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Public Options

Christine Mehring on the art of Charlotte Posenenske

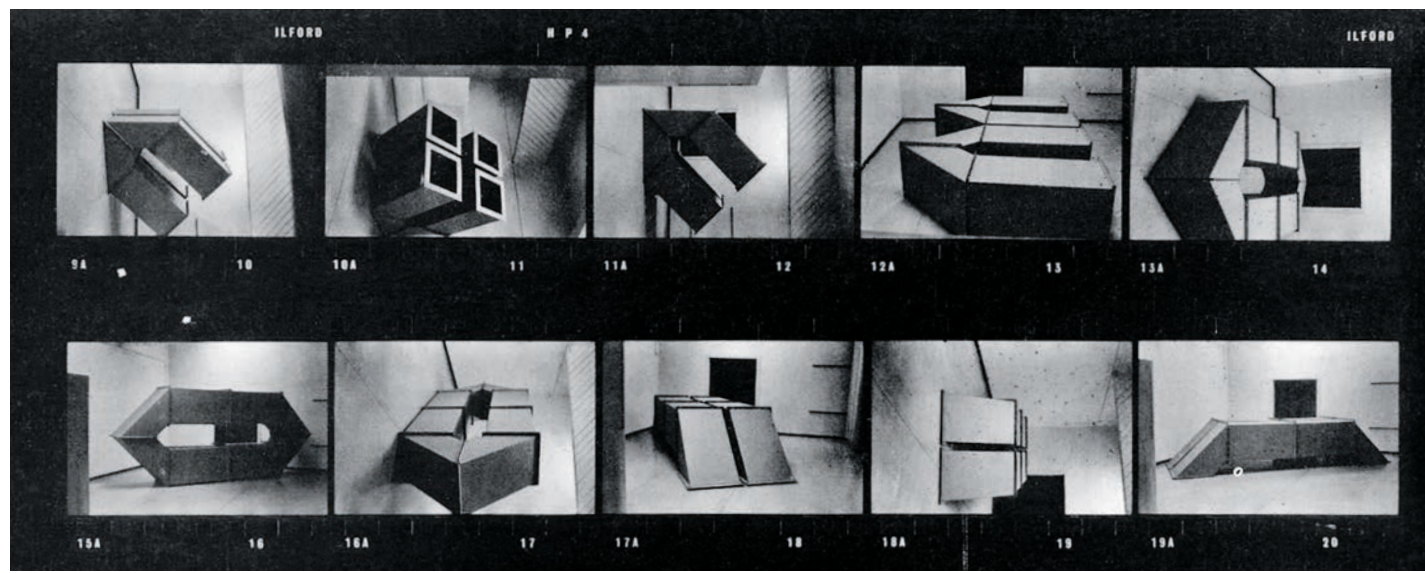
CHARLOTTE POSENENSKE IS A MIRROR TO OUR BAD CONSCIENCE. In May 1968—as the revolutionary ambitions of the '60s reached their pinnacle—the thirty-seven-year-old West German artist expressed her struggle to reconcile her artistic practice with her political convictions: “I find it difficult to accept that art cannot contribute to the solution of pressing social problems,” she wrote in the Switzerland-based *Art International*.¹ A year and a half later, she issued a less equivocal statement, tartly declining to submit a proposal for an art project in a public-housing development in Bielefeld, West Germany: “Each investment exceeding the minimum satisfaction of the actual needs [of the tenants] serves only to pretend these needs are met completely,” she asserted in the significant if little-known Frankfurt-based cultural magazine *EgoIst*.

That is why 38,000 DM are to be invested . . . for a fountain or a sculpture. That which is supposedly no longer merely useful—art—gives a good return for the developer. [Art] is meant to make believe that these rabbit holes have fulfilled all needs, and that one can now afford the beautiful. Art is supposed to advertise the slums of the future. . . . Art here has the function of an alibi.²

As these disparaging words suggest, Posenenske’s faith in art had collapsed entirely. In fact, she had quit: quit making art, quit looking at and talking about art, quit socializing in Frankfurt’s art circles, even quit her marriage to the architect Paul Friedrich Posenenske. She had taken up graduate studies in sociology and was to devote the rest of her life to researching and improving the conditions of industrial labor—a career trajectory that continues to bluntly challenge any pieties we may have regarding art’s ability to make a measurable difference.

Yet more than forty years after this disavowal, Posenenske’s art is everywhere. In the years following her death from cancer in 1985 at age fifty-four, a few exhibitions kept her memory alive—at least among a select group of German art devotees. Cologne’s Galerie Paul Maenz led the effort, surveying her practice in 1986. A smattering of other shows followed, notably one at Frankfurt’s Museum für Moderne Kunst in 1990. But it was only after her inclusion in Documenta 12 in 2007 that Posenenske’s belated and posthumous “career” took off on the international stage, culminating in last year’s publication of her catalogue raisonné and this year’s trio of retrospectives at the Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, and Artists Space in New York.

Posenenske’s artistic practice spanned roughly seventeen years. Following studies under the German abstract painter Willi Baumeister from 1951 to 1952 at the Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design and work as a stage designer



from 1952 through '55, she produced an impressive oeuvre of roughly three hundred works. The early work comprises the “*Rasterbilder*” (Raster Images), 1956–57, in which patterns of circles or dots echo the pixelations of electronic imaging; the extensive “*Spachtelarbeiten*” (Palette Knife Works), 1956–65, in which semi-repetitive applications of casein paint with a palette knife counter the impulsiveness of then-prevalent Informel painting; the transitional “*Spritzbilder*” (Sprayed Pictures) and “*Streifenbilder*” (Stripe Pictures), both 1964–65, in which the use of a spray gun and colored tape, respectively, reflect a similar effort to desubjectivize artmaking; and a handful of largely undated paintings and sketches for the facades of public buildings, created in collaboration with architects. What Posenenske considered her mature work includes reliefs, 1965–67, which were made by folding and unfolding metal sheets sprayed mostly in monochrome, industrial-standard shades of black, blue, red, or yellow; the variable “*Vierkantrohre*” (Ducts, or, literally, four-edged pipes), 1967, which were sculptures assembled from sets of galvanized steel or cardboard components; and the kinetic, semi-architectural aluminum or plywood structures known as “*Drehflügel*” (Turning Leaves, or Turning Wings), 1967–68.

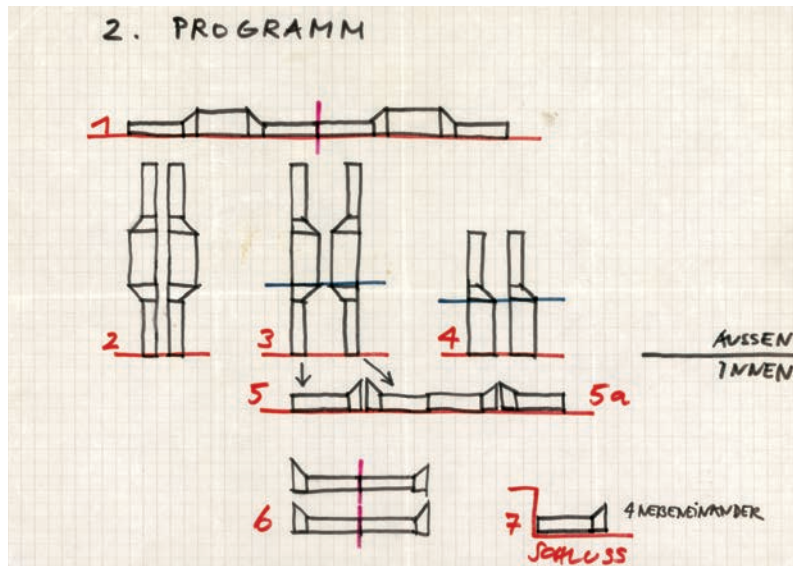
In producing these works, Posenenske exploded the vocabulary of modernist abstraction; engaged intensely with contemporaneous architecture, design, and technology; probed postwar West German identity and history; pursued viewer participation; and wrestled with art’s role in the market and in society. But the imposing complexity of her art has often been occluded by a perverse attraction to the fact that she voluntarily stopped producing it. To many a guilt-ridden artmaker, this decision has suggested a kind of saintly purity, a stance that privileges the interaction with and function of art at the expense of its formal intelligence and historical insight. In other words, her departure from the art world—a social action in itself—prompts an overemphasis on her proto-relational explorations of art’s social aspects. To be sure, along with Lygia Clark, Allan Kaprow, Franz Erhard Walther, and others, Posenenske is the object of intense interest today precisely because of such investigations of relational aesthetics *avant la lettre*. But although the participatory valences of her work cannot be dismissed, they are only a starting point for any serious consideration of her oeuvre,

providing a foil against which the formal and referential address of the objects she produced may be apprehended even more clearly.

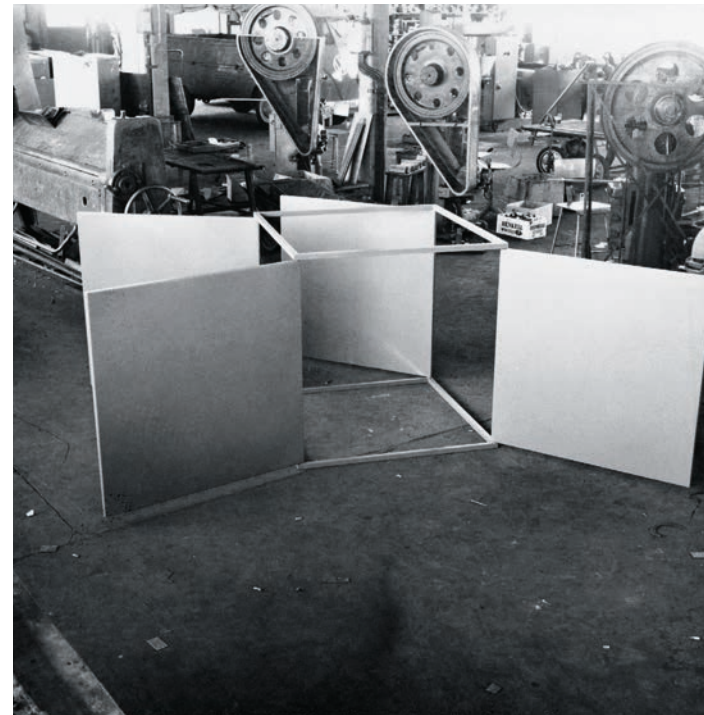
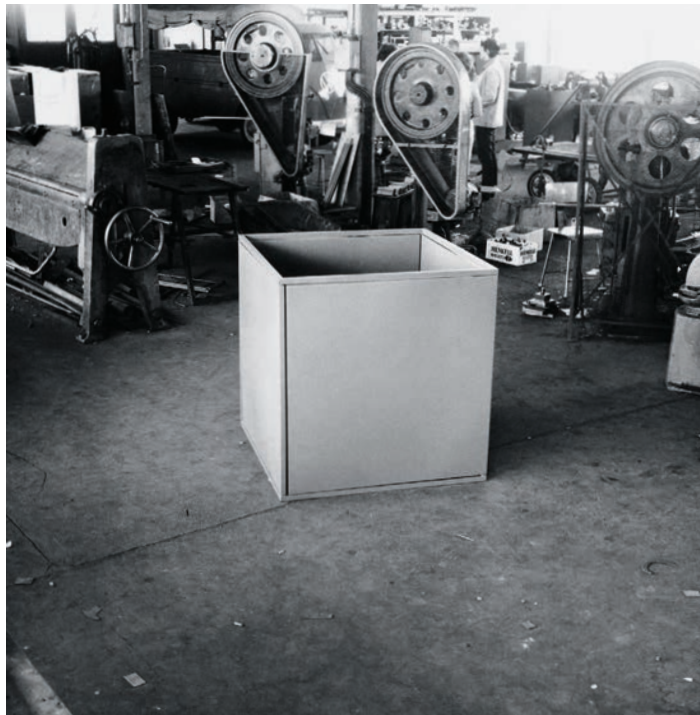
Most important, the explicitly political nature of Posenenske’s forays into interactivity should be understood. For Posenenske, a democratic art was necessarily an art of openness. By 1967, she had come to believe that art should be easily accessible, participatory, and public. On the most basic level, her signature works couched these democratic values in explicitly material terms—clearly related to prewar dreams of mass production’s utopian potential yet imbued with a certain postwar criticality. From that point forward, everything she made was to be structured and planned in “series”—the Series A through C reliefs, the Series D and DW “Ducts,” the Series E “Turning Leaves”—that were programmatically unlimited and, as she pointedly put it, “not originals for individuals” (“*nicht Einzelstücke für Einzelne*”).³ She sold everything at cost, i.e., the sum of the cost of production plus overhead (which, one should add, she was at liberty to do as the result of an inheritance).

This approach echoed the contemporaneous rage in Western Europe, and West Germany in particular, for so-called multiples. The commitment to unlimited and affordable editions reflected a progressive belief in the egalitarian potential of the art market over and against its demonization as a means for capitalist exploitation (a belief that had credibility only in the context of the small-scale continental art market of the '60s, where the financial stakes were much lower than in the US, the wheeling and dealing was far gentler, and dealers and artists alike were struggling to withstand a “made in the USA” invasion). In accordance with this attitude, Posenenske referred not to her “viewers” or her “audience” but to her “consumers.”⁴ Her estate, in the hands of her second husband, Burkhard Brunn, is still committed to these principles. The prototypes made during the artist’s lifetime are sold only to publicly accessible institutions and not to individual collectors. More radically, Brunn decided posthumously to resume production of Posenenske’s unlimited editions and to sell these contemporary versions, too, at cost—that is, without a profit.

The logic of the multiple operated not only among Posenenske’s works but also within each of them. Like so much '60s art, most of her mature works are serially structured in and of themselves. Posenenske’s closest friends and interlocutors



Opposite page: Invitation card for Charlotte Posenenske's exhibition "Vierkantrohre Serie DW" (Series DW Ducts), 1967, Galerie Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf. Photos: Abisag Tullmann.
 This page, above, from left: Charlotte Posenenske's installation program for Vierkantrohre Serie DW (Series DW Ducts), 1967, for her contribution to the exhibition "Dies alles, Herzchen, wird einmal Dir gehören" (All This, Sweetie, Will One Day Be Yours) at Galerie Dorothea Loehr, Frankfurt, September 9, 1967. Charlotte Posenenske, Vierkantrohre Serie D (Series D Ducts), 1967, galvanized sheet steel. Installation view, temporary installation, Offenbach, West Germany. Photo: Abisag Tullmann. Below: Charlotte Posenenske, Drehflügel Serie E (Series E Turning Leaves), 1967-68, spray paint on sheet aluminum on foam plating. Installation views, temporary installation, metal workshop, Offenbach, West Germany.





in the art world—the brilliant yet little-known Minimalist-cum-Pop artist Peter Roehr and his partner, graphic designer and soon-to-be-dealer Paul Maenz—put a finger on this international development in “*Serielle Formationen*” (Serial Formations), a landmark exhibition that opened in the Studio Galerie of Frankfurt’s Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität in May 1967. (This was more than a year before John Coplans’s better-known “Serial Imagery” show at the Pasadena Art Museum in California.) In keeping with the duo’s goal of revealing the different concepts underlying the superficially similar appearance of many serial artworks, the reconfigurability of Posenenske’s yellow Series B relief was contrasted with the work of Carl Andre, Arman, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Günther Uecker, and Andy Warhol, to name a few of the participants. While the configurations of other works were determined by the artists, Posenenske’s was a *participatory* seriality. Like many of her reliefs, the one on view at the Studio Galerie took the form of a handy, meter-long sheet of aluminum that any owner or curator could install in any number. What Roehr and Maenz were pursuing was an “immanent critique” of the loss of agency and individuality in a consumer society, and by offering choices and prompting initiative,⁵ Posenenske’s contribution exemplified this agenda.

With the “Ducts,” Posenenske transferred even more of her artistic prerogatives to her consumers. While in industrial production a product’s components are typically fused into a fixed configuration, in this series Posenenske broke down the product and exposed the contingency of such industrial arrangements—thus neutralizing some of the mysterious, Wizard of Oz-like authority of the industrial process (an authority that was perhaps actually amplified in works arranged by artists alone, as in, say, Judd’s objects). The “Ducts” consisted of up to six elements that a consumer requested in any number and that arrived separately: square ducts in two lengths, a rectangular duct in one length, two kinds of angled connectors, and a “T piece” (used for bracing). Posenenske’s specifications for their assembly were flexible, to say the least: “They can start out from the floor, the ceiling, or the wall,” she instructed, “and can also form a single continuous installation,”⁶ or, if the assembler preferred, they could be left as discrete structures. Posenenske’s ceding of the installation process to consumers, some of whom would have had no experience in handling art, probably drove the shift in this work group’s material from sharp-edged galvanized steel to safer, lighter cardboard.

Perhaps in order to make explicit the collaborative and flexible nature of the “Ducts,” Posenenske decided to perform such participation and reconfiguration at the September 9, 1967, exhibition event “*Dies alles, Herzchen, wird einmal Dir gehören*” (All This, Sweetie, Will One Day Be Yours), organized by Maenz at dealer Dorothea Loehr’s farm-turned-gallery on the outskirts of Frankfurt. Four men, dressed in Lufthansa overalls emblazoned with the word SERVICE, carried cardboard “Ducts” into the courtyard. Every five minutes or so over the course of the evening, the team changed the arrangement in accordance with the artist’s explicitly open-ended instructions, which encouraged the men to take “the size of the room, the available time, the number of viewers and the weather”⁷ into account.

Another group of works, the “Turning Leaves,” brought not only installers and performers but also exhibition visitors into the process of determining a work’s form. While the reliefs and “Ducts” usually stay put once installed in a given venue, the “Turning Leaves” can change at any moment. Each of their

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three or four hinged panels may be closed, opened all the way, or left ajar. The “Turning Leaves” thus quite literally revolve around social encounters and interactions, as viewers negotiate with one another over what to do or not to do; whether to preserve, repeat, reverse, or change one another’s actions; whether to make decisions alone or together. These encounters are pushed to an extreme in the two two-meter-tall versions, which one can enter as if they were rooms. In Posenenske’s March 1968 exhibition at Loehr’s, the “Turning Leaves” were recognized as a participatory tour de force. “The interior of the figure was popular especially,” one reviewer noted, “not only because of the particular view from that point but also as a place of exchange for short conversations. The object [functioned as] toy, object to be beheld, article of use all at once.” Another critic reported that “one can stroll through upright, have oneself locked up, play hide-and-seek, or . . . create different space, light, or plane constellations.”⁸

A CONVERGENCE OF FACTORS afforded Posenenske the freedom to develop such innovative participatory models and allowed her to find enthusiastic supporters of her work as well. Frankfurt-area dealers and curators like Maenz and Loehr could take risks because they had little to lose, being on the margins of an already marginal European market. The city’s art professionals, such as they were, were unusually receptive to an artist who was programmatically inviting people to touch, manipulate, and, quite possibly, damage her work. With her background in design, Loehr in particular was used to indelicate handling of her wares: A member of the *Werkbund*, she had built a career as a dealer of, and contractor for, midcentury modern furniture and interior design. Presciently rejecting the art/design distinction, she showed both together for years. Frankfurt’s art world was a community, moreover, in which many people—most important, Maenz—were on the same political wavelength as Posenenske. “The extreme left in art,” Maenz reportedly proclaimed about “*Dies alles, Herzchen*,” “turns the Galerie Dorothea Loehr upside down in order to stage transient situations.”⁹

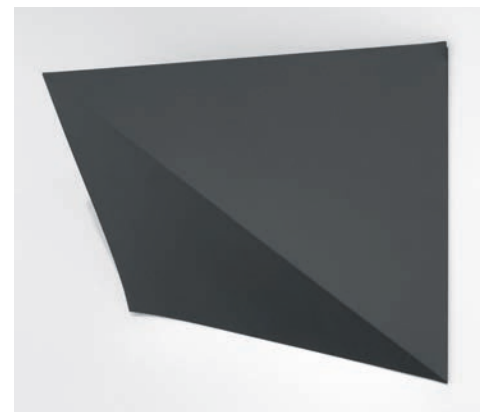
It is all too easy to infer that in Posenenske’s work generally, and in the “Turning Leaves” especially, the gallery allegorizes the polis just as it does in today’s relational work. However, while Posenenske’s abdication of control and her insistence on interactivity were always informed by her politics, she was never an idealist. She was acutely aware of the limitations of art and had never set out to change the world with it in the first place. In fact, rather than emphasizing Posenenske’s renunciation of art in order to retroactively cast her work as a tool for such sweeping change, we would do well to respect the quite clear—and, for her, painful—line she drew between her art and her sociology. That line takes relational aesthetics and interactivity to task for the vague analogies these models often imply between art and society and for sidestepping the complex realities of power, manipulation, and conflict inherent in community building—critiques that in recent years have been advanced by Claire Bishop and Hal Foster. Surely, the soberness of Posenenske’s work and its potential for conflict (people might argue about what to do with the works or how to manipulate the revolving panels) run counter to the sunny address of a great deal of contemporary relational work. But making art more accessible, participatory, and interactive was, for Posenenske, not enough; it was not commensurate with her notions of political responsibility.

The political developments in late-’60s West Germany distressed her and crystallized her convictions regarding the limitations of art. As the daughter of a Jewish father and a gentile mother, Posenenske suffered traumatic childhood experiences during the Third Reich that are also surely relevant here. Her father committed suicide out of fear of deportation when she was nine years old; she was shocked to learn at age eleven that she would be barred from attending high school; she escaped deportation only because a sympathetic local police officer

hid her file; and she went into hiding thereafter, first in a basement laundry room in her native Wiesbaden, then on a farm in the nearby countryside. Thus, as an adult, Posenenske was disturbed, to say the least, by revelations about the support for National Socialism by still-extant corporations and by the 1966 election of a former leading member of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party), Kurt Georg Kiesinger, as West German chancellor. Moreover, like many others on the left, she believed that effective parliamentary opposition was impossible following the Social Democratic Party’s move to the center and its Great Coalition with the conservative Christian Democrats, led by Kiesinger. Frankfurt, along with Berlin, became a hotbed of extraparliamentary opposition, but it seems Posenenske did not feel at home there, either: Though registered, she was a by-and-large inactive member of the local SDS (the Socialist German Student Association), and she considered “ridiculous”¹⁰ the claims of allegiance with workers by the Red Army Faction, which had announced its existence with the April 2, 1968, department-store bombings in Frankfurt.

For Posenenske, then, investigation of the conditions of art—its production, distribution, and function—and reflection on its impotence gradually began to take precedence over its creation. “Possibilities of moving beyond art were of the greatest interest to me back then,” she later reflected, recalling her efforts to plan a 1967 collaborative exhibition with Roehr and their peer Wolfgang Schmidt. One idea they had considered, without articulating any concrete realization, was for each of them to exhibit “a different artist (good or bad). . . . R/S/P don’t make art, but an artist. They take him in the way they found him and demonstrate with him and his oeuvre all the social (aesthetic) problems contained therein.” Another thought was to stage “an exhibition about Vietnam, the *Notstandsgesetze* [emergency laws], Greece, South Africa, etc. etc.” The three artists discussed their ideas, but the result “was the decision not to do the show.”¹¹

Such decisions, stemming from Posenenske’s careful consideration of politically responsible options for artmaking, ultimately led to her belief that the kind of institutional critique implied by the exhibition of an artist as a persona, or of an exhibition organized around contemporaneous political events, was insufficient. The very concept of political art, she concluded, was invalid because art, for better or for worse, was inherently multivalent (and hence an ineffective tool for activism).¹² This elimination of options led, likely in early 1969, to her remarkable and courageous decision to quit the art world. Posenenske arrived at this point gradually: While she effectively made no new art in 1968, she had two more solo shows that year. Only in early 1969 did she officially make the break, gathering the unsold remnants of her practice and literally banishing



Opposite page, top: Handlers rearranging Charlotte Posenenske’s *Vierkantrohre Serie DW* (Series DW Ducts), 1967, during “*Dies alles, Herzchen, wird einmal Dir gehören*” (All This, Sweetie, Will One Day Be Yours), Galerie Dorothea Loehr, Frankfurt, September 9, 1967. Bottom: Charlotte Posenenske (right) at her solo exhibition, Galerie h, Hannover, West Germany, 1967. This page: Charlotte Posenenske, *Diagonale Faltung* (Diagonal Fold), 1966, paint on sheet aluminum, 20 3/4 x 29 1/2 x 10”.

them to an attic. Throughout this period, she engaged in intense deliberation, giving voice to her difficulties in her writing and discussing them with her closest peers—with Roehr, who likewise quit making art around the same time; with Maenz, whom she tried unsuccessfully to dissuade from opening a gallery; and with Jan Dibbets, for whom she “tried to clarify for half a night the problems which to me appeared to be connected to the production of art. In vain—he remained optimistic!”¹³

Posenenske is not the only ideologically driven quitter in art-world lore: Think of Lee Lozano’s dropping out or of Seth Siegelaub’s turn to the publishing of leftist books. But the political integrity of Posenenske’s transition, and the extent to which she put her money where her mouth was, remain unrivaled. Before declining to participate in the Bielefeld public art competition, she and Brunn—with whom she enrolled in the sociology program at Frankfurt’s university in the fall of 1969, shortly after leaving her husband for him—had rung doorbells and polled local residents in order to learn about their actual and desired life circumstances. Their notes include questions like “Kindergarten? School? Playground?” “Dist. [distance] to cinema, soccer field, bar?” “Where do you meet up with friends?” “Are you bored sometimes during the day?” “Why do you live here?” “For 38,000 [deutsche marks, likely the budget of the project]—something useful in the [development]?” This somewhat amateurish study, conceived on the road in a Volkswagen bus, was the preface to a far more cerebral and sophisticated work, her 1978 *Diplomarbeit* (the equivalent of a master’s thesis): *Vorgabezeit und Arbeitswert: Interessenkritik an der Methodenkonstruktion. Leistungsgradschätzen, Systeme vorbestimmter Zeiten, analytische Arbeitsbewertung* (Time Allocation and Labor Value: Critique of the Interests in Methodological Construction. Performance Rating, Systems of Predetermined Time, Analytic Labor Evaluation).¹⁴ Authored with Brunn and published as a book in 1979, the thesis is a detailed study of three systems for assessing the value of labor, all of which had arisen in the postwar period to replace Taylorism and piecework. The duo intended to reveal to union leaders and industrial



Charlotte Posenenske, *Blaue Faltung* (Blue Fold), 1965, lacquer on aluminum, 34 x 39½ x 5¾".

workers the subtle ways in which, under the guise of objectivity, employers had systematically shaped these systems in their own interests—for example, covertly eliminating worker input and disregarding considerations of physical and psychological health. The plain language with which Brunn has recently articulated the aim of their investigation provides a clear sense of the nature of Posenenske’s commitment, beyond any artistic endeavor: The pair’s goal was to learn “how exploitation really works, how a worker’s lifetime is taken away from him and how he eventually becomes a mere accessory to the machine.”¹⁵

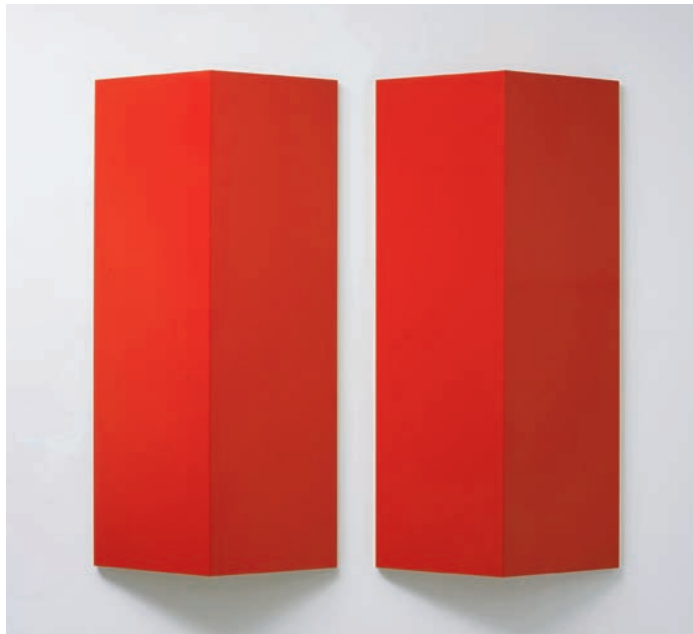


Charlotte Posenenske, *Plastisches Bild* (Sculptural Picture), 1965–66, lacquer on aluminum, destroyed.

IN THE WAKE OF THIS ACCOUNT of Posenenske’s journey from social art to sociological studies, the assertion that she was passionately committed to abstraction may seem contradictory. But operating alongside and in concert with her work’s interactivity was her devotion to a nonfigurative, self-reflexive model of art within a tradition of prewar European modernism, of which she was, to all appearances, acutely aware. Throughout the early ’60s, with the “Palette Knife Works” and then with the “Sprayed Pictures,” she attempted to overcome the subjective and arbitrary paint applications of art informel—applying paint to paper in a manner that was highly mediated (in a more obvious way than a brush would suggest), at times even deadpan (an impression conveyed by her clumsy filling in of edges and by her slightly off-parallel repetitions of strokes). In the mid-’60s, this work evolved to a high-modernist investigation of the essence of painting. Whether by gluing crinkled or smooth strips of colored tape to paper in her “Stripe Pictures” or by folding and lacquering aluminum sheets in her reliefs, she crystallized the simultaneously flattened and objectified nature of both color and support, and pushed the medium of painting to the boundary it shares with the medium of sculpture. Modernist reduction à la Posenenske turns expansive and complex, resulting in an explosion of the ingredients and techniques of painting but also in perceptual aporia.

Color and folding are key to the latter. Posenenske explained that “the problem is the tension that arises between the actual plasticity of the support and the illusionist-plastic effect of color.”¹⁶ “[Color] enhances the plastic form in that it enhances the natural shadow,” she elaborated elsewhere, “or it works against the natural plasticity of the support, sublates it optically.”¹⁷ For example, in the 1966 aluminum relief *Faltung* (Folding)—two horizontal red folds jutting forward from a blue plane—the material continuity of plane and folds is barely legible because the latter bulge outward so dramatically. Conversely, in *Wandobjekt* (Wall Object), a relief from the same year, the red is so saturated that it optically flattens the central fold. Posenenske described her reliefs as “ridges, intersections, pyramids, warpings, steps, corners, bars, folds, funnels”¹⁸ and “attempts to thereby create tension, irritation, concentration.”¹⁹ The effects of light and shadow enhance or, more commonly, distort the resulting plastic forms. In the stunning *Diagonale Faltung* of 1966, the “diagonal folding” captured in the laconic title leaves the simple monochrome and rectangular aluminum sheet entirely unreadable as such; from whatever angle we try to view it and understand its true nature, the surface appears two-toned, because the light can never hit the two equally gray planes in the same way, and the simple fold appears warped, because only the bottom and right edges are flush against the wall.

In her freestanding movable sculptures, this intricate engagement of our perception by means of abstraction reinforces the works’ interactivity, and vice versa. When their hinged “walls” or “doors” are closed, the “Turning Leaves” retreat into simple, seemingly inaccessible volumes. When their movable components are left ajar or opened completely, they erupt into complex tentacular configurations that take time to understand—particularly in the case of the two-meter-tall versions, which may be installed in relatively small spaces that preclude a distanced, comprehensive point of view.

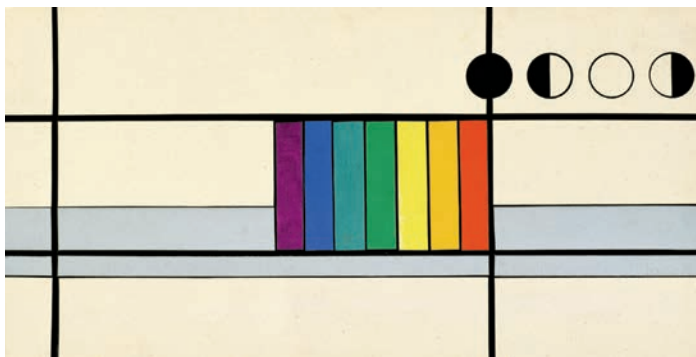


Charlotte Posenenske, *Reliefs Serie B* (Series B Reliefs), 1967, aluminum sprayed standard RAL matte red, each 39¼ x 19¼ x 5½”.



Charlotte Posenenske, *Welle* (Wave), 1965, lacquer on plastic, lost.

Some of this may sound familiar from Color Field and Minimalism, from Frank Stella’s shaped canvases, Judd’s transition from relief to “specific object,” Ellsworth Kelly’s perceptual manipulations, or Robert Morris’s gestalt play. Indeed, Posenenske was familiar with contemporaneous American art. (She likely saw a good deal of it in European galleries over the years and on a 1965 trip to the East Coast with her first husband.) And unlike many of her European contemporaries—whose aversion to American art often stemmed from an equation with American imperialism or from insecurity and competitiveness—she admired it. Her art was, in fact, seen in close relationship to its US counterparts, not only in “*Serielle Formationen*” but also in Udo Kultermann’s 1967 book *Neue Dimensionen der Plastik*, a widely read survey that reproduced Posenenske’s and Morris’s work on facing pages.²⁰ Rightly so: Posenenske’s strategy of turning painted plane into sculptural object, and her pursuit of an effect of perceptual “tension, irritation, concentration,” rival the use of the same strategy and the same effect by her best US peers. Better than most of them, she understood, and followed through on, the consequences of turning from two to three dimensions and of perceptually destabilizing her viewers. Her entry into the world of sculpture fully mobilized the vernacular, and her visual engagement of the viewer evolved into an instigation of all-encompassing, tactile, creative participation.

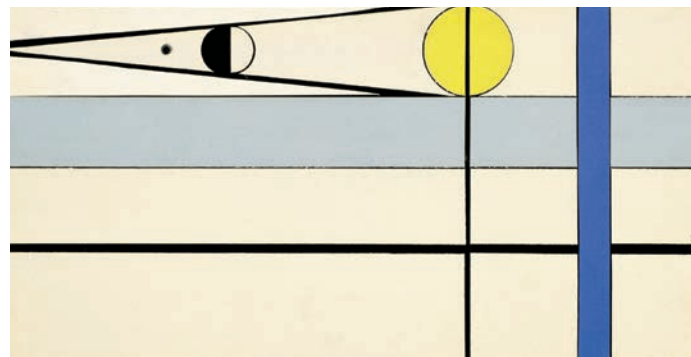


Posenenske's transition from a world of rubble to one awash in shiny new buildings and commodities was, in a sense, a transition from chaos to design.

In tandem with these developments, Posenenske intertwined the self-reflexiveness of her art with cultural-historical circumstance, autonomy with dependence. On one hand, she insisted that her objects “should not represent anything but what they are,”²¹ a fact embodied in her literally self-reflective, concavely folded reliefs such as *Blaue Faltung* (Blue Folding), 1965, and *Weisse Faltung* (White Folding), 1966. On the other, she continued this thought by noting that “the objects should have the objective character of industrial products” and elsewhere listed cultural phenomena that informed her work, including “car and air traffic, light effects, and impressions of fast driving,” as well as “traffic signs, automotive parts, building elements, and advertisement elements.”²²

Specifically, Posenenske's work undertakes and engenders a process of comprehending her sociocultural context—namely, the mid-'60s culmination of the West German “economic miracle” and its origins. Like many Germans of her generation, Posenenske had experienced a rapid and intense transformation of her everyday life, transitioning from a period of destruction and need to a time of unprecedented increases in living standards. This arc was romantically exaggerated in Posenenske's case when, following their marriage in 1955, she and her first husband got an apartment in Wiesbaden's stately Isenburger Schloss (where the Hessen building department he headed was located). If Posenenske's work with pressboard, sheet metal, and cardboard—especially the ways in which the work approximates architectural spaces, industrial assembly, and packing cartons—evokes the orgy of construction, production, and consumption that marked the boom years, her stress on inexpensive materials, ephemeral structures, and flexible use suggests a make-do sensibility forged in the earlier era of rubble and reconstruction.

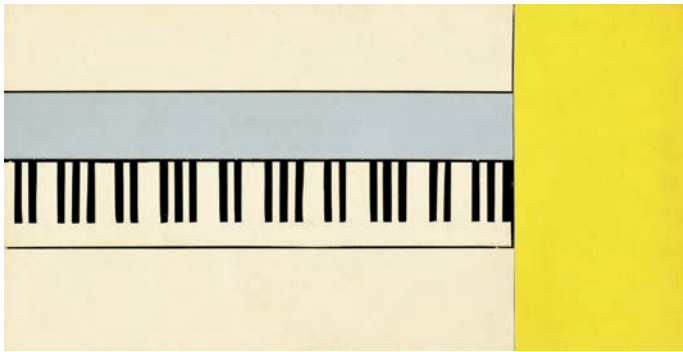
This transition from a world of rubble to one awash in shiny new buildings



and commodities—from destructured to restructured material culture, so to speak—was, in a sense, a transition from chaos to design. Posenenske's immersion in the discourse and practice of contemporary design likely shaped her predilection for period-resonant forms and materials. Paul Friedrich Posenenske was active in the reconstruction of Hessen cities, and his architectural practice was very much of its time in its formal and ideological orientations: His buildings often employed open plans with movable walls and exposed steel for both structural and aesthetic purposes, and his firm was frequently commissioned to build schools for educating a generation of “new” Germans capable of extricating the country from its fascist history and bringing it into a democratic future. His domestic taste, too, reflected this new Germany: The couple's home was a midcentury classic complete with brick wall, area rug, and Saarinen chairs. In addition, his office appears to have facilitated the artist's access to fabricators and tools, as evidenced by some of her technical drawings for installation plans. She also owned, and very much admired, her husband's colleague Ferdinand Kramer's recombinant shelving systems.

Indeed, it might be said that in Posenenske's early forays into design, she acquired the language that was to mediate her artistic explorations of postwar German society. Her work in stage design by definition involved the design and creation of surroundings and objects that were charged with meaning, and she was reportedly drawn particularly to working with the industrially fabricated machinery that manipulated the sets and props onstage. In the exterior murals she created for a school in Hainstadt built by Paul, she alluded to the educational initiatives and the pragmatism driving Germany's economic recovery by creating geometric visualizations of the various objective lenses through which we diagram the natural world: for example, the color spectrum, the temperature scale, and the umbra of Earth.

Posenenske's culturally mediated approach to abstraction links her work with that of a range of artists—including Imi Giese, Imi Knoebel, Blinky Palermo, Uecker, and Walther—who, in the creative ferment of late-'50s and '60s Düsseldorf, developed a peculiarly German model of abstraction. In a reformulation of critic Clement Greenberg's concept of “homeless representation,” this model might be called “abstraction at home.” For the American champion of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field, homeless representation amounted to a justification of figurative traces in painting used to formal, modernist ends.²³ If these figurative traces had no home in an iconographic sense, neither were Greenberg's modernist ends advanced by embeddedness in social or historical circumstance—they had to float free of context. Midcentury West German artists' abstraction at home, by contrast, might be defined by the use of largely nonrepresentational ingredients that were nevertheless charged with



This and opposite page, top: Studies for, and exterior of, Charlotte Posenenske's *Grundschule* (primary school) murals, Hainstadt, West Germany, ca. 1958. This page, bottom: Charlotte Posenenske, *Drehflügel Serie E* (Series E Turning Leaves), 1967–68, spray paint on sheet aluminum on foam plating. Installation view, Frankfurt Airport, 1968.



specific meanings rooted in their country's culture. Palermo's use of commercial colored fabrics in his cloth pictures resonated with the economic miracle in a manner reminiscent of Posenenske's work.

HOWEVER, UNLIKE MOST of these artists and others with similar concerns, Posenenske simultaneously zeroed in on one of the defining characteristics of the late-capitalist era that transcended West German borders and reconnected the country with the international world. What she grasped and was fascinated by was the way in which complex systems of organization and production are captured in immense structures possessing what might be called super-individual scale. This has little to do with socialist ideals of an individual's absorption into the mass, but rather indicates a situation in which systems surpass individual comprehension. Brunn remembers Posenenske returning from a visit to the Hannover trade fair enthralled by the way a gigantic kettle used in industrial production encapsulated this new sense of scale that transcended any relation to, and understanding by, any one person.²⁴ Moreover, she was captivated by the ways in which the intricate interconnectedness and perpetual circulation of

products and people within consumer societies tended to accelerate, rather than destabilize, the ascendance of this super-individual scale. Perhaps only Roehr and another of her Frankfurt peers, Thomas Bayle, were as obsessed with such notions of mass and scale and with the relation of parts and wholes within a late-capitalist context.

In hindsight, Posenenske's gravitation toward large-scale systems and structures is apparent early on—in the oversize industrial implements and machinery she was drawn to in her work for stage sets and in her Hainstadt mural, with its representations of the diagrammatic conventions we use to grasp natural systems. Her embrace of seriality belongs in this super-individual framework as well, as does her pursuit of an experience of an irritating, nearly incomprehensible visual and spatial complexity. Posenenske's closely related interest in interconnectedness and circulation is implied by her "Ducts"—by their resemblance to ventilation ducts and their often winding configurations—and is made literal in the "Turning Leaves," the hinged panels of which propel viewers' movements along intersecting, involuted paths. But this latter interest materialized most concretely in a series of programmatic photo shoots Posenenske arranged for her "Ducts" and "Turning Leaves," installing the "Ducts" on a traffic island outside her Wiesbaden home and each in a different location at Frankfurt's airport. As public settings and points of social convergence, such contexts echoed and gave sociocultural significance to her works' formal logic.

Seen within these frameworks, participation—to return to that admittedly central feature of Posenenske's work—gains a very specific sociocultural traction. For some of her West German users, it may have reflected the hands-on communal efforts of postwar rebuilding; for others, it may have formed an active, creative counterpoint to the consumption-induced complacency of the miracle years. But for Posenenske, above all, participation by definition exceeded individual efforts in favor of a collaborative practice that revealed the positive potential of her era's new scale and technological interconnectedness. In the years 1967 and '68, the visual, material, and participatory registers of her work came together to advance an impassioned yet clear-eyed evaluation of a world on the cusp between authoritarianism and democratization, industrialism and postindustrialism, national identity and international networks. This investigation, moreover, was accompanied by an utterly fearless confrontation with art's—especially abstraction's—vocabulary and its role in that world. If only for a short while, that convergence of functions allowed her to remain faithful to her artistic conscience *and* her social conscience. If she ended up turning exclusively to the latter, perhaps it is because she had satisfied the former. □

CHRISTINE MEHRING IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.

For notes, see page 352.

