

Wide Audience

Gaëlle Pigasse

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curated by
Vers Dor, Stefan Lux,
and Roelien van der Sar

Ersatz und Teile

Freilager-Platz 1

4142 Münchenstein, Switzerland

Gaëlle Pigasse (*1991 in Montreal, Canada) is a Paris-based artist. After initially studying photography at the International Center of Photography in New York, Pigasse shifted to a fine art practice. Her work draws from an increasingly evolving archive of found objects, which she uses as conduits for fictions that probe the contemporary condition. Combining her interests in narration, cities, and public space, Pigasse isolates mundane objects or moments and renews them with artistic potential, unveiling the cultural history and symbolism embedded in their surface.

Roelien van der Sar: Hi Elle, thanks for taking the time to do this, and even more thanks for presenting this exhibition with us.

Gaëlle Pigasse: Thank you for inviting me.

R: Although the exhibition features only a single work, the show's title and the work's title don't coincide. In fact, the piece itself remains untitled. What led to this decision?

G: I don't see them as interchangeable. The work stays untitled because I don't want to pin it down with language. Titles can close things too quickly. I've kept the works in this series anonymous for that reason. The exhibition title works differently. It doesn't just name the object. It includes the room, the situation, the people who might show up. *Wide Audience* is a bit ironic. The work is quite hermetic. Not very welcoming at first glance. But the title also acts like an address. Almost like calling out to someone who may or may not be there yet.

R: So the title addresses the exhibition situation rather than the object itself.

G: Yes. At least that's how I think about it. Of course people will read other layers into it.

R: You previously presented the work at Leroy's in Los Angeles, in a different configuration. The title of that show was "Closed," which almost sounds like the opposite of "Wide Audience." There seems to be a tension between the two titles. Could you speak about that, and maybe explain what "Closed" was?

G: Sure. *Closed* was a site-specific installation built from private documents I salvaged from a dumpster outside the gallery. A small archive someone had clearly meant to discard. From that point on I began working almost exclusively with this find. I realized that bringing those materials back from the dead and incorporating them in "Wide Audience" created a bit of friction. They were meant to disappear. Now they circulate again. Handling someone else's paperwork is strangely intimate. Almost uncomfortable. In the digital age we talk about data theft like it's an industry. Very abstract. But when you physically sift through someone's letters or prescriptions, it feels different. More... comment dire... visceral. I'm interested in that thin line. I don't really see another way to make this work. In "Wide Audience" one document is installed face down. At first it just looks like a crumpled sheet of paper. But if you look carefully from the side, you notice it's a medical prescription. The patient's name is there. The doctor. Addresses. Everything. It's not visible in the photo documentation, so you can only make use of the information if you engage with it in person, you need to close the distance. I make sure that the viewer has to do some work to get to this info. So the ethical question shifts a little. I feel it, but I pass it on to the viewer. They have to

decide how far they want to go. Whether it's okay to read it. Whether it's okay to invent a story around it. Interpretation becomes an ethical act. Personally I couldn't resist inventing stories. The documents triggered them immediately. I started imagining who these people were. The addresses gave them names and neighborhoods. None of that appears directly in the works, but they couldn't have come to be any other way. I'm basically reframing these papers and trying to communicate with fictional versions of their owners. This is probably a long and winding answer...

R: No, please go on. Those are usually the most insightful ones.

G: During my 2024 residency at Quinn Emanuel in LA I developed a routine. I took long walks every morning through the Arts District. Just wandering around before things opened. Galleries next to coffee shops, restaurants, offices, etc. When you look through the windows you notice something strange. The galleries have paintings on the walls, of course. But so do the coffee shops. For different reasons, obviously, but still, sometimes the difference feels small. The painting in the gallery says: "Hey, we're paintings, so this is an art gallery." And the coffee shops have coffee and paintings, they say: "Hey, we have coffee, but we have the right look." The coffee shop actually reinforces the perception of the gallery by mirroring it. In both cases, art is performing "art" to tell you where you are, making the work feel like a secondary detail to the lifestyle it's selling. Walking around in the district every day I became aware of my distance and detachment from the place. I couldn't afford most of these spaces anyway. And often I didn't even care what they were selling. That includes the galleries. So I became what Americans call a window shopper. Someone with very little buying

power looking at the world through a transparent barrier. So close but so far. Oddly enough that position felt powerful. You watch everything from the outside. You judge freely. Of course it's also a bit cynical. The gentrification was impossible to ignore. The political situation at the time didn't help either. My residency basically turned into walking in the morning and resting in the afternoon. Thinking about what I had seen.

R: That sounds almost like a working method.

G: It is. I like sitting inside the mundane until something cracks open. Then I bring that crack into the exhibition. At some point I became obsessed with how artworks appear in cartoons. It started with Ad Reinhardt's famous panels, but then I drifted into animation. I began watching old Warner Bros. cartoons. I wanted to see if there were episodes set in museums. And you notice something quickly: art in cartoons is rarely meaningful. It's just valuable and expensive. The story assumes that, but it never explains why.

R: Why cartoons?

G: It's a combination of reasons. First, the look of them. If you watch cartoons made before the 70s, the aesthetics are incredibly modernist or rather a certain kind of abstract modernism: flat colors, hard shapes and geometric compositions. It's basically mid-century design in motion. So I started wondering how this language—geometric abstraction, modernist design—ended up on children's television. Fairy tales used to shape how children imagined the world. Now cartoons do that job. I would argue they form a basic grammar for how many people understand culture and art. The way cartoons treat modern art is with suspicion while the

cartoons itself borrow heavily from their visual philosophy. Just look at internet memes which are essentially contemporary art for the masses. Half of them come from cartoons. The images are already in our heads. It's not just nostalgia. Something deeper is going on. We remember entire *Sponge-Bob* episodes without trying. In a strange way they've replaced older cultural epics. They function like the *Iliad*, but in fragments. So I started asking myself: how much of modernist visual language slipped into the subconscious that way? What has this visual component produced in our impressionable mind?

R: What did you find?

G: That cartoonists are incredibly efficient. When they need to show "modern art," they reduce it to the simplest possible form. A few triangles. A floating rectangle. Maybe a line cutting through the canvas. It's exaggerated, almost silly. But you recognize it instantly. In "*The Pink Panther*," which I cherish from my childhood, for example, you see these geometric paintings where the shapes spill out of the frame. Completely over the top, but in a way it's the most accurate summary of geometric abstraction I've seen. And that's when I realized something: cartoonists understood the visual code of modern art very well. Probably better than many artists. They didn't need theory. They just needed the sign. And my walks in the Arts District started to feel similar. Looking through shop windows. Paintings reduced to rectangles on walls. At some point everything becomes a rectangle. A canvas. A menu board. A sheet of paper. That's basically where the red rectangle in untitled [for "*Wide Audience*"] comes from.

R: I often think of your works as continuations of one an-

other. Materials return. Installations are dismantled and re-appear elsewhere. "*Wide Audience*" almost feels like a sprout growing out of "*Closed*." Maybe not linearly, but there's a clear connection. Could you return to how the materials functioned in "*Closed*"?

G: Yes. That exhibition was very tied to the space. Leroy's used to be a Vietnamese restaurant, it's an amazing space to exhibit in. You still feel it immediately. There's a kitchen smell. Bamboo wallpaper in the dining room. The whole place carries its past. The title "*Closed*" referred quite literally to the restaurant closing before it got a second life as an art space. But also to a broader feeling I had while being there. So many places felt closed. Accessible only to certain people. Skid Row is just around the corner, which adds another layer. Most of the show came straight from the building's dumpster. Menus, invoices, emails. Things like that. The red menu board was there too—the same material you see in "*Wide Audience*." But I didn't use it then. I wanted the show to embody what I felt like. So in the end I made the space inaccessible. I installed documents with the backside facing the street directly onto the storefront windows of the restaurant... From the outside it looked a bit like a shop under renovation. The windows were covered, but not completely. Small gaps remained, so people could peek inside. The opening happened right there, on the sidewalk. People on the street couldn't really enter the exhibition. They could only look through the cracks. Meanwhile we were inside making cocktails in the kitchen and bringing them out to the front. It was a bit absurd. Ian, who runs the space, had just installed a bar for the gallery. And for this show I immediately closed it again. Hahaha. Jessie from Quinn Emanuel actually pointed out how strange that situation was. From the street it almost looked like a private party happening behind

boarded windows. If you're not in on it, it must have been really hard to comprehend what was going on. People passing by could sense it was an event of sorts, but they weren't quite part of it.

R: Which almost inverts the idea of a wide audience.

G: Yes. "Closed" was exclusion staged quite literally.

R: And one of these documents that covered the window became untitled in "Wide Audience."

G: In untitled [for "Wide Audience"] I wanted to focus on one particular document. This prescription is like a stand-in for the person. And if you happen to recognize the drug, you can already start guessing things about the person. Their age, maybe their condition. The fiction begins immediately. But it's also a stand-in for their network, doctors, insurance, drug companies. So the paper becomes a kind of relay point. In that sense it already speaks to a "wide audience," even if only a few people are meant to read it. The prescription circulates widely, but only within a controlled circuit. Outside of that circuit they are almost unreadable. Or at least you feel that you shouldn't read them. That tension interested me. The space at Ersatz und Teile makes this even clearer. It sits at the very bottom of the staircase in this eight-story high-rise. It's basically the start—or the end—of the stairs, depending on how you look at it. Most people take the elevator. They pass the staircase without thinking about it. And even if they use the stairs, they rarely end up at that lowest point. So the exhibition already begins with a kind of filtering. The room itself is also strange. From one angle it almost looks like a perfect white cube. Very clean. Very gallery-like. But if in totality it's not a proper room at all, more so a left-

over piece of architecture. You feel that immediately in your body. The proportions are slightly wrong. The space feels compressed. And that mirrors the document quite well. Untitled [for "Wide Audience"] also looks very neutral at first. Just a piece of paper. But behind it there's a whole network of lives, institutions, and decisions. So both the work and the space operate a bit like that. Small surfaces that open onto something much larger.

R: If you follow that logic a bit further, it might even implicate the viewer directly. If you happen to be part of the same insurance system, then—technically speaking—an almost immeasurably small fraction of your own money may have gone toward this person's medication.

G: Yeah, that's an interesting point. Private and public concerns are tethered to one another. That's what an audience is: just a loose network of private people who happen to intersect in the public.

R: Listening to you, what strikes me is that your practice doesn't revolve around a fixed concept. The meaning seems to shift with each context. Even the way you talk about the work keeps things open.

G: I think art is a strange kind of object. It exists somewhere, but its function isn't fixed. Most things come with instructions. Art doesn't. Meaning depends on the person looking. Of course art still performs functions. Even when it claims to be useless. In cartoons an abstract painting simply signals "this is modern art." In a café it might signal taste. So the cliché that art has no purpose isn't quite right. Its purposes just keep changing.

R: Kant might say beauty has Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck—purposiveness without purpose.

G: Yes. That tension is very useful.

R: And maybe necessary if you want to speak to a “wide audience.”

G: Exactly. Serious ideas need a bit of looseness. Otherwise nobody stays. I like that balance, the comic and the serious living next to each other, and intermingling.

R: I think that’s a good note to end on. Thank you for the conversation.

G: Thank you.

Work:

**Gaëlle Pigasse, untitled, 2025,
cardboard, private document,
55 x 30 cm**