

On the Anthology 1987-2012

by LG Williams / The Estate of LG Williams

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A man, his determined features suggesting a taciturn cartoon hero, glances into an adjoining room through an opening cut into what is presumably a door. So as to be able to do so he somewhat awkwardly holds open a shutter with the index finger of his right - awkwardly, because this shutter, swivelling around a pin at the apex of the opening, is on the other side, that is, on the viewer's side of the door. Moving it must have required some pushing and poking, and the raised finger now intersects the character's field of vision. In a speech bubble we read words that also form the title of the piece: I CAN SEE THE WHOLE ROOM! ... AND THERE'S NO ART IN IT!

The looking of the protagonist is not rewarded in the manner that he appears to have expected. That his glance remains without result is perhaps due to the fact that he uses the opening against the intentions of its designer. The shutter would be lifted more easily from the viewer's side, and it is thus the viewer who should inspect what lies on the other side of the door. Indeed, the viewer is rewarded with the very presence of art the absence of which the cartoon hero proclaims.

The image is a work by LG Williams / The Estate of LG Williams of 2011. Made of vinyl and engineer grade reflective sheeting on heavy-duty aluminum, materials frequently deployed by the artist, it measures 122 x 122 cm. It forms the only component of an exhibition at the Gloria Maria Gallery in

Milan in November 2012, entitled Anthology 1987-2012. From his vantage point, as he casts an uninvited glance into the exhibition space, the stern hero will in fact not see any art. The gallery's empty white walls become an integral component of the art work.

An engagement with Williams' Protean practice reveals an all-pervasive interplay between comments on reality and the construction of fictional worlds. Already in his name the artist presents us with a character half of which is fictionalized as a historical phenomenon that is now held in trust. A visit to this particular exhibition affords the viewer an encounter with a perplexing variety of perceptions, insights and suggestions. The viewing of Williams' work is a very multi-layered thing.

Beyond the artist's own art history, the viewer encounters aspects of art history taken more widely. The image is based on, and modifies, a painting by Roy Lichtenstein, I CAN SEE THE WHOLE ROOM! ... AND THERE'S NOBODY IN IT! of 1961 which gained notoriety after its sale at auction at a record price on 9 November 2011.

Lichtenstein's, and in turn Williams', works, stand in a long traditions of art works addressing the sense of sight. Whilst paintings are in general produced to be seen, some of them address vision in more specific terms, be it that they are allegories of sight, or be it that they show people seeing with particular insistence. For example, in L'Enseigne de Gersaint (Gersaint's Shopsign) by Jean-Antoine Watteau (1720) in Charlottenburg Castle, Berlin, two figures are engaged in the close visual inspection of a painting that is being shown to them. A small number of art works require of the viewer to glance through openings. In the case of anamorphic perspective boxes this is due to the nature of perspective distortion and foreshortening. The use of another optical apparatus, the magic lantern, is the subject of a group in porcelain by Etienne Maurice Falconet, modelled in c. 1760, in which a girl peeks into a round opening to enjoy the spectacle inside. In a number of instances, however, glances become highly charged, and in extreme cases even morally ambiguous, when they penetrate into very private worlds. The opening that permits us to witness the ecstasy of St Teresa, carved by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini, in the Cornaro Chapel in Rome, completed in 1652, is large enough to accommodate the glances of

numerous members of the congregation. Several smaller apertures, on the other hand, allow visual access to more erotically or sexually charged scenes: these range from the keyhole in Marcel Duchamp's *L'Étant donné*s in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1946-1966) to the broken window pane in Mark Wallinger's *Diana*, National Gallery, London (2012).

There are no indications that the quest for people in the Lichtenstein image and for art in Williams' case is driven by erotic motives, and the viewer will likewise presumably not wish to go further in sexualizing the imagery than to acknowledge that the cartoon hero possesses a rugged handsomeness. Why the latter is concerned with the presence of people, and the presence of art, respectively, remains unexplained. Nor are we given an explanation of why the door should make provisions for such visual checks in the form of the shuttered opening, evocative of a context of surveillance. Nonetheless the shutter, placed on our side of the door, offers to the viewer a strong incentive to penetrate the substance of the art work.

The fact that the exhibition presents itself as a survey spanning the past twenty-five years suggests that this particular work represents or embodies sufficient amounts of characteristics of all the other works so as to be able to stand in for them. In its use of industrial materials, and its non-gestural execution, the piece is indeed typical of much of Williams' output, but by far not all of it. Similarly, a coolly conceptual approach is frequently dominant in his art, but it is not ubiquitous. The suggestion of the exhibition as anthology therefore conforms with reality, and opposes itself to it in the guise of fiction at the same time. An *Antology 1987-2012* by LG Williams / *The Estate of LG Williams* does nonetheless exist, but it does so in different ways. Within the factual, tangible walls of Gloria Maria Gallery it exists as part-fiction, whilst it has an intangible, but real existence in the form of a presentation on the internet. Visits to the website and to the gallery do not mutually make one another obsolete – rather, they set up a dialogue between the two modes of presentation. Rather like Watteau's *L'Enseigne*, William's piece refers to other works, stands in for them, invites us to consider them, without losing its relevance in its own right. A visitor to the exhibition will encounter a cunning take on art history, including the artist's own. As we return the glance across the protagonist's index finger, our corporeal eyes are engaged as fruitfully as the eyes of our mind.