Door}, 1983-84
Richard Artschwager once said, "I am making objects for non-use...by killing off the use part, non-use aspects are allowed living space, breathing space." Door, the new wall sculpture by Artschwager that is the focus of the current MATRIX exhibition, consists of what appears to be a full-scale wood door and frame placed against the gallery wall and an adjacent brace-shaped wood relief sculpture that is nearly the same height. Although all of Artschwager's objects either reproduce architectural elements (doors, windows) or resemble furniture (tables, chairs), they are always altered in form and context. Although outfitted with an elegant, blown-glass knob, the door is decidedly non-functional—it can never be opened. In addition, the door is oddly proportioned (too wide for its height), and the exaggeratedly large painted-on wood grain pattern looks blatantly artificial. Artschwager calls this process of alteration "warping." By covering a wood surface with an imitation of wood (in paint or, in other words, with a veneer of wood-grain-patterned Formica), he is, as he put it in a recent conversation, "painting what is already there in the place where it is." Artschwager in this way investigates the distinction between a real door and the stylization of a door, or between "real-life" and the art object.

Artschwager also combined furniture-like objects with a language sign in Chair Table (1980)—this time using an enlarged wood exclamation point suspended over the table. In both Chair Table and Door, he transforms a typographic mark into an outsized object while turning pieces of furniture into painterly objects by adding the surface illusion of painted or Formica wood grain. Normally, a brace ( ) is used to combine two words or items that are to be considered together. In his notes, Artschwager calls this sign a bracket ( ), a mark used in writing and printing to enclose part of a text. (Of course, both brackets and braces have several other meanings that have to do with carpentry and architecture.) Artschwager, like the Belgian Surrealist painter René Magritte before him, is questioning the relationship between the written symbol and the art object. Magritte often combined written and pictorial signs in his paintings. In his famous Ceci n'est pas une pipe ("This is not a pipe"), the phrase appears along with a realistic rendering of a pipe, reminding the viewer that a painting is not equivalent to the object it portrays.

In the MATRIX exhibition, we are able to learn how Artschwager developed the final form of Door by studying his preparatory notes, drawings and three-dimensional sketches, which he calls "fragments,"—materials he rarely exhibits. There are, for example, several drawings of hutchs in the sketchbook. Eventually, the hutch-shape evolved into a door and frame. The brace shape may have been inspired by the "blop," a lozenge-shaped oval form that became Artschwager's trademark in the conceptual pieces he made in the late 1960s and 70s. From the sketchbook we learn that at various times Artschwager considered including in the piece a basket, a chair, a table and several punctuation marks (a question mark, an exclamation point and period). Artschwager suggests multiple interpretations of the elements of Door in his notes. He sees the brace shape as an "art novo" decorative handle on one page; on another page it becomes a whale's tail. The wood grain design reminds him of mountains in Chinese paintings as well as the northern lights. (But, as he writes in his sketchbook, "There is a big difference between imagining a mountain and a piece of wood standing vertical.")

Though other contemporary artists have made furniture-related sculpture—e.g., Scott Burton (MATRIX 32), Joel Shapiro, Siah Armajani—Artschwager is closer in spirit to an earlier twentieth century artist, Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp also explored the evocative potential of doors and windows. In one of his altered "Readymades," he covered the glass panes of a French window with black leather, thus not only negating its function, but transforming it into a Fresh Widow.

Richard Artschwager's art has always resisted categorization. He was included in Primary Structures in 1966, the first major exhibition of what became known as Minimal sculpture, but since his geometric constructions referred to domestic furnishings they did not fit comfortably into a movement devoted to nonreferential, reductive forms. Artschwager was also a frequent participant in Pop Art exhibitions of the time, but his grisaille paintings (done in tones of grey) and furniture-like objects did not have the slick look of commercial advertising that characterized the Pop movement. In the 1970s Artschwager was often grouped with the Photorealists because the images in his paintings were derived from photographs. Rather than being faithful recreations of the photograph, however, Artschwager's images were distorted by the textured celotex board on which they were painted. Artschwager's work is really a fusion between abstraction and realism. Like Duchamp, Artschwager seems to take irreverent delight in these confusions. By refusing to put himself in one camp or another, he is able to chart his own maverick course.

Artschwager was born in 1923 in Washington, D.C. He received a degree in biology and chemistry from Cornell University in 1948, after serving as a soldier in World War II, and moved to New York in 1950 to study painting with French emigre artist, Amedée Ozenfant. Finding himself at a stylistic impasse in his own work, Artschwager devoted his time to making real furniture during the fifties. When a fire destroyed his loft factory in 1958, he again began to make art, drawing his vocabulary of forms and skill as a craftsman from his years of professional cabinetry. Artschwager was the subject of a travelling retrospective exhibition in 1979-80, and he will be having a large exhibit of his works at the Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland, this winter.

Constance Lewallen
Works in MATRIX:

Door }, 1983-84, painted wood and glass in two pieces—left, 81-1/4" x 65" x 9-3/4"; right, 74-3/4" x 25" x 1-1/2"; artist's sketchbook and miscellaneous two- and three-dimensional studies. Lent by the artist; courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, NY.

Selected one-person exhibitions:


Selected group exhibitions:


Selected bibliography about Artschwager (see also catalogues under exhibitions):


MATRIX is supported in part by a grant by the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.