

The international exhibition "Documenta 5," held in Kassel, West Germany, marks the institutional acceptance of Conceptual art in Europe.

Two foundational exhibitions, both organized by the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann, demarcate the origins and the zenith of the production and the institutional reception of Conceptual art in Europe. The first was the (by now famous) exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" that took place at the Berne Kunsthalle and elsewhere in 1969, and the second was "Documenta 5," the fifth installment of what had become the most important international group show of contemporary art, organized in Kassel, Germany, every four or five years since 1955.

These two exhibitions demarcate—in their initial omissions as much as in their eventual inclusions—the changing orientations that occurred in the late sixties and early seventies in different centers of artistic production (New York, Paris, London, Düsseldorf). Artists like the group Art & Language, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Blinky Palermo were still excluded from "When Attitudes Become Form." (Buren was prosecuted by the Swiss police for illicitly pasting his color-white-striped paper signs throughout Berne—his contribution to an exhibition in which he thought he should have been represented.) However, three years later all these artists were given a central role in "Documenta 5," where they installed works that would subsequently be seen as the foundational models of European Conceptual art and its strategies of institutional critique.

"Documenta 5" used its institutional resources on the level of the exhibition as much as that of the catalogue to enact the legalistic-administrative dimensions of Conceptual art and to transform these into operative realities. The catalogue (designed by Ed Ruscha to look like an administrative loose-leaf binder or a technical training manual with a thumb index) carried one of the first systematically philosophical and critical essays on the commodity status of the work of art (written by the philosopher Hans Heinz Holz). More importantly perhaps, it reproduced "The Artists Reserved Rights Agreement," a contract developed by New York art dealer Seth Siegelaub and New York lawyer Robert Projansky. Originally published in *Studio International* in 1971, this contract would allow artists to participate in decisions concerning their work after it had been sold (exhibition participation and reproductions in catalogues and books) and would also oblige collectors to offer the artist a reasonable, if minimal, share in the increasing

resale value of their work. This was obviously an arrangement that would be loathed by most collectors; so much so that they refrained from buying works by any artists who had signed the contract, thereby deterring other artists from engaging in the project altogether.

### Conceptualism's encounters

Several factors came together to transform 1972 into the *annus mirabilis* of European Conceptual art, culminating in the emergence and institutional reception of the work of the Bechers, Broodthaers, Buren, Hanne Darboven (born 1941), Hans Haacke, Palermo, and Gerhard Richter [1]. The first factor was that the politically radical student movement of 1968 and the cultural radicality of Conceptual art entered into a dialogue in 1972, rather than—as had been the case with "Documenta 4" in 1968—remaining entangled in a polemical confrontation. Thus, the work of Broodthaers and of Buren at "Documenta 5" turned some of the critical tools of 1968 (that is, the Frankfurt School tradition of a Marxist critique of ideology and the poststructuralist practices of semiological and institutional critiques) back onto the actual institutional frameworks of the museum, the exhibition, and the market.

The changing relations of that generation of postwar artists to the legacies of European avant-garde culture undoubtedly constituted the second factor. A particular tension emerged from the simultaneous reception not only of the recently rediscovered practices of the most advanced forms of European abstraction (Constructivism, Suprematism, and De Stijl) but also American Minimalism: both practices were evidently fused and operative in the work of Buren, Darboven, Haacke [2], and Palermo.

Thirdly, all of these artists contested the dominant positions of Joseph Beuys in Germany and Yves Klein and the Nouveaux Réalistes in Paris (and in Düsseldorf). Throughout the early sixties, Beuys, Klein, and the Nouveaux Réalistes had developed an aesthetic in which memory and mourning had unknowingly confronted the effects of their instant spectacularization. The new generation of artists recognized the fallacies of these earlier positions, displacing them with self-critical acuity that focused on the

▲ 1969

● 1968a, 1968b, 1971, 1972a

■ 1960c, 1967a, 1968b

▲ 1988

● 1915, 1917, 1921, 1928, 1965

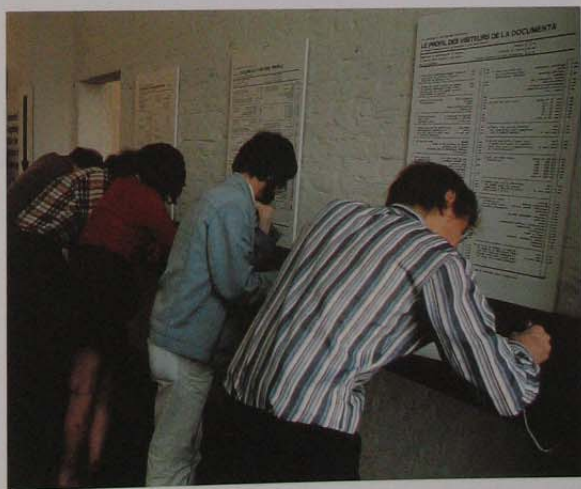
■ 1960a, 1964a



1 • Gerhard Richter, *48 Portraits*, 1971–2

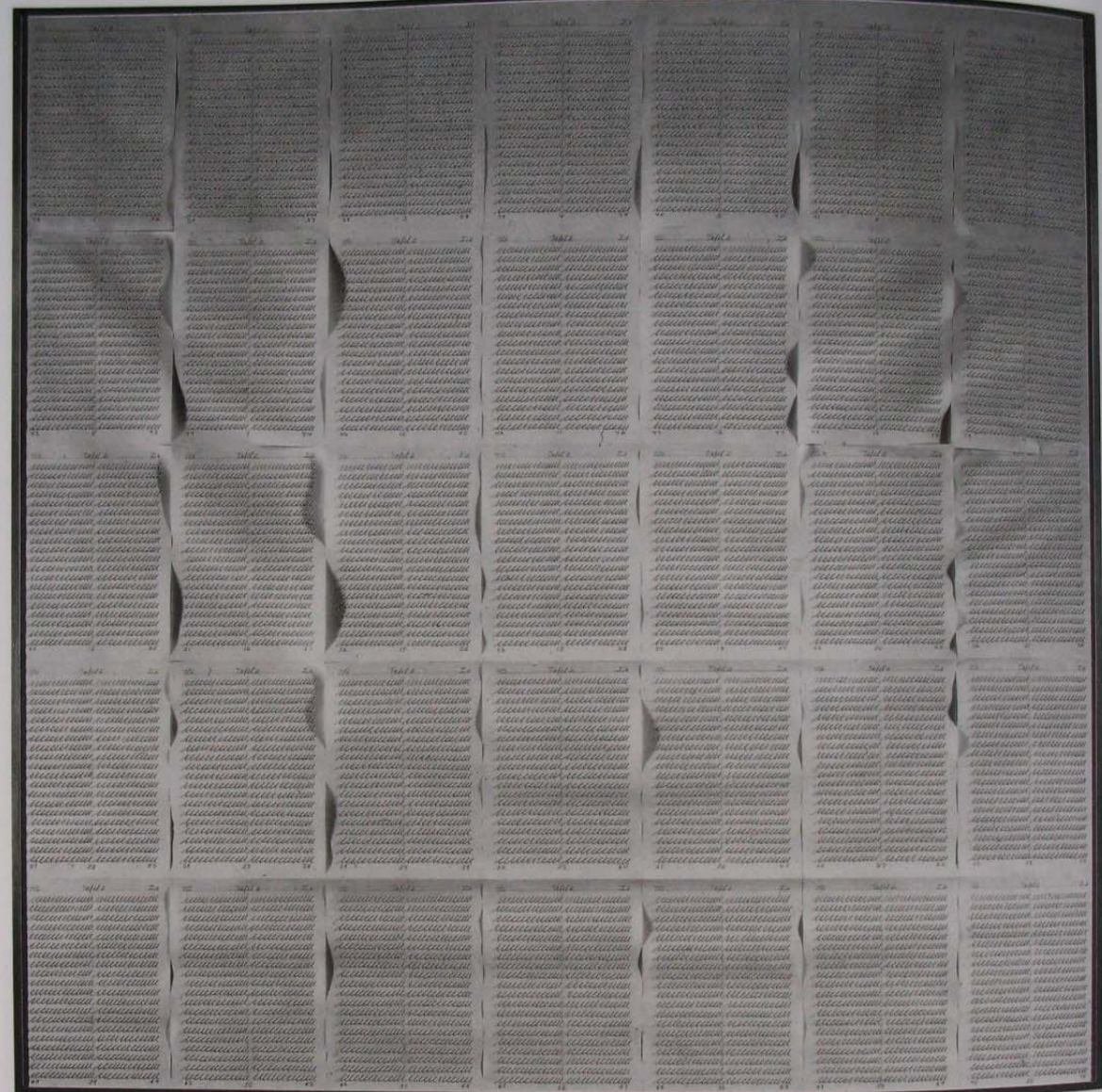
Oil on canvas, forty-eight paintings, each 70 x 55 (27½ x 21¼)

social and political power structures governing the production and reception of culture in their own time. Furthermore, since the younger artists had already engaged in an explicit dialogue with American art of the early to mid-sixties, in particular with Pop art (in the cases of Broodthaers and Richter, for example) and Minimalism (Buren, Darboven, Haacke, and Palermo) were especially concerned with the work of Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, and Robert Rymán), they were fully prepared to confront the recent formulations of a Conceptualist aesthetic that was first articulated by the artists around Seth Siegelaub in New York in 1968 (Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner). Yet in all of the European responses to Conceptualism, even in their most esoteric and hermetic variations (such as the work of Darboven) one of the principal differences from Anglo-American Conceptual art was a dimension of historical reflexivity that now appeared as inextricably intertwined with Conceptualism's neopositivist self-reflexivity on the epistemological and semiotic conditions of its own languages.



2 • Hans Haacke, *Documenta Besucher Profil* (Documenta Visitors' Profile), 1972  
Audience participatory installation

▲ 1962c, 1964d    ● 1962c, 1994b    ■ 1957b    ◆ 1968b, 1984a



### 3 • Hanne Darboven, *Seven Panels and an Index*, 1973 (detail)

Graphite on white wove paper, panels 177.8 x 177.8 (70 x 70), index 106 x 176 (41% x 69¼%)

One could argue that Darboven's work [3] originated to some extent in her earlier encounter with kineticism (as represented in the work of Almir Mavignier [born 1925], her teacher at the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst [Academy of Fine Arts] in Hamburg, and his attempt to innovate postwar abstraction by mechanizing and digitalizing its permutations and chance operations). The second formative encounter for Darboven was her friendship with Sol LeWitt during the three years she spent in New York from 1966 to 1968. Darboven's trajectory synthesized the oppositions between an infinity of spatio-temporal proliferation and processes of digitalized

▲ 1955a

quantification, the dialectics of mathematically determined operations with a new type of drawing bordering on the iterative order of writing. Furthermore, she fused the order of the scriptural with the public performance of compulsive repetition, investing the concept of automatism with significations that were radically different from its initial definition in Surrealism or its postwar resuscitation in

▲ Abstract Expressionism.

• Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly had of course initiated the process of denaturing drawing in favor of drawing that repeated a more-or-less fixed and contained grapheme or that approached

▲ 1924, 1947b

• 1953, 1958

the condition of writing (initiated in the postwar period as a dialectic structure of somatic and libidinal loss and emancipation from myth). Once the features of iconic representation (e.g., figurative line, volume, chiaroscuro) had been completely stripped from the body of drawing's mimetic relationship to nature, the order of language and iterative enumeration (in Johns) appeared as a perforation of the body of drawing itself, as the surfacing of its social skeleton of inexorable constraints.

Yet Darboven's work traces this process in even more minute detail, and exacerbates the quantification of the temporality of its proper production. Thereby she inscribes drawing mimetically within an advanced social organization where experience is increasingly governed by an infinite proliferation of administrative rules and operations that prevent drawing from appearing any longer as an exemplary enactment of the subject's immediate access to psychosomatic or spiritual experience. Darboven registers these ruling patterns of the collective forms of spatio-temporal experience, and she identifies the automatic repetition of an infinity of eternally identical acts as the microscopic matrix of drawing itself.

This infinity of possibilities (an infinity of permutations, of processes, of quantities) is very much at the center of Conceptualism. The extent to which this model would inform European practices of Conceptual art became poignant in Hans Haacke's contribution to "Documenta 5" when he installed the third version of his series of "Visitors' Polls" [2, 4]. This work made the historical dialectics of Conceptual art painfully obvious. On the one hand it offered (or subjected) the spectator to the most complex form of viewer participation that neo-avant-garde parameters had ever allowed for (by asking them for the full statistical accounts of their social and geopolitical identities). At the same time, however, the work articulated the extreme poverty of spatio-temporal, psychological and perceptual/phenomenological experiences available both to the conceptions of the artist and to a realistic estimation of spectatorial capacities and dispositions.

Haacke's synthesis of a seemingly infinite number of random participations (the size and scale of the work are totally open and dependent on the number of visitors who choose to participate in the statistical accounts) and a very limited number of factors of total overdetermination (since only a very limited series of questions could be asked in the ready-made statistical questionnaire) makes up the constitutive opposition of the work. In that reductivist instantiation of each participant as explicitly unique and different, yet at the same time a merely quantifiable statistical unit, Haacke's work acquires the same intensity of having mimetically internalized the order of the administrative world that we had encountered in the work of Darboven.

A similar dialectic can be discerned in the development of the work of Blinky Palermo (Peter Schwarze/Heisterkamp) who—like his friends and fellow artists, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter—had arrived in West Germany from Communist East Germany, where he had spent his childhood. The definition of Palermo's abstraction lies in the triangulation between the ruins of the heroic



4 • Hans Haacke, *MOMA-Poll*, 1970

Audience participatory installation, two transparent acrylic ballot boxes, each 40 x 20 x 10 (15% x 7% x 3%), equipped with photoelectric counter, text

abstractionists of the prewar avant-garde (Mondrian and Malevich in particular), the radical revisions of these legacies of abstraction in the postwar period in Europe (in particular in the work of his teacher Joseph Beuys and in the presence of Yves Klein in Düsseldorf at the moment of Palermo's emergence), and thirdly, the dialogue with American postwar abstraction in its most reductivist models, ranging from Ellsworth Kelly and Barnett Newman to Sol LeWitt.

While Palermo clearly recognized that the spiritual and utopian aspirations of the Bauhaus and De Stijl, of Suprematism and Constructivism lay in historical ruins, he also realized that all attempts to resuscitate them would inevitably turn out to be travesties. As with the radical departures in the work of Darboven, Palermo equally emancipated abstraction from its entanglement with myth and utopia (as it had still appeared in the hands of Beuys) and at the same time he severed abstraction from its entanglement in spectacle culture (as it had been inadvertently or cynically proffered by



5 • Blinky Palermo, *Wall Painting*, 1972

Red lead on card, 22.7 x 16.5 (8 7/8 x 6 1/2)

Klein). Thus the neopositivist and empiricist formalism of the American Minimalists provided Palermo with a counterforce that allowed him to articulate the contradictory predicaments of abstraction in postwar Germany all the more.

Palermo's work consists of three principal types: the reliefs and wall objects, the fabric paintings, and the wall paintings. All three rehearse, and some of them repeat, the fundamental problems facing postwar abstraction. The first group (which is also chronologically the earliest) departs from the most advanced forms of postwar reflections on the transition from easel painting to the relief as they had been embodied in Barnett Newman's works such as *Here I* (1950).

Palermo's wall objects, however, rapidly move to a more explicit reflection on their simultaneous status as both reliefs and architectural elements, comparable in many ways to the Postminimalist work of Richard Tuttle. As in Tuttle's reliefs, Palermo's *Wand-Objekte* (1965) oscillate between organic and geometric form as though they literally wanted to reembody abstraction, against its rationalist and technological tendencies. The *Wand-Objekte* seem to be reflecting on the contradictions between autonomous pictorial presence and public architectural space. Yet the intensity of their intimacy and phenomenological presence appears first of all to compensate for the absence of that horizon of collectivity toward

which the heroic abstraction of the twenties had been able to define itself. All these oppositions are as much articulated in the reliefs' formal definition as they are generated by the tensions between natural and industrial qualities in the chromatic definition of the objects, and it is far from accidental that in these wall reliefs Palermo frequently quotes Yves Klein's supposedly patented "International Klein Blue," modifying it ever so slightly, yet remaining within its spectrum, publicly exposing the absurdity of Klein's attempt to brand a color and to own the copyright in a particular tint.

In Palermo's fabric paintings, store-bought lengths of commercial decorator's fabric are sewn together in bipartite or tripartite horizontal divisions to compose a painting. Reiterating a model that had been developed in the first and only Ellsworth Kelly painting that was made with the colors of industrially produced fabrics, entitled *Twenty-Five Panels: Red Yellow Blue and White* in 1952, Palermo's fabric paintings withdraw two crucial elements from conventional abstraction: first of all they eliminate even the last traces of drawing and facture, where the process of paint application—even in its most reduced form of staining, as in Mark Rothko's work for example—had itself become an integral element in the production of painterly meaning. Secondly, the fabric paintings perform a denaturing of color in exact analogy to the denaturing of drawing in the work of Darboven. Choice of color and color itself now appear as suspended between their innate relation to the realm of the natural and their new conception as a commercially produced readymade. But the cheapness of the materials and their ready-made character are constantly counteracted by Palermo's determination to conceive the most differentiated chromatic constellations and chords from the extreme poverty of his own means.

The third group in Palermo's oeuvre is that of the wall drawings and wall paintings that he first executed in 1968 in a work for the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in Munich. Undoubtedly resulting in part from Palermo's attention to the development of painterly and sculptural practices in the context of Minimalism (in this case, the wall drawings of Sol LeWitt in particular), Palermo's wall drawings/paintings address the dialectics between painting's internal order (its figure-ground hierarchies, its morphologies, its relations of color) and its external "situatedness" within public social space.

Palermo was among the first to recognize that painting's transition into architectural space would no longer carry any of the promises that this shift had entailed in the work of El Lissitzky, for example. Typically, in his installation at "Documenta 5," Palermo positioned his bright-orange wall painting [5] (executed with industrial rust-proofing paint) in a mere leftover space (in terms of the public display functions of exhibition architecture) and he also placed it in what was structurally the most functional space (a staircase that—while not intended for exhibition usage—connected two floors of the exhibition spaces). Palermo's wall paintings, in their explicit referral to outside spaces, to overlooked spaces, to the functional and utilitarian dimensions of architecture and painting (even more evident in his deployment of lead primer from the shipyards in Hamburg in his installation for the Hamburg Kunstverein

▲ 1951

▲ 1953

● 1947a

■ 1994b

◆ 1926

in 1974) insist on their dislocation and their industrial materiality principally to contest notions of autonomous plasticity. Yet if they open up to architectural space, they do so only as a mnemonic image of the lost promises of radical abstraction that had once engaged in the production of a new industrial culture of the collective.

If Palermo's work still bracketed industrial use-value and painterly surplus value, and remained suspended within an ambiguous space between an architectural surface as a carrier of painterly plasticity and an exhibition wall as an institutional space, Daniel Buren's installation for "Documenta 5" foregrounded an almost systematically analytical approach. In his work *Documenta* the exhibition walls were treated as mere carriers of information, as discursive sites. The work consisted of inserting white-on-white striped paper underneath an array of extremely different objects (such as Jasper Johns's painting *Flag* [1954], the base of an architectural model by Will Inley, or posters as examples of contemporary advertising) throughout the various segments of the vast and complex exhibition. Thus, the elements of Buren's installation functioned primarily as markers of the discursive condition of the institution, the exhibition, and its architecture.

Inevitably, the white stripes on white paper called forth a comparison with the long history of instances in which reductivism attenuated painting to the highest level of perceptual and phenomenological differentiation. Yet it became instantly clear that Buren's white-on-white work probably shared as much with Kazimir Malevich's famous climax of Suprematist reductivism and

▲ Robert Ryman's most advanced forms of extremely differentiated reductivist painting of the early-to-mid-sixties, as it engaged with a conception of spatiality and visuality from which pure plasticity had withered away. This conceptual evacuation made room for a discursive analysis and institutional critique of the usages of space in a society driven by administration, where the difference between two whites was more likely to be derived from two types of paper or two coats of wallpaint than from the anticipation of two highly differentiated spiritualities.

If the work of these artists seems to mourn the lost utopian potential of avant-garde practices, and of abstraction's aspirations toward progressive and emancipatory functions, the work of Sigmar Polke by contrast assumes a position of Romantic irony. Yet it is not any less aware of the tragic losses that postwar culture had to confront. Polke's travesties of abstract painting would eventually even incorporate the Conceptualist impulse to a linguistic reductivism, as in his series of *Lösungen* (Solutions) [16]. Thereby both abstraction's historical failure and the preposterousness of its radical promises in the present day become the target of Polke's sardonic and allegorical humour.

What the work of this generation of artists acknowledged—and responded to accordingly—was the fact that the spaces and the walls of the "white cube" had in fact been permeated by a network of institutional powers and economic interests and that they had been irreversibly removed from the neutrality of a phenomenological space within which the subject would constitute itself freely in its acts of pure perception. It might have appeared difficult at the time to recognize that the work's emphatic radicality was enforced by an almost ethereal withdrawal of what one might traditionally have regarded as the tasks of the aesthetic. Thus one could argue that Buren, Darboven, Haacke, Palermo, and Polke operate from within a highly contradictory, not to say aporetic form of melancholic modernism, attempting to redeem the radical utopianism of avant-garde abstraction, yet mourning at the site of its irreversible devastation. But to the very extent that their work yields its structural and formal organization in its entirety to the ruling principles of social administration, in the very semblance of an affirmation of the totality of these principles as the solely valid forms that actually structure experience, the aesthetic, within its radical negation, attains an unforeseen transcendence.

#### FURTHER READING

**Vivian Bobka**, *Hanne Darboven* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1996)

**Brigid Doherty and Peter Nisbet (eds)**, *Hanne Darboven's Explorations of Time, History and Contemporary Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Busch Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, 1999)

**Gloria Moure (ed.)**, *Blinky Palermo* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani; and London: Serpentine Gallery, 2003)

**Harald Szeemann (ed.)**, *Documenta V: Befragung der Realität—Bildwelten Heute*, (Kassel: Bertelsmann Verlag/Documenta, 1972)

**David Thistlewood (ed.)**, *Joseph Beuys: Diverging Critiques* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press/Tate Gallery, 1995)

**David Thistlewood, (ed.)**, *Sigmar Polke: Back to Postmodernity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press/Tate Gallery, 1996)

|   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | + | 1 | = | 3 |
| 2 | + | 3 | = | 6 |
| 4 | + | 4 | = | 5 |
| 7 | + | 3 | = | 8 |
| 5 | + | 1 | = | 2 |
| 3 | + | 4 | = | 9 |
| 6 | + | 2 | = | 7 |
| 8 | + | 7 | = | 4 |
| 1 | + | 5 | = | 2 |

▲ Sigmar Polke, *Lösungen V*, 1967

Lacquer on burlap, each 150 x 125 (59 x 49¼)

▲ 1915

● 1915

▲ 1957b

hal foster  
rosalind krauss  
yve-alain bois  
benjamin h. d. buchloh

with 637 illustrations,  
413 in colour

# art since 1900

modernism antimodernism postmodernism

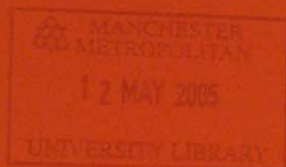


Thames & Hudson

To Nikos Stangos (1936–2004), in memoriam

With love, admiration, and grief, we dedicate this book to Nikos Stangos, great editor, poet, and friend, whose belief in this project both instigated and sustained it through the course of its development.

We would like to thank Thomas Neurath and Peter Warner for their patient support, and Nikos Stangos and Andrew Brown for their editorial expertise. The book would not have been begun without Nikos; it would not have been completed without Andrew.



The publishers would like to thank Amy Dempsey for her assistance in the preparation of this book.

Any copy of this book issued by the publisher as a paperback is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including these words being imposed on a subsequent purchaser.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2004 by Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QX

[www.thamesandhudson.com](http://www.thamesandhudson.com)

© 2004 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-500-23818-9

Printed and bound in Singapore by CS Graphics