

For immediate release

DOUG WHEELER

January 17 – February 25, 2012



DOUG WHEELER

Untitled – Environmental Light Installation, 1969

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photograph by Doug Christmas; courtesy of the artist.

David Zwirner is pleased to present an ambitious new work by American artist Doug Wheeler (b. 1939), whose large-scale installations have rarely been seen in the United States. Built within the gallery's 519 West 19th Street space, Wheeler's *SA MI 75 DZ NY 12* (2012) explores the materiality of light while emphasizing the viewer's physical experience of infinite space. The exhibition marks the first presentation of an "infinity environment" by the artist in New York.

As a pioneer of the so-called "Light and Space" movement that flourished in Southern California in the 1960s and 1970s, Wheeler's prolific and groundbreaking body of work encompasses drawing, painting, and installations that are characterized by a singular

experimentation with the perception and experience of space, volume, and light. Raised in the high desert of Arizona, Wheeler began his career as a painter in the early 1960s while studying at the Chouinard Art Institute (now the California Institute of the Arts) in Los Angeles.

Wheeler's early white canvases incorporated abstract imagery that created a spatial dynamic and activated the central void of the painting's field. His practice quickly developed into the environmental aesthetic for which he is presently best known. In 1965, the artist made a transitional work in which he over-sprayed a canvas with subtle variations of white and installed neon tubes inside the back of the frame. Installed with a white floor, the painting appeared to float on the wall. Wheeler subsequently abandoned canvas altogether with a body of innovative, radiant works known as "fabricated light paintings" in which he applied lacquer to Plexiglas boxes that were illuminated from within by neon tubing. These "paintings" were followed by his "light encasements," which consist of large squares of painted vacuum-formed plastic with neon light embedded along the inside edges. Intended to be installed in a pristine white room with coved angles, these works dematerialize and create an immersive and spatially ambiguous environment that absorbs the viewer in the subtle construction of pure space. According to critic and curator John Coplans, who organized Wheeler's first solo exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1968, Wheeler's "primary aim as [an artist] is to reshape or change the spectator's perception of the seen world. In short, [his] medium is not light or new materials or technology, but perception."¹

In 1969, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Wheeler realized his first environmental installation outside of his studio—a "light wall"—using a single row of daylight neon light embedded inside a viewing aperture that encompassed the entire dimension of the gallery wall within an enclosed space. He stretched a nylon scrim to create a luminous "ceiling" that captured and reflected light and appeared to float above the room. Of this

(continue to next page)

type of work, Wheeler has said, "I wanted to effect a dematerialization so that I could deal with the dynamics of the particular space. It was a *real* space—not illusory—it was a cloud of light in constant flux. That molecular mist is the most important thing I do. It comes out of my way of seeing from living in Arizona—and the constant awareness of the landscape and the clouds."²

In subsequent exhibitions, Wheeler continued to explore similar effects by manipulating architecture with neon and fluorescent lighting, creating entire luminous rooms in which the viewer experienced the sensation of entering an infinite void. In 1975, for a solo exhibition at the Salvatore Ala Gallery, Milan, Wheeler executed the first of his "infinity environments" by creating an expansive all-white room that simulated dawn, day, and dusk in a continual succession. Wheeler created similar environments at only two other venues: the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1983), and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (2000). As the fourth of the artist's "infinity environments," the installation at David Zwirner will similarly replicate the transition from day to night.

Wheeler's first solo exhibitions were held at the Pasadena Art Museum (1968), Ace Gallery, Venice, California (1969), and Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf (1970). His work was included in a number of important exhibitions in the 1970s and 1980s, including *Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Doug Wheeler* (Tate Gallery, London, 1970); *Rooms* (PS1, New York, 1976); *Ambiente Arte* (Venice Biennale, 1976); and *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1986), among others. More recently, Wheeler's work was presented in *Selections from the Collection of Helga and Walther Lauffs* (Zwirner & Wirth/David Zwirner, 2008); *Time & Place: Los Angeles 1957-1968* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2008-2009); and *Primary Atmospheres: Works from California 1960-1970* (David Zwirner, 2010). In 2008, Wheeler created an ice environment as part of his overall design for "*Upside Down: les Arctiques*," an exhibition of Eskimo and Inuit art at Musée du Quai Branly, Paris. He is currently featured in the exhibition *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, as part of the Getty Research Institute's *Pacific Standard Time* initiative. Work by the artist is held in major museum collections, including the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Wheeler lives and works in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Los Angeles.

On the occasion of the exhibition, David Zwirner will publish the first extensive monograph devoted to the artist's work in collaboration with Steidl, Göttingen. The publication will contain rare archival documentation as well as new scholarship on the artist by Germano Celant.

Notes

1 John Coplans, *Doug Wheeler*. Exh. bro. (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1968), n.p.

2 Doug Wheeler, cited in Jan Butterfield, "Douglas Wheeler," *The Art of Light and Space* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), p. 121.