

Pedagogy and Painting

Blinky Palermo, Joseph Beuys and the Sociality of Semblance

Brendan Getz



Blinky Palermo Retrospective, Dia Art Foundation Curated by Lynne Cooke, 2011

Lesser known in the United States than his German peers of the Düsseldorf Academy Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, Blinky Palermo is just as highly regarded in Germany and perhaps even more mythologized. His untimely and mysterious death at the age of 33 in 1977 while traveling in the Maldives, stopped short a life that came to be as enigmatic and precarious as his work.¹³ To research Blinky Palermo is to find a similar effect of vertigo as to experience the work itself. The multitude of disparate and often contradictory points of view that embody the literature and criticism surrounding it is notable. What is clear, however, is the degree to which his work continues to perplex and evade categorization yet command a unique and renewable resonance. As a form of non-declarative work, performing inexpression that refuses to be read, it paradoxically calls to be read into, or even perhaps through. It is precisely this mysterious quality of 'illegible recognition' that seems to have aided its resistance to historical compartmentalization. It may be just this quality that gives it its power in an ethical dimension of engagement with another, one that keeps it alive and relevant in our current sociopolitical landscape.

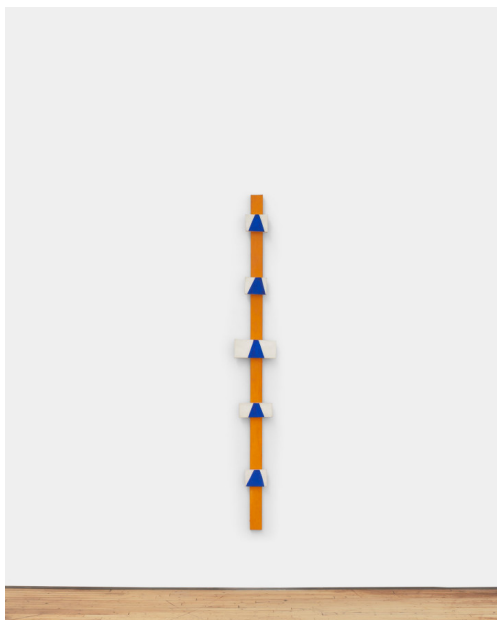
Seen through the lens of Theodor Adorno, this body of work gestures beyond itself as a form of semblance, or as he tells us, "art is semblance in that, in the midst of meaninglessness, it is unable to escape the suggestion of meaning."¹ Semblance for Adorno is the German word *Schein*, which in its layered meaning can also be translated as a seeming like, or gleaming light, or a ticket to hold the place for something else. On the other hand, the opacity of difference found between an object of thought, and its non-identical relationship to something else, is demonstrated in the pedagogy of Palermo's notable teacher, Joseph Beuys, and extends through to his students. This "poetics of relation," as Édouard Glissant offers us, is vital in its fecundity as an "aesthetics of turbulence" or a process of social exchange.⁶ Further, an inter-subjective questioning of the isolated individual, one that begins in the work itself, proves to be a poignant reminder of the ways in which art as a non-discursive medium is coextensive with the discursive space of sociopolitical critique, where history, myth, sentiment, reason and material form are couched in, and dependent upon, one another. It is

a prototype that inscribes itself on an ever-renewing basis in the time and place it is found to be in, including in and from the life of Palermo himself.



Blinky Palermo / Peter Schwarze

Born Peter Schwarze in 1943 with his twin brother Michael to a single mother in Leipzig Germany, both would be adopted that year by Wilhelm and Erika Heisterkamp– who would raise them as their own.⁶ Peter wouldn't become aware of his origin story until 1961, three years after the death of his adopted mother Erika. With a foundation in the field of graphic design in the Bauhaus tradition, he entered the famed Düsseldorf Academy in 1964 at age 21, where he would claim the attention and pedagogical resonance of Joseph Beuys.¹⁴ For the next three years in art school, he would build a body of work that is prominently featured in his oeuvre today, unusual for any developing artist.



Blinky Palermo Totem 1964-1967
(produced in art school)



Joseph Beuys and Blinky Palermo

A Turn to Pedagogy, Teaching Beyond Didacticism for Beuys

Palermo's relationship with the pedagogy of Beuys is complex, but what is apparent in both artists is the merging of analytical thought with that of feeling through self-reflexive aesthetics— thinking via sense and sensing via thought. Both artists shared a poetics of semblance and prototype through form, color and gesture, while importantly offsetting the conceptual constructs or 'origins' that preclude them. This includes rejecting a Cartesian mind-body dualism that produced an artificial tension of the faculties, while at the same time refusing to reduce a notion of the individual to an isolated unit. While their work may appear different on a surface reading, both practices stage possibilities for reorganization and consider aesthetics as ethical and critical engagement. Looking further into these shared sensibilities between teacher and student requires a closer look into the formation of Joseph Beuys as a postwar German artist.

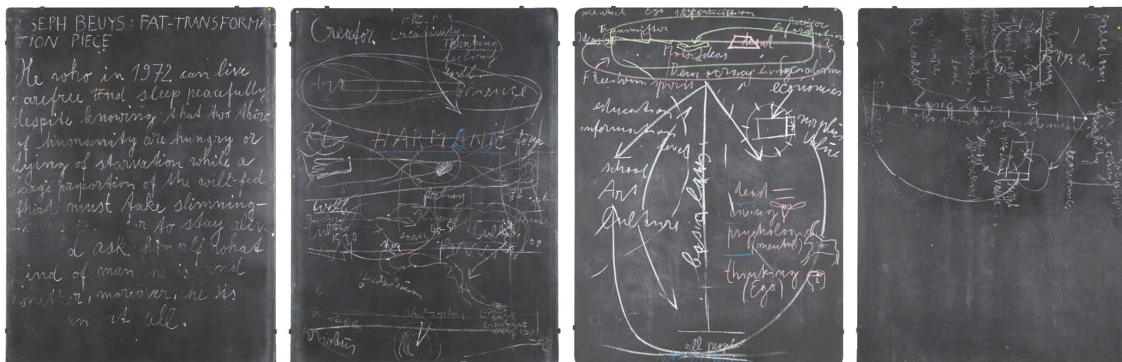
There is a long tradition of German Idealism going back to Immanuel Kant, who sought to liberate reason from outside influence, situating it as the sole product of the individual subject. This didn't dismiss emotion, but highly regarded it for playing a role in constituting analytical reason, something clearly exploited by the rise of fascism in the 20th century, as is often critically cited with respect to German Romanticism. However, a patriarchal suspicion of sentimentality established a narrow and specific application of emotion. For Kant, "We have both spirited and tender emotions. The latter, if they rise to [strong] affections, are worthless; the propensity to them is called sentimentality. A sympathetic grief that will not admit of consolation, or one referring to imaginary evils to which we deliberately surrender ourselves— being deceived by fancy— as if they were actual, indicates and produces a tender though weak soul, which shows a beautiful side and which can be called fanciful, though not enthusiastic."⁷ A leap for Joseph Beuys was to go beyond this paradigm, traversing the tender territory ascribed to the sentimental, while reconstituting the subject as a malleable and relational project. This is something close to what the theorist Jean-Luc Nancy, whose own writing proved poetically coextensive with his life as a heart transplant recipient, might call a "singular plural."¹¹ Beuys understood the linkages and vertiginous regressions of positing an origin or singularity and attempted to lay bare the mechanics of reality construction for others to reassemble as a community project. This is reflected in Beuys' formulation of sculpture and his often-quoted statement, "everyone an artist," on which he clarified as not an individualist declaration but a structure of a "social organism."

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| <i>Thinking Forms</i> — | how we mould our thoughts |
| <i>Spoken Forms</i> — | how we shape our thoughts into words |
| SOCIAL STRUCTURE— | how we mould and shape the world in which we live: Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone an artist. ¹⁵ |

Beuys' connection to a politically romantic notion of art production, albeit inverted in its challenge to an absolute individualism, opposed the other bedrock of contemporary art, Marcel Duchamp, and his individualist anti-political position. Sides were drawn, and many seemed to take the Duchampian path. Benjamin

Buchloh, the critic most associated with Gerhard Richter, wrote in his 1980 essay *Beuys: The Twilight Of The Idol*, that Beuys project is “simple-minded Utopian drivel lacking elementary political and educational practicality.” He goes on to write “Beuys’ existential and ideological followers and admirers, as opposed to his bourgeois collectors and speculators, are blindfolded like cultists by their leader’s charisma. As usual with charisma, this seems to be nothing but a psychic interaction between hyperactive unconscious processes at the edge of sanity and the zombie-like existence of supposed normality in which individuation has been totally extinguished, so it seems perfectly necessary to become a ‘follower’ of whomever seems to be alive.”²

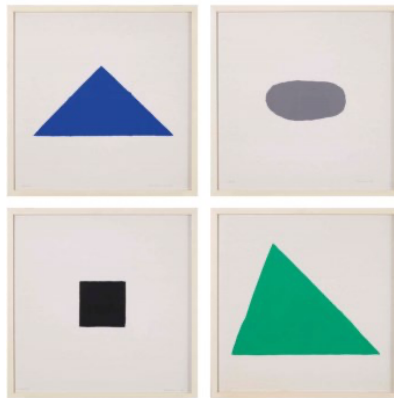
Cult leader charisma notwithstanding, Buchloh’s unsubtle subtext likens Beuys’ project to fascist leaders, of which Beuys historical involvement as a youth is nevertheless unfortunately associated. It is conceivable however that a post-war artist in Germany is entirely galvanized by a direct experience with industrialized violence and fascism, and looking at Beuys own work and words seem to indicate his entire project is responding to such a crisis, one that continues today. In Beuys’ own words to the question, “WHAT CAN WE DO?” he responds “This only way is NON-VIOLENT TRANSFORMATION. Non-violent, not because violence does not seem to promise success at the moment or for some special reasons. No. Non-violence has to be based on human, spiritual and moral and social and political grounds. On the one hand, the dignity of man is inextricably bound up with the inviolability of the person, and whoever disregards this, leaves the plane of being human. On the other hand, the systems which need to be changed are built on violence of every imaginable kind. Therefore, every way of using violence is an expression of conformity which thus consolidates that which it wants to dissolve.”¹⁵ Of course, the problematic notion of a humanist stance pertains to who may be granted access to the plane of being human, something historically denied to many groups with horrifying repercussions. It is in the space of inter-subjectivity however, where the shared non-individual status of being coextensive yet non-identical with others allows for a capacious approach to emerge for Beuys. Here we may consider the prototype, as a contingent placeholder for possibility. Viola Michely writes of Beuys, “[he] embodied a prototype of the teacher, the academic, the social reformer. Roundtable discussions were part of his artistic concept. The blackboards that were inscribed with the results of these discussions and the discussion protocols became works of art; the discussion itself became an art form of self-portrayal.”¹⁰



Joseph Beuys Four Blackboards 1972

A Semblance of Blinky Palermo

As Palermo's work has been considered mature from the time of his closest relationship with that of Beuys, the connection is clear in a sense of history, but more importantly through its manifest form. While Beuys' work offered prototypes of a teacher, or reformations of oneself as a practice of speculative self-portrayal, Palermo playfully distilled this notion of 'shaping' through 'shape.' Beuys' speculative chalkboards can be received as Palermo's speculative shapes, where 'shaping' and 'shaped' are interdependent concepts. A semblance of one another, as a relationship between life and art may suggest, is a powerful resonance between Beuys and Palermo. The porosity between life and art, or provision for a prototype, reverberates through and beyond the work of Blinky Palermo, all the way to his name. It would be at the Düsseldorf Academy that Peter Heisterkamp would become Blinky Palermo, named by another student for his likeness to the mob affiliated boxing promoter of Sonny Liston. This likeness, or name for appearance, effectively placed Palermo himself in a congruency with that of an art object— it looks like a 'thing,' so it could be called a 'thing,' and yet that 'thing' is not there, nor does it refer to that 'thing' as a signifier. In the case of his name, it would not be that he becomes a representation of the 'original' Blinky Palermo, but a displacement of an origin, a "uniqueness without unity" as Jacques Derrida had described in *Monolingualism Of The Other: Or, The Prosthesis Of Origin*.⁵ It is just this conceptual and linguistic displacement that appears throughout his body of work as prototypes for possibilities, contingent upon the existence of something else. In other words, the work is not in the formal object, but in the promise of a situation, without declaring it imminently so— a deferral of mutual origination between artist and viewer given in the form of the prototype.



4 Prototypes 1970

Prototypes, Subject to Change

The prototype is a model, a provisional form subject to change. More importantly however, it's contingent upon another form to be realized— a promised form yet to come. As a promise however, it does not yet exist, or the promise would be unnecessary, but the presence of something beyond itself is actualized in a way to what J. L. Austin outlined in *Speech Act Theory*. A prototype only stands as a prototype, insofar as it exists in relation— a correlation to something 'other' with a potential, yet unsecured existence. As a model of mutually dependent ontology, we might find something analogous to the way language itself functions between us. As a meaningful function, particularly as it pertains to the formation of the self, Derrida found a curious ontology occurring within the situation of language.

The self requires a non-self in order to be a meaningful term. Without the identification of 'the other,' the self would not be identified. For Derrida, language exists as a promise of 'the other,' a promise that something other than oneself may exist, in that the formation of the 'I' occurs in the situation of language. A kind of 'Prosthetic Origin' appears, a precarious placeholder of contingency that might hold a provisional basis for identification. In *Monolingualism Of The Other: Or, The Prosthesis Of Origin*, Derrida writes: "the formation of the speaking-I [dire-je], the me-I [moi-je], or the appearance, as such, of a pre-egological ipseity. This I would have formed itself, then, at the site of a situation that cannot be found, a site always referring elsewhere, to something other, to another language, to the other in general. It would have located [situé] itself in the non locatable [insituable] experience of language in the broad sense of the word."⁵ In a similar way, Palermo's formal language holds as a precarious placeholder of contingency for something other than its own object. It both annihilates and extends itself before the viewer as a promise, or prototype.



Gelber Fluß 1976

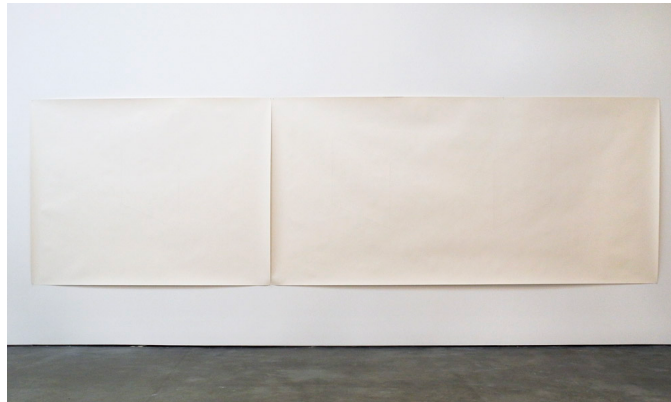
However, the power of that speculation is in direct relation to its banality, or perhaps its modesty. The simplified gestures, colors, scale and forms that Palermo engages in, are utterly plausible. The more plausible the speculation, the closer to the 'real' it sits in proximity— yet it will lastingly, and necessarily be deferred away as a promise. This tension inherent in the 'nearly actualized,' sends the viewer into a vertigo, the conditions of which are upheld by the viewers engagement with the space of the work in its 'incomplete totality.' Palermo's work defers conclusions while gesturing to another iteration, and yet 'abstraction' as platonic form is rendered with parodic specificity.

Parody and Parity

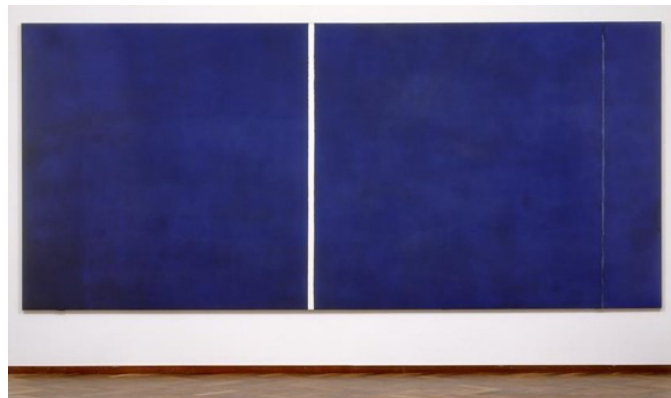
A likeness can become parody when difference is strategically emphasized, as seen in the genre of caricature. Blinky Palermo's art practice is not a caricature of Joseph Beuys' work, nor does his work operate as caricature. However, there is humor in Palermo, much more so than in Beuys, where laughter can be a response to a sudden departure from expectation, something Palermo sets up well in multiple domains. The form of semblance that is parody can become parity or equivocation if an 'authentic original' is challenged as an origin. Here again Derrida's "prosthetic origin" is useful, as Palermo's work does not descend fully into parody or parity, but rather uses qualities of both in correspondence. As Blinky Palermo the American boxing promoter was a producer of boxers to enter the ring, so too was Blinky Palermo the German artist, whose polemical work came to make its argument. Yet its argument was couched in appreciation, both

for discourse and the landscape it depends on, which gave meaning to the work in its capacity to reassemble a sense for reality.

These metaphysical issues were certainly of consequence to Barnett Newman, whom Palermo greatly admired, and was clearly impacted by. Newman's exploration into figure/ground inversions, and correlative qualities stemmed from an interest in human relations as it pertains to inter-subjectivity, and the delineation of the self. About his own work, Newman remarked, "It's no different, really, from meeting another person. One has a reaction to the person physically. Also, there's a metaphysical thing, and if a meeting of people is meaningful, it affects both [of] their lives."¹²



Blinky Palermo II-1 and II-2, 1974



Barnett Newman Cathedra, 1951

With respect to the other, Emmanuel Levinas posited “[that] the relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other’s place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery.”⁸

This Mystery Levinas speaks of, is that of an irreconcilable alterity, or that which is outside of the experience of a ‘self.’ The way in which we approach this, or apprehend this notion, is perhaps of the highest consequence for a humane sociopolitical approach to our current climate. To recognize not only the unresolvable difference of the other, but the fact that it is required for us to meaningfully be an ‘I,’ a ‘door that swings both ways’ as one is bound to another, is a foundation for ethical engagement with our community. The ‘I’ is not an

isolated occurrence, but as constituted by and with 'the other,' it may only be a promise or a prototype. The 'door that swings both ways' may not be a door at all, but simply outline or identify a blueprint for a membrane, established simply by imagining the other, a prototype for a necessary alterity. In this way, so too may be the 'I' in the work of Palermo, as the reciprocal and precarious relation to the paradoxical displacement of the 'real'— the Mystery, by virtue of other mysteries. Importantly however, for Palermo and Beuys, while life and art may find porous exchanges, they are not a unity. The connections they make, the way they interface, the relations that result, are their own transient entities. The hyphenated space of semblance is not what it resembles, but it may gesture toward a gleaming prototype of what might plausibly emerge. As a self-reflective practice, it is inherently and intimately critical, leveraging the abyssal gap of the non-discursive realm of art, to refresh and reorganize the discursive world of language at the threshold of understanding.



Blaues Dreieck 1969

To The People of New York City

Palermo's final work would be produced in 1976, one year before the artist's death. It was a large installation, titled 'To The People Of New York City,' composed in 15 parts, including 40 aluminum panels painted in the colors of the German flag; cadmium red, cadmium yellow, and black.³ They were arranged in varying combinations, eluding any decipherable, concrete sequence— except for the black panels to consistently be placed to the far right. As a post-war German artist, national identity was a very complicated issue, serving as both a lead anchor, and a propellant for distance.⁹ This gesture of a reconfigured German flag, with a deliberate dedication to New York in the title, may read as another gesture of identity in relation. A displacement of reconfiguration, that finds itself to be a prototype of how one could exist— or more consequentially, how one finds themselves existing. It strikes as a hopeful gesture, but one that follows the poetics of relation all the way down. As Édouard Glissant put it, "Thought of the Other is the moral generosity disposing me to accept the principle of alterity, to conceive of the world as not simple and straightforward, with only one truth-mine...The other of Thought is precisely this altering. Then I have to act. That is the moment I change my thought, without renouncing its contribution. I change, and I exchange. This is an aesthetics of turbulence whose corresponding ethics

is not provided in advance. If, thus, we allow that an aesthetics is an art of conceiving, imagining, and acting, the other of Thought is the aesthetics implemented by me and by you to join the dynamics to which we are to contribute. This is the part fallen to me in an aesthetics of chaos, the work I am to undertake, the road I am to travel...The other of Thought is always set in motion by its confluences as a whole, in which each is changed by and changes the other.”⁶



To The People of New York City 1976

Blinky Palermo was a sketch that implied another drawing, a reproduction of a reproduction. His was a promise of the other, through the other, in a uniquely derivative and incomplete reconfiguration of language as a quietly bold, unspectacular silence between spaces. As a life and work that continues to open like a nested doll on our collective consciousness, it defies its own finitude, while maintaining specificity in relation to self and other. It holds a tremendous power in its call for intimacy, not simply for the small scale in which Palermo favored, but for the break in its open and fallible voice, that speaks louder in its form than an illustrative or denotive word might. This is what keeps it elusive, while simultaneously relevant: an active metaphysics of contingency toward that which is most plausible yet denies its own existence through its promise— from one form to another.



Peter Schwarze / Blinky Palermo

Notes

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- 10) Michely, Viola. *Letters As Works Of Art. Beuys and James Lee Byars**. Claudia Mesch/Viola Michely (Hg.): *Joseph Beuys. The Reader*. London/New York, 2007: 88 -106.
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