Decoration and Abstraction in Blinky Palermo’s Wall Paintings

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The forms and concepts of decoration are not solely the domain of architectural history, the history of decorative arts, or the emerging field of visual culture. They have a place in art history as well. Decoration can be central to artistic practice, to the ways in which art communicates generally and relates to society specifically. While familiar to historians of pre-modern and non-Western art, this terrain is much less explored by historians of twentieth-century art, despite the number of artists who embraced decorative practices during that time. Counter to common expectations, this includes abstract artists of the postwar era.

In pursuit of these issues, the nearly thirty wall drawings and paintings that the German abstract painter Blinky Palermo made between December 1968 and March 1973 prove enlightening. When Palermo drew lines on walls or painted them in monochrome fields of color, when he highlighted spatial characteristics or added decorative forms, some critics dismissed him as a mere wall painter while others praised him for providing an “intensive experience of space.”1 The two accounts, representative of the reception of these works, will turn out to be important for understanding the ways in which the wall paintings exemplify decoration mobilized to generate an abstract art that is historically meaningful—both with respect to the history of abstract painting and in relation to the historical context of a German sixties marked by the so-called economic miracle and by vibrant debates about the social and political role of art.

Palermo left us with three other types of work: cloth pictures (bands of commercial fabric mounted on stretchers), metal pictures (perhaps best known in the United States following the 1989 exhibition of To the People of New York City at the Dia Foundation for the Arts and its recent installation at Dia’s new space in Beacon, New York), and what Palermo referred to as “objects” (painted pieces of wood in various shapes, often mounted on the wall in pairs). While Palermo’s other work may look strikingly different from the wall paintings and is far less concerned with ornament and decoration, it shares a historical resonance with the abstract forms and colors that will be at issue here—for example, the objects engage the legacies of a
national tradition in German art.

To relate Palermo's works, particularly his wall paintings, to their historical context is at odds with the prevalent, often crude reception of his art, like much of postwar German art, as existentialist and expressionist. Palermo's art has long been seen in relation to a litany of biographical trauma: his adoption as an infant soon after the end of World War II; his use of a pseudonym taken from the name of the Mafia manager of the boxer Sonny Liston, Frank “Blinky” Palermo; his reluctance to speak or write about his work; and, above all, his problems with drugs and alcohol that led to a tragic death in 1977 at the young age of thirty-three.

Within the Wall Paintings
Experience, for Palermo, was of central importance to his temporary wall paintings. “It does not stay in the photograph,” he warned, “it stays only in the memory of someone who actually stood inside.” Lamenting this transient mode of working, the artist nevertheless assembled thorough documentation, including notes, photographs, sketches, and ground plans mounted on cardboard, which today provide the basis, along with contemporary reviews and a handful of reconstructions, for any historical consideration of his body of work.

Palermo made one of his earliest wall drawings in the spring of 1969, for the exhibition series *Blockade* at the Galerie Block in Berlin. He responded to the gallery’s idiosyncratic sequence of walls joined at varying angles, unfolding like an accordion around the circumference of the room. Wherever walls met, Palermo drew two thin lines with red chalk extending from floor to ceiling on either side of the joint. As photographs and a film made by local television show, this alteration enhanced the awkward, strange qualities of the space. The lines mimicked the vertical edges of the walls but, although drawn thinly and lightly, were more readily visible than the actual joints. In effect, each joint flattened out and disappeared, rendering uncertain the exact demarcations of the space. As the rhythm of lines compelled one to walk along the walls—the artist suitably referred to the piece as an *Abwicklung*, “unfolding”—this illusion kept repeating. Palermo reportedly talked about another version of this work made for the Kabinett für Aktuelle Kunst in Bremerhaven in terms of “Aktivierung des Raums,” “activation of space.” The vertical lines in both locations created a heightened, activated sense of space insofar as the resulting optical illusions defamiliarized the space for viewers and enhanced their spatial, perceptual, and bodily consciousness. Sensitivity to and reflection about the
surroundings replaced everyday spatial oblivion.

Visitors to the Berlin and Bremerhaven exhibitions were further puzzled by the accompanying music. In a letter to his Berlin dealer René Block, Palermo referred to “a tape that continuously plays the piano piece with text Modell op. 33 by Henning Christiansen. This piece,” he explains, “is made concrete through my intervention, as it comes from an imaginary space into your concrete space and hence enforces my intentions.” The piece by the contemporary Danish composer and visual artist features a voice saying in a simple rhythm, “hier von und dazu,” accompanied by minimal piano chords. Most of these words have multiple meanings: hier means “here”; von means “from,” “of,” “by,” or “about”; and dazu can be roughly translated as “for the purpose,” “therefore,” “for this,” “besides,” “in addition,” “together,” or “with.” How did Palermo make this music “concrete”? The composer himself had already “concretized” language, as it were, stressing its material qualities in a way similar to concrete poetry by isolating prepositions from nouns that would determine their meaning. The longer one listens, the more these words turn into mere babble, pure sounds arranged in melodic rhythm. Palermo’s wall drawing enforced the uncertainty of the words and suggested several referents: hier may be the “here” of the speaker or the viewer, von is a “from” that is spatially and temporally undetermined, and dazu leaves open what is added to what—viewer to space, space to viewer, lines to space, line to line, or viewer to line. Such multiple meanings foregrounded the materiality of the words and thus made the composition “concrete.” Wall drawing and music worked in tandem to defamiliarize exhibition visitors.

That effect became decisively more visual several months later in Tuchverspannung, poorly translated as “cloth bracing,” one of two adjacent room installations at the Galerie Ernst in Hannover. Palermo had stretched a band of yellow-orange cotton cloth diagonally from wall to floor in one corner of the room and from wall to ceiling in the opposite corner, concealing the right angles where walls met floor and ceiling. A visitor to the exhibition described losing his balance while walking through the space, comparing the experience to a slowly tilting ship deck. Another wrote that “the room lost its customary proportions and looked as if it were about to keel over. In this way the viewer’s normal sense of space is dramatically disturbed and the viewer himself is left with a feeling of insecurity.” Even the photograph compels us to tilt our head to the left to adjust for a disturbed sense of balance. The usual horizontal anchor of body and vision is replaced by the diagonal axis spanning the space.
between the two bands—an axis Palermo marked with an arrow in one of his sketches. Whether to balance or to enrich viewers’ spatial experiences in this exhibition, Palermo created a contrasting sense of stability in the adjacent gallery space, described by a reviewer as a straightforward articulation of the room’s boundaries: A dark blue line “exactly follows, at a slight distance, the contours of the door, windows, and heater.”

The wall circumscription and the monochrome plane featured in this early exhibition became central motifs in Palermo’s wall paintings and were soon used to unsettling ends in more sophisticated ways. In a second wall painting for the Kabinett für Aktuelle Kunst, a “mild grey,” as one reviewer described it, covered the lower two-thirds of the three walls (the fourth wall being the fully glassed storefront) and reached a little above the average height of a person. Merging with the similarly colored floor, the grey fields enclosed visitors; from all sides of the perceptual field the walls pushed them back toward the window in a close-to-claustrophobic manner. The white space above eye level appeared spacious and immaterial by contrast, further enhancing the grey’s constraining effect.

Palermo’s Wandmalerei auf gegenüberliegenden Wänden (Wall Painting on Facing Walls), commonly referred to as the “positive/negative” wall painting and exhibited at the Galerie Heiner Friedrich in Munich from February to March 1971, embodies in the most complex and condensed way what one might call the phenomenological core of the wall paintings. Palermo painted one wall of the gallery space in a subdued orange, enframed by a white band of a hand’s breadth that ran around wall and door. He then reversed the color scheme on the facing wall. With minimal means Palermo destabilized the visitors’ spatial experience. The two facing walls fragmented the space because adjacent walls and ceiling were missing their unifying links. Themselves out of place, they destroyed in turn the sense of place any ordinary room generates. The white and orange fields further created visual effects similar to the grey walls in Bremerhaven,
perhaps more intensely because the frames roughly coincided with
the periphery of the visitors’ vision. The darker, orange wall appeared
to move forward, out of its white frame and toward the viewer. The
white wall seemed to open up and pull the viewer in.12

Utopian Environments, Past and Present

Palermo was not alone when he turned to exhibiting rooms in late
1968, not alone in foregrounding a phenomenological understanding
of and heightened sensitivity to space. With American art still at the
center of the postwar art canon, one might think of minimalism’s
explorations of the body and objects in space, leading into concep-
tual art’s critical investigations of space. After a brief cross-Atlantic
delay, this art was indeed exhibited in German cities during the late
sixties: an extensive survey of Minimal Art traveled to Düsseldorf
in early 1969, and Konrad Fischer opened his influential gallery in
Düsseldorf in 1967 with Carl Andre’s 5 x 20 Altstadt Rectangle, fol-
lowed two years later by one of Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings and one
of Mel Bochner’s first measurement rooms. Yet the phenomenological
subtext so central to the thinking of these American artists and their
critics completely escaped the German audience of the sixties; they
were unable to see any kinship with the phenomenological concerns
of Palermo’s wall paintings.

Instead, Palermo’s wall paintings were received as part of a European
euphoria for “environments.” Artists produced and curators com-
missioned work that, in keeping with the etymology of the term,
literally “encircled” their viewers. The medium played a prominent
role at Documenta 4 in 1968, for example, with Dan Flavin’s signa-
ture fluorescent light tubes installed along the edges of the walls of a
darkened space or Christo’s Corridor Store Front. Complete exhibitions
were devoted to the theme; for example, 12 Environments in Bern and
Vier Räume in Munich, both in 1968; or Räume und Environments in
Leverkusen in 1969.13 Rooms were

explained, the “fog, which of course is to be perceived sensually, really demands participation of all senses in a condensed way. Sensibility is thus activated to the highest degree.”

To be sure, there was an American reference, just not the one to minimalism and phenomenology one might expect. Instead European critics adopted the term “environments” from Happening artist Allan Kaprow’s original use to describe an art that filled “entire containing areas, nearly obliterating the ruled definition of the rooms” and that incorporated the spectator as an “important physical component.”

The latter was central to the way environments were defined in Europe: as “a medium of expression in art taken from reality, a medium that succeeds in activating the viewers’ consciousness through a complex use of his senses” and that engaged visitors in various activities such as thinking, moving, arranging, playing, touching, or smelling. Some environments stressed the use of a full-scale room, others the participation of the audience, but most focused on the interplay of room and audience to enable a heightened sensual experience of space.

Environments and their popularity were bred by intense debates in the German art world about the social and political role of art. They reflected one of five main positions within these debates: efforts to democratize art, the practice of art-making as a form of negation, art as agitation, a rejection of artistic practice altogether, and calls for a socialization of art. Seeking to democratize art, artists and institutions worked to expand access to a broad population, a trend that gave rise to affordable multiples, art fairs, a publication boom, and new forms of art education, such as Bazon Brock’s Visitors’ School at Documenta 4. Negational art sought to overcome stale conventions of art making and to provoke its audiences, exemplified by the performances of Fluxus artists and the young Jörg Immendorff. Agitational art went further to promote political education and change, using posters, in the case of Klaus Staeck, or montaged objects, in the case of Hans-Peter Alvermann, to comment critically on specific historical events or social conditions. The rejection of art altogether, as inherently elitist and apolitical, was voiced both from within the art world (e.g., Alvermann ceased to make art in 1966), and from outside (most prominently in the public demonstrations against and critical reviews of Documenta 4). The socialization of art comprised efforts to make art socially effective, to heighten communal consciousness and sense awareness, and to foster communication and participation. Much utopian jargon evolved, claiming that “the incorporation of the reality of the surrounding necessarily and consequentially obliterates the border between art and life” or that “the new ‘artless art’ is on its way to overcome inflexible forms and to lead to a new creativity of the masses.” Amid such vague generalizations, environments presented concrete examples of an art that systematically
pursued this socialization.

These positions within the German art world developed within the broader context of '68. Like the United States and France, West Germany around that time witnessed a wave of political protests—against capitalist structures, authoritarian thinking, and American imperialism; and for a critically engaged consciousness and greater social, political participation. In Germany the protests became known as the Außerparlamentarische Opposition (APO; Extra-Parliamentary Opposition), a widely accepted term introduced by the German student leader Rudi Dutschke in 1966. The APO had grown out of demonstrations in the late fifties and early sixties against nuclear armament and the Spiegelaffäre (involving an illegal order to search that magazine’s offices). It gained an increasing public presence with protests against the brutalities of the U.S.-led war in Vietnam, the stale bureaucracies and curricula of the universities, widely perceived continuities with the National Socialist past in the form of state personnel and popular mind sets, and other cumulating threats to the young democracy. The most important of these were the left Social Democratic Party’s move to the center and subsequent coalition with the right Christian Democrats, and the so-called Notstandsgesetze, Emergency Laws, allowing for a temporary suspension of the constitution for the purposes of inner security. Galvanizing moments were the fatal shooting by a police officer of the student protester Benno Ohnesorg on June 2, 1967, a worker’s attempt to assassinate Dutschke on April 11, 1968, and the Star March demonstration in the capital on May 11, 1968, with some 50,000 participants protesting the impending passing of the Emergency Laws.19

The German debates about art and politics were shaped not only by this immediate context but also by art-historical precedents in the earlier twentieth century. The utopian belief that art could heighten awareness of one’s surroundings provided continuity with designs for rooms and wall paintings found in Russian Constructivism, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus. Contemporary curators and critics knew these well. The Räume and Environments catalogue cited El Lissitzky and Kurt Schwitters as forefathers, and the Italian environment retrospective Ambiente: Arte dal futurismo alla body art, showed, albeit only in 1976, reconstructions of wall paintings by Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Schlemmer, and others juxtaposed with contemporary environments by artists such as Daniel Buren and Sol LeWitt.20 Lissitzky’s Prounen Raum of 1923 received wide attention when its 1965 reconstruction toured Europe as part of the artist’s retrospective. The Prounen Raum heightened perception of space because painted, wooden reliefs were organized according to the successive viewing typical of an exhibition visit—a long horizontal wooden stick, for example, emphasized the effect of spatial recession upon entering the room.
If pre- and postwar environments were designed to enhance perceptual and spatial awareness, thereby to build a critical consciousness of the world, the means often differed. While many of the earlier examples were painted, younger artists proved themselves inventive in using unexpected materials such as fog or foam rubber. Theirs was a climate that had grown indifferent, indeed hostile, to painting and its traditional, bourgeois connotations.

Palermo’s use of painting did not, however, prevent his wall paintings from being associated with contemporaneous environment practices. The wall paintings were frequently commissioned and executed for exhibitions devoted exclusively to environment art; for example, the exhibition series *Blockade* and the *Ambiente* exhibition. Accordingly, critics then and now have referred to Palermo’s wall paintings as “environments” or have stressed aspects central to this category of work, especially its critical potential. Discussing the wall paintings, Max Brüderlin praised Palermo as a protagonist for an “aesthetic effectiveness beyond a subjective viewpoint into a totality of (collective) space,” and Laszlo Glozer described one installed in an abandoned Munich underpass “as an instruction for critical perception.” Most famously, the utopian nature of the wall paintings was stressed by the artist Joseph Beuys, Palermo’s teacher at the Düsseldorf art academy. “He was extremely political,” Beuys claimed, in terms of “a declaration of a poetic stance.” He continued:

[Palermo] wanted to create order in an area reaching as far as he could manage . . . in some environment, say, a museum, where he moved something on a wall, for instance, with color . . . you see a few structures and levels of order, which he put in some kind of a spatial concept to make something palpable: the way he imagined the order of a world that is created out of art . . . it was certainly a message. It was definitely a kind of protest.

Beuys may well have monopolized Palermo’s work for his own causes; as is well known, Beuys was active in seeking reforms leading to greater participation at the Düsseldorf art academy and in society at large. Be that as it may, his understanding typified the positive reception of the wall paintings. We may conclude for now that Palermo’s wall paintings, by heightening their viewer’s perceptual and spatial awareness, relate to utopian conceptions of concurrent and historical environment art as critically and socially engaging. Yet the wall paintings are far from exhausted by these phenomenological and historical contexts.
Palermo’s Banalities
Alongside the positive reception, hostile criticism of the wall paintings erupted in local newspapers, and Palermo was frequently dismissed as a Wandmaler, as a “mere” wall painter. His first wall painting was derided as “impressively boring,” his second as nothing but “bleak walls” that “pulled a joke on its viewers.” Reactions were hostile, it seems, because the wall paintings bordered on artlessness, on banality. Cheap materials reinforced this impression: ordinary house paints, as in the “positive/negative” wall painting, or, in at least one instance, regular undercoating. The colors were often trivial: dull, like the grey in Bremerhaven; or blatant, like orange or the primaries. But Palermo was most banal when picking up on “banal schemes,” as one critic noted. His habits of tracing edges and filling in spaces must have seemed uninspired and simplistic to the point of childishness.

Another staple in Palermo’s repertoire of banalities was mere replication. For a wall painting at the Galerie Konrad Fischer, Palermo transferred the dado running along the stairs of his apartment building onto facing gallery walls, at full scale, in reversed symmetry. The invitation to that exhibition included a photograph of the staircase, although the shape was readily recognizable and visitors hardly needed the pointer. More commonly, Palermo replicated shapes found in situ. In the “positive/negative” wall painting, the white and orange bands simply copied, as it were, the outlines of the walls and roughly corresponded in width to the door and window frames. The motif of the rectangular frame also picked up on the fluorescent lights, which formed two nested rectangles running parallel to the ceiling’s perimeter. For yet another wall painting at the Kabinett für Aktuelle Kunst, Palermo simply transferred the shape of its black, storefront window frame, reduced by ten percent, onto the adjacent interior wall. One could hardly miss that it was a copy. When Palermo did the same thing the following month in a pedestrian underpass in downtown Munich, he compared his painting to a “stamp,” which it was indeed: the actual painting was a replica of the existing window frame, the concept a replica of what he had just done.

Palermo liked everyday spaces such as this downtown underpass. Especially for group exhibitions, he sought out ordinary places, in three instances choosing staircases over standard display areas. Taken by themselves, his banal additions within commercial galleries might have reminded visitors that these seemingly privileged spaces were simply regular rooms. Yet the
wall paintings can hardly be classified as the type of “institutional critique” practiced by conceptual artists during the late sixties and seventies, largely because they were made for such a variety of spaces. While four of Palermo’s proposals for different institutional settings—two schools, a university, and a corporate conference room—remained unexecuted, he made other wall paintings for semi-private spaces—the artist’s studio and the outside of a house—or for private apartments.29

The banality of Palermo’s wall paintings in the context of the home was particularly prominent when juxtaposed with furniture or with paintings, as in an installation with his friend the painter Gerhard Richter for the apartment of Six Friedrich, the former wife of Palermo’s dealer. Here Palermo partially enframed a window with a grey, right angle of about a hand’s breadth. The shape reproduced half the outline of the window and filled in some of the plain, surrounding area. Two paintings by Richter hung to the left of this window—*Klorolle* of 1965 below and *Vorhang* of 1964 above, painted in his signature blurred, photo-realist style. It might have seemed challenging to match the banality of Richter’s subject matter—a toilet roll and a curtain placed next to the window. But, like the other wall paintings, the grey angle did just that by blending in with the interior. Palermo’s contribution, unlike Richter’s, was not even a painting. It was merely paint on the wall. We will see that Palermo was neither sloppy nor inconsistent in combining banality with the heightened sensitivity laid out before. Banality was Palermo’s ingenuity.

German Pop Interiors
Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Konrad Lueg (aka Konrad Fischer, Palermo’s dealer and friend) formed the core of a loose group whose art came to be known as Capitalist Realism. When Palermo began painting walls five years after their first group exhibition in an abandoned shop in Düsseldorf, he responded to the legacy of his older friends. The banality of home decor and living environments had been at the core of their German variety of pop art from its inception. Once again, Palermo’s particular brand of banality brings to mind much of American postwar art—Ellsworth Kelly’s noncompositional paintings in France, Jasper Johns’s Flag, even Sol LeWitt’s absurd pursuits of simple systems. The German context, however, is more historically and geographically immediate and more specifically relevant in its focus on interiors and decoration.

On the evening of October 11, 1963, Richter and Lueg organized Leben mit Pop: eine Demonstration für den kapitalistischen Realismus in the Düsseldorf furniture store Möbelhaus Berges. The performance consisted of three parts. Visitors were greeted by life-size sculptures of the dealer Alfred Schmela and President Kennedy, gathered in a waiting room decorated with antlers, then were called in groups to enter an explicitly “average living room” where the two artists lounged on furniture placed on pedestals. A television was running next to a set table, the magazine Schöner Wohnen and flowers were placed on a tea cart, and the odor of a pine-scented air freshener filled the room. Accompanied by dance music periodically interrupted by advertising slogans for furniture, the duo took visitors on tours through, in their own words, “the entire department store on display without alterations.” Eight of their paintings were added to a “comprehensive furniture exhibition of all current styles on four floors.”

Three years later, Lueg followed up on Living with Pop with the little-known exhibition event Kaffee und Kuchen at Galerie Schmela. The gallery was turned into a dining room, displaying on flower-patterned wallpaper a selection of Lueg’s paintings of decorative patterns taken from washcloths, wallpaper, and the like. Invited friends came for coffee and cake, seated at a long table set with pretty china, napkins, and all. Richter’s early blur paintings continued to feature curtains and toilet rolls, chairs and chandeliers, pillows and pianos, although his iconography of banality was never limited to the home and included mass-media imagery ranging from pyramids to portraits. The “average living room” became a central theme too for Polke, who began to incorporate into his paintings actual fragments of decorative fabric, first in Palmenbild of 1964.

The banality so central to German pop, as well as to Palermo’s wall paintings, must be seen in the context of the so-called Wirtschaftswunder, an era of “miraculous” economic recovery and boom during
the fifties and sixties that resurrected a defeated Germany from the rubble of the war. The period witnessed the rapid rebuilding of war-ravaged industry, a historically low unemployment rate, the fastest growth of gross national product in the country’s history, an ever-increasing availability of goods, and rising standards of living for average citizens. Increasingly complacent lives were filled with American-style supermarkets and vacations in foreign countries, televisions and washing machines, modern furnishings and decorative objects. The “miracle” was fed by American help in the form of the Marshall Plan, the currency reform of 1948, and the great demand for German exports in the wake of the Korean War.³³

Already at the time, there had been much argument about German pop. Was it ironic or indifferent, funny or resigned? Did these artists criticize the self-satisfied consumerism of the economic miracle, a petty bourgeois lifestyle with its so-called volkstümlich (popular-traditionalist) taste, or did they embrace its iconography and materials precisely to renounce the critical potential of art? “Lueg’s homage to washcloth and towel is a celebration of modern life. One will search in vain for a biting social critique,” the dealer Hans Strelow warned in his incisive essay for Lueg’s 1966 exhibition at Galerie René Block; “let’s learn to enjoy our environment.” Block, on the other hand, argued that inspired by “more banal and more narrow-minded patterns than American pop art, these artists rendered ironic the behavior of the German petty bourgeoisie [des deutschen Spießertums], which came through the war unbroken,” and the writer Heinz Ohff insisted that the Capitalist Realists “took the banal and surmounted it.” In a world full of banalities, he continued, these artists “took back what commerce had taken from them: the image.”³⁴

Palermo and the Capitalist Realists focused on banality as located in the everyday, lived environment and as witnessed during the years of the economic miracle. Yet Palermo’s wall paintings lacked the ambivalent attitude toward banality at the core of German pop art. This banality resided only in the forms, in the making, and in the materials, and was therefore less overt, more genuine and generic, and never class or group specific. Palermo’s wall paintings repositioned the Capitalist Realist theme of the banal interior by placing it in dialogue with contemporary environments and by stressing its decorative aspects.

Decoration

Two points of entry into Palermo’s wall paintings have emerged: their phenomenological concerns situated in the utopian framework of European environments and their banal qualities in relationship to German pop. Both tendencies coexist in each individual wall painting. As viewers grew accustomed to the destabilizing effects, the banality
of Palermo's means gradually surfaced. At Galerie Block the wall showed through the brittle chalk lines. At the Kabinett für Aktuelle Kunst the poor grey paint quality became noticeable. In turn, even the most banal of Palermo's wall works, his transfers, were arranged so as to disturb the viewer's visual understanding. At Galerie Fischer the transferred dados began to float, and the inverted symmetry of their arrangement suggested a mirror that remained spatially unresolved. The juxtaposition of actual and painted window frames in Bremerhaven and Munich implied a shadowlike projection that was incorrect given lighting conditions and the perpendicular relationship of wall to window. Surely the opacity of a window painted on the wall was no less puzzling.

A third term, decoration, allows the wall paintings to accommodate these otherwise mutually exclusive poles of the phenomenological and the banal, of heightened sensitivity and shallow simplicity. Curator Klaus Honnef experienced all of Palermo's wall paintings as "somewhat decorative" and even went on to report that "Palermo has absolutely no objection to his work being regarded as a type of interior decoration." Palermo was infamously taciturn, and many words have been put into his mouth, yet Honnef's account seems plausible given visual evidence for the artist's decorative interests and given his design studies at the Werkkunstschule in Münster prior to transferring to the art academy in Düsseldorf. Palermo's interventions functioned as ornaments: they adapted to the architecture or emphasized existing spatial features but were always in excess of these. They evoked standard decorative vocabulary (repetition, patterns, planes, lines, and symmetries) and standard decorative practices within architecture (dados, moldings, and blind windows), some of which were noted at the time. The decorative additions deeply affected and destabilized the viewer, or they appeared banal, almost unworthy of notice. Palermo's best wall paintings held both reactions in suspension.

Such decorative aspects proved most obvious in the "positive/negative" wall painting. Critic Günter Pfeiffer called it "spatial design," elaborating that Palermo "practices a mimicry of classicism, which sometimes leads us to speculate that he has joined the coffered ceiling painters of the eighteenth century." The linear enframings were reminiscent of molding, basic decorative strategies such as reversed symmetry and balancing of line and plane were used, and the choice of the color orange was arbitrary and excessive in truly decorative fashion. Palermo exaggerated this decorative feel in a second version, another collaboration with Richter made for Friedrich's new Cologne gallery a month later (and reconstructed for permanent display under the supervision of Richter in 1984 at the Lenbachhaus in Munich). Richter exhibited two plaster busts—one of himself, the other of Palermo—and placed them on tall pedestals facing each other.
Palermo painted all four walls ochre and enframed each with a white stripe. In contrast to the “positive/negative” version, these color planes and white stripes completely blended in with the architecture and acted as pure embellishment. The ochre walls wrapped around both viewer and busts in such a unified, unimposing way as to approach mere stage sets.\(^{40}\)

Many other wall paintings—some already discussed—were overtly ornamental. A reviewer of the Galerie Ernst exhibition speculated whether Palermo was “going for ingenious decoration in impressive rooms?” The stretched fabric indeed recalled historic decorative schemes, such as ornamental coverings of corners and edges in baroque and rococo interiors or the use of textiles to decorate walls.\(^{41}\) The decorative effect was enhanced by the fabric’s placement parallel with the room’s track lighting. Palermo further liked decorative dados, not only transferred (as in the Fischer exhibition) but also in situ. In the staircase of the Frankfurter Kunstverein he simply painted and filled in the wall segment beneath the banister (the 1999 reconstruction of this 1971 wall painting is still on view). At the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (for an exhibition series entitled 14 x 14), the artist painted a narrow blue line beneath the stucco work of the wide, open exhibition space, thereby literally expanding on the pre-existing ornament—he referred to it as _ausschmücken_, decking out. Next to the old stucco work, the blue color seemed cheap and false, bordering on kitsch. Yet one can infer from critics’ reports that despite that banality the line also caused one’s body to feel estranged in the vast, empty space by literally underlining its large scale.\(^{42}\)

Similarly, for the 1970 exhibition _Strategy: get arts_ at Edinburgh’s College of Art, Palermo painted a line in the center of the off-white architrave on each of the four walls surrounding the building’s grand stairwell: one red, one blue, one yellow, and one white. The trite effect was the same as in Baden-Baden—perhaps even stronger given the uninspired choice of primary colors—but the perceptual disturbance was more complicated. Palermo broke up the unity of the neoclassical space by painting the stripes in different colors. Climbing the stairs, with their direction switching midway, one imagines turning around, precariously but nevertheless repeatedly, in order to understand the piece as a whole without ever being able to see everything at once.

Palermo was far from working in a vacuum, because in the sixties ornament and decoration had emerged as major themes in German painting. The 1965 exhibition _Ornament? Ohne Ornament_...
in Zürich and Munich had introduced the topic, which was given extensive public attention three years later in another exhibition, *Ornamentale Tendenzen in der zeitgenössischen Malerei* in Berlin and Leverkusen. So-called New Ornamental painting was the focus of articles and talks by the writer Klaus Hoffmann, whose work culminated in a comprehensive book in 1970.\(^{43}\) Artists associated with this trend were members of the SYN group—which included Klaus Jürgen-Fischer and Rolf Gunter Dienst—as well as Jürgen Claus, Werner Schrieb, and Otmar Alt. Frequently included in these discussions were pop and op art, color field painting, and signal art—a type of painting using memorable shapes and colors reminiscent of signals. This new painting, it was widely believed, shared an ornamental vocabulary of contours and lines, repetitions, symmetries, and stylized representations. Unlike Palermo’s three-dimensional use of such elements, however, the New Ornamentalists focused exclusively on ornament as applied to the plane of the canvas. In fact, much effort was spent on distinguishing the quasi-autonomous ornament in painting from “superficial, light-hearted ornamental art, simplistic applied art, flat wall decoration, [and] wallpaper art.”\(^{44}\)

Many argued that ornamental painting was historically and socially resonant. Theorist Hans Heinz Holz compared ornaments to hieroglyphs, arguing that their forms carried coded meanings. The ornament, he wrote, has “emblematic character, which potentially makes it akin to heraldry and totems. The social may thus play into it at least indirectly.”\(^{45}\) Hoffmann and Claus, too, understood ornament as a “means of man’s self-representation,” as part of a human process to understand the world in its laws, its totality and details.\(^{46}\) How these abstract shapes encoded “the world” and, above all, what they signified, remained unexplained.
Here lies the first crux of Palermo’s wall paintings, for they do use
decoration to open up meanings about “the world.” By playfully
exploring different avenues available to him at the time—environ-
ments, banality, and decoration—Palermo stumbled onto something
rarely pursued: a historically resonant abstract painting. The wall
paintings are firmly tied to the context of the late German sixties and
early seventies on several levels. Decorative forms are used, on the
one hand, to participate in environment efforts to heighten viewers’
perceptual consciousness, one of several positions in the art and pol-
itics debates, and, on the other hand, to develop the German pop art
theme of the banal interior, which was related to the economic miracle.
In effect, decoration operates ambivalently: Its phenomenological
use depends on hyperawareness of the unfamiliar, its banal use on a
familiarity that goes almost unnoticed; one use refers to a climax of
criticality, the other to the epitome of complacency. Decoration in the
wall paintings thus creates an interplay between these poles, which
essentially coexist yet also alternate in questioning one another.47
Palermo’s wall paintings do not simply support or reject art’s poten-
tial to improve our perception, our criticality, and our world. They
are more nuanced. Amid the euphoric, utopian debates about art and
politics during the late sixties, and amid the revival of the prewar
avant-garde’s visions, the banal qualities of the wall paintings pro-
ject caution and skepticism about the success of a critical art, espe-
cially in light of a nation enthralled with an economic miracle. Yet
in the aftermath of that consumerist utopia come true, the phenome-
nological qualities of the wall paintings push toward critical reflec-
tion. Palermo operated in the blind spots of the utopian spirits.

 Appropriately so. When Palermo began to exhibit his wall paint-
ings at the end of 1968, much of what that year stood for was starting
disintegrate, especially in Germany. Students there had nowhere
near the level of general-population support that their French peers
received, and they were unable to disrupt state authority to the same
extent. In the years after 1968 the united front of the APO fractured
into small splinter groups, ranging from subcultural living communes
to numerous Leninist or Maoist Communist K-Groups to violent fac-
tions like the RAF (Red Army Faction). In the wake of these develop-
ments Palermo was one of the few artists who questioned the social
and political effectiveness of their artistic practice. By the same
token, signs of recession in the years preceding 1968, along with the
electoral gains of the far right and a crisis in the defense ministry,
had put a first damper on the miracle, on the record consumer spend-
ing and economic growth that had lasted more than a decade. Yet
immediate changes in government and financial policies managed to
avert a full-blown crisis. By 1968 the boom was back. Germans were
trying hard to hold on to their newfound standards of living.48
Abstraction and Decoration

Palermo’s wall paintings resonate historically not only with the sixties art and politics debates and the aftermath of the German economic miracle but more broadly with the tradition of abstract painting. Palermo persisted in painting at a time when this medium, with the exception of New Ornamental painting, had largely fallen out of favor—environment artists chose new experimental media over traditional ones, and German pop artists mocked both painting more generally and abstraction more specifically. This may be the reason why today Palermo is such a painter’s painter and an artist’s artist. With a clever optimism of subtle solutions, he always chose open-ended possibilities over foreclosure. Palermo’s wall paintings cleared a meaningful space for painting amid the seemingly irreconcilable poles of phenomenological effects and banal qualities. In the course of doing so, they confronted head on the ambivalent role decoration had assumed with respect to abstraction. By venturing into decoration, Palermo engaged abstract painting’s own history, its very foundations and fears.

A comprehensive treatment of the complex relationship between the development of abstract painting and decoration remains to be written. Symbolists and Fauves, for example, favored decoration as a means of overcoming the depiction of the visible world in pursuit of the expressive potential of pure color and form. Maurice Denis praised Paul Gauguin as a “decorator” who “made use of the flat application of color and the precise contour. His art has more in common with tapestry and stained glass than with oil painting.” Henri Matisse, in his use of patterns and arabesques to create a nonhierarchical sense of unity, was no less committed to the decorative. At the same time, many abstract painters perpetually worried about producing “just” decoration, about the looming dangers of non-art and insignificance. Around the time of his self-proclaimed First Abstract Watercolor, Wassily Kandinsky noted that “a terrifying abyss of all kinds of questions, a wealth of responsibilities stretched before me. And most important of all: What is to replace the missing object? The danger of ornament revealed itself clearly to me; the dead semblance of stylized forms I found merely repugnant.” Clement Greenberg eloquently brought to a point abstract painting’s simultaneous reliance on and fear of decoration. “Decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting, and part of the latter’s formal mission is to find ways of using the decorative against itself.” Late Impressionism and Fauvism, for Greenberg, “sharpen the problem by increasing the tension between decorative means and non-decorative ends.”

Given that decoration was long felt to be threatening to artists because of its non-art connotations, it comes as no surprise to find that most writers on Palermo have ignored or actively refuted those
very decorative aspects that I believe are central to his wall paintings. Based on a more narrow view of decorative wall painting, art historian Bernhart Schwenk wrote that “in contrast to conventional wall painting, Palermo did not employ the sign on the wall in the sense of decoration or an ornament. . . . Palermo’s painting was neither supposed to cover or hide the wall, nor to negate the architecture, which was the goal of illusionistic painting.” Susanne Küper granted that Palermo “played with the sharp division between art and everyday as much as with the one between spatial decoration and the visual arts.” In the end, however, the wall paintings show only “how close Palermo moved towards the border of wall decoration,” which still implies an opposition of abstraction and decoration rather than the complicated, at times daring, negotiation of these terms that I propose Palermo pursued.

The wall paintings traffic in two grey zones: between the phenomenological and the banal, as we have seen, but also between abstraction and decoration. What is that point at which acceptable decorative qualities become decorative threat? How banal, how obviously found, and how much part of the everyday environment can abstract painting be and still be noticed, still have a perceptual impact, and still pass as art? Some early oil paintings by Palermo, dating from 1965, addressed these very questions through the lens of decoration. Flipper, for example, is a grid of red and white squares delimited by blue lines, an essentially modular grid seemingly cut off on the left. That cropping visually betrays its found, transferred nature, if not necessarily its exact origin (the side of a pinball machine in Palermo’s favorite bar). Here we have the decorative virtues of dazzling and flickering colors, of flat and allover surfaces, but we also have the decorative threat of just another pretty pattern found around the corner.

To see how this ambivalent view of decoration vis-à-vis abstraction enters the wall paintings, let us turn one last time to the “positive/negative” wall painting. The orange wall places the viewer at a contemplative distance in that it reads as a monochrome picture, on a white wall or in a white frame, thus embodying many of the virtues of the decorative in abstract painting: nonobjectivity, planarity, and color intensity. The white wall, on the other hand, is part of the viewer’s space in that it reads as a white wall enframed by orange ornament, thus making the modernist nightmare of the decorative come true: barely noticed, entirely blending with the architecture, and immersed in our actual environment. Palermo dramatically juxtaposed the banality of decoration with the decorative as large-scale abstract painting. In this installation the space between these two, the “specter that haunts
modernist painting,” is decisively open. It is a space for the viewer to occupy quite literally and to contemplate.

Palermo painted his last wall painting proper in 1973 at the Kunstverein in Hamburg. Its exhibition area consisted of a large room featuring a central formation of freestanding walls, which Palermo painted reddish brown. A suitable ending to Palermo’s career as a wallpainter, this work overstated the case made in, above all, the “positive/negative” wall painting: the simultaneous existence of merely painted walls (now plural) and imposing gigantic monochrome (now sculptural object).58
Notes
Versions of this essay were presented in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University, the Department of Art at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and at the symposium “Working through the Present: Art in Germany since the Sixties” at Princeton University. I would like to thank the audiences, and especially Michael Jennings, for their questions and suggestions. I am also grateful to Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, Pia Gottschaller, Jeffrey Inaba, Sean Keller, and Scott Rothkopf for their helpful comments at different stages, and to Christoph Schreier, Kunstmuseum Bonn, for granting me access to Palermo’s documentation of the wall paintings. My research was kindly supported by a Frederick Sheldon Traveling Fellowship from Harvard University, a fellowship from Harvard’s Center for European Studies, and an A. Whitney Griswold Grant from Yale University.

1. Ludwig Rinn, “Palermo,” *Kunstforum International* no. 2–3 (1973): 116. This and all following translations from the German are my own unless otherwise noted. For a summary of frequent dismissals of Palermo as a “mere” wall painter, see Sabine Grosser, *Palermo: Eine Annäherung an seine Arbeit und deren Rezeption* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), 82–83.


3. For the complete illustrations of the documentation, see *Palermo: Zeichnungen, Werkverzeichnis*, ed. Thordis Moeller, essays by Klaus Schrenk and Christoph Schreier (Stuttgart: Oktagon, 1995). The documentation is in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Bonn. Klaus Gallwitz reported Palermo’s wish to make some of the wall paintings permanent. “He unsentimentally stated that for once, this thing would have to be preserved. His room or his wall, he said, was simply more than a mere object for exhibition, which subsequently gets taken down or is scratched off.” Klaus Gallwitz, unpublished manuscript, 19 June 1970, in Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GK), Germany, Folder 550. Thomas Lange first referenced these folders in *Dickicht des Materials. Gradnetz des Bildes. Palermo: Bildidee und Werkbegriff* (Worms: Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000), 110. Two reconstructions are permanent: a collaborative installation with Gerhard Richter at the Lenbachhaus in Munich and a wall painting at the Kunstverein in Frankfurt. A wall painting at the Kunstverein in Hamburg was uncovered in 1993 before the building’s destruction; a wall painting at the Galerie Konrad Fischer was re-created in 2002 at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, England; and the Palermo exhibition on view in 2002–2003 in Barcelona and London included a refabricated wall installation that Palermo first realized at the 1976 Venice Biennale. The “Palermo Restore” project at the Edinburgh College of Art recently explored the possibilities of restoring or re-creating the wall painting Palermo exhibited there. For a discussion of the debates and problems surrounding the Hamburg reconstruction from a conservator’s point of view, see Christian M. Scheidemann, “Wo liegt die Kunst? Zur Freilegung einer Wandmalerei von Blinky Palermo,” in *Restaurierung und Öffentlichkeit: Beiträge zur Berufsübungsverbände*, ed. Cornelia Weyer, 29–36 (Düsseldorf: ICOM Committee for Conservation, 1993).

4. The *Blockade ’69* exhibition series was documented and broadcast by Sender Freies Berlin (SFB). A copy of the film is in René Block’s archive, Berlin. The photograph reproduced here appeared in *Magazin Kunst* 9 (1969): 1294. The title of the
series is a pun using the gallery’s name to refer to the Berlin Blockade, the year-long closing by the Soviet Union of all Western land-and-sea access to West Berlin. It is fair to assume this did not play a significant role in Palermo’s conception of the wall painting, because there is no evidence otherwise and because the artist avoided blatant historical references. In his first wall drawing a few months earlier, for example, he had eliminated a swastika from a sequence of motifs generated by variations on open and closed square forms. Compare Franz Dahlem’s account of this in “To the people . . .” Sprechen über Blinky Palermo (1943–1977): Gespräche mit Freunden und Zeitzeugen, ed. Digne M. Marcovicz (Cologne: Walther König, 2003), 120–121.

5. See the elevation and ground plan drawings in Moeller, ill. 520.


8. My description is based on the Christiansen piece as it plays in the SFB film clip. Compare the description in d.w. as “incomprehensible babble.”


21. B76, 188; and Blockade ’69. Other examples include Documenta 5; Strategy: get arts in Edinburgh; Intermedia in Heidelberg; and the 14 x 14 exhibition series in Baden-Baden.


24. Beuys in Glozer, 63.


27. Helms.


29. For the unexecuted works, see Dieter Ronte’s recollection in Palermo: Bilder, Objekte, Zeichnungen, exh. cat. (Bonn: Kunstmuseum Bonn, 1995), 12; and Palermo: Zeichnungen, Werkverzeichnis, ed. Moeller, ill. 591a–b, 579.


32. Dienst, 138–139.


34. Hans Strelow in Konrad Lueg: Waschlappen und Handtücher, exh. cat. (Berlin: Galerie René Block, 1966), repr. in Ich nenne mich als Maler Konrad Lueg, exh. cat. (Bielefeld: Kunsthalle, 1999), 32; René Block in Stella Baum, “Die frühen


37. Palermo occasionally designed shopping windows before leaving the design school in Münster and moving to Düsseldorf. “Biographie,” in Bernhart Schwenk et al., *Blinky Palermo*, exh. cat. (Leipzig: Leipziger Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst; Stuttgart: Cantz, 1993), 229. For more about Palermo’s time in Münster, see Blinky Palermo, interview with Herbert Nolte, n.d., in Archiv Dr. Herbert Nolte, Wuppertal, Germany.

38. Compare Helms.


44. Hoffmann, *Neue Ornamentik*, 156.

Claus, Expansion der Kunst, 47, 45.

Because of this alternation, Palermo’s wall paintings are not ironic, which would imply a hierarchy between the phenomenological and the banal, with one being the overt meaning and the other the implied one.


Ornament and Abstraction was the subject of a recent exhibition at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland. The accompanying catalogue gives a broad overview and focuses on non-Western ornament but engages the subject neither on a conceptual level (working out different paradigms of the relationship) nor a historical one (focusing on the actual decorative practices of abstract artists, for example). See Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern, and Contemporary Art, ed. Markus Brüderlin, exh. cat. (Basel: Fondation Beyeler; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). For excellent case studies of two historical relationships between abstraction and decoration, see Nancy Troy, The De Stijl Environment (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983); and Jenny Anger, Paul Klee and the Decorative in Modern Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).


Susanne Küper, “Wandzeichnungen und Wandmalereien,” in Blinky Palermo, 138. A worry about the decorative is not limited to the reception of Palermo’s spaces but also entered the discussion about environments in the late sixties. For example, the 1976 Biennale catalogue stated that environments defined the building “as a space limited by six surfaces—the walls, the floor and the ceiling—otherwise called ‘the room,’ humanly speaking. Refusing to consider the art work a ‘decorative object,’ the exhibition considered it an element inserted into the spatial totality of the surrounding milieu and belonging to a structural system.” B76, 264.


57. Georg Jappe has pointed to the experience of standing in a quasi-empty room that is the “echo form of painting.” Johannes Meinhardt argues that the wall becoming painting, “das Umschlagen der Wand in Malerei,” is at the core of Palermo’s wall paintings. Johannes Meinhardt, *Ende der Malerei und Malerei nach dem Ende der Malerei* (Stuttgart: Cantz, 1997), 173.