



By Lauren O'Neill-Butler

Charlotte Posenenske : *Prototypes for Mass Production*

Charlotte Posenenske

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In the May 1968 issue of *Art International*, the thirty-eight-year-old German artist Charlotte Posenenske published a manifesto lamenting the “regressed” utility of art and, by implication, the larger network of the art world. Her statements convey her concern with the social role of artists, and presage her decision later that year to become, perhaps unsurprisingly, a sociologist. Yet unlike other artists from the late 1960s and early ’70s who employed strategies of rejection or withdrawal—Lee Lozano comes first to mind—Posenenske was not concerned with blurring the boundaries between art and life. Rather, her final works, the *Prototypes for Mass Production*, 1965–67, composed of bent and bowed aluminum sheets spray-painted in RAL waterproof colors, were meant to be endlessly reproduced, the reproductions exhibited in noncommercial venues and distributed at cost. Twenty-three years after Posenenske passed away, and following the notable presence of her work at Documenta 12 in 2007, the occasion of her first solo US exhibition makes considerations of her practice all the more intriguing and difficult.

Fifteen Prototypes, the majority having their gallery debut, were installed in the main exhibition space, adjacent to a small room of Posenenske's early abstract paintings on paper and a solitary collage. The paintings reveal her increasingly formal concerns and share the Prototypes' basic colors—black, blue, red, white, and yellow. A few of her earliest works recall the gestural and violent marks in Joan Mitchell's canvases, while the scaled-down *Streifenbilder* (striped pictures) and *Spritzbilder* (sprayed pictures), dating from 1962 to 1965, foreshadow the Prototypes' hard-edge motifs and materials. Take the creased aluminum rectangles in the monochrome *Faltung* (Fold) group of Prototypes from 1965, which give way to the following year's convex, concave, tented, and zigzag *Relief* works; with their metallic curves and slopes, these serialized and standardized sculptures appear completely geometric and reductive, all surface and no depth.

Nonetheless, the conceptual underpinnings of the Prototypes and their mimetic copies, which are regulated by Posenenske's estate, should be understood in the context of a 1960s desire to democratize art, even if their strong, sleek, and stripped-down patinas point elsewhere, namely to American Minimalism. Given Posenenske's rejection of the singularity of objects and her desire for art to be an agent of change, her work is more closely aligned with El Lissitzky or even Joseph Beuys than with, say, Donald Judd. Posenenske intended for the prototypes to be exhibited outside, on the floor, in multiple configurations and public contexts (in the late '80s, a few were shown in markets and airplane hangars). Yet their coolly detached elegance seems almost antithetical to public participation, and in fact only patrons or curators can choose their arrangement: a case of theory versus practice.

Did Posenenske's focus on mass production hinder her political convictions or belie a social objective? Perhaps, if her withdrawal from the art world is any indication; however, this exhibition proved that her work is not so easy to characterize. That Posenenske's career is undergoing a revival speaks to the tenuous boundaries of contemporary art, to the perpetually unfinished business of writing artists into the canon, as well as to the art market. Near the end of her prophetic manifesto Posenenske remarks that as artworks age they accumulate prestige and achieve higher prices. These prescient sentiments resonate strongly, however eerily, as her status ascends.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler

Charlotte Posenenske,
Faltung (Fold), 1966,
spray paint on folded
sheet aluminum,
29½ x 29½ x 5½".

