

Ester Partegàs

samesation



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Rice University Art Gallery

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Today, no matter what country you find yourself in, you may experience a disquieting sense of recurrence. More and more, the effects of globalization are apparent in the spaces that make up our visual landscape – shopping centers, lobbies, airports, fast food restaurants – they are so similar that we no longer see them. In their uniformity and repetition we may experience them as one unvarying place. Likewise, seldom do we pause long enough in these environments to think about why they look the way they do, and to ask, “What are the forces that influence, indeed determine, our environment and numerous aspects of our lifestyles?”

*Ester Partegàs considers the role of thoughtful observer to be an important aspect of her artistic practice. In **samesation**, she explored the imposing presence and encroachment of the marketplace on public spaces. Using her sense of unease in impersonal “corporatized” environments as a departure point, Partegàs distilled ubiquitous elements from the contemporary urban landscape to reveal what is often hidden. The central position of **samesation**’s looming ATM referred to people targeted as consumers and their worth as measured by their purchasing power. Partegàs’ symmetrical design and placement of the objects, her meticulous crafting of them in paper, as well as her use of exaggerated scale, all contributed to the shifting real/surreal quality of the installation.*

*A native of Barcelona, Spain, Ester Partegàs has lived in Brooklyn, New York for five years. From her vantage point of living between two cultures, Partegàs notes that the encroachment of the marketplace on public spaces is taking place abroad as well as in the United States. Sameness, she observes, is probably the most recognizable characteristic of the expanding consumer culture. The corporatization of public spaces has created a homogenous environment that makes it hard to differentiate one place from another. Visitors to the installation commented that **samesation** touched on related issues, such as the effects of technological advances or ecological concerns that reach beyond the urban environment. A biology professor commented that if we continue to treat the earth in a cavalier fashion, indeed we will be “planting” modular trees ordered from a catalogue. Through **samesation**, Ester Partegàs offered a humorous, but nonetheless poignant reflection on how our environment dramatically affects our relationship with the world and ultimately, with ourselves.*

Kimberly Davenport
Director



Excerpts from Conversations Between Ester Partegàs and Kimberly Davenport

Kimberly Davenport: What is the significance of the title *Samesation*?

Ester Partegàs: *Samesation* comes from two words: sameness and sensation. It suggests repetition of the same, a feeling of *déjà vu* or basically, the fast homogenization of our environments. With the title, I wanted to emphasize right from the beginning that the installation is about a sensation, about my experience of certain architectural practices rather than about architecture.

What is the concept of public space behind *Samesation* and why did you decide to work on that?

I wanted to recreate one of those ordinary public places we walk by everyday, because I have been noticing how they are all becoming the same boring, predictable places, very ugly and pretty scary. It seems they are losing a certain individual, cultural, or geographical identity and are incorporating an economical and political one instead. *Samesation* is a public space that no longer has as its main goal providing free, open areas for people to enjoy. *Samesation* represents the aesthetics of the successful economy, and it is still called "public" because it is open to everybody as far as everybody is potentially a consumer.

You were very interested in the Houston urban environment before you came.

Yes, I had never been here before, but I have read a lot about it in architecture and urbanism books. A city with no zoning and gas stations on every single corner! I really wanted to see it; I had to see it! In the books, frequently Houston is cited as an example of what not to do if you are interested in building a community instead of a no-man's-land type of place.



What about the Rice Gallery space itself? How did it affect your ideas?

Although I knew what I wanted to do, the space always helps to define the work. It is unusual for an art gallery to have very high ceilings, marble floors and one huge glass wall. It is more like a midtown New York business building, which made me very happy for the work I had in mind. It certainly helped the work look more clean and distant. When the show was up I especially liked the effect on the glass wall, how the outside garden was reflected on it, so that it looked like a continuation of the interior fake one I had built.

You have done a couple of projects in public places, outside the commercial art gallery. How does this context affect your work?

Since I don't understand the art object as a commodity, one with an economic value, but instead, as an object of social and cultural value, I work with private and public in the same way. In both places I try to make an object that has meaning in the context in which it is placed. When I work outside I have to think of the different characteristics of the place, but it is the same when I am asked to do something for a magazine or in a book format. Every "placement" has its own parameters that I need to bear in mind.

Your previous installations were made out of paper, and even though this work is of a much larger scale, you chose to use it again here – why?

I wanted to make a very fake environment, a place you could not use at all, a place that would somehow feel perishable, one that could not last. Paper has different aspects that I am very interested in: one of them is that nothing that big made out of paper can be real or usable. To enter the installation is to enter an artificial world, an imaginative area. In my work, I want paper to work as a narrative, a fictional device.







Also, paper is the best material for me to represent our culture, which is so much invested in the ephemeral and the perishable. And very important too, I like paper as a common ordinary material. It is not a noble material like iron or marble or technology, so that people don't feel intimidated by it and tend to approach it easily. I don't want to make art that intimidates or imposes; I want to attract and engage.

Although *Samesation* has the poignant serious look of the corporate business world, it's also very playful and humorous.

Yes, I think people noticed how *Samesation* is purposefully designed in such a simple way that it is almost a mockery of the corporate aesthetic. *Samesation* is symmetrically divided and it is all modular. The installation can be divided from the middle into fourths or eighths and be repeated endlessly without losing its appearance. It can be an "order by catalogue" product: 'Can I order 8 modules of *Samesation* for my backyard?' Above all, the modules collapse. The little branches come apart and fit inside the next bigger branches, and these branches go inside the trunk; 2 ATM awnings go inside 2 ATM machines, etc. Everything folds and becomes flat, like IKEA furniture. This extreme simplicity certainly makes fun of the idea that in life, things cannot be as easy as ordering 'a plant with 8 rounded leaves of the size #12.'

You have worked on a very small scale in some of your previous installations; here the objects are slightly larger than life.

I increased the scale in *Samesation* (1.3 to life-size) for 2 reasons: one was to make you feel smaller, and the other was to make you feel awkward. Historically, scale has been used to express power – the one who is bigger has the power! I'm sure you've walked into buildings with huge columns and big steps, felt very insignificant, and thought, 'Gee, I have to walk up there!' The ancient Romans and Greeks, as well as the Nazis used scale that way, and it is still used for similar purposes in architecture all the time. I wanted to incorporate this effect in a subtle way. I placed the 'way too big' ATM machine in the middle of the space so that people walk around it and understand it to be a power structure, a phallic structure, basically. The awkward effect comes from my personal experience of corporate public plazas. For example, even if you wanted to, you could not sit on the round benches of *Samesation* because they go right up to above your hip. With this, I was imitating the bothersome strategy of urban furniture because it is probably not meant to be comfortable, and sometimes not even meant to be used at all.

It seems like *Samesation* embodies a new, not particularly desirable direction that our lives are taking.

If we consider that what makes life beautiful and free and exciting is to have options and different possibilities, *Samesation* is about how our options in life are being cut off. It seems there is one type of aesthetic and lifestyle that is being imposed rapidly all over, from the environment to the food, from your job to your free time. I want to be able to choose for myself what I eat as well as how and where.

Oh yes, like the street corner here where there's a Starbucks on the left, and another Starbucks directly across the street on the right corner!

Yes, I saw it and I couldn't believe my eyes. I don't want to reach that point in this world. I don't want to confuse the concept of coffee or the idea of coffee with a brand of coffee, because for me, coffee is much more and so many other things. Everything in the world is being branded and reduced; companies try to sell you McDonald's or Burger King, Pepsi or Coke as the broadest spectrum of options you can choose. All this is becoming so boring, dangerous and fascist!

Would you say that with your work you are trying to change any behavior, or make people think about consumerism?

I am not trying to make the viewer think about consumerism. I am trying to encourage people to practice the exercise of thinking. It's hard to measure the efficacy of art in a divided world that wants clear, practical results for everything. Division produces alienation, and alienation produces money, but it doesn't make the world richer, more fulfilling or creative. With my work I want to connect things, show how things are related and how complex they are. I don't want to direct people's thinking, but instead, open up the possibility of a dialogue. I just want to provide material to think upon.





Dislocated by Hilary Wilder



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In "Junkspace," Rem Koolhaas' contribution to the Spring 2002 issue of *October*, the author describes in broad, at times metaphorical terms, the forces responsible for what he apparently perceives to be a global cultural crisis; he describes Junkspace as "the body double of space, a territory of impaired vision, limited expectation, reduced earnestness."¹ A result of rampant growth in practically all areas of human consumption, a collapsing of visual vocabularies as well as spoken language, and the uniformity and subsequent deadening of both public and private locations, Junkspace is as much a general description of a blurry architectural catastrophe as it is a qualification of specific situations.

Ester Partegàs' installation *Samesation*, while addressing the kind of impersonal and redundant environment that is dissected in Koolhaas' essay, avoids overt evaluation in favor of a fairly straightforward formal re-enactment. Created entirely out of matboard and assembled in a modular fashion that allows each element to be easily disassembled, folded and transported, the installation is a collapsible replica of a plaza/airport/lobby cash machine in its characteristic locale – a consumer place-type that, as a result of its ubiquity and its singularity of purpose, paradoxically seems both invisible and oddly conspicuous. The oversized ATM is flanked by trees, plants, and round benches, each constructed from similar, angular planes and shapes; like a liposuctioned and loofah-ed actress portraying an average-looking person "in a story based on real-life events," *Samesation* is a prettier, streamlined, inauthentic

¹ Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace;" *October*, no. 100 (2002): pp. 175-190.

version of a quotidian subject. While the work at first appears perplexingly impartial regarding the consumer spaces it represents and their impact on the increasingly slippery notion of location, *Samesation's* strength ultimately lies in its inherent contradictions: it is approachable but austere, unthreatening yet dreadful, an individual, handcrafted version of the commercial and the mundane. The exaggerated size of the elements in the installation (roughly 1.3:1) could be construed as a less-than-subtle metaphor for the oppression of individuals by their surroundings or by commerce itself, but their scale also creates a theatrical, funhouse atmosphere. The trees and plants, essentially reduced to the visual terms of the ATM, are both beautiful and unapologetically fake, underscoring our confused relationship to the already ambiguous concept of artificiality.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Samesation* is its link to new models for discrete consumer and social environments. The parceling out of specific areas for separate functions has been hardwired into our "social imaginary" of the future, and, as we become more and more acclimated to dedicated spaces such as the gated community, the mall, the gym, and the cinema multiplex, the terminology that corresponds with this specificity has become a significant component in marketing tactics (e.g., Sony PlayStation, ESPN's SportsZone, Powerbar's "Energy Stations"). As much as this language connotes a singularity of action and purpose, it also reflects a seriousness of that purpose, and the soft sell and hard aesthetics of *Samesation* evoke a suspicion of the emphasis our culture places on "taking care of business." The installation elicits questions regarding individual power and varying degrees of complacency in the context of a society that is centered increasingly around the efficiency – and, for some, the comfort – of franchise.

Partegàs is not alone in her consideration of current approaches to the development of public and commercial spaces; many other artists have recently exhibited work that seems to address a shift in our understanding of location and an unease about the diminishing of both urban centers and distinct architectural modes. That several artists are concurrently addressing these themes may be indicative of more widespread concerns regarding commercial development strategies and a nostalgia for individuation and idiosyncrasy, but, interestingly, their observations are manifested in different ways: while many engage in a critique of their subjects, some, including Partegàs, take a more neutral position. Although the apprehension expressed by

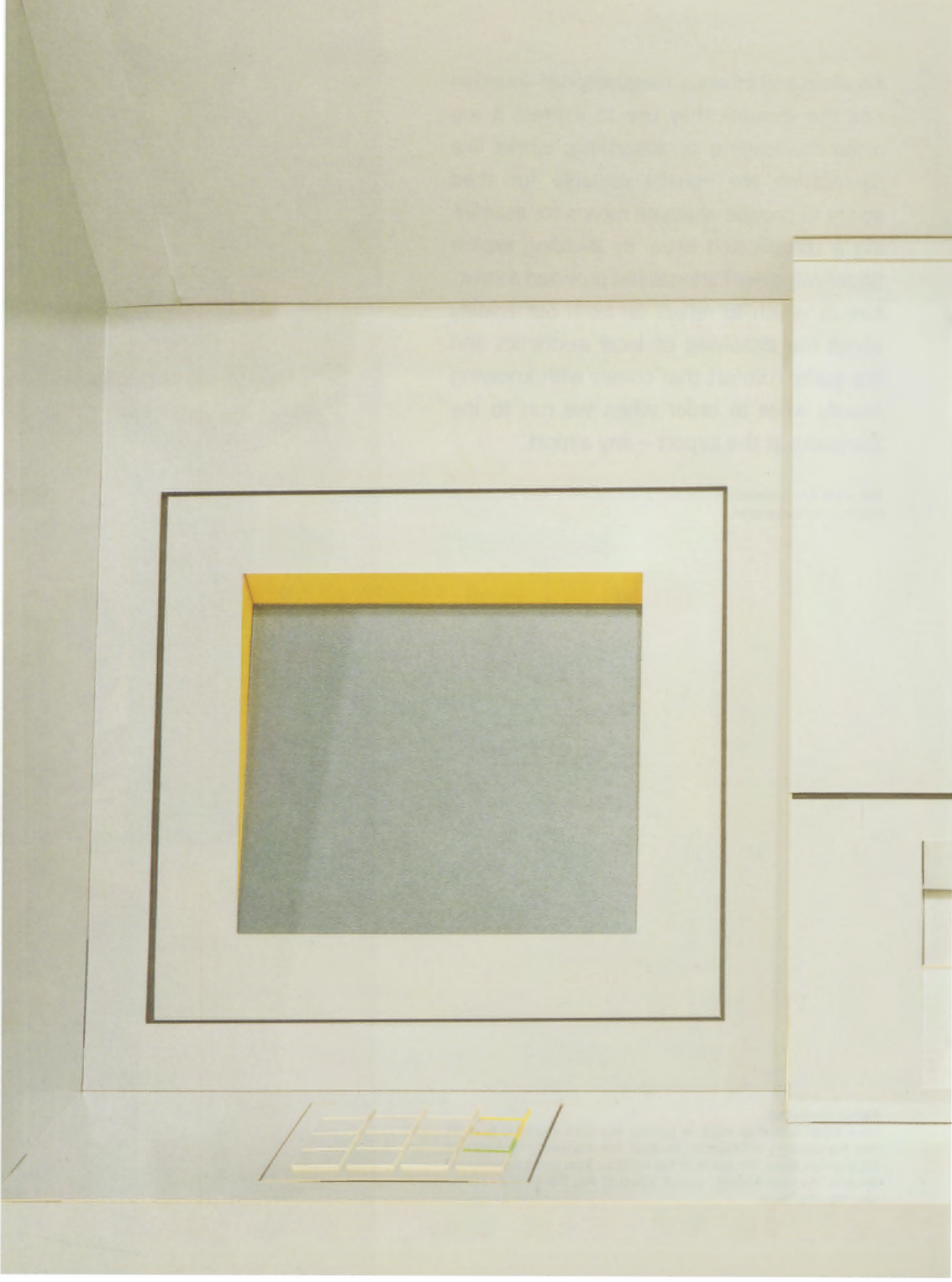
Koolhaas and others is inarguably well-founded and the vehicles they use to express it are often challenging or absorbing, works like *Samesation* are equally valuable for their ability to provide alternate means for examining a complicated issue. By avoiding explicit finger-wagging, Partegàs has provided a structure in which to reflect on both our anxiety about the dissolving of local aesthetics and the guilty comfort that comes with knowing exactly what to order when we run to the Starbucks at the airport – any airport.

This article first appeared on Glasstire, a website about Texas visual art at <http://www.glasstire.com/>.

About the Author

Hilary Wilder earned an M.F.A. in painting and video and an M.A. in Art from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is presently co-director of the artist-run space, the Bower, in San Antonio, Texas and a writer-in-residence in The Core Program, Glassell School of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas.





About the Artist

Ester Partegàs was born in La Garriga, near Barcelona, Spain, and currently resides in Brooklyn, New York. She received a B.A. in Fine Arts from the University of Barcelona and a Postgraduate in Multimedia Art from the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. Solo shows include *Yo Recuerdo*, Montenmedio Arte Contemporáneo in Cadiz, Spain (2003); *to from from at across to in from. The centerless feeling* at De Chiara Gallery, NY (2001) and Helga de Alvear Gallery in Madrid, Spain (2001). Group exhibitions include *Outer City/Inner Space* at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York (2002); *Temporary Residents*, at MetroTech Center/Public Art Fund, Brooklyn, NY (2001) and *Brooklyn!* Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, Lake Worth, FL (2001).

Ester Partegàs, *Samesation*, 2002
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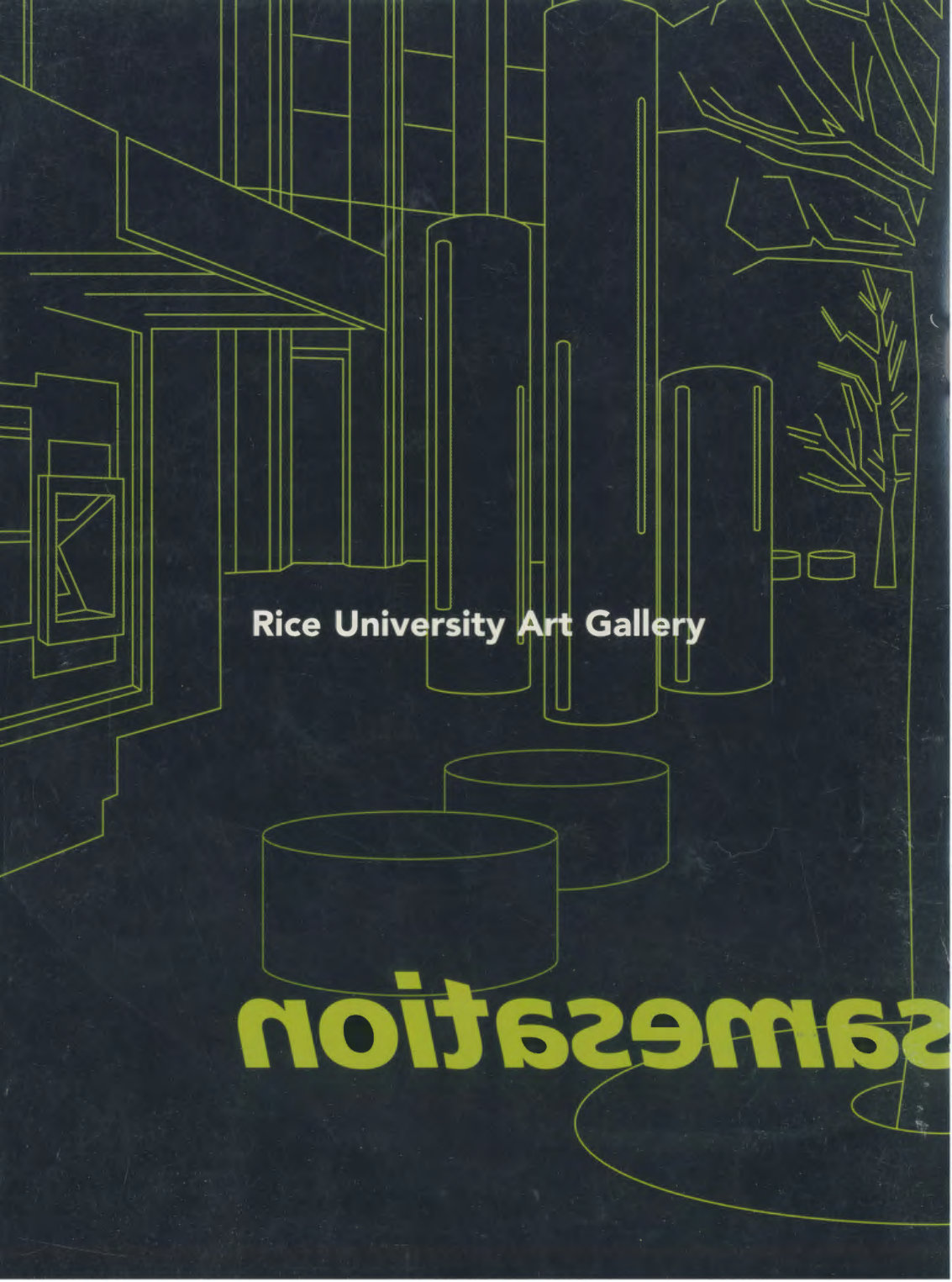
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