



Window Space

Xpace Cultural Centre
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Erika Verhagen

Ha Ha Wall

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Sleight Objects

The Window

My neighbor picks up leaves on her lawn one by one with her bare hands. She wears a sweater set, demurely squatting, picking up leaves until her hands are full. She doesn't look up as we walk pass, and why should she? She's in her space, and we acknowledge it by averting our eyes. We are glimpsing an invisible border, one that separates the public sidewalk and the private green grass.

Ha Ha Wall, the title of Erika Verhagen's installation is perhaps a good place to start. The 18th Century Ha Ha Wall is a wall built into the landscape in order to not disrupt the scenic view of the countryside, keeping out those that are not wished in¹. Built usually out of stone directly into the land, the wall is constructed to be invisible from those that are 'inside' the area the wall borders, but can be seen by those on the outside. In other words its an 'invisible' border separating the 'outside' from the 'inside'. And here is where Verhagen's installation sits. Literally situated in-between Lansdowne St. and

¹ "Ha-Ha." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Jan. 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ha-ha>.

Xpace, in a window space bubble from which both the street and gallery are visible. It straddles a semi visible line of exposed and protected.

Ha Ha Wall feels odd coming out of your mouth, It's a mismatch of words that should not equal what they do. It's an odd sticking of a verbal exclamation and a hard impermeable structure, and so it follows that the work *Ha Ha Wall* represents is not what you expect. Verhagen has created an implied living space² where domestic-ish objects are trapped in behind closed door actions. The hooked rugs are draped or hung loosely on wooden armatures, an upended glass sits atop a woollen spill across from a chair illusioned to look like a shadow of itself.

The glass

The glass cup is Erika's Ha Ha Wall. It's tricky. It sits upside down on the floor but is still filled with water. Reminiscent of a neighbour placing a glass to a wall in order to listen, but the glass is filled with water, instead of amplifying the sound the water silences it. A physical, invisible distance separates you like wearing noise cancelling headphones. When you enter Xpace, audio inaudible from the outside greets you. A loop that replays and replays the glass breaking on a hardwood floor, an event that will never come to pass, and yet it could have already happened. Like a sonic afterimage Verhagen replays for your ears the event she has hooked with wool, a white milky spill surrounds the glass, circling it, but not venturing underneath. The glass itself sits on the ground, it has a long shadow carved out of the rug, displaying the white of the painted floor beneath it.

The audio presents a trapped interior action, you hear a domestic scene: a glass falls, shattering on the hardwood floor, a pause, the ceiling being stuck with a broom from the downstairs neighbour.³ But the real glass isn't shattered, instead it's as though the glass

² Interview with the Artist, 2019

³ Interview with the Artist, 2019

fell and landed upside down without spilling a drop. Instead the carpet has absorbed the fall, mimicking the spill.

When a wall isn't a wall it's a haha.

The rug

Sleight as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary means: 'deceitful craftiness'.⁴

Sleight of hand is usually associated with magicians, but in Verhagen's work it's everywhere. Deceitful craft, and not negatively deceitful (but instead tricky) informs all of the work in *Ha Ha Wall*. Verhagen employs the medium of craft to pull pranks, or twist visual metaphors. She transforms rugs into sneaky events: they don't fade into the background so much as become part of the background, the spill around the cup, the shadow beneath the chair.

Closest to the front of the window a rug lies in bed. The rug is draped over a low wooden frame, and gently personified it becomes both the bed and the subject. At the 'head' of the bed it has sculptural cut outs, highlighting lumpy round pillow-like forms in creams and greys. Near the middle faint heather blues and greys come together to form the geometric shapes of a quilt pattern, bordered by a wide cream rectangle finishing in long rounded strips like fingers, reminiscent of tassels on woven rug.

and domesticity has a border

and here you are in it and here you are not

The chair

⁴"Sleight." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sleight>.

Here, there is a shadow that is actually a hooked rug.

The chair itself has a round seat and a curved back, it looks like a kitchen chair, not out of place around a table. Stretching from its legs is a deep grey shadow and hooked seat covering in the shape and colour as the shadow beneath it. As though the seat was gone and all you were left with was the wooden frame. Here again is a frozen action, or maybe a muffled action is a better fit. Verhagen is employing craft to trick, to fake the would-be sitter out of what would truly be a soft chair, padded with the very thing that is pretending to not exist.

When we spoke on the phone Erika was worried/ joking that this was ‘the tiniest furniture showroom in Toronto’. Meaning that she worried that the work looked too ‘designy’ the furniture was too much just that, furniture. But that sentiment is perfect for *Ha Ha Wall*, furniture showrooms are sort of exactly what Verhagen is getting at. They are the perfect inside/outside space, one that is both intimate and impersonal. You walk through a false depiction of your own interior space surrounded by strangers, purchasing products to furnish their own spaces. Verhagen describes her sculptures as “objects that cross over into real life”.⁵ The lines get blurry, the showroom starts to swirl and then freezes with shadows permanently etched into rugs, and glasses perpetually falling.

Leaks

On Lansdowne facing *Ha Ha Wall* the sounds of traffic from College and Dundas West crash over you on either side, a different kind of soundtrack to the work. You swing open the glass door to Xpace and have that unique auditory experience of moving from one soundscape to another. From dense street noise to calm gallery quiet. And as you walk through the gallery at Xpace you will hear sound bleed in from Verhagen’s window. Soft recorded interior noise recorded at her apartment: talking through a door, an alarm going

⁵ Interview with the Artist, 2019

off in another room, a glass smashing on the ground, and lots of dead air⁶. This sound leak follows you as you walk through the space, bringing a bit of the domestic with you- like the smell of onions on your clothes. But if you walk back towards the window space you'll notice a new leak, the sound of the street worming its way back in, mixing the inside sounds with the outside.

-Lucy Pauker

⁶ Interview with the Artist, 2019