20 JAHRE
TEXTE ZUR KUNST

März 2011 21. Jahrgang Heft 81
€ 15,- [D] / SFr 25,-
G 10572

WO STEHST DU, KOLLEGE?

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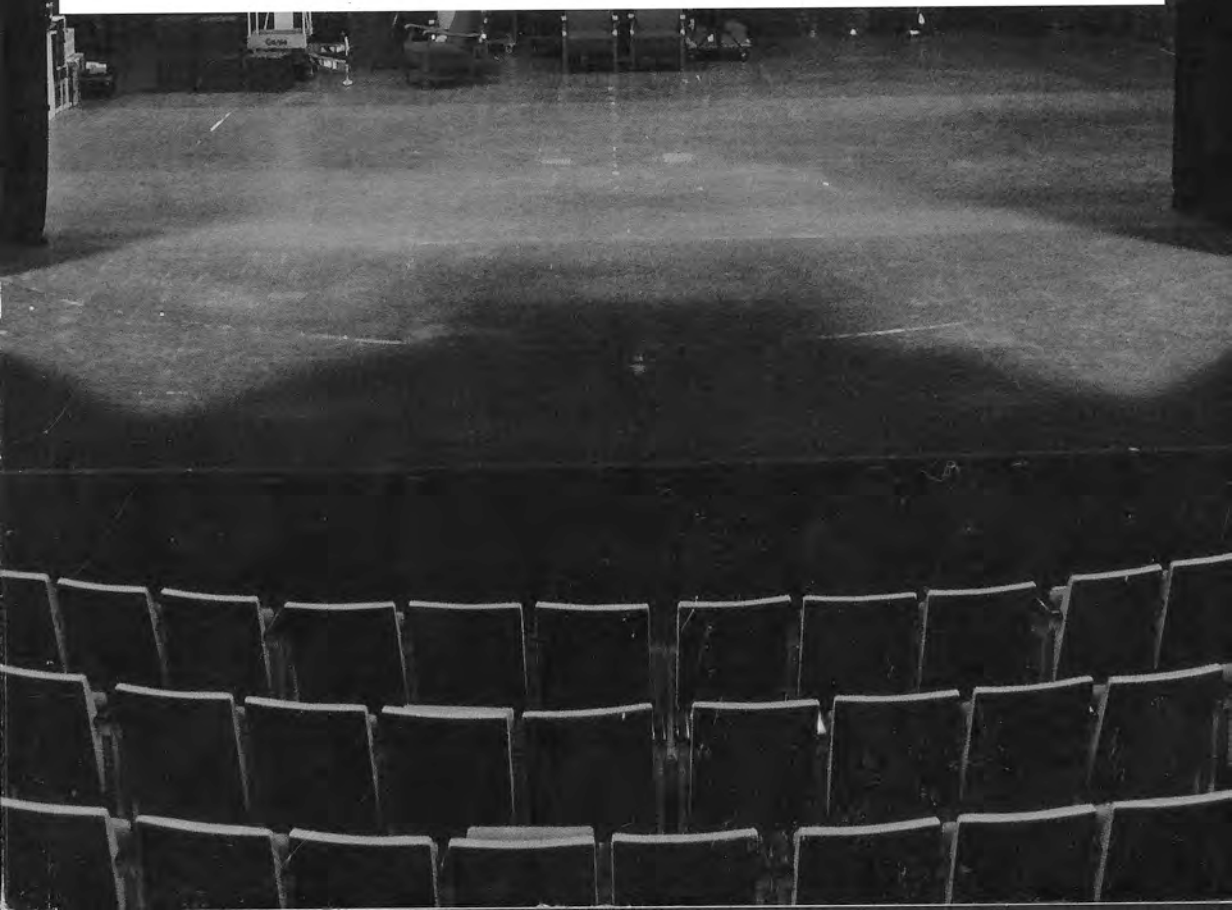


as an occasion to deliver a grandiloqent requiem for the lost Europe of "Flaubert [...] Mozart [...] and Vermeer".

While Farocki and Ehmann's exhibition can't be charged with the same Eurocentrism, it nevertheless restricted its scope predictably, privileging already well-known artists and neglecting work from Latin America, Africa or East Asia. It is not that a broader approach would necessarily be more progressive, but rather that these omissions hampered the show's analytical aims. Even after decades of jeremiads about spectacle, images continue to unpredictably colonize further aspects of social life. Yet these changes are of course distributed far from evenly, their effects skewed along any number of lines. Lacking a more differentiated model of these developments, "The Image in Question" could only gesture toward a crucial consideration: given the ever-increasing proliferation of images across formats, discourses and populations, can we speak anymore of "the image" as a singular entity? Although the exhibition didn't itself manage to reply, it did ultimately succeed in suggesting that the most effective responses to such questions of the image will take the form of further questions and further images.

ANDREW STEFAN WEINER

"The Image in Question: War – Media – Art", Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, October 21–December 23, 2010.

Notes

1 Harun Farocki/Antje Ehmann, The Image in Question: War – Media – Art, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 2010, exhibition brochure.

2 See William J. Broad/John Markoff/David E. Sanger, "Israeli Test on Worm Called Crucial in Iran Nuclear Delay", in: *The New York Times*, January 5, 2011. Accessible online at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/16/world/middleeast/16stuxnet.html.

3 This phrase is spoken in the film "Before Your Eyes – Vietnam" (1982), and is cited by Thomas Elsaesser in his essay "Harun Farocki: Film-maker, Artist, Media Theorist", in: *Afterall*, 11, Spring/Summer 2005.

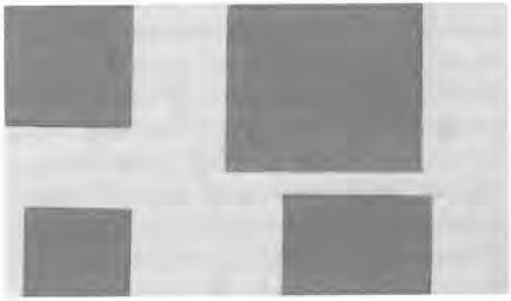
4 For description of this technique see Harun Farocki, "Cross Influence/Soft Montage", in: the same, Against What? Against Whom?, ed. by Antje Ehmann/Kodwo Eshun, London: Koenig Books, 2009, pp. 69–74.

5 A dossier containing representative selections from the project can be found in *Art Journal*, Summer 2007, pp. 23–33.

6 For further discussion of the relation between Joreige's practice and the history of the Lebanese war, see Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Contemporary Art Practice in Lebanon", in: Out of Beirut, ed. by Suzanne Cotter, Oxford, UK: JRP-Ringier, 2007, pp. 82–84.

PALERMO IN LOS ANGELES

On "Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977" at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles



His early death in 1977 turned Blinky Palermo into a mythical figure, the "James Dean of the art world." One might think that the countless retrospectives and monographs should add up to an exhaustive treatment of the oeuvre of Peter Heisterkamp (Palermo's real name). Yet has the scholarship undertaken to date truly grasped the essence of his art? A walk through the artist's first retrospective in Los Angeles made that seem at least dubitable.

Since very few American museums hold works by Palermo, and since his art is rarely given out on loan due to its fragility, several central pieces were missing from the survey exhibition. A more important undertaking, however, would have been to take a look at the reception of Palermo's oeuvre on the West Coast, which has as yet received little attention.

With little of his work available in American venues, Blinky Palermo has remained something of a cult figure in the US, with nothing resembling the institutional status accorded his peers Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter. Of all postwar German artists, he was most deeply engaged with American art and culture, and yet among the least embraced by the US market. Palermo's

slipperiness intrigues: a painter who came of age in the world of Beuys and Fluxus, whose work is admired by often opposing artworld camps, and whose practice bridges an older European project of geometric abstraction grounded in ideas of utopian social evolution and a more American model of the closed-off and self-referential formal object.

Thoughtfully curated by Lynne Cooke (formerly at Dia and now chief curator at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid), "Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977" was a compact exhibition of unusual intimacy.[1] An anti-blockbuster, it drew few of the crowds who packed William Eggleston next door. It was also the most important museum exhibition in Los Angeles this past year, intimately embraced by LA-based artists from painters and abstract filmmakers to experimental composers and conceptually oriented practitioners.

For many people I know, Palermo represents the last credible figure in a certain lineage of geometric abstraction; his death in 1977 is like the death of Modernism. Yet he himself arrived on the scene belatedly, after the heroic period of abstraction was over. Rather than mourning this condition, he assumed it as a challenge, to explore what possibilities painting and abstraction might still hold.

The first two rooms opened a rich field of possibilities, as viewers could watch Palermo encounter and absorb different historical models of abstraction, as in the celebrated "Composition with 8 Red Rectangles" (1964), with its nods to Malevich, and the almost tongue-in-cheek "Blue Brigde" (1964–65). As he questions and explores what a painting is – its materials, expanse, how it relates to the wall or room – his work veers between seemingly incompatible projects of gestural abstraction, shaped canvases, systems painting and postminimal painting-as-object, all strangely twisted, repurposed and made new. He keeps inventing things, like the use of found supports to make paintings that hover between canvas and object, devices that seem meant to undo all sorts of categorical enclosures. To risk cliché, the effect of Palermo's work is often ineffable. A filmmaker friend notes how there is "a charge between two things – usually across a new kind of space, not just negative, but created; a space neither outside nor inside the work".

The show moves loosely chronologically, but unlike the Dusseldorf retrospective three years ago, which segmented Palermo's work by genre, Cooke's installation at LACMA blends different phases – objects, fabric paintings, metal paintings – in ways that feel truer to Palermo's messy, less systematized practice. Time after time, Palermo pares down, takes an element or convention and stretches it to some limit. While using a reductionist language, he escapes the constrictions of minimalism or the orthodoxy of any number of more programmatic positions. He finds that strange energy of a practice in transition (like the moment when Judd embarks on objects, or Buren leaves painting), and manages to ride that wave multiple times.

His early objects are small, curious and deeply material; as another friend of mine notes, "Each piece seems to have been discovered instead of planned". Amidst various staffs and angles, we encounter the deep oddness of a work like "Tagtraum 1" (1965), a two-part structure comprising a small painted dark green triangle on framed canvas, and a larger object in which a similar green triangle is mounted on an awkwardly shaped orange wedge, sort of like a hard and misshapen pillow. What is it – a painting, a sculpture, a joke on color theory and relative perception? However formless, it is a dark and haunting work. Likewise, a seemingly simple structure like "Leisesprecher I" (1969), with its framed and unframed rectangles of dyed cotton fabric, not only segues between objects and cloth paintings, but offers a strange conceptual or material study: here is what fabric looks like, off and on the frame, see here how the painting surface is this puckered and soft material casually hung like a banner on the wall. Yet Palermo is not Buren, or Rauschenberg. Rather than fully abandoning painting to work with site

or in some rather codified space of the everyday, he continues to work within painting while ever expanding beyond it. "Painting" in Palermo's hands becomes a discipline, a set of almost philosophical ideas and arguments and inventions, that extend outward.

It's hard not to feel that Palermo's work has been not all that well served by the growing body of Palermo literature. While the solid historical research that has been published recently must be appreciated greatly, it sometimes seems to miss the point. A reliance on biography and historical reference obscures the works as much or more than it reveals them. To fixate on when and where Palermo first bought his fabrics, or propose that the fabric paintings' importance lies in their entanglement with the banal and the decorative, or a 1960s color scheme, as Christine Mehring does, ultimately says little about what makes them compelling art objects, in their own time or now.[2]

Two of the "Stoffbilder" (1968, 1967–69) (or fabric paintings) were shown at LACMA in 2009 in Stephanie Barron's "Art of Two Germanys" exhibition. They are uncanny objects that create their own space, and that continue not to fit into histories of abstract painting. Palermo's innovation here, the fusion of the monochrome and the readymade, is striking: the projective immersive space of modernism created by common household goods. Yet they are not demonstrations of a concept but deeply strange objects. Horizontal bands of dense color, they fuse the concrete and actual with the purely perceptual. In addition, a certain lightness of touch creates movement between pieces. In the installation, they are allowed to partly intermingle with roughly contemporaneous works, like the odd cloudlike form "Grey Disk" (1970) or the two small grey boxes hung at eye level ("Untitled", 1970) that hover between painting and object in very different ways. In addition, Cooke has installed an early metal painting, the monochrome grey square ("Untitled", 1973), in the same room, to bridge different bodies of work and allow us to sense the continuities at play.

One large room presents documentation of several of the wall paintings, and another smaller room presents glimpses of the larger body of metal paintings, with four different four-panel works, including "Times of the Day I" (1974–75) and "Himmelsrichtungen I" (1976). Among the surprises was a 1976 work featuring four narrow vertical strips of aluminum, painted white with blue and black at the tips, appearing sort of like giant matchsticks, which curves slightly out from the wall at the ends. Part of an apparently suspended or underdeveloped body of work, it was hard to know whether to read this intriguing object as a reprisal of Palermo's early staffs, or a departure into new territories altogether. The perhaps controversial inclusion of an untitled acrylic on aluminum work from 1976, a vertical panel with bands of gestural marks and scrapings amidst a larger yellow field, also posed unanswerable questions; apparently left with one of Palermo's girlfriends, it is now owned by Julian Schnabel. Oddly, the inclusion of apparently "unfinished" works felt useful. The exhibition offered not an exhaustion overview of a fully developed and cohesive "œuvre", but snapshots from a quickly moving life.

Coming after the major European retrospectives in Barcelona and Dusseldorf, the touring exhibition offered a more modestly scaled and perhaps more idiosyncratic take on the artist.[3] The show was no doubt constrained by the difficulty of obtaining loans of Palermo's notoriously fragile (and newly monetized) works, and by the unavailability of the later metal paintings, which, as Cooke notes in her catalogue essay, seriously restricts Palermo scholarship and reception.[4] Quite a few details of the presentation seemed a bit sloppy, as if I hadn't given the exhibition quite the attention it deserved. Pencil marks on the walls seen at the pre-opening were still there on closing day, and one panel of "Coney Island II" (1975) was unaccountably higher than the rest. Some important works were missing from the story, and although the drawings are addressed in the accompanying catalogue, their continued

marginalization is a nagging problem in Palermo's larger reception.

Of course, Palermo's hard-fought "lightness" could go over all too well in Los Angeles, where the decorative and banal is an easy path of least resistance. Yet there is an entire reception of Palermo's work in Southern California that is crucial, and almost entirely undocumented – from his early friendships with Michael Asher and John Knight to the deep engagement with his work by Stephen Prina and Morgan Fisher, to his impact on younger artists like Madison Brookshire, Brandon Lattu and Yunhee Min (both Fisher and Min gave artist talks during the exhibition). The heterogeneity of this list conveys the unpredictable quality of Palermo's practice, and its aliveness in our own very different present. It is hard not to feel that art has not advanced in any meaningful way since the mid-1970s; the options Palermo offers feel as fresh and relevant – and as necessary – as any.

LIZ KOTZ

"Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977", Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, October 31, 2010–January 16, 2011.

Notes

1 The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue: Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977, ed. by Lynne Cooke/Karen Kelly/Barbara Schröder, Dia Art Foundation, in association with Yale University Press, 2010, including essays by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh/Lynne Cooke/Suzanne Hudson/Susanne Küper/James Lawrence. My thanks to Madison Brookshire, Dave Hughes, Brandon Lattu, Monica Majoli, Jon Pestoni and Mark So for discussing Palermo's work with me.

2 Christine Mehring, "Four of a Kind: The Art of Blinky Palermo", in: *Artforum*, 41, No. 2, October 2002, pp. 138–143, and Mehring, Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 45–85.

3 The exhibition travels to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. (February 24 through May 15, 2011), and then Dia: Beacon and the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, in New York (June 25–October 31, 2011).

4 Lynne Cooke, "Palermo's Porosity", in: Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977, op. cit., p. 19 (footnote no. 32).

LEAP INTO THE CURATORIAL VOID

On "Paul Thek: Diver, A Retrospective" at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

European institutions have devoted several solo exhibitions to the oeuvre of Paul Thek (1933–88). Thek, whose art is difficult to sum up, is considered a pioneer in the genres of the installation and the environment; his works have long become legendary, and their significance as a point of reference for contemporary positions remains undiminished.

The Whitney Museum has now held Thek's first retrospective in his native America. Earlier presentations often attempted to read his oeuvre in light of the problems of their own time; the curators of the Whitney show, Elisabeth Sussman and Lynn Zelevansky, chose a different approach. Walking through the exhibition, however, the visitor could not quite ascertain what that approach was – although there are plenty of plausible reasons to engage Thek's art, even aside from his art-historical significance.

"Belief is a technology"[1], Chris Kraus wrote in reference to Paul Thek, a Brooklyn-born artist who in the mid-1960s sabotaged the hyper-rational language of Minimalism by filling geometric forms (the kind popularized by Smithson and Judd) with sculptures of human flesh. Thek became well known for these pieces – his Technological Reliquaries – and for various efforts that followed, but by the time he died of at the age of 54 in 1988, critics called his career a failure and considered his practice obscure. It's a depressing story but one that lends itself all too obviously to mythology, which was all the more inevitable given Thek's ties to figures like Peter Hujar, Susan Sontag and Eva Hesse. Four years after his death,