

# Forbes

## 'As Conceptual As It Gets': Fluxus Pioneer John Armleder Discusses His Bi-Coastal Retrospective



*John M. Armleder stands between two of his "dot" paintings, at the Almine Rech Gallery in New York City. Photo: David Alm*

"Intentions -- I never have any, and if I had one, I'd be inclined to forget about it," said the artist John Armleder Tuesday afternoon as he was putting the finishing touches on a retrospective of his work dating back to the early 1960s, opening Wednesday January 18th at the [Almine Rech Gallery](#) on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Rather, the Swiss-born painter, sculptor and performance artist added, each person who experiences his work will experience it in his or her own way, based on who the viewer is, where they live, whatever "baggage" they may bring -- and, of course, wherever the exhibition itself may be.

The show compliments another retrospective of Armleder's work that opened last week at the [David Kordansky Gallery](#) in Los Angeles, whose soaring ceilings and spacious galleries stand in contrast to the far more intimate Almine Rech Gallery. Both provide an ideal setting to experience Armleder's work, but in vastly different ways. Armleder wouldn't want it any other way.

"If you're a composer of music and write a script, and then if someone plays it -- whether the composer himself or someone else -- it becomes a totally different event," he said, glancing at the large, abstract paintings that adorn the walls of the Almine Rech Gallery's main room. "The filter is always language, or culture. So whatever you do, when you do it two minutes later, it's already changed. The world, the context has changed."



*John Armleder, January 13 - February 25, 2017, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, Installation view . Photography: Fredrik Nilsen Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA*

Now 68, Armleder was a pioneering and highly influential member of the Fluxus movement that arose during the 1960s and '70s. Defined precisely by its lack of definition, Fluxus was initially comprised of a loosely affiliated group of interdisciplinary artists such as Joseph Beuys, Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik, and took much of its inspiration from the creative ethos of Dadaists, like Marcel Duchamp, and the experimental composer John Cage. While Armleder upholds the Fluxus philosophy that a given work is never fixed, either during its creation or after it's "done," however, even that label is insufficient to describe the entirety of his career, which privileges viewer subjectivity and eschews authorial control over anyone else's experience of his work.

On display at Almine Rech are several of Armleder's "dot" and "pour" paintings -- works that, taken together, juxtapose maximum control with controlled chaos -- as well as his "puddle" paintings, which all but eliminate control altogether. "I combine different strategies of making paintings," he said of the former two groups, which he often combines as diptychs that contrast their aesthetics, and ultimately undermine their ability to, as Armleder puts it, "make sense." "By putting them together I obliterate, or void, them of their rightful meanings," he said.



*John M. Armleder, Jena, 2016. Mixed media, 225 x 280 cm. Photo courtesy of Almine Rech Gallery and John Armleder*



*John Armleder, While, 2016. Mixed media on canvas, 215 x 150 x 6 cm, at the Almine Rech Gallery. Photo: David Alm*

To create a puddle painting, Armleder buys whatever paints he can find at a paint store, whether their colors match or not, and whether or not their chemical properties are compatible, and literally pours them together into puddles on a canvas. There, the puddles start to dry into bubbles, and the chemicals interact until the bubbles explode. The results surprise, and delight, Armleder as much as anyone else.

The largest, and likely the most whimsical, piece in the New York show will be familiar to anyone who has walked that city's streets: a pair of three-step platforms erratically populated with bunches of flowers, still wrapped in plastic, as if waiting for a buyer to take them home along with a carton of milk. "It just happened," Armleder said. "I walked along and saw what you call a 'bodega,' and saw the flowers, and saw it as a sculpture that I could do." When a reporter asked him what it would look like when it was finished being installed, he replied, "Oh, it's done. This is it."



*Installation view, Almine Rech Gallery, 2017. Photo: David Alm*

Also on display in both the New York and LA shows are several of Armleder's "furniture sculptures," works that combine paintings with found domestic objects -- sofas, chairs, even a set of venetian blinds. "The painting is very often discussed as being a window," Armleder said. "So you have a blind, which is a closed window in a way, but there's no window, no view behind, which is exactly like a painting as a window, because you never look behind the canvas. You have this idea that the view of the world is on the surface of the painting, not through the painting."

Surfaces have long interested Armleder. Turning from the set of blinds, he pointed to a blank white wall in the back of the gallery. "Here again you have a wall painting," he said, describing it as one of his earliest such works, from the early 1970s. "It's just clear varnish, which is shiny."

Indeed, the wall did have a slight sheen, unlike another of his original wall paintings from the same era: "You just paint the wall the color that was originally used to paint the wall, just one more coat," Armleder said of the latter work, clearly amused by its anti-aesthetic implications. He chuckled, adding: "That's as conceptual as it gets."