

## Exchange

David Reed

The artist John Baldessari, Blinky Palermo's friend, pointed out to me that it was no accident that Palermo adopted a gangster's name: since he died in 1977 at the age of 33, his work has been surrounded by a powerful myth based on his life and tragic death. But the trouble with such a myth is that it focuses on the persona of the artist and the uniqueness of the work, so much so that the work is at risk of being isolated from that of the artist's contemporaries, from common concerns and aspirations. In my alternative approach, I propose to view his work in a historical and cultural context. This self-imposed challenge has provoked an emotional experience for me, because it touches on a process that is dear to me in my own work: "exchange," as Palermo once called it.

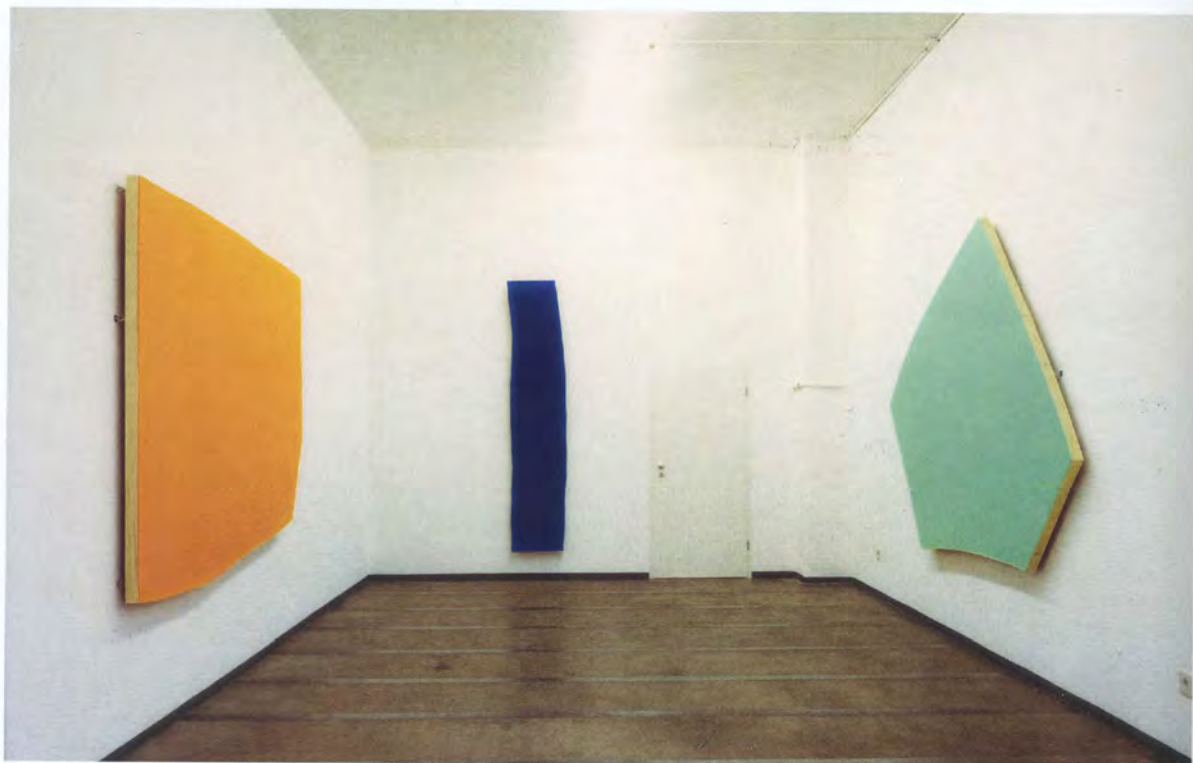
Exchange between artists can range from a casual chat at an opening to an extended, intense relationship of a special kind that occurs when artists recognize they share a certain perception of the world or an elusive sensation. Two individuals might prod each other to reciprocally develop their art. A great example of this kind of exchange was brought to public view through the Cézanne-Pissarro exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2005. There are many other examples of such pairs in art history—think of Giorgione and Titian, Géricault and Delacroix, Drouais and David, Gorky and de Kooning.

As artists, we are aware of the "anxiety of influence," the competitive and conflicted relations with our contemporaries and between generations. Such potentially negative dynamics can be countered by exchange. Because within a lifetime, one can barely accomplish all the developments necessary to making original art, these exchange relationships become critical. I'm not talking about influence; I'm not talking about competition—who did something first or better. It's a misconception that one person can alone claim artistic discovery, since art develops socially and psychologically.

Exchange relationships often have a limited duration. This can be because of their intensity and because of human weakness. The death of one of the artists, however, often intensifies rather than ends the other's relationship to the work of the deceased. This is the case in each of the pairs of artists I mentioned above. Upon the death of Gorky, de Kooning wrote in a letter to *ARTnews*:

**Sir: In a piece on Arshile Gorky's memorial show—and it was a little piece indeed—it was mentioned that I was one of his influences. Now that is plain silly. When, about fifteen years ago, I walked into Arshile's studio for the first time, the atmosphere was so beautiful that I got a little dizzy and when I came to, I was bright enough to take the hint immediately. If the bookkeepers think it necessary continuously to make sure of where things and people come from, well then, I come from 36 Union Square.**

I would first like to thank Lynne Cooke for the opportunity to give the talk on which this essay is based and for our conversations about Palermo. Thank you also to Thordis Moeller and Peter Buchholz for our exchange. Moeller's catalogue raisonné continues to be an invaluable resource. I would especially like to thank Christine Mehring and Pia Gottschaller for their writing and our conversations. I would like to thank Ulrike Müller and Matt Wolf for their help with research and editing; Müller translated most of the quotations of Gerhard Richter from the original German, published in *"To the people . . ." Sprechen über Blinky Palermo*, ed. Digne M. Marcovicz (Cologne: Walther König, 2003). And I would like to thank many friends and colleagues who have talked to me about their memories of Palermo and shared their perceptions of his work. Sometimes I'm sure that I've asked strangers and friends questions about Palermo to the point of being a single-minded bore and I apologize. Sometimes I got surprises.



Imi Knoebel, *24 Farben—für Blinky*, 1977. Installation view at Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Cologne, 1977. Dia Art Foundation, New York.

Overleaf: Palermo installing *Dreieck über einer Tür*, 1969.

Palermo's death had an enormous effect on a number of artists to an extent that is remarkable—perhaps other cases of such a wide effect would be the deaths of Jean-Germain Drouais and Annibale Carracci. Many of Palermo's German colleagues were affected by it, especially his longtime friends Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Imi Knoebel. Each, I feel, connects his own work to different aspects of Palermo's to continue an exchange. I admire very much how they keep Palermo alive in their work.

Knoebel dedicated a piece to his friend's memory in a series of twenty-four large, free-shaped paintings, *24 Farben—für Blinky* (*24 Colors—for Blinky*, 1977). Before this work, all of Knoebel's work had been in black and white, except for one painting in green, a color that Palermo had helped him identify and find. Knoebel explained in a recent interview that he feels indebted to Palermo for bringing color into his work:

**Well, Palermo was a master of colour and that's why I dedicated it to him. He was dead and it wasn't until then that I took the colours. It was not without reason that he accompanied me in my search for the green. I didn't have any experience with colours. I didn't even know what they were. I had never before painted a colour. And that was actually an act of violence—to take the colours, to use them. But the time was ripe!**

Immediately following *24 Farben—für Blinky*, Knoebel painted *American Wall* (1977), using red, yellow, and blue, and consequently color began to open up further possibilities for him.

The simpler divisions and colors of Polke's recent fabric paintings also seem to me to reflect a memory of Palermo. While Palermo was living in Düsseldorf, and both artists were using store-bought fabrics, the two had gone together to buy cloth. Describing these outings, Polke complains that Palermo was no fun because he never picked patterned fabrics.

Richter is especially articulate about the closeness of his relationship. Like de Kooning, he remembers the first visit to his friend's studio:

**[Palermo] had a totally shabby little studio, and then there was, as if it were surrounded by a halo, an immaculate cloth picture, all clean and crisp. That was a beautiful sight! It really impressed me! And we had such a sense [the English word is used in the original] about what was good or bad—that was great!**

Richter recounts that they could see a painting in the same way and decide whether a color or a shape worked, often agreeing. He continues:

**During a period when we spent a lot of time together and he sometimes worked in my studio, we did the collaborative paintings. I don't remember too well. At first, there were two panels. I started to paint one gray and said to Palermo, "Join in, why don't you do one as well?" That was quite pretty. Both of us were spreading this gray paint on the canvas with our fingers. The panels were two by one meters, so together they were two by two meters. Later they were exhibited together, and after that they were ruined. That's how it started! It would occur again sometimes after that. On one occasion there were two Polaroid photographs on the table. I had taken pictures of light bulbs, and I said, "I'm worried about painting them, they're too abstract!" Then he would say, "I will just add another one, which will make it even more abstract!" That's how the beige-brown Krefeld images came about.**

Another shared exploration had to do with the relationship between painting and architectural spaces. In April 1971, Palermo painted the walls of Galerie Heiner Friedrich in Munich with a hand's-width border following the shape of a wall with a positive-negative flip between Munich ochre and white on opposite walls. Upon seeing the show, Richter told Palermo: "I liked it much. Then I said that only sculptures were missing in this kind of a room. Go ahead! We did them ourselves. I made a plaster cast of his face and he supervised mine." The resulting collaborative piece, *Wandmalerei und Skulptur (Wall Painting and Sculpture)*, was shown at Galerie Heiner Friedrich in Cologne, also in 1971. A version in which all four walls are ochre with a white band is now installed at the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus in Munich. I see this collaboration as a monument to their artistic friendship and to the possibilities of painting. In their portraits, Palermo and Richter are literal painters, in fact made out of paint (gray paint over plaster in the original pieces and rendered in paint texture in the bronze version). This piece fills the whole architectural space, controlling it with painting.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, a strong, if ambiguous, interest was developing in Germany for American postwar culture of all kinds, but it's fair to say that Palermo, as compared with his German colleagues, had an unusually strong interest in American art and music, even while he was still studying at Düsseldorf's Kunstakademie. This interest may also have been sparked by ample opportunities to see American art, as exhibitions of American Pop, Minimal, and Postminimal art regularly appeared in such galleries as Heiner Friedrich, Konrad Fischer, Rolf Rieke, and Alfred Schmela, as well as at Kunsthallen and Kunstvereins, even before similar exhibitions were organized in the United States. The Documenta exhibitions in Kassel especially provided extraordinary platforms for international exchange.

A number of American artists exhibited environmental works in Germany. Mel Bochner met Palermo, who was already working on his Wall Drawings and Paintings, at the opening of his show at Konrad Fischer in 1969. Bochner's measurement of space in this show seems related to Palermo's as seen in his show one year later at Konrad Fischer, in which he painted the shape of the stairwell of his studio building on the wall of the same gallery space. Richard Tuttle also exhibited wall drawings in Munich and Cologne during these years.

Dorothea Rockburne met Palermo at Documenta 5 in 1972, when she was installing *Syllogism*. Palermo's contribution was a wall painting in the stairway on the left side of the Museum Friedericianum, between the first and second floors. It was painted with thinned orange lead primer that soaked into the wall. The wall was painted, not all the way to the ceiling, but to the height of a double square, based on the width of the wall along the floor. Down the hallway, directly across from Palermo's wall painting, was a remarkably related piece by Michael Asher—a long, narrow room built in the corridor space. One could have seen both pieces from one spot. While Asher's room was clearly divided in half and painted black on one side and white on the other, the dividing line between Palermo's two stacked squares was indistinct. Asher could not be in Kassel for the Documenta opening, but in September he was in Europe and visited Palermo's studio in Mönchengladbach, where they became friends. I wish we had a record of their conversations.

In November 1970, Palermo and Richter traveled to New York City for the first time. They bought an excursion ticket and stayed at a hotel near Times Square. They visited the studios of Malcolm Morley and Robert Ryman, whom they'd met through Fischer in Düsseldorf. They visited the curator Diane Waldman at the Guggenheim Museum and went to a party for David Hockney. At night, Palermo would go to jazz clubs, sometimes in Harlem. James Rosenquist, whose show of environmental Pop paintings Richter and Palermo had seen together at Rolf Rieke earlier that year,



Left: Wall painting, Documenta 5, Kassel, 1972.

Right: Michael Asher, Installation, Documenta 5, Kassel, 1972.



picked them up for a tour in his convertible and took them to dinner at the revolving restaurant in the Marriott Marquis hotel near Times Square. The two young Germans must have been struck by the speed, size, and diversity of New York. Rosenquist, I understand, likes to say that a day in New York is like getting on a Ferris wheel: you need to get up early and just let the day take you around. Richter remembers the trip:

**We had booked fourteen days with a travel agency, a cheap flight, and a cheap hotel. After ten days we returned, because we were so exhausted and tired from all the walking, walking, walking. We had had enough and we felt for the first time that we were Europeans. We felt a little proud. That was a great experience. We felt European. We were different.**

Of course, this experience is familiar: not only do we encounter difference when we travel to other places, we also recognize something new in ourselves.

A few years later, in the spring of 1973, Palermo's three-week tour of America with his wife, Kristin Heisterkamp, began and ended in New York, where again he visited Waldman and Ryman. They also traveled to Chicago,

Las Vegas, and Los Angeles, where they stayed in Venice Beach with John Knight. Knight and Palermo had met at Documenta 5 and became closer when Knight rented a studio for two months in Mönchengladbach, where Palermo lived at the time. In Los Angeles, Knight took Palermo on an architectural tour of the city. They saw Irving Gill's Horatio West Court and probably the Schindler House on Kings Road. Knight remembers discussing the color of the stucco buildings in Los Angeles, especially the way in which color had been soaked into the walls of Gill's buildings. Palermo often used color that could be related to a particular location, such as the ochre of his wall painting in Munich, which was based on the color commonly used for buildings throughout that city. After Palermo's death, Knight dedicated a trifold multiple edition to Palermo, because it related to their discussions of color.

Baldessari and Asher also remember Palermo's Los Angeles visit. Maria Nordman and Palermo had started a friendship, perhaps after meeting at the 36th Venice Biennale. I wonder whether he saw her project on Pico Boulevard, which was not far from Asher's studio or from where he was staying with Knight. At the time, there was a strong relation between Nordman's work and Palermo's. It fascinates me that Palermo could share his architectural and color interests with these California artists.

In December 1973, Palermo, with encouragement from Friedrich, made the extraordinary decision to move to New York, where he would live and work until 1976. A short time after his move, Palermo was joined by Knoebel, and together they embarked on another trip to the American West in July 1974. Their first stop was in Houston, where Helen Winkler took Palermo to the Rothko Chapel. The harsh Texas afternoon sun presented lighting problems for Mark Rothko's monumental paintings, so they went early in the morning. Palermo entered the chapel alone in the predawn darkness and stayed alone, watching the rising sun illuminate the paintings. It's quite something to imagine him in the chapel watching the paintings emerge from the darkness, sensing their size around him. Even under normal conditions, these paintings overwhelm the space, almost crushing a viewer. This experience must have been intensified for Palermo by the darkness and the protracted sunrise.

Winkler loaned them her Chevy Blazer for their drive west to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where they arrived on the doorstep of Susan Grayson, an American artist whom Palermo had first met when she lived in Cologne and Düsseldorf. The three then drove over the mountains to Santa Fe, stopping in Madrid, a ghost town where Grayson took photographs of Palermo and Knoebel in newly purchased Western wear. At the Santa Fe Museum of Art they saw a show of prints by Agnes Martin—the series *On a Clear Day* (1973)—which marked her return, after seven years, to making art. Martin seems to have wanted to test how far she could go in eliminating

variations from her hand, as the prints, though based on earlier drawings, were redrawn by the printers. The prints, I think, would have been especially interesting to Knoebel, who had done works involving similar issues. It must have been fascinating for them to note that such small prints (a foot square) were conceived in the grand landscape through which they had been driving. Palermo and Knoebel then continued on to Las Vegas, where they saw Walter De Maria's *Las Vegas Piece* (1969) and Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969). They must have been impressed by the large size of these works and how the human body was used for scale—as to measure space in a way that related to the Martin prints.

Perhaps these trips inspired Palermo's special interest in American landscape painting. When Grayson later returned to New York, he complained to her that there was nowhere to see American landscape painting in Manhattan, a fact I also remember well from those years. They went together to the Brooklyn Museum, the only place where they could find such painting. Kasper König remembers that Palermo's favorites were Ralph Albert Blakelock, Albert Pinkham Ryder, Thomas Eakins, and Edward Hopper. I imagine Palermo appreciated them for their individual ways of painting the big space and changing light of the American landscape.

In December 1974, Palermo applied to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service to request an extension of his visa. There he wrote, "During the past two years, I have made several visits to the United States to examine art being made here, to talk and exchange ideas with American artists, and, recently, to create new art works." He goes on to say, "The paintings and drawings I am making in the United States are different from the kind of art I make in Germany. I use different materials and media and I find my work influenced by the country I am in." What were those exchanges with American artists? How and why was Palermo's work in New York different from the work he had done in Germany? How was he "influenced," as he puts it, by being in New York? What contemporary American art interested him? Is his work part of that historical moment in New York? I've often wondered about the dedication of his last work, *To the People of New York City*. How are we to understand this dedication?

I think that from the beginning in New York he had a problem to work on—a possible direction for a way out of the crisis, the dead end, he felt that he was up against in painting. Three of the last paintings Palermo had made in Germany before he left for New York were monochromes on steel, one meter square—a blunt size. He had painted each with a color that he had used on previous wall paintings: the red lead primer he had used for the wall painting in the stairwell at Documenta 5; the gray of the wall painting in Bremerhaven; and the brown of the Hamburg wall painting. These paintings laid out the problem: how would he translate the concerns that had burgeoned in his European wall paintings into portable paintings created in

**Blau/Gelb**, 1965. Casein paint on wood,  
13¾ x 13½ inches (35.1 x 34.1 cm).  
Private collection.



this different context of New York? In Europe, Palermo had made over twenty Wall Drawings and Paintings; in the U.S., he made none. Perhaps this reflects the lack of opportunities for such work in the U.S., where there were no Kunstvereins or Kunsthallen for commissions and the museums were rarely willing to experiment with such work. Palermo didn't want to make conventional easel paintings in New York, but he must have wanted to shift his concerns away from wall painting. The metal made this clear. In New York he was looking for new solutions to the pictorial problem he had set for himself in the wall paintings—how to extend and expand color into architectural space. Palermo felt that he would find the solutions as outgrowths or shifts, which he could discover by seeing how his New York colleagues had dealt with these issues. I think he came to New York in search of this exchange.

In those years in New York, one route for exploration was through the shaped canvas, a strategy that Palermo had already dealt with in his Objects. Another possibility would be what I'll call *internal* shaping—physically dividing the painting from the inside. This does something different than externally shaping a canvas by means of the shaped painting or object painting. With an internal physical edge, the painting folds back into itself, complicating its existence as an object. An early example by Palermo, from his time in Germany, is *Blau/Gelb* (*Blue/Yellow*, 1965). In New York,



Richard Tuttle, **Two**, 1965. Acrylic on plywood, 31½ x 22¾ x 1¼ inches (80 x 57.8 x 3.2 cm). Collection Connie and Jack Tilton Gallery, New York.



Palermo painted about half a dozen double-square paintings on aluminum. The crucial element of these works is the physical division created by joining the two square panels. These divisions are often emphasized, because they are between two areas of the same color, often white or off-white areas between two stronger colors. To my knowledge, this alternative to the shaped canvas has never been isolated and studied, but there are plenty of other examples, including works by Lee Lozano, Brice Marden, Robert Mangold, Richard Tuttle, and Elizabeth Murray. Like a number of my colleagues, I saw Palermo's paintings for the first time in the office or back room of Friedrich's space on Wooster Street in 1974. Though I remember being fascinated by them, I also remember feeling offended by the paintings because they were on metal—a surface I found too unusual, too harsh and tough, too crude. I've since come to love the surface of Palermo's paintings, and I should have recognized then what I was seeing. Of course, I knew nothing about what Palermo had done in Europe. In those years there was not much to read in English about his work, so I was pretty much on my own. Later I traveled to Germany and found out more. Thinking back, I'm not sorry about this, in fact I hope my misunderstandings have been helpful, as an exchange between artists and cultures isn't an exchange of information but instead is a way to impart a sense of possibility—pointing out new ambitions and questions. Palermo's work made problems visible to me that

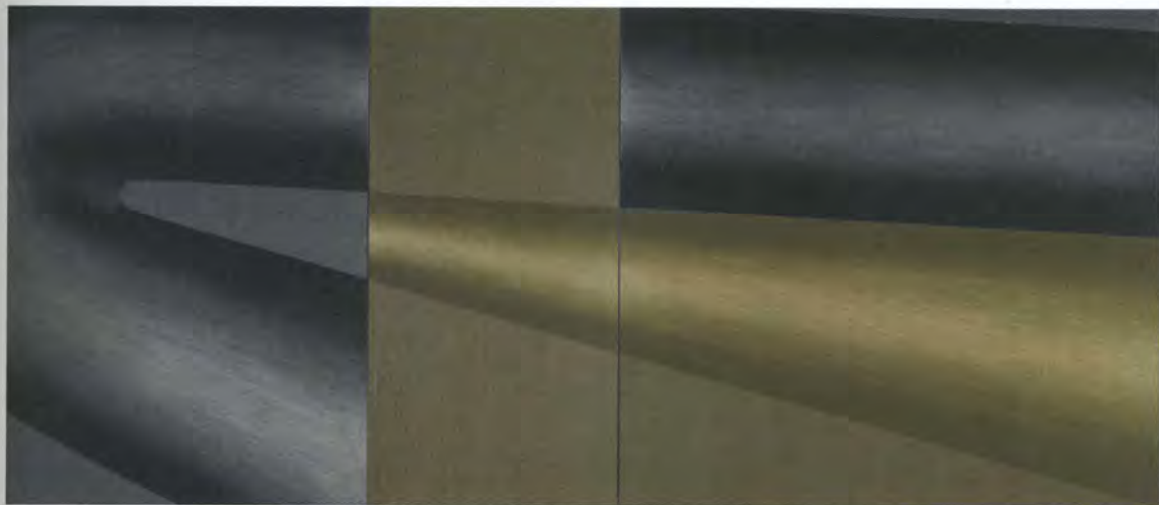


***Times of the Day II***, 1975. Heiner Friedrich, Inc., New York, 1978. Acrylic on aluminium, 22½ x 20½ inches (56.8 x 52 cm), each. Dia Art Foundation, New York.

I hadn't seen before. I was already fairly formed as an artist, so I am not saying that these experiences (not just with Palermo's work but with the work of many European artists) changed me that much, but they did make me understand my position within a larger context, a larger language, of painting. And I became more ambitious.

In an essay on Mangold, Richard Shiff defined surfaces such as those of Palermo as "declarative," "paint applied 'matter-of-factly.'" He stated, "Declarative painting is antithetical not only to the gestural drama of pictorial expressiveness, but also to the 'topical' and the 'beautiful.'" The term comes from Barnett Newman's statement that paintings should declare themselves. The surfaces are workmanlike—as accomplished and skillful as a carefully painted wall.

Palermo's surfaces should have helped me understand another aspect of his work that eventually would become very important to me. A "declarative" surface leads back to the painter and to how the painting was made. In these years of the early and mid-1970s, this emphasis on what we called "process" was crucial. It seemed a way to avoid the decorative and to give purpose. Lozano, for example, painted each of her Wave paintings in one



Lee Lozano, *Slide*, 1965. Oil on canvas, three parts. 72 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 168 x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (183.2 x 426.7 x 3.9 cm), overall. © The Estate of Lee Lozano. Hauser & Wirth, Zurich and London.

session; sessions on some of the later, more complex paintings lasted many hours, pushing her physical stamina and dexterity to the limit. Palermo must have become aware of this performance aspect of painting from his teacher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Joseph Beuys. Sometimes Palermo's *Objects*, done while he was still in Europe, seem to be things found on the street that he would simply wrap in canvas and cover with color. These works are very much implied performances. In New York, Palermo participated in photographic performance pieces with Grayson. She asked Palermo to photographically document a short, absurdist performance, in which she put cigarettes into all the openings in her head. For the last photograph of the series, she photographed Palermo. Grayson also made a short slide piece using a motorized shutter—taking sixty-six photographs of Palermo while he mugged and performed for the camera. Palermo quickly changes, passive then aggressive, playful one moment and serious the next. These photographs give me a better sense of his personality than anything I have read or heard.

Grayson told me that Palermo was interested in how Yves Klein could patent his blue, while at the same time one could go out and find the color on the street. Found color in a painting retains some of the meaning of its former context but becomes unstable—especially when combined with simple, geometric, signlike forms. Robin Bruch and Harriet Korman were working then in New York using this method and approaching their paintings as images in this way. The basic geometric shapes in their paintings work with this tension to make connections—they are both a shape and its representation. Shapes and colors are used in an everyday way, like found objects.

The show that ultimately opened my eyes to Palermo's work was at Friedrich's West Broadway gallery in 1978—several *Times of the Day* paintings were shown. These metal-panel paintings extend the single painted object into a group that expands into the architectural space, absorbing the world



around them. During the same period, there were other artists, including Ralph Humphrey, Jo Baer, César Paternosto, Alan Shields, Joe Overstreet, Harmony Hammond, and Tuttle, who, like Palermo, expanded the architectural boundaries of painting: painting could project three-dimensionally; paintings could wrap around so that they would be impossible to see all at once. These paintings would have to be experienced over time, looked at from different points of view. This situation would make a viewer aware of his or her body in relation to the painting and to the space around the painting.

I didn't understand Palermo's *Schmetterling II* (*Butterfly II*, 1969) until I saw it in the right light conditions at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt. A bright red on the side and back of the painting cast a wonderful pink glow on the white wall around the piece, making it levitate and shimmer. In the way that it makes one perceive the spaces around it, *Schmetterling II* functions almost like a work by Dan Flavin. The fluorescent light of Flavin's works captures the space of the architecture around them. I know of two works that Palermo owned: a Flavin and an edition by Barnett Newman.

The New York School solution, to which Palermo and his contemporaries looked, was to make a painting that was a portable object that could control its environment, a practice that radically changed the nature of what a painting could be. The works, though still called *paintings*, are objects that look outward, expand into the space around them, and make a viewer aware of their environment in a new way. As such, these paintings are a kind of flexible mobile installation/environment. They are wall paintings that have come off the wall. An inspired Franz Kline painted directly onto a wall in his loft on New Year's Eve in 1960; he removed the wall and it became *New Year Wall: Night*. Rothko, by contrast, was commissioned to install his paint-

ings in architectural spaces, a practice that culminated in the Rothko Chapel. Perhaps the greatest result from the New York School was *Stations of the Cross* (1958–66) by Newman, whose work Palermo loved and had probably seen in Amsterdam at the Stedelijk Museum's retrospective in 1972. The New York School established a vocabulary. My two favorite groups to follow Newman's *Stations* are Lozano's Wave paintings and Andy Warhol's *Shadows* (1978–79).

*To the People of New York City* was found in Palermo's studio in Düsseldorf after his death in 1977. Bearing strong affinities with these American predecessors, Palermo's fifteen-part work is made up of forty panels in total. Unlike these referents, the parts vary in size. Palermo's choice of colors for *To the People of New York City*—red, yellow, and black—might be seen as a variant of a Neo-Plastic color scheme, black replacing blue and the white of the wall replacing the Neo-Plastic white painted on the canvas. In fact, Richard Bellamy and Noah Goldowsky invited König and Palermo to visit the New Jersey studio of the late Neo-Plastic artist Burgoyne Diller, whose later sculptures isolated colored forms against the wall behind them. Diller had died in 1965, and his work was then in eclipse, so the visit was remarkable. It reveals Palermo's deep interest in an American understanding of Neo-Plastic painting. König also recently told me that Palermo was attracted to works that Piet Mondrian made in New York. Mondrian had arranged rectangles of color on the walls of his East Fifty-ninth Street studio, creating a kind of proto-wall painting, famously documented by Harry Holtzman after the artist's death. In addition, Palermo looked to Fritz Glarner's work, especially the tondos, which, in an earlier style of environmental painting, covered ceilings and walls, such as those of the Rockefeller family's dining room.

Like Newman's *Stations*, Palermo's panels relate to one another in sequence. The relations between these groups of paintings change, sometimes shifting backward or forward, between the last painting of the previous group and the first of the following, creating a series of sliding relationships. The unusual perceptual effect of Newman's paintings influenced Palermo: the force of an area of a color counts in a way that it doesn't in other paintings. One is aware of the size of the areas of color in relation to one another. How does Newman do this? One way is through the use of hidden squares, which sometimes underlie the divisions of the paintings. In *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV* (1969–70), there are red and yellow squares on either side of the central zip.

The near squares established in most of the panels of *To the People of New York City* create relationships *between* the panels. Palermo also revolves the proportional relations of height and width in the parts in sequence. This increases the relations between the panels in a way that boosts the Newman effect. For example, the heights of Parts I to IV match





Piet Mondrian's study at 5 East 59th Street, New York, 1943-44. © 2009 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust.

Facing page: Palermo's studio shortly after his death, Düsseldorf, 1977.

the width of Part V. And there are relations between internal shapes and external proportions.

Parts XI to XIV are double-square meters — a beautifully even number, a standard size, a conceptual size, that fits into a proportional system Palermo brought with him to New York from Europe. But for me, the size of the paintings is unfamiliar, because it is not standard in the U.S. Other panels are a meter high or 125 cm high. Part V is a strangely uneven dimension in height: 26.5 cm. Where does this come from? It doesn't seem to relate as a proportion to 100 cm in any interesting way.

In my calls to those who knew Palermo, there were occasional surprises, and one occurred during a discussion with Knight, who said that he remembered Palermo talking about his Metal Pictures in relation to the I beam columns in New York subway stations. Palermo, according to Knight, was interested in the way the columns were painted during a subway-beautification project at the time. The interiors of the I beams were painted one color and the exterior (flat sides and edges) another. The layered paint on the subway columns does, in fact, remind me of the surface of Palermo's paintings on metal, and the subway theme seems to fit with Palermo's obsession with ways of moving from one place to another — the paintings over doorways, stairways as forms and as locations for wall paintings, and the early

Burgoyne Diller, *First Theme*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 72 x 71¾ inches (182.9 x 182.2 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum purchase with funds provided by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund.



painting *Blaue Brücke* (*Blue Bridge*, 1964–65). (Pia Gottschaller speculates in this publication that Palermo may have conceived of *To the People of New York City* while on a plane flying between New York and Europe.) And there is the fact that Palermo used similar I beams in his installation in 1976 at the Venice Biennale. The sizes of the panels might be seen in this light as a working out of two different systems, one based on familiar sizes in Europe and one based on familiar sizes in New York. Sometimes these different sizes fit together, and sometimes they conflict. In this specific way, the painting manifests Palermo's attempt to resolve differences between Europe and New York. *To the People of New York City* seems to be dedicated to just the kind of people who would be riding the subways: diverse and working class.

*To the People of New York City* discourages systematic thinking. It asks questions about aspects of painting that are usually taken for granted: What is an individual painting? Can one painting be a group of separated panels? If so, when are single panels also paintings? Can all forty panels be a painting? Are there relations in the order of the colors? Are there relations between proportions? One gets a restless, dislocated feeling trying to figure out an order in the paintings. No system works. As soon as one decides that there is a given, something consistent, or a logic that works, an exception becomes evident. In the sketchbook for the work, a strange notation on a





Barnett Newman, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV*, 1969–70. Oil on canvas, 107½ x 237½ inches (274 x 603 cm). Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

drawing for the single panel of Part XV reveals that it is the only panel consisting of uneven horizontal divisions. It says that the top division on the left is 36 cm down on the left and 36.5 cm down on the right, making this edge not perfectly horizontal. This seemed strange, so I measured it at Dia:Beacon and the measurements logged in the drawing are exactly right—the edge drops down on the right 0.5 cm. This subtly but strangely twists the space of the painting. And the notation in the notebook proves that this is a purposeful gesture. Of course, it could have been an accident that happened in the process of working, and Palermo liked the accident and recorded it in his notebook, or, more likely in my opinion, Palermo decided he wanted to break another given. He makes a question out of an assumption. It's not even clear what is horizontal.

Order might be seen to have been achieved, however, if one ignores the colors of the top and bottom bands, focusing instead on the central squares. The black square is always in the panel that is the farthest to the right in every part; and, in the four single panels, Parts XI to XIV, again the two black squares are on the right, if they are put in numerical sequence. Black is handled in a different way than the other two colors: it is the source, the first step. It seems to me that Palermo made this the first decision, and the rest of the color order derives from this initial resolution. Each of the parts demonstrates Malevich's theory that the black square is the beginning of new potential for painting. Color flows, in each part, from the black square in the panel on the far right to the panels in reverse sequence to the left. This flow is in the opposite direction of the numerical order of the panels and parts and counters our Western habit of reading from left to right. In a counterflow of color, one reads the panels in sequence from left to right and then unreads them from right to left, prompted by the black rectangles to the far right of each part.

"If I could, I would say that one should perceive [Palermo's] works like a breath," Palermo's teacher Beuys once said. *To the People of New York City* is indeed a movement to the right in sequence and a countermovement to the left in color, breathing in and breathing out.

It is remarkable to me that Palermo moved to New York to take on specifically the issues of New York painting. He handled these issues from his own European point of view and came up with answers different from those of the American painters. But they were recognizable answers, which is why his work was so relevant to painters of my generation and felt connected to them, and why it continues to be so influential for younger generations in New York.

Looking over the notes from my talks with artists who knew Palermo, I've been struck by a common theme: Alan Uglow told me how he and Palermo cut a hole in the fence so they could sneak onto the field at Pratt to play soccer. Ryman and Palermo played pool in Ryman's studio while discussing the technical problems of painting on metal surfaces. Several people have also told me that they remember Palermo playing pinball at Magoo's and the Three Roses Bar on Church Street. The only German artist to come to Bochner's opening at Fischer's gallery in 1969 in Düsseldorf, Palermo joined him for drinks at a bar, where they enjoyed a game of pinball:

**While we drank, we played pinball, a popular and intensely competitive sport among the local art crowd who hung out at this bar. The form it took was to cover the upright part of the pinball table with a coat so nobody could tell who was winning, then play for increasingly higher and higher stakes as the game went on, only knowing what the score was at the end of the game when the coat was removed. It was great fun and lasted well into the night. I don't remember who won.**

Exchanges can happen in many ways: games are one. Play can be a way to open up rigid systems.

During my trips to Germany, I visited the studios of a number of painters in Cologne and Düsseldorf where I noticed blue isosceles right triangles over studio doorways. One day, I finally asked about them and found out that Palermo had painted triangles above doorways to the studios of his colleagues, in homage. At one time, Palermo's triangles—which could have been found above the doorways leading to the studios of, among others, Richter in Germany and Ryman in New York—might have been seen as a symbol of their exchange. Back then it somehow didn't seem necessary to analyze and figure out things, as we feel pressure to do now. There was a freedom in this attitude, and perhaps this is why I find those times so interesting. The possibilities still remained open.

