

“It is what it is. Or is it?”
CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM HOUSTON
5216 Montrose Boulevard
May 12, 2012–July 29, 2012



View of “It is what it is. Or is it?,” 2012. Foreground: Abraham Cruzvillegas, *Autorretrato embarazado y mascando pepitas* (Self-Portrait Pregnant and Chewing Pumpkin Seeds), 2012. Background: Klara Liden, *180° Wall Piece*, 2012

Marcel Duchamp famously said that the readymade was “a form of denying the possibility of defining art”; in a similar way, this exhibition denies the possibility of narrowly defining the readymade. Nearly a century after *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, we are still wrestling with the relevance of the readymade, particularly its critical power in our digitally saturated, perpetually remixed world. It’s daring of Dean Daderko, the curator of this exhibition, to wade into these deep waters. He has included a wide array of artworks, from Bill Bollinger’s *Evergreen Joe Hemmis*, 1970, to Rachel Hecker’s portraiture, from Felix González-Torres’s lightbulbs (which Daderko reinstalls in a new configuration every few weeks) to William Cordova’s labyrinthine record liberation project. Perhaps the most imposing (and, paradoxically, easily overlooked) piece in the show is by Klara Liden, who was invited to create a site-specific intervention. Struck by the array of markings and scars on the back of a wall in the main gallery, Liden opted to invert the entire structure and expose its unseen side, raising critical questions of labor and power: How do museums come to define what is seen or unseen? What is the work of the artist? Liden exposes the remnants of labor in the museum (scaffolding, crowbars) and also the marks left behind in the process (color tests, graffiti, paint splatters).

As the title suggests, rather than establishing a clear definition of what is or is not a readymade, the exhibition challenges any attempt at a narrow definition, especially with pieces like the hyperrealist paintings of Ellen Altfest and Catherine Murphy or the video work of the Russian collaborative *Chto Delat*. In the end, the show’s broad definition of the readymade as “physical evidence of conceptual exercise” invites us to engage with the continuing debates around the nature of the readymade itself.

— John Pluecker