

Art

MONTHLY

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Live and Kicking

Sally O'Reilly defends live art

FACT Finding

Beryl Graham checks out Liverpool's new technology centre

Woman on the Moon

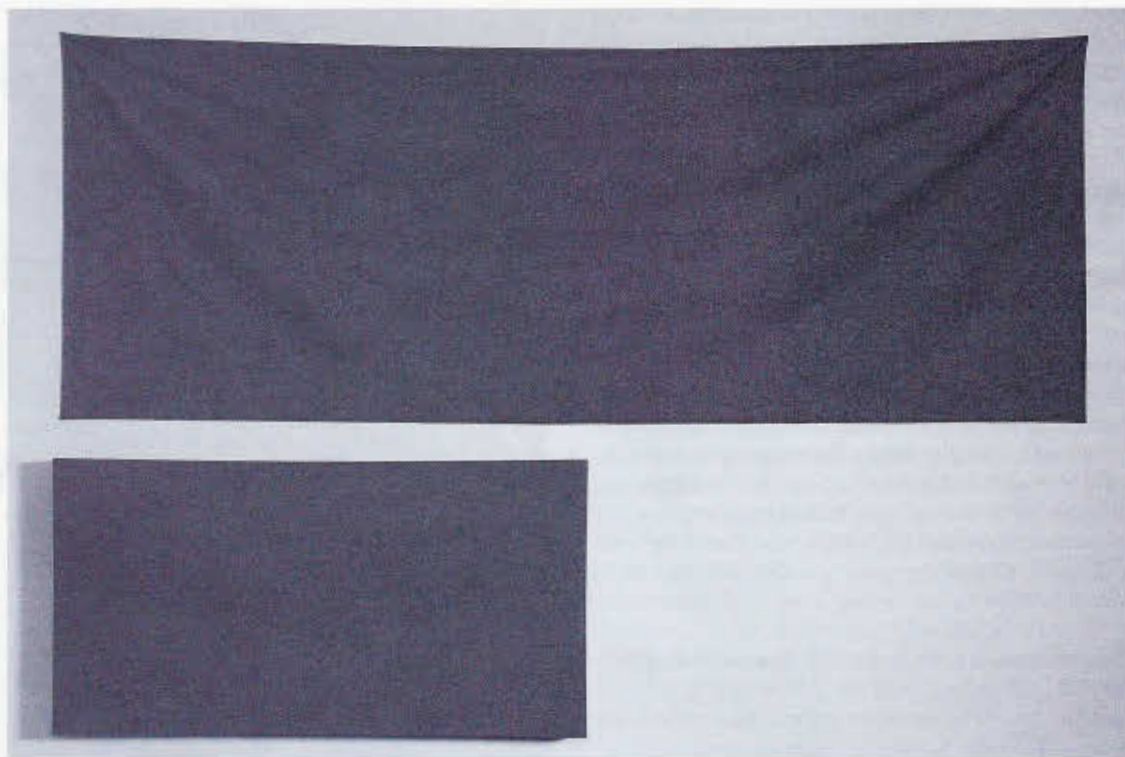
Aleksandra Mir profiled by Gilda Williams

LA Times

JJ Charlesworth visits the City of Angels



Blinky Palermo
Quiet Speaker II 1969



Polaroids makes the viewer much more attentive to the underlying structure of a work.

The invitation to look hard and long is made more explicit by the inclusion of *Untitled*, 2001, a startling reminder of Wool's earlier textworks. The painted text, once deciphered by the viewer, comprises a message: 'The harder you look, the harder you look.' Initially the textual nature of this painting seems to jar with the other works, although this is a key work for attending to the significance of the next body of photographs 'East Broadway Breakdown', 1994-2002, to the artist's paintings.

This consists of 160 A4 monochrome photographs of a very particular urban landscape. The accompanying exhibition leaflet reveals that these are the downtown streets of New York between Wool's Lower East Side studio and his home, although the sense of a journey can be ascertained from the photographs. The 35mm snapshot aesthetic is evident in these night-time photographs of apparently banal but desolate street scenes. An abandoned police car, discarded rubbish and a stray dog are featured, but more often the images are of empty roads, lonely street corners, wastelands and dead ends. However, in the context of this show, it is the incidental details of the urban landscape that are important – the stains, splashes, graffiti, the unofficial hand-painted signs. Looking across the gallery at Wool's large abstract paintings, it becomes clear why it is important to look hard at *East Broadway Breakdown*. A piss-stained doorway, the splash of paint thrown at a building, or a pool of water from a blocked drain, all become a collection of photographed traces that may have been translated into

painted abstract gestures. The forensic quality of some of the photographs, and the stubborn association of monochrome photography with the documentary do have connotations for Wool's paintings. Wool may simply be drawn to the random, chaotic visual qualities of these traces, but their link to unknown mark-makers from an urban world brings a provocative tension to the abstract work.

'Crosstown Crosstown' may have painting hung on one side of the gallery and photography on the other, but the work of Wool stages a much more complex, intertwined relationship between the two media. If you look hard, and attend to the terms of this dialogue, you can't help but come against two figures: the abstract expressionist and the vandal. ■

Nicky Bird is an artist and lectures on contemporary photographic practice at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle.

■ Blinky Palermo

Serpentine Gallery London March 26 to May 18

'Palermo at the Serpentine?', went the incredulous response from an American friend with a long appreciation for reductive painting. She had resigned herself to London's indifference regarding radical abstraction originating in the 60s in the rest of Europe and somewhat later in New York. The distinction you used to hear in Milan or New York prioritising painting, as a metaphysical

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ENGLISH HERITAGE



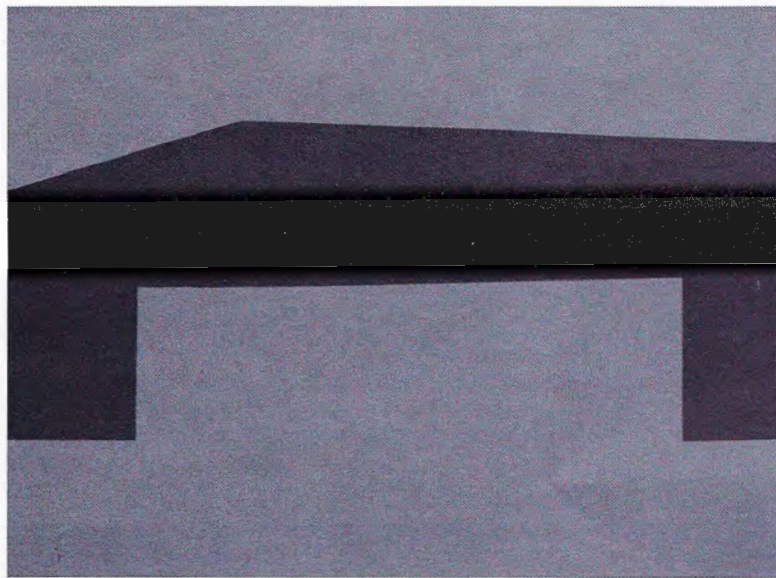
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New Art at the Old Gym

discourse on procedures and materials, over pictures, as image and representation, registered irreconcilable definitions of little interest to a British milieu. Peter Heisterkamp was a protégé of Joseph Beuys who encouraged him to assume the name of the Mafia boxing manager he resembled. The range of Blinky Palermo's brief production (he died age 33 in 1977) undermines classification, yet his achievement is seen as crucial to the formation of a critical abstraction whose momentum would reach contemporary artists such as Victoria Civera, James Hyde or Cathy Wilkes.

This show, organised by Gloria Moure for the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, challenges both idealist and functionalist positions on painting as it illuminates the complexity of Palermo's work. The exhibition's crowded installation, the structure of which also discards any notion of chronological progression, conveys the breadth of projects which seem lucid and risky. There are for example, in the rotunda gallery, large painted wood structures, several dyed fabric paintings, a bare canvas bisected by a red line, small triangular paintings positioned over doorways, photographs framed by Palermo documenting site-based projects and display tables containing further installation records. We miss only the late aluminium paintings which the Dia Foundation won't release. One pleasure from this rich show is in loosening a train of thought adequate to Palermo's fugitive practice. The cadmium red T-shape structure from 1966, whose wooden bars are 2.5m long by just 3cm wide, is like an anorexic suprematist fragment that wilfully pushes monochrome to an absurd outcome. Along with other zip-like paintings such as *Butterfly II*, 1969, all made of salvaged and roughly painted wood, this T-shaped piece secularises Barnett Newman's transcendental motifs as if wanting the contingency of a fallen symbolic form. Only after considering Palermo's installation documents, and the fine watercolour studies which fill the show, is it apparent that its shape and scale must derive from window motifs and that its effectiveness comes from his aim to articulate interior spaces through a diagrammatic figuration which invariably reiterates architectural features of an exhibition space. Examples from 1970-71 include the installation for Munich's Galerie Heiner Friedrich where facing monochrome murals were negative images of each other. One wall was entirely painted except for a narrow all-round border; on the opposite wall only the border was delineated. In the Kabinett für aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, Palermo painted *Window I*, a scaled outline of the gallery's front window on an inside adjacent wall, and with *Window II*, he repeated the action for a pedestrian underpass in Munich. None of these 20-odd installations survives, although the rigour of Palermo's documentation shows him developing his pictorial vocabulary from these reflections on the geometry of prosaic architecture.

Clearly it was important for Palermo that his work had components retrieved from the non-art environment, as if wanting to check the excesses of earlier



metaphysical claims for painting without, however, reducing the work's meaning to sheer materiality. Palermo was making space among the work's effects for those of no instrumental outcome; the possibility of sensory pleasure perhaps, or the discomfort of encountering an intractable and ugly object. This experience may be keenest with the rectangular horizontally-banded works, such as *Untitled (red-blue)*, 1968, made from department store fabric, dyed and unpainted. The colour of these cloth pieces includes combinations of dusty greys, ochres and close-keyed blues, to strident contrasts of black with viridian or scarlet with cerulean. Through their evocation of Mark Rothko we recognise the partial suppression of modernist tropes of purity and authenticity without their substitution by irony, leaving us uncertain how to account for the kind of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure we are experiencing. One revelation of this exhibition's installation is the ease with which much of the work shifts from autonomous object, or spatial intervention to applied art in the form of interior design. Palermo shared Newman's interest in fashionable design colours; with their mute facture the fabric paintings become the perfect accompaniment to imaginary furnishings while the wall paintings enhance spaces as if for everyday use.

At the end of his life, Hegel's critical idealism has art resisting instrumentality in order to reveal society's contradictions as artificial constructions. One fascination of Palermo's work rests with the contradictions it enfold which succeed in destabilising our criteria for qualitative judgements. ■

Blinky Palermo
Blue Bridge 1964-65

Mark Harris is an artist.



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Isaac Julien

Baltimore

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