



ARTFORUM

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Gerhard Richter, installation at Sperone Westwater Fischer, 1978.

point subtly; in this case, the mixed media sculptures looked on as you fumbled through the documents spread out before them. As if you had been called to deliver the verdict.)

But the exhibition veered between stating and overstating its point: parts repeated themselves—the same facts, the same images over and over again, from tape to manuscript, slides to sculpted tableaux to xeroxes of faces. The point was made, and then over-made, the viewer informed, then over-saturated. The tape of Millett reading from her manuscript told Sylvia's story, which was really Millett's reading of the story; it was the carrier of heaviest emotion, and seemed artificial, the story manipulated, manipulative, in places, like propaganda. In terms of its effect, it transformed the gallery into a church. A church or a kino, where we lived the torture, died the death, and then left, having done it for the week, feeling good, feeling brave, but having done nothing.

This, I think, is dangerous. Maybe the whole exhibition was dangerous, but in the wrong sense of the word, because it was an end in itself, the communion with others, the purge. It hadn't the stuff to stimulate a reaction outside of itself. If it had wanted to incite action, it didn't, it even encouraged a slip back into passivity. And all that because the exhibition—more specifically, Millett—did too much of the work for us. I think that the information alone, presented 13 years after the fact, at one

remove from the press coverage, the courts, the sensationalism of 1965, could have accomplished more.

I've never believed, as GERHARD RICHTER once claimed, that pictures can be made according to recipes, without personal involvement, that the making of pictures isn't an artistic act. I've never thought this mission impossible ever had anything to do with how or why Richter paints. The remark is 13 years old, but it's been quoted again on an information sheet for his recent exhibition. It comes from a "textcollage" Richter made with Sigmar Polke, another artist, in 1965 (it was later exhibited in Hannover), when they were both students at the art academy in Düsseldorf. Their '60s *tabula rasa* was designed to rid painting of its stifling *ich*, the gesture, the subjectivity; Polke decided that all dots were his friends (another quote), and polka-dotted his paintings (to simulate the raster of the printed page); Richter, painting after amateur photos, said the paintings that resulted were really photographs. He stressed the "arbitrariness" of his selection, the banality of the views, and tried to drain painting of its *Zwang* to present a world view, as I said before, to kiss goodbye to the *ich*.

It never worked; as soon as he decided on a certain source material, selected something, began to paint, decisions were made, and a certain esthetic projected, even when the esthetic posed as no esthetic. I have

always seen a statement made in the old paintings, which was a neutral, apathetic statement, but still a statement. I was always mystified, granted, at the recognition of forms in the paintings for naught; at the way Richter gave them a content which really wasn't any. At the way they had no political or social message. They always seemed compromises to me, paint, varnish and surfaces, images, paintings in the strictest sense of the word, that tried not to be any. They are the most indecisive paintings I know.

So, in the new paintings you recognize Niagara, jet trails, jealousy; you've got a hold, you move closer, but the image blurs, becomes unreadable as you try to see more—it knocks at your knuckles until you let go. The same game is being played with your eyes and expectations, by pictures that invite, but don't want, to be understood. The images you see are there, but they mean nothing.

The pictures undermine their own content, and force you back to concentrating on surfaces alone. And these are well-painted, fascinating surfaces you can lose yourself in. Surface is so scintillating in fact, everything so meticulously painted, that it's hard to become convinced of the hands off, "objective," "painting is idiocy" position many credit Richter for maintaining, to make the paintings more conceptual than they are, and Richter himself more intellectual, more in control than he is. I've never made the leap of faith. I like

looking at these paintings, which is a lot as far as I am concerned, but I've never bought the theoretical groundwork that goes along with them. I've always felt it was the work of people who liked to look at the pictures as I do, but went too far in explaining why.

Richter puts a lot of his ideas into paint; new paintings seldom look like what he's done before, and all his works together reflect a versatility that used to fascinate me. I saw in the versatility a flexibility of thinking and the guts to paint whatever he wanted. But today the variations look like empty moves, skittishness, a lure for rather than a trick on the market. A look to Polke explains a lot, because he shared the beginning, and for a long time acted out the same inconsistencies, with dot paintings, cloth paintings, flamingo paintings, potato houses, paintings left in their packing wrappers (Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1976), no paintings. Always stylistically inconsistent while ideologically very consistent, if arrogance, wit and finally dropping out can be considered an ideology. Richter, for his part, has remained the serious player. But without a strategy of play the moves he makes become uninteresting.

Writing this review has been a wrestling match with works I felt at first gave me too little to go on. HEIDI GLÜCK's paintings looked too skeletal, the signposts too scant: there were lines, geometric forms, empty blocks of space between forms—the forms your eyes sketched into the empty spaces. You read from left to right, covered ground or kept time with your eyes which were held in, and sent back and forth, by the clearly marked edges of the canvas.

Some of the longer paintings on canvas look like the last possible paintings one could make short of working directly on the wall, as if they have been stretched to a point at which all forms and colors must maintain a delicate balance to keep the whole thing from breaking. The paintings hold tightly together, are things in themselves, succinct, tense, self-sufficient, most of all, rational. But some of those triangles are really crocodiles with irrational undersides: they're not platonic forms, they have their start in fantasy. They look like what they're not: rational, cool, diagrammatic forms, cryptic.

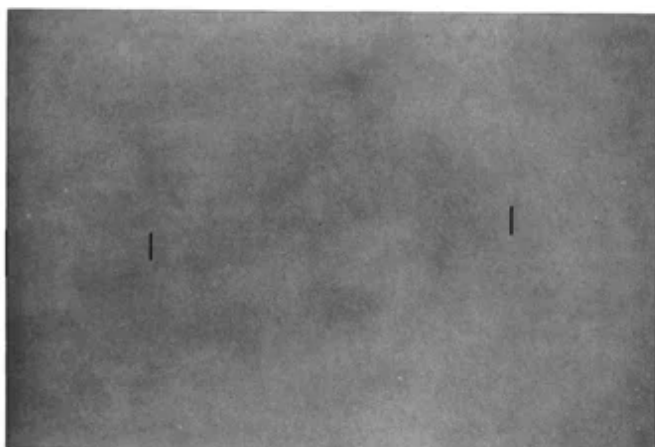
Likewise the short, vertical lines (stops) in the paintings and the spaces which they mark out. Our eyes busily fill in the mirror images of other forms or

continue forms on, but into spaces that aren't in fact as long as they would have to be to work. They only look as if they do. I connected to the works first on this level; I liked the way the input for so rational an end product was in fact so irrational, the mix of dead seriousness and play. But I don't want to cloud the works with too extensive a report from their libido. Because they are what you see, and not what the artist can tell you about them.

I cheated: turned to Glück for the facts I needed to figure out how the pictures worked. Telling myself (or hearing the artist tell me) that it should have been possible to understand the pictures without the biographical baggage, something which I wasn't able to do. An analogy then, from Glück, for what I saw happening over the whole surface of any of the paintings: Greek attic vases, paint that looks as if it's pasted on, blacks on terra-cottas, as she pointed out, the "handles" that those lines form at the edges of her pictures. The vases being coherent, contained, circular forms in space, with an order, rules, logic of their own; like one of Glück's canvases, stretched, held in tension; the space manipulated, the true appearances of things compromised in filling in the space, "distortions" for the sake of the whole representation. When it comes to translating visual ideas from drawings (of which five sets were exhibited) to canvas, compromises are made, the vertical lines made thicker, for example, so that they can hold their own on a new scale, and against a material that breathes more than paper does.

The exhibition included works on paper and composition board as well. The ideas Glück is dealing with sometimes work even better on paper or board than they do on canvas. The eye has an easier time in skimming over the harder, more opaque surfaces, and lines and forms really cut the space, fix it, freeze it, pull it down; the lines even have a materiality about them like glued-on pieces of thread, in a way that seems closer to what I think the artist is after.

So why do I keep returning to the paintings on canvas? Because they are riskier, the relations they mark out more fragile; and because the selection and matching of inks and acrylics, the contrasting of those to the ground, the sealing shut of the canvas, the measuring out and the placing of forms involves a drama: I think you can feel that they often don't work. And since they're



Heidi Glück, *Untitled*, 1977, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 54"

paintings on canvas which could be much less specific than they are, I feel a tension in them, a pull between the wish to paint (anything), to color, and the more important commitment at this point at least to saying something specific, to disciplining oneself, to controlling strictly what goes into the paintings, to keeping the work abstract. The paintings look skeletal but are loaded, and when they work they really work.

—BARBARA FLYNN

JOHN WALKER, Cunningham Ward; HARVEY QUAYTMAN, David McKee Gallery; LARRY BELL, ERIC ORR, Marian Goodman Gallery; HELEN MAYER HARRISON, NEWTON HARRISON, Ronald Feldman Gallery; "The Battle of Chile," Film Forum:

JOHN WALKER's paintings are Studio School, Tenth Street, '50s. The scale is heroic. The geometric rectangles must be read as antigeometric. The color is predominantly earthy, muddy,



John Walker, *Ostraca II*, 1977, canvas, acrylic, chalk and gel on canvas, 122 1/2 x 96 1/4"

primal. For the added touch of personal synthesis there are the pieces of canvas collage out of Cubism, the tentative black lines from Matisse. Slapdash and thrown together with machismo, these paintings rage tough. The philosophical discourse that envelops them must be dragged out of the existential closet. The references, the ambitions, the influences are all ripe for devastating parody. It's as if the artist has been in deepfreeze for the last 25 years.

I see Walker's paintings in a hostile historical environment, and for that reason they become more than what they are; they assume a thoughtful character, which makes me want to re-create a more tolerant world. They trigger this action because they so clearly represent a different idea of the viewer than does the endless parade of post-Minimal, post-process, post-modernist blank-works. But Walker's art doesn't particularly appeal to me either, and I deplore and resist its aspiratory aura. I am bred on the convention of the holistic image and here there are whole sections that seem utterly unconvincing and inattentive, while there is an overall obviousness that is downright embarrassing. Is this Walker's intention—the old Abstract Expressionist idea that we must be made uncomfortable with the work of art? The paintings are raw; Walker seems to be present in every struggle of mark against mark, plane against line. The artist is laid bare, creating a familiarity that is embarrassing.

The paintings reach from the floor to the ceiling and you can't get back far enough to take them in all at once. They fail to cohere, focus, relate. Jaggedly cut, colorful parts from other paintings are stuck right on top of the densely textured ochre and sienna rectangles. (The similarity of this procedure to Lee Krasner's is inevitable, even if done for entirely different reasons.) These patches are large because you are forced close to them, but they are small compared to the total canvas size. As much as you can't see the whole picture at one time, the jarring shifts are disturbing. In one painting, what appears to be a large blow-up of a Kandinsky stops at a mellow, rather crisp, sandy rectangle, which is subsequently dropped in favor of an ambiguous, slightly arched line wispily drawn on a blank space. I wonder how Walker sees these things in a large studio, if they "work" if you can get back far enough from them. But then their main characteristic, their embarrassing clumsiness, would disappear.

So you don't move forward and back,

REVIEWS
NEW YORK

Heidi Glück

Bertha Urdang Gallery

By Barbara Flynn

Writing this review has been a wrestling match with works I felt at first gave me too little to go on. Heidi Glück's paintings looked too skeletal, the signposts too scant: there were lines, geometric forms, empty blocks of space between forms—the forms your eyes sketched into the empty spaces. You read from left to right, covered ground or kept time with your eyes which were held in, and sent back and forth, by the clearly marked edges of the canvas.

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—*Barbara Flynn*

Cover: Milton Resnick, *Untitled* (detail), 1975, oil on canvas, 40 x 36."

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