

ARTFORUM

Charlotte Posenenske

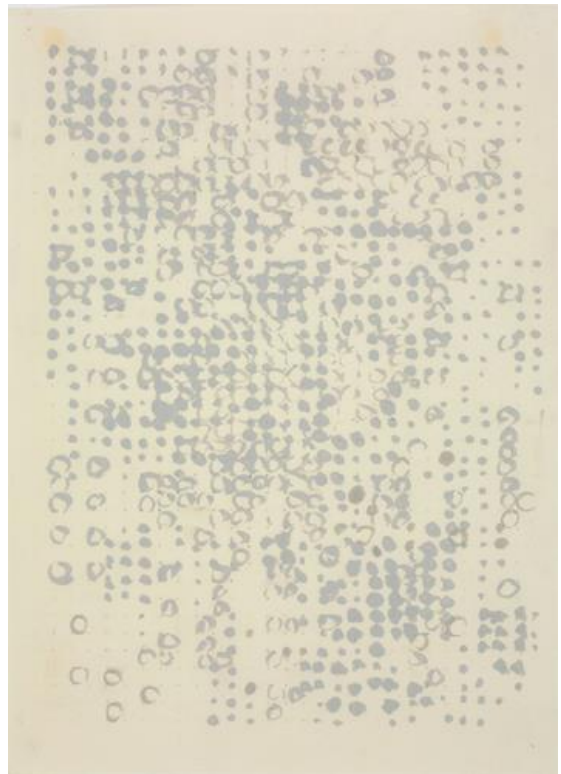
PETER FREEMAN, INC.

By Lloyd Wise

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It is somewhat difficult to believe, but until quite recently, Charlotte Posenenske was little more than a footnote, effectively forgotten by the art-historical literature until a modest installation of her reliefs and participatory sculptures at Documenta 12 in 2007 brought her memory roaring to life. Since then, the late German artist has been exhibited widely in Europe and the United States, celebrated as much for the way in which she married a sculptural practice to “the social” as for her work’s coolly industrial mien. But Posenenske’s sculpture is only part of the story. This small show shifted focus, presenting thirty paintings and drawings made between 1957 and 1965 that preceded her better-known output. The narrow emphasis was helpful, as it encouraged us to take in this body of work on its own merits and on its own terms. Even so, these pieces are mostly interesting insofar as we know what they lead to. Flirting with modes of anti-compositionality and desubjectification, the artist can be seen making attempts to push the mediums of painting and drawing to their limits, cycling through various strategies of mark-making before finally abandoning two dimensions altogether.

One of Posenenske’s foremost instruments in this period was the palette knife. Famously deployed by Courbet in defiance of the academic mandate for absolute smoothness, the implement is used by Posenenske to rein in the gestural exuberance of art informel, which was in vogue in the middle of the last century. Take, for example, a piece from 1959–60 in which the tool has been used to set rectangular blocks of black and blue acrylic atop a flat white ground. There are no drips, and no accidents: The result is a cluster of impassive marks, a deadpan Joan Mitchell. Posenenske explored a more gestural mode of abstraction, too, but did so in a way that



Charlotte Posenenske, *Rasterbild (Grid)*, 1957, casein on paper, 17 1/4 x 12 1/4".

feels weirdly robotic, taciturn nearly to the point of parody. To create two drawings here, both titled *Gestiche Arbeit* (Gestural Work) and made in 1963 and '64, respectively, Posenenske appears to have coated a dip pen in black acrylic and brandished it with rapid, violent slashes; among the caustic splatters, traces of the implement's use are visible where its sharp nib has nearly lacerated the paper. These febrile marks bring to mind not so much spontaneous expression as something more like mechanical breakdown, as if a stray tine on a malfunctioning machine, dripping with slick grease, had been running berserk next to a drop cloth or wall.

The exhibition also included Posenenske's experiments with novel materials such as spray paint and felt-tip markers—moves that spoke to painting's assimilation of consumer culture in the 1960s—but the show's most prescient works were its earliest: the *Rasterbild* (Grid) pieces. Created in 1956 and 1957 and built up from hundreds upon hundreds of small dots and circles, these drawings in ink and casein took two distinct forms. In some, Posenenske disregards the grid almost entirely, making marks that are free-form, almost effervescent. In others, there's a comparatively severe regularity, a rigid adherence to the grid's structure across the full expanse of the ground. Recalling Benday dots or punch cards, the latter, more than any of the works here, channel the dumb repetitions of machines. In the September 2010 issue of *Artforum*, Christine Mehring notes that the *Rasterbild* pieces evoke a screen's pixel arrays, an observation that rings truest with respect to a painting from 1957. Executed in a gray rather than black casein, that work is eerily lambent—it seems to glow. In the context of our moment, which sees a generation of artists fusing industrial fabrication to the tropes of modernist abstraction in order to approximate and compete with the screen, these modest works feel at once extraordinarily nuanced and profoundly contemporary.