September 2011

LETTERS
COLUMNS
BOOKS
Craig Clunas on Gao Minghui’s Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art
James Quandt on Raúl Ruiz’s Mysteries of Lisbon
SLANT
David Josellit on Nicolás Guagnini’s The Panel Discussion, the Tennis Match, and a Bogotá
J. Hoberman on Jack Smith’s posthumous career
ON SITE
Gary Indiana on the Stellineset Memorial
FILM
Rachel Haidu on Sven Augustijnen’s Speculum
TOP TEN
Chandler Burr
PREVIEWS
FALL 2011 EXHIBITIONS
45 shows worldwide
Julia Bryan-Wilson on “Pacific Standard Time”

FEATURES
274 VENICE 2011
Claire Bishop
Daniel Birnbaum
Francesco Bonami
Benjamin Paul
Tim Griffin
John Kelvey
Nicholas Cullinan
302 TABULA RASA:
THE ART OF R. H. QUAYTMAN
Paul Galvez
312 TRUTH OR DARE:
THE ART OF WITNESSING
David Josellit
318 CLOSE-UP: LEAP YEAR
Yve-Alain Bois on Martin Barré’s Greenwich and 60–T–44
322 FOREST FOR THE TREES:
THE ART OF GOSHKHA MACUGA
Dieter Roelstraete
328 OPENINGS: ADRIÁN VILLAR ROJAS
Jessica Morgan
331 OPENINGS: OLIVIA PLENDER
Brian Dillon

REVIEWS
335 Christine Mehring on Blinky Palermo and “If you lived here, you’d be home by now” 2011, Hessle Museum of Art, Aarhus, Denmark
338 Jeffrey Weiss on Richard Serra
340 Sam Pulitizer on Ryan Trecartin
341 Dennis Lim on Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Visit www.artforum.com to view videos and other web-exclusive content related to this issue.

Cover: R. H. Quaytman, Chercber Holophane, Chapter 21, 2011, oil, silk-screen mix, and gesso on wood, 20 x 20” (See page 302.)

Blinky Palermo
HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, WASHINGTON, DC; DIA-BEACON, BEACON, NY; HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART AND CCS GALLERIES AT BARD COLLEGE, ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NY
Christine Mehring

BLINKY PALERMO’S LOVE for America has long gone unrequited. The German painter’s art was inaccessible for decades on this side of the Atlantic, save for small commercial-gallery surveys and the Dia Art Foundation’s holdings of certain significant works. This despite Palermo’s embrace of American culture, from Thelonious Monk to Barnett Newman, and his resulting move to New York in 1973; despite his legendary status among painters who have come of age in the US since then, from David Reed to Julian Schnabel to Wade Guyton; and, most shockingly, despite Palermo’s momentous gifts to these American artists. His most important bequest may have been his playful mobilization of vernacular forms, materials, and media—found geometric shapes with erratic edges, ready-made fabrics in period palettes, sewing, and wall painting—drawn from design, architecture, and commercial culture. With these innovations, Palermo led abstraction out of the deadlock generated by sophisticated modernist discourse in the US, which by 1973 had become infuriously prescriptive and calcified.

Given that state of affairs, the first North American retrospective of Palermo’s art would seem an easy endeavor: Almost anything would be something. For close to a decade, curator Lynne Cooke has gone to great lengths to resist that low standard, aimed instead to give Palermo his proper due. Indeed, her long-awaited Palermo exhibition—which opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in fall 2010, traveled to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden this past spring, and remains on view at Dia:Beacon and the CCS (Center for Curatorial Studies) Galleries at Bard College through the end of October—marks an especially ambitious moment in the long line of retrospectives (about nine, depending on one’s definitions) that European museums have offered since the artist’s death in 1977 at age thirty-three.

These European retrospectives, with the exception of the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf’s in 2007, inadvertently misrepresented Palermo by interspersing his four groups of work—objects (Objekte), cloth pictures (Stoffbilder), wall paintings (Wandmalereien), and metal pictures (Metallbilder). They did so not only horizontally but also vertically, with a cloth picture, for example, hanging high above an object. The resulting hodgepodge time and again created the impression of an artist who died before he was able to produce coherent bodies of work. The rationale for these displays was Palermo’s own hanging of his pieces while he was still a student. But such an approach disregards the fact that, beginning with his February 1968 exhibition of cloth pictures at Düsseldorf’s Galerie Konrad Fischer, Palermo emphatically differentiated his work groups, showing them in clear separation—not merely in separate rooms but in separate exhibitions. Few curators seem to have taken seriously the recollection of Gerhard Storch, who worked closely with Palermo on a never-realized metal-picture exhibition just before the artist’s death, that Palermo would never have brought together in one place “things that obviously had nothing to do with one another or that only apparently belonged together.” (All translations here are mine.) Of course, that is by definition just what retrospectives do. Cooke has creatively negotiated this tension between the aggregation of a historical survey and the divisions the artist himself imposed, nor by resorting to the artist’s student hangings but by giving ample room to most of the work groups while creating fluid, rapidly paced transitions between them.

The Objekte are allowed the most space, reflecting not only their status as obstinately individual things—their idiosyncratic shapes and colors making them difficult to relate to one another—but also that they best assert these idiosyncrasies when nearly lost in expansive surroundings. In fact, the Hirshhorn’s interior, idiosyncratic itself but lacking spatial markers and therefore scale, looked better than ever punctuated by Palermo’s bunches of color. Coupled with the museum’s curved walls—the convex inner partition literally lifting the corners of Palermo’s haphazardly crooked Tagtraum I (Daydream I), 1965, the concave outer surface swelling the surface and bottom edge of his polygonal Grünes Vier Eck (Green Quadrangle), 1967—the objects in turn looked strikingly peculiar (off in their own world) and convincing (productively looking forward). This was no small feat for a body of work that had over and over again shown Palermo still entrenched in addressing and undoing his art-historical influences—the German traditions of Expressionism, Romantic art, and spiritually
motivated abstraction. In concert with Gordon Bunshaft’s architecture, Cooke’s hanging uncovered a confidence that Palermo never knew his objects had. Misfits on the curving walls, the objects became instantly intelligible as forerunners of Palermo’s much later metal pictures; to the people of N.Y.C., 1976, mounted slightly away from the wall to begin with, was ready for takoff.

The cloth pictures, by contrast, failed to meet the architect’s challenge and appeared to better effect in the artist’s original hangings (and on the walls of the Düsseldorf retrospective four years ago). On the Hirshhorn’s torqued walls, the horizontal seams separating the color fields of the cloth pictures illusionistically bent upward and downward, a fun-house effect underlined, quite literally, by the strong curved shadows at the bottom of each canvas. If Palermo hung his cloth pictures in close proximity and dialogue (just inches apart and in groups of works with similar or identical proportions), here they were torn apart (at wide intervals, as if to elude the fact that the various loans rarely matched up). It did not help matters that one was forbidden from coming within two yards of certain works (a point from which one could easily mistake the dyed fabric for just another color-field painting of the local Washington kind) or that one piece was in unusually poor condition (tragically faded in the lower half, as evidenced by the more saturated edges and better-preserved fabric in the same color in a nearby cloth picture).

Palermo’s work pressures retrospective hangs precisely because he was so painstaking about the problems of location and of series: how works behave in an environment and in a sequence, whether temporal or spatial. The exhibition’s treatment of his wall paintings—represented by the complete set of documentation panels that the artist compiled during his lifetime and that consists of sketches for and photographs of the wall paintings as they were installed—was no less subject to these tensions. Cooke’s hang did not follow the specific chronological organization of Galerie Heiner Friedrich’s January 1971 exhibition of this documentation, still in progress at the time, and it was difficult to discern what order took the place of that older scheme. An installation centered around certain motifs, spatial features, and recurring strategies might have assisted viewers in considering the artist’s motivations—his use of the monochrome field to visually disconnect a wall from its surroundings, say, or his frequent use of windows to play with opacity and transparency in a wall painting, or his painted or drawn circular inscriptions of walls to both orient and disorient. That said, Cooke’s hanging beautifully captured the overall feel of its historical precedent: The proximity of forty-nine equally sized panels of drawings and photographs in a tight space suggested a commanding body of work, its explosive creativity reined in only by Palermo’s move to New York City and the resulting lack of opportunities for site-specific installations.

Palermo would have enjoyed the challenge of working with the Hirshhorn’s space. In this sense, there was one unfortunate omission from the show’s wall-painting presentation: a technical drawing Palermo made in 1976, after his return to Germany, for an unrealized installation in a space that echoed the Hirshhorn’s circular galleries, a smaller but similarly circular and windowless conference room of a Munich insurance company. Four open vertical steel boxes were to be set flush into the wall, each containing a back panel set at varying angles and painted yellow, creating, in the artist’s words, “Four directions (fixed points, ordinal directions) ... in a nearly directionless ... circular room.” But though this piece was absent, its concerns seemed reflected in the show. The combination of fixed points within a continuum that interested Palermo in the conference room in some way mirrored Cooke’s overall curatorial strategy at the Hirshhorn—concentrating on the four main art works while tending equally to points of connection that, aided by the circular progression of the gallery, meaningfully reconstructed moments in and rationales of Palermo’s development. For example, the room dominated by austere cloth pictures was capped by an ascetic, chromium-plated-steel, T-shaped untitled Object from 1973, which led into an intimate space with an untitled 1973 monochrome made from rust-preventive undercoating on steel; while still echoing the standardized formats and found colors of the cloth pictures, these in turn prepared the viewer (as they had the artist in a moment of isolation and crisis) for the breakthrough of the subsequent metal pictures and their experimental approach to color.

That central thrust of the metal pictures is undeniably captured at Dia and Bard. Indeed, the extensive representation of this body of work is one advantage these venues hold over the show’s previous stops. Most stunningly, Dia unites Palermo’s “Times of the Day” series, 1974–76, for the first time since its exhibition at Galerie Heiner Friedrich’s New York branch in 1978. Experiencing all six separate but related works together allows us to appreciate the rigor within which Palermo allowed to but ultimately defied color systems and conventions—using simultaneous color contrasts to make equally sized fields larger or smaller, or establishing sequential patterns only to break them. Largely scattered across private collections, “Times of the Day” has far too long remained in the shadow of to the people of N.Y.C., whose installation at Dia:Beacon for more than eight years has made it an icon for both Palermo and Dia. In juxtaposition with “Times of the Day,” the magnum opus pales a bit, lacking as it does Palermo’s signature audacity and facility with the most idiosyncratic of colors. That said, Cooke’s commanding assembly of metal pictures also highlights an emerging austerity, demonstrating that perhaps Palermo himself was ready to part with what had come most naturally to him. Cooke boldly and abruptly closed the DC and Dia venues with a metal picture (Untitled, 1976) that appears unsuccessful and unfinished but makes palpable a career cut short.

Cooke’s most resourceful decision, however, was to work with artist Josiah McElheny to frame and effectively extend the Palermo retrospective at its venue in upstate New York. The resulting exhibition at Bard’s Hessel Museum of Art, “If you lived here, you’d be home by now,” brings together the divergent experiences of art in...
domestic and public environments. Drawing from the Marieluise Hessel Collection, part of which formed the foundation of Bard’s museum and part of which normally remains in Hessel’s home as a promised gift, McElheny collaborated with Cooke and Tom Eccles, CCS Bard director, to stage artworks in various spatial arrangements with furniture that can be used by visitors. Thus pieces by Palermo and close friends such as Imi Knoebel and Gerhard Richter, as well as by contemporaries such as Carl Andre and Franz West, rub shoulders with iconic modernist chairs, tables, and the like by Frederick Kiesler, Charlotte Perriand, and R. M. Schindler and with designs by John Chamberlain, Donald Judd, and Scott Burton. Certain ensembles are directly inspired by Hessel’s home. One of Andre’s “title”

At the Hirshhorn, curator
Lynne Cooke’s hanging uncovered a confidence that Palermo never knew his objects had.

pieces, for instance, is placed onto an area of parquet set into the concrete flooring in the museum’s entrance space to echo one’s experience of that work when entering the collector’s home.

Just as Palermo brought painting into unsettling proximity to decor, here the normal order of things is troubled. For one, the show uses furniture to heighten our attention to and understanding of the art—when, say, lying on a 1970s bed or lounging on a midcentury-modern-inspired cowhide, we contemplate the domestic iconography of Richter’s painting Kissen (Pillow), 1965, or Joseph Beuys’s felt suit. But perhaps more important, art is used to increase our awareness and understanding of furniture—when, for example, the carving of space by light in a series of 35-mm stills by Knoebel throws into relief that same effect in Burton’s granite chair, to a point where we nearly forget that Burton’s work is for use while Knoebel’s is not. McElheny, Cooke, and Eccles thus pay homage to Palermo’s still underappreciated interest in vernacular architecture and design. “Human habitation, that was important to him,” Palermo’s teacher Beuys recalled. “How people dwell, how they live, on which chairs they sit, what they surround themselves with.” In their mobilization of art on behalf of design, the trio specifically called on the logic of Palermo’s wall paintings, which often collapsed art and design. Some of these wall paintings had ensnared entire rooms in private apartments, complete with lamps and containers, to defamiliarize inhabitants’ experiences of their homes, while others drew attention to design features commonly overlooked or taken for granted by visitors in public exhibition spaces.

That these aspects of Palermo’s most fiercely innovative body of work have effectively been lost to us was bound to draw the attention of McElheny, an art historian’s artist who gives back to us potent episodes in the histories of modern art (especially their intersections with histories of modern design) that have fallen into oblivion. Palermo’s wall paintings are a case in point. “That does not stay in the photograph; it stays only in [the] memory of someone who actually stood inside,” Palermo said of these works, although he nevertheless documented them and have likely prefered permanent installations for some of them. Reconstructions, made over the years to re-create the spatial experience central to the wall paintings, have mostly proved problematic, for example by merely approximating original colors or by working with entirely different spaces. McElheny ingeniously and elegantly solved the problem by using the staples of Palermo’s wall paintings—“inhabiting the working methods of Palermo,” as McElheny puts it—to create his own six works for walls and ceilings. When he “inhabited” Palermo’s use of a “Munich ochre” for a 1971 wall painting in Munich, he translated this vital choice of local color into New England’s “barn red.” And when McElheny, echoing Palermo’s 1970 wall painting at the Galerie Ernst in Hannover, circumscribes two ceilings with a black stripe of a hand’s breadth, we can actually experience, rather than merely imagine, the way this small inter- vention makes possible our experience of the ceiling (as enclosing and raising a space) and the way it underlines, quite literally, otherwise overlooked or imperceptible architectural features (such as a window-pane skylight or slightly crooked walls). McElheny also produced Tino grey disks after a prototype by Blunky Palermo, vaselike objects whose plans are based on a shape in Palermo’s 1970 Prototype, silk screens of found geometric shapes that the older artist had used as a basis for some of his objects. In a double sense, then, McElheny returns to the world Palermo’s passions for the world. And yet such maneuvers are far from heavy-handed versions of appropriation. This art remains both an honest tribute and entirely McElheny’s own, a daring and rare feat not unrelated to Palermo’s relationship to the American art of his time.

In her Burlington Magazine review of the 2003 Palermo retrospective at London’s Serpentine Gallery, Cooke acutely noted that, given the fragility and ephemeralness of Palermo’s oeuvre and the resulting difficulty of loans, “the decision to embark on [a retrospective] must be taken cautiously, with a willingness to abandon the project if loans are not forthcoming, that is, if a representative if not comprehensive selection of work proves unavailable. Alternately, in place of a survey of the artist’s oeuvre, some more focused perspective, a particular thesis that is pertinent and timely, could be proffered.” Cooke did not abandon the project and exceeded her own standards by offering both a survey and a “more focused perspective.” While Palermo’s first retrospective in the United States would have been more representative with better and more extensive loans (of cloth pictures, in either venue) and more space (for metal pictures, in DC), it presents a sensitive take on the artist’s development that stands out from most of its predecessors in Europe. Revealing the ways in which Palermo’s art can live on—both in retrospect and in the hands of contemporary artists such as McElheny—will be this exhibition’s most important legacy.


Christine Mehring is an Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago. (See Contributors.)