

GREENE NAFTALI

**(L.A. in London)
John Knight
at Cabinet
September 16–
October 29, 2022**

In 2013, John Knight carefully removed the weather-beaten wooden cladding from the exterior walls of Galerie Neu, located within a hodgepodge former industrial building in Berlin due for demolition. The panels were then transported to the gallery's new project space in an elegant nineteenth-century apartment building, where they hung like oversized wainscoting around the internal perimeter. Adjustments made them fit snugly around the door frames and windowsills—neat cutouts for the light switches and power outlets. With this deceptively simple gesture, Knight drew attention to the sites and systems manifesting in the German capital at the time. The piece spoke to a rapidly changing city experiencing an influx of galleries, an exponential increase in housing prices, and changes to working conditions for artists.

Titled *Bohemian Grove* (2013), the artwork was recently in its fourth and final iteration at London's Cabinet gallery. Much like a guest book, the installation is marked each time it's displayed, simultaneously growing and diminishing with time. And as was the case with its first display, each space it's shown in adds context to the work. In 2014, it was included in a group show at the blue-chip Gladstone Gallery in New York, where further incisions

were made in the sheet material and the gallery's location within the former industrial zones of Chelsea was placed under scrutiny. In 2017, the work traveled to Belgium's Museum Cultuur Strombeek Gent (the only time the work has been installed in a public institution), carrying the attendant context of the museum's relationship to larger economic fluctuations.

For its final outing at Cabinet this fall, *Bohemian Grove* appeared in its most fragmented state yet. The panels were cracked and splintered at their extremities, battered not only from the Berlin weather but from the subsequent shifts in climate as they moved repeatedly from storage to transit to gallery. Punctured with specters of its previous displays (an outline in the shape of an upside-down envelope, where a gallery's sign was once positioned, or the recognizable perimeter of a window trim), new cuts accommodated Cabinet's antithetical touchscreen climate and window controls. Old cutouts left the gallery walls exposed, the bright white masonry dissociated with the tired brown and gray wood. Some parts of the wood were weathered and discolored; others cracked like bark on a tree, its surface shifting in a moiré pattern of decomposition.

Exhibited with few didactics, Knight's work is sometimes criticized for being impenetrable. Yet the paucity of *Bohemian Grove* allows for context and broader ideas to shift into view. Slowly dematerializing each time it's shown, it recalls Michael Asher's 1979 intervention for the MCA Chicago, in which

he removed aluminum panels from the building's exterior and installed them inside the building's storefront-like windows. Grappling with the idea that the MCA's growing art collection was largely out of view and inaccessible to the public, when Asher's work wasn't on display inside the museum, the panels were reinstalled on the exterior of the building. Paradoxically, the work's public storage also subjected it to the elements outside, and thus, its slow decay. Alongside artists like Daniel Buren and Dan Graham, Asher and Knight were progenitors of an ultra-conceptual movement in the late 1960s, following the Light and Space and minimalist movements, in which the art object itself started to become obsolete. These artists, and others, no longer required studios as sites of material production, emphasizing ideas over objects. Many took to addressing the ideologies of constructed spaces where they were invited to exhibit—institutional critique's nascence.

Cabinet opened its new custom-built space in 2016 after operating from a former office block in East London for a number of years. The idiosyncratic, freestanding, 12-sided, five-story building is located on the former grounds of the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens—an eighteenth-century outdoor entertainment space featuring what historians call "commercialized leisure."¹ Places of dancing, eating, and drinking, these exclusive sites welcomed only certain clientele, as they required a paid ticket for entry. Built at Vauxhall's original site, Cabinet's space may feel equally as exclusive to the

uninitiated. Because he predominantly works site-specifically, this context is no doubt important to Knight. His inferred critique of the gallery's location might be found in the fact that his work is tricky to buy or sell, negating the "commercialized leisure" of the art market and suggesting a more complex conclusion.

Further insight can be offered by Knight's title, *Bohemian Grove*, which references a 2,700-acre campground in the Californian redwoods where the highly secretive and powerful male-only "Bohemian Club" meets annually. The gathering, which has been convening for over 150 years, is ostensibly an opportunity to "get back to nature," yet it's also purported to be the location for high-level political decisions and business deals. With this detail, Knight offers his scant context: The gallery, the gardens, and the grove can all be read as environments for the bourgeois.

The art world, much like the grove and the limited-access pleasure gardens, is an exclusive realm, welcoming of and accessible to few. Knight's recent installation acts as a key to these broader ideas, as it has for each of its previous installments. By bringing something that was outside—and widely accessible to a public—inside, to be viewed by a more exclusive and initiated audience, this work imbues waste material with powerful and urgent dialogues that question the very systems that support it.

1. Danielle Thom, "Welcome to Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens," Museum of London, last updated October 24, 2017, <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/vauxhall-pleasure-gardens>.

Rosa Tyhurst



John Knight, *Bohemian Grove* (installation views) (2022).
Images courtesy of the artist and Cabinet, London.
Photos: Mark Blower.