing with their

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own female images in the same structural way as “straight” women. However, Gever did concede that the “stubborn contradiction surrounding sexual identity need not forestall intelligent analysis of sexual politics or disallow representations of the body . . . rather it makes them all the more urgent.”  Olander’s exhibition was successful in its ability to expose issues of homosexual representation that revealed an even greater division and distinction of gender between gay men and lesbians.

Another text that showed Olander’s contextual motivation for this exhibition began in the form of another letter, this time addressed to Olander from Stephen Prina and Christopher Williams, dated August 21, 1986. Prina and Williams invited Olander to contribute to an issue of New Observations that the two artists were editing, on the topic of “The Construction and Maintenance of Our Enemies.” Olander’s response again recapitulated much of the theoretical language espoused in his essay for Homo Video, and added context to his sense of an increased need to defend homosexuality.

Olander submitted an essay titled “‘We Are Unwilling to Start Down that Road’: 3 Vignettes” to New Observations, taking its title from Associate Justice Byron R. White’s Supreme Court decision on Bowers v. Hardwick of June 30, 1986, ruling against


homosexuals' right to privacy, specifically with regard to sexual acts. Olander’s vignettes presented three “straight” views of homosexuality that translated as acts of censorship, charlatanism, ignorance, and intense discrimination. More biographically candid than Olander’s other writings, the first vignette of his essay recalled a contradictory encounter with an exhibition at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions in 1986 titled Social Distortion. The show included the work of the artist Tom of Finland and many other artists working with sex, violence, rebellion, and conformity. Outside the small interior gallery space created to house the racy illustrations was a sign that stated “Adults Only,” alerting the parents of minors under the age of twenty-one to the unsuitable nature of the work for younger viewers. However, just adjacent to this boundary was fifteen paintings by Robert Williams, a Zap comics artist, which by Olander’s description, showed “a female nude being fucked in as many ways as there were paintings.” Olander’s second vignette told the story of a group of friends who attended a Louise Hay seminar after reading her book You Can Heal Your Life. Hay had claimed that people were developing AIDS because they felt guilty about being gay, and encouraged men – whom she called boys – to bring teddy bears to seminars for when they got “scared.” The last vignette was of a peaceful demonstration against the Bowers v. 

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60 The majority opinion in Bowers v. Hardwick, written by Justice Byron White, framed the legal question as whether the constitution confers "a fundamental right upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy." Justice White's opinion for the majority answered this question in the negative, stating that "to claim that a right to engage in such conduct is 'deeply rooted in this Nation's history and tradition' or 'implicit in the concept of ordered liberty' is, at best, facetious." The ruling was later overturned as unconstitutional in Lawrence v. Texas in 2003. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bowers_v._Hardwick, Accessed January 30, 2012.


63 Olander, “We Are Unwilling to Start Down that Road,” 5.
Hardwick decision, near the historic site of the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion in New York. The event was picked up by the tabloid media press Weekly World News, who cast it with the headline: “Peeved Pansies Predict Revolt. Hordes of howling homosexuals are in a foot-stomping snit because the Supreme Court won’t okay their bizarre bedtime practices – and they’re threatening to prance out of the closet and scratch our eyes out.”64 Clearly there was humor in Olander’s examples of his “enemies,” but these three scenes revealed the discrimination and homophobia rooted deep within the cultural mind.

Despite the number of gays and lesbians “coming out” on an unprecedented scale, the political and social conditions for homosexuals were becoming worse. Under President Reagan, the Bowers ruling and Attorney General Edwin Meese’s “Commission on Pornography” in July of 1986 were directed to harass, contain, and suppress activity that fell outside “traditional” views of American life. Nonetheless, these repressive acts precipitated more collective concerns from within the gay community. For Olander, assuming a more activist position to clarify and defend gay difference in aesthetic judgement and in critical discourse was essential. Homo Video: Where We Are Now was an example of an activist exhibition in its mining of an institutional problem and steady dismantling of it through a multiplicity of discursive elements. Olander was clearly aware that the issues of gay and lesbian individuals were beginning to boil into a more complex reality. His exhibition marked an early recognition of this urgency, one that would eventually be realized in 1990 with Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble, in the development of queer theory. Butler’s text would begin to uncover the political possibilities that could

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64 Olander, “We Are Unwilling to Start Down that Road,” 2.
come from the radical critique of the categories of identity, through a convergence of feminist, gay, and lesbian perspectives on gender.65 Olander’s curatorial challenge to the ideological apparatus was to develop an ongoing conversation with the politics of gay and lesbian concerns.

As the 1980s progressed, Olander continued to produce complex exhibitions. He also continued to support oppositional work that pushed against aesthetic and critical expectations. One of Olander’s most critically well-received shows was *Let the Record Show, The Window on Broadway by ACT UP*, which ran from November 20, 1987–January 24, 1988. Organized just four months after the formation of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), Olander invited the group to install an artwork in the New Museum’s arched Broadway window. In an article from January 1988, Olander recalled that his first encounter with ACT UP was seeing their poster which proclaimed the equation: “SILENCE = DEATH.” The poster (designed by the collective Silence = Death and lent to ACT UP), with its pink triangle and black background was designed to promote awareness of the AIDS crisis, and to fight what Olander described as “the often uninformed and negligent response of federal, state, and local governments to AIDS.”66 Olander distinguished the artistic significance of the “Silence = Death” logo as an activist response inspired and produced in the arms of the crisis. The title of the installation was


taken from Olander’s exhibition brochure, which stated, "Let the record show that there are many in the community of art and artists who chose not to be silent in the 1980s."67

Detailed extensively in Douglas Crimp’s article, “AIDS Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” the complex installation provided current information on the AIDS epidemic and attempted to depict it with historical perspective. The installation was divided into three sections: a large photo of the Nuremberg trials, and below it, six life-sized photos of “AIDS Criminals” whose words were inscribed onto a slab of concrete, then the neon sign, “Silence = Death,” and strikingly, “no word from the President.” A light would illuminate a series of boxes, highlighting quotes by Jesse Helms, Jerry Falwell, William F. Buckley, and others, stating the positions taken by each on the epidemic. US Senator Jesse Helms, for example, was represented by his statement that, “The logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected.” Above these images and texts was an electronic display that scrolled through passages that read as follows: “Let the record show . . . William F. Buckley deflects criticism of the government’s slow response to the epidemic through calculations”; “At most three years were lost . . . Those three years have killed approximately 15,000 people; if we are talking about 50 million dead, then the cost of delay is not heavy . . .” The display then proceeded to state the increasing death toll for each year, until it finally read: “By Thanksgiving 1987, 25,644 known dead . . . AIDS . . . President Reagan: ‘I have asked the Department of Health and Human Services to determine as soon as possible the extent to which the AIDS virus has

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penetrated our society.’” The final element of the installation was a neon sign flashing the ACT UP slogan after each element, “Act Up, Fight Back, Fight AIDS.”

Figure 6. Installation view of Let the Record Show the Window on Broadway by ACT UP at the New Museum, November 20, 1987 – January 24, 1988. Courtesy the New Museum Digital Archive.

Olander’s text for the brochure was reprinted in the December 1987/January 1988 issue of Art & Artists, detailing the original text of the installation for an audience beyond

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those who saw it in New York. In the essay, Olander stated that the intention of the work was to “make the viewer realize the depth of the problem and understand that history [would] judge our society by how we responded to [the] calamity,” including those national figures who used the AIDS epidemic to promote their political agendas. When asked if this type of work was art, Olander pointed to the many works of art throughout history that were inspired by periods of crisis, while acknowledging their propagandistic power. Olander referenced Jacques-Louis David’s La Mort de Marat, painted in 1793 to serve as a rallying point for the popular and middle classes sympathetic to Jean-Paul Marat’s radical vision of revolution, and as a more recent example cited Hans Haacke’s U.S. Isolation Box, Grenada, 1983 (1983). The point for Olander was simple: “not all works of art are as ‘disinterested’ as others, and some of the greatest have been created in the midst, or as a result, of a crisis. Many of us believe we are in the midst of a crisis today.”

The execution of the ACT UP installation at the New Museum was the first time that an activist work was presented in the context of an art institution, showing the museum’s fundamental support of socially and politically engaged work. Another result of this moment was the formation of the artist collective Gran Fury, who would go on to continue making activist and informative works in public space, such as Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do (1989). Olander’s involvement in ACT UP inaugurated

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the beginning of a movement that continued to grow into more than eighty chapters in the United States and thirty chapters internationally, into the mid-90s.70

Looking back at this moment, thirty years later, it is relevant to elaborate on the importance of this work. It was one of the last projects that Olander realized towards the end of his life. This project, recognized for its urgent call to action, inscribed Olander’s curatorial work into the realm of cultural practice. For better or worse, his commitment to the political struggle of homosexuality, and eventually AIDS, may have positioned his work as essentially activist, but the breadth and scope of his interests opened out into the larger world.

The last few years of Olander’s life were occupied by many lectures, panels, symposia, and cultural activities. To name a few, he lectured at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, Los Angeles; Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; University of Southern California, Los Angeles; he also served as a panelist for the Gay/Lesbian Studies Conference at Yale University; a panelist for the Public Art Fund Spectacolor Board, and panelist for symposium on Rudolf Baranik, among several others. His unconventional views were respected by many in the field, and his prominence as a curator was just beginning to reach outside the confines of the New Museum. As is noted in the several books that were dedicated to him after his death, not only was Olander a brilliant art historian, curator, and scholar, but he had a charismatic way of presenting his

ideas that kept people open and interested. Olander’s accomplishments, his concentrated
ten-year legacy begs the question of what would have come next, leaving a melancholy
feeling over this brilliant life cut short.

Figure 7. William Olander, *The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*, 1987–, Photo from October
1986, photographer unknown. Christopher Cox Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature,
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. New Haven, Connecticut.
Afterword

At present, the multiplicity of artistic practices, discourses, and activist interventions of the 80s is being reevaluated with its first retrospective exhibition. The curator of the exhibition, Helen Molesworth, has positioned the delayed reflection upon the decade as complicated by the prevailing silence surrounding the AIDS crisis. The absence of a figure such as William Olander in the discourse of the 1980s can only be partially understood by the insurmountable loss of the AIDS epidemic. Olander’s resistance to the professed ideology of a conservative agenda and the suppression of diverse aesthetic production tells an alternate history of a complex political reality. Moreover, Olander’s practices document a contradiction of postmodern discourse, one that is generally whitewashed by the elegant façade of poststructuralism. His career and thought cannot be summed up as stylistically “postmodern,” or through reference to Continental theories popular in his time. Olander’s voice, and his active interest in art and politics, divulge the highly politicized context of postmodern art in the 1980s from within the structure of the art world itself.

The reconsideration of exhibitions such as The Art of Memory/The Loss of History, Homo Video: Where We Are Now, and Let The Record Show brings into focus the important discursive and conceptual considerations in curatorial work that can activate art production, distribution, and reception. Olander’s exhibitions, in conjunction with the critique of social and cultural histories immanent in his writing, show a fearless address

of contemporary issues. Rather than waiting for history to write itself, Olander’s curatorial work was alive and participatory in its own moment. Revealing the layers of difference in an exhibition such as *Homo Video: Where We Are Now*, or making distinctions from similar aesthetic practices such as in *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History*, evinced an astute awareness on Olander’s part of his own historical circumstances. What I hope translates from the examination of this critically active curatorial practice is a return to the notion of an exhibition as a space to talk about things in public that perhaps are not always so easy to contend with in private. Olander’s work illuminated issues that are still relevant to today’s cultural practices.

Today, the integration of art as part of a larger culture industry is perhaps not always is in the best interest of a field that aspires for independence of thought and methodology. The majority of art institutions and galleries have continued to enforce a state of pluralism that blankets distinctions of social conditions or the possibility of multiple, parallel histories within artistic production. Viewing art is, in and of itself, a special task, and one that should remain open, aware, and fearless of its unique place in culture. As David Deitcher, a close friend and colleague of William Olander described it:

> For like the larger market economy of which it is part, the cultural economy shapes, and in many ways disfigures, us and the art we create and interact with as we try to make sense of the lives that we lead.\(^{72}\)

> The long-term ideological results of the eighties continue to impact how art is produced and distributed, and the contemporary situation has only come to be complicated further by the way art is consumed. Paintings still sell better than any other

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art form, and one can’t help but wonder how art will continue to evolve in a world saturated by images. William Olander allows us to understand, with a renewed interest in curatorial practice, how the role of the curator can either amplify or silence the meaning of art and its discourse within institutional space.
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Appendix: Articles, Essays and Exhibitions by William Olander*

*The information listed in the following appendices was originally compiled by Gayle Rodda Kurtz in her Master’s Thesis from 1991 titled “William Olander: The Practice of an Activist Curator.” Since her thesis remains unpublished, for the reader and for the purpose of accessibility, I have reprinted Rodda Kurtz’s detailed bibliography here. For more information, see Gayle Rodda Kurtz, “William Olander: The Practice of an Activist Curator,” (M.A. Thesis, Hunter College, New York, 1991.)

Articles by William Olander

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–. “Video, Television and Popular Art: On the Work of Bruce and Norman Yonemoto.” (unfinished)


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**Essays by William Olander**


Exhibitions by William Olander


Adrian Piper, It’s Just Art, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, April 23, 1980.