

Christine Mehring. *Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. 297 Pages;

Suzanne P. Hudson. *Used Paint: Robert Ryman.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. 315 Pages.

In our time, the single artist monograph is becoming an endangered species. Recent titles in art history increasingly seem to be centered around movements, historical periods, or thematic or theoretical concerns. History seems doubly set against monographs concerning a single painter, the twin specters of the death of the author and the death of painting looming large over would-be scholars of Poussin, Velázquez, Pollock, or Richter. In the shadow of these twin presumed obsolescences, we find Christine Mehring and Suzanne P. Hudson's respective monographic studies *Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era* and *Used Paint: Robert Ryman*.

The names of Palermo and Ryman are relatively familiar to scholars of postwar art—Ryman probably more so than Palermo on this continent. However, while most of us at least know generalities such as the fact that Ryman only painted in white, both of these painters remain largely under-studied, neither fitting neatly into survey texts or courses alongside Warhol, Judd, or even Acconci or Haacke. Mehring and Hudson both take this marginalized condition as their point of departure, attributing it to their respective subjects' choice of medium. The question thus arises: how do we discuss semi-neglected artists when the conventional format with which to do so has also fallen into neglect?

Unlike, say, Warhol or Rauschenberg, who made paintings but for whom the medium was not their primary concern, Palermo and Ryman are both what we might call "painter's painters." Following the centrality of painting to Palermo and Ryman's respective practices, Mehring and Hudson both follow the traditional conceit of narrating the careers of their subjects in chronological periods that divide the two texts into chapters dealing with different mediumistic or formal concerns. With Palermo, the task is easy, almost obvious. While the periods do overlap, the first works of his brief career were painted sculptural objects. He then moved on to *Stoffbilder* (cloth paintings), wall paintings and drawings, and finally, shortly before his early death, to *Metallbilder* (metal paintings).⁵ Dividing Ryman's

⁵ This division of Palermo's career into four distinct *oeuvres* was introduced by Anne Rorimer in her 1978 *Artforum* article "Blinky Palermo: Objects, 'Stoffbilder,' Wall Paintings" (though Palermo

much longer career comes with more difficulty, as Hudson herself acknowledges. Like Mehring's text, *Used Paint* proceeds chronologically, though, as Hudson warns in her introduction, "some years are retraced" (24). She divides her text into five chapters—somewhat fancifully, she has named them "Primer," "Paint," "Support," "Edge," and "Wall"—the last four each dealing with an aspect of Ryman's engagement with the mediumistic characteristics of painting. Unlike that of Palermo, Ryman's career cannot be divided neatly into a few mini-*oeuvres*. The seeming sameness of Ryman's work—most obviously his almost exclusive use of white paints—is countered here by the implication of a developing career in which the artist moves from one aspect of painting to another, successively "testing" the limits of process, material, shape, and exhibition.⁶ It is not necessarily Hudson's intention to narrate Ryman's career as a linear trajectory of formal or mediumistic development, though the artist obviously did add to his practice while retaining earlier concerns through the course of the fifty years that the text takes us through. Indeed, Hudson describes her project as "less about constructing a normative monograph . . . than offering a series of interlocking essays on Ryman" (24). However, the monographic format, combined with the chronological nature of her inquiry, works against what seems to be her true intention: to analyze different facets of Ryman's practice that happen to largely coincide with decades of his career.

Both texts also situate their subjects according to a formative early influence, almost in the manner of an origin story. Mehring begins with Palermo's enrollment in Joseph Beuys's famous class at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Among his fellow students were Imi Knoebel, Imi Giese, and Jörg Immendorf, and the larger milieu surrounding the Kunstakademie included such legendary figures of postwar German art as Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Anselm Kiefer. Throughout her text, Mehring returns to Palermo's relationship to his German elders and peers, culminating in her last chapter, which focuses on Palermo's collaborations with the more established and now canonical Richter.

had already died when the article was published, the *Metallbilder* were still new and had not yet been widely exhibited). Rorimer, "Blinky Palermo: Objects, 'Stoffbilder,' Wall Painting," in *Artforum* 12:3 (November 1978). Twenty-four years later, Mehring herself repeated this strategy, adding the *Metallbilder*, when she published "Four of a Kind: The Art of Blinky Palermo," also in *Artforum*. Christine Mehring, "Four of a Kind: The Art of Blinky Palermo," in *Artforum* 41:2 (October 2002).

⁶ The term "testing" recurs throughout Hudson's text. As far as I know, this term was introduced to Ryman scholarship in Yve-Alain Bois's essay "Ryman's Lab," in *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture: Paintings from the Daros Collection* (Zürich: Alesco AG, 1999).

Hudson proceeds from Ryman's tenure as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art in New York beginning in 1953, positioning this experience as an alternative to a formal art education—which Ryman never had. Ryman's co-workers at MoMA included Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, and the critic (and Ryman's future wife) Lucy Lippard. While Beuys functions in Mehring's text as both a signal example of artistic practice and social engagement, and as a neo-Romantic counter-figure to Palermo's more sober work, Hudson bases her reading of Ryman's career largely on the pedagogical models he encountered working at the Museum under the leadership of Alfred Barr and the director of the Museum's education department Victor D'Amico. Throughout her text, Hudson sustains her thesis about Ryman's practice, that he "paints pragmatism," through the biographical fact of his work under, though never directly under, Barr and D'Amico. To the credit of *Used Paint*, the force of Hudson's argument comes from her rigorous and persuasive readings of Ryman's work, but it raises the question of the role of biography in the single-artist monograph: in this late moment in the monographic format, is the artist's biography necessary as a kind of rhetorical trope to "anchor" the author's claims about the artist's career? The same question might be asked of *Abstraction of an Era*, though, as we will see, the two texts ask different favors from their subjects' biographies.

Not surprisingly given the nationalities of the two artists—and, indeed, of the two authors—we get in these two texts a German Palermo and an American Ryman. Mehring's subtitle, "Abstraction of an Era," points to Palermo's historicity, specifically as it reflects the growth of consumer capitalism during the German "economic miracle." In her chapter on the sculptural objects, Mehring traces Palermo's work back to his education in Beuys's class and reads the works as a marriage of Beuys-esque shamanism (Palermo "heals" trash and transforms it into art) with German Romanticism's obsession with the fragment, only to argue that Palermo's objects undermine these spiritual associations as they make them. The materiality of the objects (in the sense of Donald Judd's "Specific Objects"), she argues, always returns to sneer at the showy and subjectivity-laden postwar European art movements of Art Informel, the Zero Group, and neo-expressionism.⁷ In this sense, the objects foreshadow Palermo's project with the *Stoffbilder*, whose use of pre-

⁷ See Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965).

made commercial fabrics Mehring associates with the emergent commodity capitalism.

There is a story here about postwar German culture and the *tabula rasa* that the post-Marshall Plan economic reconstruction represented. Mehring gives us something of this story between the lines, but her focus is much more on its obverse: Palermo's "de-German-ing" of his precursors and influences via his enthusiastic and idiosyncratic engagement with American art. Palermo, Mehring argues, misreads the work of a wide gamut of postwar American artists, most notably Rothko, Newman, the Minimalists, and the more systems-oriented of the Conceptualists, and the historicity of his work emerges from this specifically postwar German misprision.

Abstraction of an Era paints the picture of a German artist who would not be German. At the same time, Mehring's text, in tracing Palermo's flight from the Germanic—he literally left Germany for New York in 1973—reveals its own predilection to do the same. Most revealing is her analysis of Palermo's pivotal late work, the *To the People of New York City* suite, in which Mehring gives scant attention to Palermo's use of the colors of the German flag for his color scheme, arguing instead that the color scheme borrowed from Navajo sand painting and reflected Palermo's exotic conception of America—no doubt spurred on by his contact with land artists such as Walter de Maria through his gallerists Heiner Friedrich and Konrad Fischer. Too much can be said about the ambivalence of *To the People's* invocation of the German flag to merely relegate it to a cursory mention, particularly given the important role the author has accorded to Palermo's relationship (or lack thereof) to the German nation and her historicizing of the *Stoffbilder* within the context of postwar commodity capitalism. Upon first seeing these paintings reinstalled at Dia:Beacon, I couldn't help but recognize in their painted metal surfaces echoes of the Porsche logo, which calls to mind the German automobile industry's role in the economic miracle and its inseparable relationship with German warfare (recall the BMW logos in Hannah Höch's *Das schöne Mädchen*); indeed, the suite's epistolary title itself seems to parallel the address of Germany's burgeoning export industry. This elision of the Germanness of *To the People* in favor of Palermo's search for America is symptomatic of the manner in which Mehring's reading of Palermo's works ultimately works in the service of painting a portrait of the artist, even though this narrative frame is of a secondary importance to her text's greatest strength: its engaged historicizing of his work.

As previously stated, Hudson's text takes on the biographical convention of the monograph from the opposite direction. The Ryman we get from *Used Paint* emerges surprisingly from the discourse of American pragmatism, articulating the early influence of Barr and D'Amico through the perspective of such thinkers as John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James when, to this reader at least, a more likely bedfellow would be Jacques Derrida. This is not to criticize *Used Paint*, however; Hudson offers a fresh and engaging take on Ryman's work. The text sets out to dispel all the falsehoods of what we think we know about Ryman. Hudson's inquiry begins with the provocative claim that Ryman never produced a white painting until 2003. His paintings, she argues, were never until this point monochromes, as his concentration on process had always resulted in paintings in which white paint revealed its application in concert with its support. The point of Ryman's work, then, is neither about *reducing* painting to mute whiteness (as in the Minimalist interpolation of Ryman) nor the *idea* of "blank" paintings (as in the Conceptualist misreading), and indeed to pay too much attention to the white paint instead of what Ryman does with it would be, according to Hudson's argument, to miss the point.

The four main sections of *Used Paint* concentrate respectively on process ("Paint"), the conventions of painting ("Support"), the limits of painting ("Edge"), and the site of exhibition ("Wall"). Taken together, these inextricable strands of Ryman's practice constitute an investigation of painting as a *matrix*: a field of possibility delimited by pre-existing formal and discursive conventions.⁸ The following passage can be taken as a kind of mission statement for Hudson's text:

Ryman opens the material and conventional dimensions of painting to a different kind of medium-specificity [from that of Clement Greenberg and mainstream American Modernism] that involves a narrow-band infinitude of provisional answers to questions of what makes a painting, how it is made, with which materials, and why. . . . [T]his implies not a teleology—an obvious, necessary, or otherwise prescribed next step—but a zone of uncertainty to be explored (145).

⁸ This concept of the *matrix* is usually attributed to Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. See: Buchloh, "Kelly's Matrix: Administering Abstraction, Industrializing Color," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Matrix* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2003), and "Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram," in *Eva Hesse Drawing*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

Here, we encounter a blind spot of Hudson's text. In the open-endedness that she describes of Ryman's engagement with the medium's "givens"—his "testing"—the concerns that she teases out of his practice to form her chapters reveal themselves to be inseparable, as painting for Ryman and his contemporaries was always at once "paint," "support," "edge," and "wall." Hudson's isolating of these strands and her engaged analysis of them alongside periods of Ryman's career is admirable; however, where more precision would have been welcome is the way she moves seamlessly between material, convention, and institution. In exploring Ryman's practice, I found myself wondering especially about the latter two terms: when we speak of a *matrix* of painting, how do we differentiate the conventional from the institutional? This question becomes particularly important when Hudson discusses Ryman's engagement with the site of exhibition; we are used to casually referring to exhibition spaces as "institutional," but surely Ryman's engagement with the exhibition space (and what Hudson articulates about it) asks difficult questions about the relationship between the formal conventions of display that help to constitute aesthetic experience and the institutionalized discourses that determine the social terms of this aesthetic experience.

To be fair, this blind spot of Hudson's text points to a blind spot of the discipline at large, and it is to the credit of her formal analyses that this question arises at all. This is the crucial point at which Hudson and Merhing's text converge: we have here two rigorously formal and yet historically sensitive inquiries on the episteme of postwar painting and the manner in which this supposedly outmoded medium reflects the larger social concerns of artistic production in the era. One condition of the medium in this historical period is the manner in which paintings often resist photographic documentation, of which Palermo and Ryman's are surely no exception. Both texts are generously illustrated with beautiful, mostly full-color plates, and yet to see a Palermo or Ryman painting in reproduction is to lose much of what makes them such important, if somewhat neglected, works of postwar art. But the richness of *Abstraction of an Era* and *Used Paint's* illustrations is reflected and buttressed by thoughtful and thoroughly researched analyses that bring these images to life. To suggest that the format of the single artist monograph can also be revived by these two studies is to ask a tall order of *Abstraction of an Era* and *Used Paint*, rich and careful though they are. But as an occasion to revisit the careers of Palermo

and Ryman in a far more sustained and directed manner than we have previously had the chance to, what better format than the monograph?

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Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?. Judith Butler. London: Verso, 2009. 193 pages.

Contemporary war, and the “cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence” (1), is the focus of Judith Butler’s most recent work *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Butler’s premise that “specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living” (1) intervenes within contemporary epistemological and ontological arguments that inform framing, power, and being. In five essays, Butler systematically and convincingly engages the “frames” of war through her combination of Hegelian philosophy, a neo-Marxist conception of ideology, and post-structuralism.

Frames of War propels the strengths of her earlier works such as *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). Butler’s analysis clearly builds from the 2004 publication, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, in which she discusses forms of vulnerability, aggression, retaliation, and violence instigated by the Bush administration post-September 11, 2001.

Precariousness is presented as an obligation imposed upon us, and as such, it also serves to mark a series of conditions that allow us to apprehend a life. In the introductory chapter, “Precarious Life, Grievable Life,” attention is drawn to certain epistemological frames that govern “being” and how “being” is therefore constituted within operations of power. It is here she situates reflections upon the iteration and reiteration of norms that govern subjects, and, extending *Gender Trouble*, the ontology that governs the body. Those norms, in combination with the concept of “recognition” stemming from Hegelian texts, offer new insight into how apprehension and recognizability shape subjects. Such a reading centralizes personhood