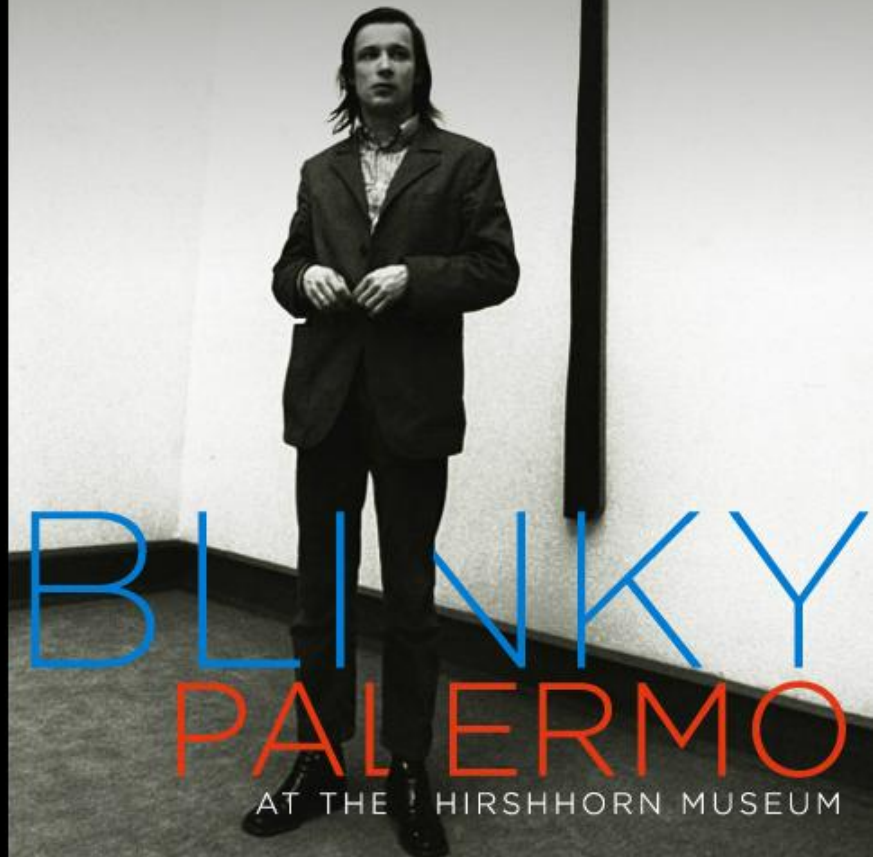
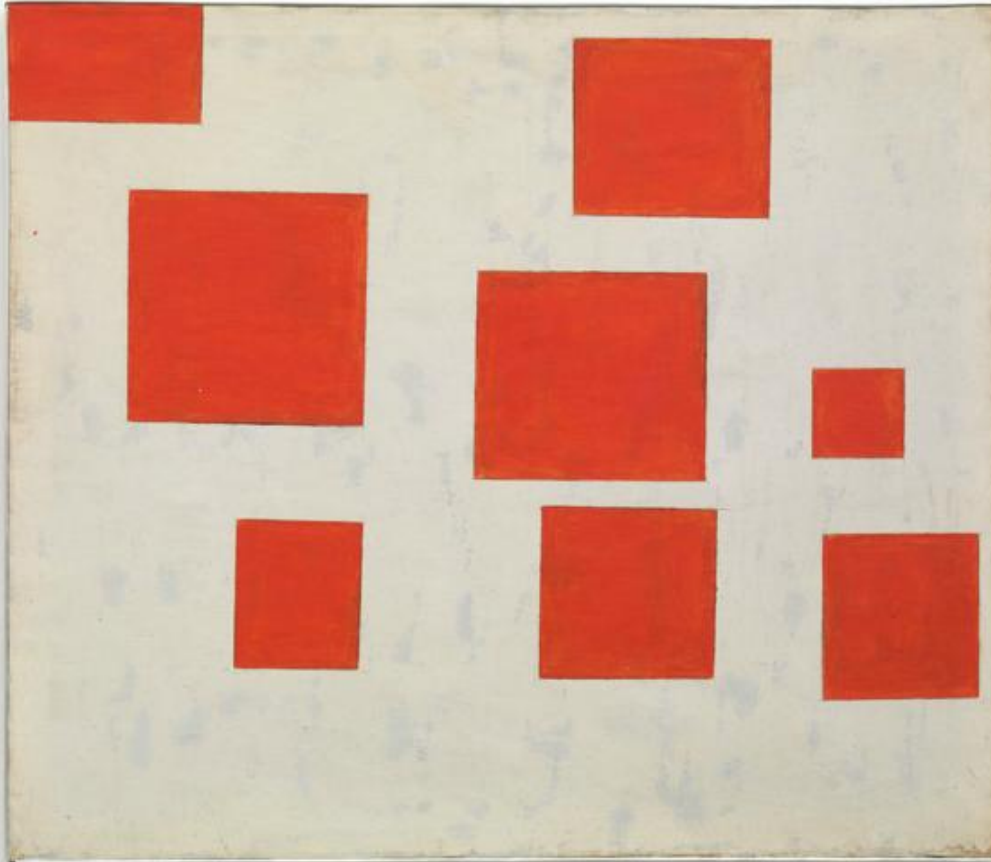


INTRO *spective*
NOT TO BE MISSED *magazine*



BLINKKY
PALERMO
AT THE HIRSHHORN MUSEUM



Komposition mit 8 roten Rechtecken [Composition with 8 Red Rectangles], 1964. Oil paint and graphite on canvas. Collection Olga Lina and Stella Liza Knoebel. Previous page: the artist, who enjoyed a productive but all-too-short career.

Art-world legends are born of mystery, lives tragically foreshortened and, of course, great talent. Blinky Palermo fits the bill on all three notes.

The circumstances surrounding both his birth in Leipzig in 1943 and his death in the Maldives thirty-three years later are open to speculation — and many of the details of the intervening years are now a mixture of fact and myth.

He was born Peter Schwarze and adopted by a couple with the surname Heisterkamp. He took the name Blinky Palermo either because he liked it or because it was bestowed on him by his teacher at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, the fabled conceptual artist Joseph Beuys. The zany Beuys (whose performances included interacting with a feral coyote) supposedly thought Palermo looked like the famous mobster by the same name. The moniker stuck.



One undisputed fact is the strength of Palermo's legacy, fully recognized in Europe and less well known in the US. When concept art and pop art replaced painting in the 1960s, Palermo remained steadfastly committed to investigating paint and how it interacted with quirky surfaces, such as metal, wood, store-bought cloth, found detritus and walls. His hybrid formats are emotionally evocative and make us aware of the properties and fundamentals of paint as the best contemporary art can do.

Palermo both drew from modern masters and his peers, from Europeans and Americans as diverse as Kazimir Malevich and Barnett Newman. His early works painted simple geometric shapes or monochromatic planes on common fabric rather than traditional stretched canvas; he later painted on found wood debris and then slick metal to test the range of paint as it interacted with eccentric surfaces. His deep impact was felt equally by hard-core conceptualists like Daniel Buren and dyed-in-the-wool expressionists like Julian

Schnabel, a fan and the owner of one seminal work in "Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964-1977," now at the Smithsonian Institution's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, through May 15. (The show was organized by the Dia Art Foundation and the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, and conceived by Lynne Cooke, an independent curator formerly with the Dia Foundation.) Cooke culled works primarily from German private and public collections and not before seen in the US. (After the Washington, DC, stopover, the show will be divided between two venues in upstate New York — Dia:Beacon and Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies — from June 25 to October 31, 2011.

I had a chance to chat with Evelyn Hankins, who organized the Hirshhorn installation, about Palermo's works and aims.

Top, from left: Joseph Beuys, Sigmar Polke and Palermo at the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, 1965. Photo by Ute Klophaus. Bottom: Joseph Beuys with Palermo in the performance *Für Blinky*, 1976. Courtesy the Serpentine Gallery, London, © DACS, 2003

The show opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art last year to real raves and I must say it was one the most beautiful exhibitions I have seen there.

We were pleased to be the debut spot on the East coast. I did not see the previous LA installation but I do know that Lynne Cooke, who conceived the retrospective, worked closely with all of us. She is a Palermo expert with a remarkable eye.

Palermo died very young but was amazingly productive in the decade and a half he was active. How does one visually outline such a prolific but short career that ended before one could discern its whole arc?

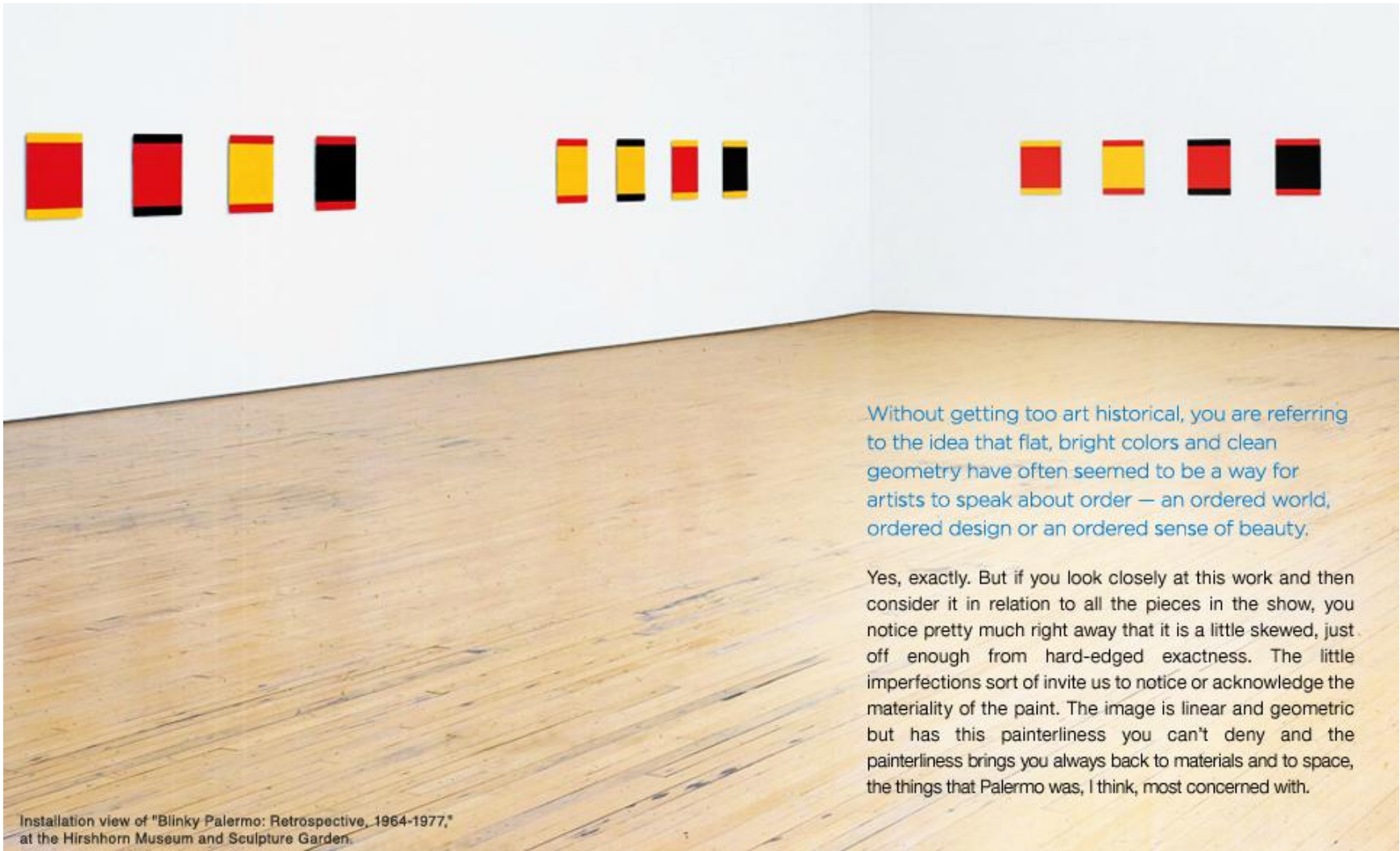
I opened the show with the small red painting, the earliest work in the overview, a 1964 work called *Composition with 8 Red Rectangles* because in that work we already see all the clues to the ideas he was addressing and to the themes in the rest of the show.

Since you mentioned that piece, which is no more than some red squares placed in seeming random order on a whitish ground, I have to get this out of the way early in our talk: The popular idea is that squares painted in a single color is something anyone can do. This deceiving simplicity is really apparent in many of the works.

Yes, and that was why I picked that work to start the show. What you think of here is the whole tradition of hard-edged abstract painting — Mondrian, Malevich — and that idea of pure, simple form and what that has meant in art.

Blaue Scheibe und Stab [Blue Disk and Staff], 1966. Fabric tape on wood. Private Collection, courtesy Hauser & Wirth





Without getting too art historical, you are referring to the idea that flat, bright colors and clean geometry have often seemed to be a way for artists to speak about order – an ordered world, ordered design or an ordered sense of beauty.

Yes, exactly. But if you look closely at this work and then consider it in relation to all the pieces in the show, you notice pretty much right away that it is a little skewed, just off enough from hard-edged exactness. The little imperfections sort of invite us to notice or acknowledge the materiality of the paint. The image is linear and geometric but has this painterliness you can't deny and the painterliness brings you always back to materials and to space, the things that Palermo was, I think, most concerned with.

Installation view of "Blinky Palermo: Retrospective, 1964-1977," at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.



Untitled, 1964. Oil paint on canvas. Collection Ströher, Darmstadt

But that hint of the artist's hand, that just slightly spontaneous quality is not at all like Abstract Expressionist gestures, where the movement of paint or obvious hand-made surface is intended to be about emotion or gut-spilling. The work produces a very different feeling.

The concept I like and that has been used a lot with Palermo is perfect imperfection. What that means is that for Palermo not one thing was haphazard, every last decision and tension was absolutely thought out. So you have this visual image that is hard-edged but there is also this other feeling that is natural, uncontrived, kind of happenstance. Sometimes this comes in the form of lines not perfectly plumb to suggest naturalness.

It is this feeling of something natural, not overly cerebral or determined. But he doesn't seem to be contrasting some feeling of naturalness in the artist's brush stroke to things that are manufactured, because both of these feelings seem to be expressed together in the work in interesting and balanced ways.

Along with this natural geometry of his, Palermo will also use colors that are super bright and vibrant, not organic at all, almost commercial or decorative — really eccentric at times. It's those kinds of opposing tensions he puts in to keep you thinking about not Ab Ex gesture but edge, color and space as properties of paint first and foremost.

I noticed that you did not do the show chronologically per se.

We did it categorically, grouping the various bodies of work he undertook. I started with the so called “Objects,” done from 1964 to 1974. Then there is a section called “Stoffbilder,” which means literally “cloth pictures” done between the years '66 and '72; a section that includes his preparatory drawings, designs and documenting photographs for the site-specific works done in the late '60s and early '70s; and finally a section on what are called his “Metalbilder” or “metal pictures,” which are paintings on metal done for the last two years of his life.

The first body of works are always referred to as “objects” rather than paintings. Why is that?

We use the word “objects” because that is how he saw them and because he was using the ideas from traditional abstract painting but extending modernism with very non-traditional painting surfaces. He was using paint on common found materials and there is this interaction between color — he was a real colorist — and certain sculpture-like properties of those surfaces.

I know readers will wonder, why not just paint on canvas?

The most important thing about these objects is that Palermo conceived of them to really heighten the interaction between the materiality of the paint and the space in which the painted object was installed. You cannot really understand the paint or the object separate from their placement in space.



Two images of Palermo by, from top, Angelika Platen and Lothar Wolleh.



So art historians stress “objects” to keep us from defaulting to things we expect from a canvas, like narrative or stories. It keeps us thinking about process, where his focus was.

Yes, I would say so.

Can you explain a bit about some of these other odd art categories Palermo coined?

The “Stoffbilder” are composed of sewn, horizontal strips of solid-colored fabric that you could buy anywhere mounted on the stretcher bars that artists use to hold canvas. The spokespersons of “high art” when Palermo started in the '60s, like Clement Greenberg, defined the essence of art as flat, monochromatic color painted on a canvas. So here is Palermo refining that idea, or taking it one step further by literally making pictures with already colored cotton cloth. This brings ideas of so-called low art from advertising and fashion into a discourse with fine art.

Without rejecting or denying the prominence of painting.

Right, right.

Untitled [Totem], 1964-67. Casein paint on canvas on wood. Dia Art Foundation, New York



He sewed them himself, didn't he? That's such a great, subtle way to toss in questions about men's cultural work as opposed to women's domestic work, or the museum art object as opposed to product design or commerce.

I do not know if he intended all that. He did sew them himself until he realized that he was not as good at sewing as others and began to have others do the sewing. But even there he was commenting on and keeping us focused on process. Like the Minimal artists who intentionally conceived of simple forms and sent work out to be made in factories, stressing that they were less concerned with who eventually produced the work and more concerned with the artistic conception or idea behind it; I think that's partly why Palermo was okay with others sewing the cloth.

Some of the loveliest works are sketches and photos he framed and displayed so carefully to document his site-specific projects. What about those?

The site-specific works were commissioned works that were painted directly on functional surfaces like walls and doorways, and not meant for future display. There was no canvas or frame. They became part of the space or part of the decoration. And importantly, they were impermanent. When the venue ended the wall was painted over and the “art” ended. This was important for Palermo because it stressed paint but challenged traditional notions of painting.



Graue Schelbe [Gray Disk], 1970. Oil paint and synthetic paint on cotton on wood-core plywood. Collection Olga Lina and Stella Liza Knoebel



You and all the writers on Palermo focus on the idea that he wanted paint to heighten our awareness of materiality, perception and real space, so I was surprised to see the care he gave to documenting site-specific works that sort of contradict that real time, actual experience factor.

He was a perfectionist and wanted to have archival records or work that were in keeping with his ideas. The way he displayed the preparatory drawings and installation photographs, you see that what he does in them is emphasize that this representation or record of the experience, regardless of how beautifully it is made and hung, can never replace, equal or be the real-time experience of the work. The records remind us that the record can never be the work itself.

That's very true. They are so lovely that you end up saying, "Gosh, I wish I had seen this in person." He accomplished his goal.

Since the museum's remodel, Gordon Bunshaft's design of the Hirshhorn, with its curved walls, is truly a perfect fit for Palermo. My favorite piece called *Butterfly II*, from 1969, is just a long vertical rectangle with this one wing-like triangle near the top. Its painted surface points you down into the next space and the next piece carries on from there down our curved walls. This spatial activation happens when our building and all the works kind of sing together.

Coney Island II, 1975. Acrylic paint on aluminum.
Collection Ströher, Darmstadt



Any other showstoppers?

One of the last paintings he does before he dies is painted on metal and owned by Julian Schnabel who will be talking on Palermo here on May 13. This untitled work is open, loose, painterly and a bright, odd yellow. After a long time looking at edges and space, this work hints at — and this is speculation — a way he might have been thinking of going had he not died.

Schmetterling II [Butterfly II], 1969. Oil paint, canvas, wood, and composite board. MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main; former collection Karl Ströher, Darmstadt