

FRANZA,
FEVER 103,
AND
QUILTS

ULRIKE MÜLLER

THIS PLACE WHICH IS NOT ONE

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ABOUT SEVEN YEARS AGO, ULRIKE MÜLLER (who looks something like a feminist action figure, with Clark Kent glasses) took her ax to the door of painting. Painting is often a stopping point for people because it seems to mark off an annex of suspiciously too-fancy, too-aesthetic, or too-commodified stuff. But Ulrike had years of experience in conceptual art and sociopolitical action under her belt, and she arrived at painting's door equipped with curiosity and the activist's feeling that she should not be prohibited from any territory she wants to enter. She could see through the tiny port-hole in the door that beyond it lay the practice of painting—perhaps it was “form” or “formalism” in the mythic white cube, a mysteriously discrete realm of production roped off from the rest of the world and its realities. But Ulrike could also see that she had arrived at a place where form is matter, simply another material for reconfiguration. So she burst in, full of enthusiasm, ready to throw off any injunction against her own desires.

As Ulrike strode into this territory of painting, she invoked the spirit of Allan Kaprow, blurring the boundary between painting and everyday life, eager to pull anything and everything she liked into the forge of her daily practice. Kaprow had written “After Jackson Pollock” in 1958, a manifesto-like essay in which he proclaimed:

We must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms. . . . Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things. . . . An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano . . . —all will become materials for this new concrete art.

But as quotidian as its materials may be, painting is not something that just happens every day, like lunch. Painting is special, and Ulrike's entry into it is not something to be underestimated. She reports that she experienced her passage to painting as an exhilarating and shocking break with conceptualism. Having gotten past the door, Ulrike had to figure out what to do with painting, and how to do it, and so she began an extended investigation into painting—a courtship with its unique feelings, production, forms, special affects, and concerns—that has by now been going on for about seven years.

To a list of new materials, Ulrike added a voracious inventory of painted or paintable things, including bathtubs, nipples, hand-painted signs, quilts, crotches,

letters, deco and decor, jewelry, seams, spines, fingertips, semaphore, letters, orifices. Her own everyday embodiment and desire became both her platform and her iconography, and as she stood on painting's threshold, the door swung both ways, in and out—out, into the world of signs and symbols and things and activities, and back in, to the inner world of apperceptions and experiences and pleasures of an embodied feminist subject.

Funnily enough, Ulrike's paintings and drawings have come, in the subsequent time, to take a form that seems almost the opposite of the yanked-open one that Kaprow predicted. Instead of tearing down the walls of painting, dematerializing or theatricalizing it, softening it or opening it up, Ulrike makes paintings that look positively strict, with clean edges and all the austerity, upstandingness, and idealization that an icon can convey. While many of her artist forebears, those who also wanted to signal their desire to change the world and its paintings, have done so by foregrounding the issue of change, flux, time, or process in their works, Ulrike instead proposes qualities of stillness and hardness. Her figure-ground relations are staged with the clarity and legibility of street signs, an alphabet of signs literally affixed, baked onto metal substrates, even though the curious elements of this language play ambiguously with space and meaning.

In fact, Ulrike is well-informed about a particular history of experimental painting in New York in which politics and painted

form are entangled and entwined, work that was made through the lens of feminism and social action in the sixties and seventies. For several years, she assisted the painter David Reed, and she worked with him while he served as an adviser for the 2006 touring exhibition "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975," which was curated by Katy Siegel. This exhibition and its accompanying catalogue were crucial viewing and/or reading material for many artists, especially painters, because they chronicled New York painting practices during a time when painting is thought to have waned in importance. By demonstrating how actively painters and painting participated in a scene of hybrid and changing art making, the show put the painting of this time back on the map, effectively resuscitating it as a central part of the discourse. Ulrike did background research for the exhibition, communicated with many of the included artists (or their gallerists), and was actively involved in the production of the catalogue, including writing its timeline, organizing the artists' biographies, and conducting the published interview with the German artist Franz Erhard Walther.

A look through this catalogue reveals that while the artistic strategies of these artists are diverse, they share an approach toward materiality, and their work commonly makes certain qualities explicit, qualities like impermanence, fragility, contingency, lowliness, rawness, immediacy. Artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Ron Gorchov,

Mary Heilmann, Joan Snyder, Harmony Hammond, Dorothea Rockburne, Lynda Benglis, Ree Morton, Carolee Schneeman, Alan Shields, and Al Loving all struggled to democratize painting by pouring, ripping, tying, tilting, or otherwise allowing for unpredictable edges, by using trash or supplies direct from the hardware store, by tossing off lines with spray cans or lowly pencils, by leaving things on the floor. Their work reveals in its corporeality, color, tactility, and directness. They made it funky, upending its connection to anything too precious or overly planned out, and in doing so inscribed into the very fibers of their work an opposition to the classical.

Agnes Martin often wrote about her notion of the classical, and in 1973, in an essay called “The Untroubled Mind,” she put it this way:

To a detached person the complication
of the involved life

is like chaos

If you don't like the chaos you're a
classicist

If you like it you're a romanticist

In this sense, we might call the “High Times, Hard Times” artists romantic and think of Ulrike as more of a classicist. She eschews an aesthetic of romantic chaos and turbulence, in stark contrast to the shaggy seventies aesthetic, and her paintings are resolutely rectangular and serenely undisturbable, made

on steel plates with an ever-so-slightly reflective, mottled sheen that will not be rubbed out or changed by being touched. They feel coolly classical—*literally* cool, cool to the touch, like bathroom fixtures or industrial signs. They are fixed in place and time and do not reveal to us exactly how they came into being. Traditional art objects are made of materials that are organically vulnerable and sensate—charcoal is smudgily volatile, almost an extension of the fingers themselves; oil paint gives off fumes even after it stops smearing itself like a rash onto everything it touches. In contrast, Ulrike's paintings are almost crystalline or inorganic, existing in a state apart from the “caprice of the organic,” to quote Wilhelm Worringer in *Empathy and Abstraction*. (Speaking of abstraction, Worringer says, “Here is law, here is necessity, while everywhere else the caprice of the organic prevails.”) In this sense, her work bears a relation to the industrial, to the sixties, to artists like Donald Judd and Lawrence Weiner, even though her feminist, queer, activist politics may be more attuned to a more motley crew.

I think that it is not the goal of Ulrike's work to aspire to an industrial end; it merely states its purpose in the key of the industrial. In fact, though her metal icons beam out immediate signs of austerity, nevertheless the proposition of touch and tactility is at the heart of the work. Drawing is key to its development, and a particularly patient and old-fashioned kind of drawing at that, a process in which she moves from sketches to

studies and from studies to final paintings. And scale: Ulrike's paintings maintain a scale of provocatively intimate one-to-one body operations or body-to-object operations, reminding the viewer of objects of desire that she touches daily, like mirrors, handwritten letters, knobs, fixtures, jewelry, or body parts themselves. Ulrike's practice proposes the manual on every level: how you reach out and grab the things of the everyday world, how you pull them into your own hands, use them, place them in front of you for consideration, milk them for meaning, massage them into pictorial form, or lower or raise them from whatever was their former status. The marks, zones, arcs, and spaces in her paintings are schema for polymorphous figure-ground relations, suggesting a carnal set of cropped actions that might be going on in front of our very noses, things that are opening, turning, drooping, bulging, pointing, fucking, cleaving, and folding. Often the images are divided into two, paired, roughly symmetrical like the body itself, like one half of the body flipped to meet the other half, or like a body meeting a similar or same body in a twinned form of contact.

So if her work is a sign or a language, it is a lustful form of language, and it is

also an idealized form of lust. The paintings formulate a translation between these two, a schematic expression of desire distilled into hieratic containers or shapes. Kazimir Malevich wrote in 1915 about Suprematism: "The meat and the machine are the muscles of life. Both are the bodies in which life moves. Here two worlds have collided. The world of meat and the world of iron. Both forms are the organs of utilitarian reason." Ulrike's work is also such a twofold, including a classical way and a crafts-like way. Her classicism itself is expressed in two ways: first in its methodology (e.g., the refinement of iconography through a sequence of developmental studies)



Olga Rozanova, *Green Stripe*, 1917

and then in its idealization, its presentation of an idealized iconography stated in a rhetoric of Apollonian rationality. Yet hers is also a crafts-like way to work, a laborious, artisanal process with an affirmative attitude toward the craft and design aspects of making everyday objects, something that marks Ulrike's alignment with the utopian attitude of the Wiener Werkstätte and the Bauhaus.

Although these historical references arise in a confrontation with Ulrike's carefully enameled plates, I do not think so much about these schools and institutions when considering them; I think more specifically about the painting *Green Stripe* by the Russian artist Ol'ga Rozanova. This early abstract painting from 1917 proposes its utopia in one audaciously simple form. In it, a single strip of forest green runs vertically down the center between two areas of pinkish beige-white canvas. When Rozanova made this gesture, thirty years before Barnett Newman's zips, she simply complicated the relations between painting and everyday life by making painting both more ambigu-

ously auratic *and* more available than it was before, both very pragmatic and very strange. To quote Rozanova herself from 1918 (as cited by Juliet Koss in her book *Modernism after Wagner*), "We propose to liberate painting from its subservience to the ready-made forms of reality, and to make it first and foremost a creative, not a reproductive, art." As in Rozanova's painting, in Ulrike's work there is a kind of emancipatory glee in the drawing of a simple line and in realizing the way that a painting can instantly describe and then deftly inhabit a space that is between writing, icon, description, and the body itself. This complex space seems to me to be the actual territory of painting, the one that Ulrike got to when she approached the door of painting, and Ulrike has staked out a place for painting to be, a space that is between the haptic and the optic, between the twin processes of seeing and feeling—and she has consciously constructed objects for that place. To quote Malevich again: "A painted surface is a real, living form. Intuitive feeling is now becoming conscious, no longer is it subconscious."