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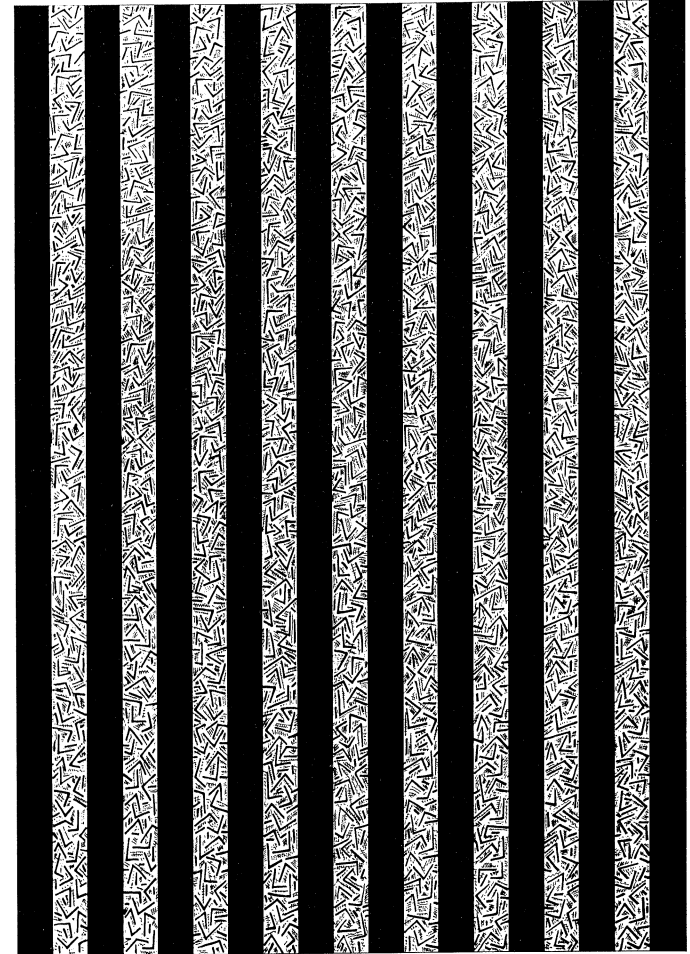
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Committee for the Visual Arts, 1983



ERNST BENKERT

November 5 - December 3

ARTISTS SPACE

Sponsored By
The Mark Rothko Foundation

cover:

Bars and Angles, 1982, ink on paper, 30"x22". photo: Pelka/Noble.

Acknowledgements

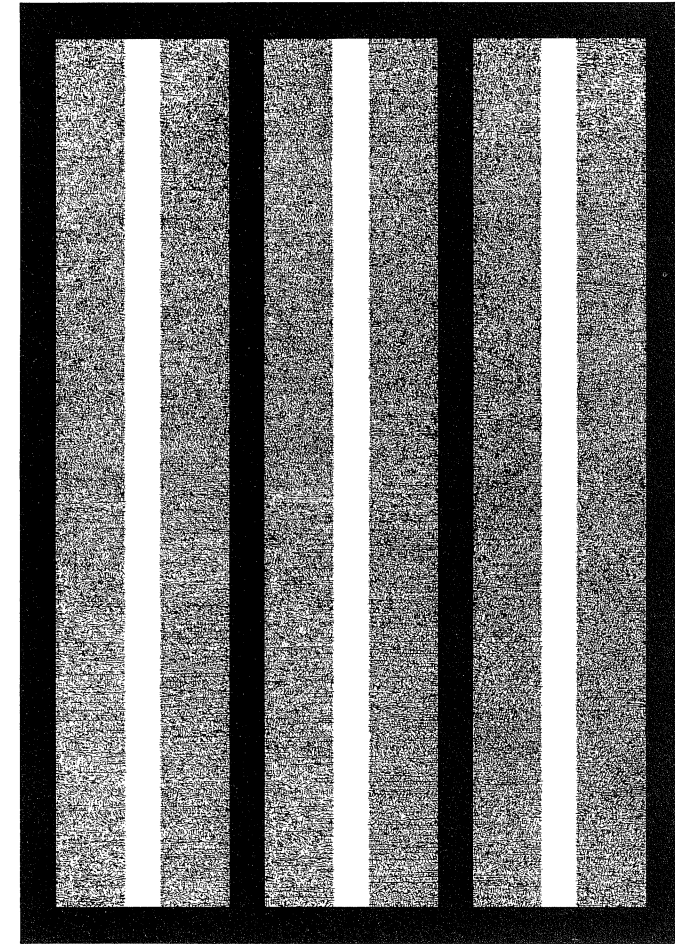
Artists Space has become known as a champion of work that is new and unseen; by extension, this has often meant the artists showing have been young and emerging. As the work of young and experimental artists has become increasingly welcomed into the mainstream of contemporary art, the equally challenging work of many older, mid-career artists has been somewhat overlooked. This is especially so if the work does not conform to the highly successful commercial market for new art that the 80's have fostered. It became apparent to us that a large number of serious artists who had been working for many years in innovative modes, outside of current trends, were not receiving adequate recognition for the high quality of their work.

At this point we realized these concerns were consistent with some of the goals of the Mark Rothko Foundation, which was reconstituted in 1976. Contrary to general speculation, Mark Rothko had not specified that the Foundation devote itself to helping mature artists; indeed, there had been no such clearly stated directive. Since 1981, the Foundation has opened the Mark Rothko Viewing Facility and Study Center to scholars, has sponsored several important exhibitions of Rothko's work with an eye to his preferences, catalogued and conserved the nearly 1,000 Rothko paintings and drawings in the collection, and awarded a generous grant to sponsor a pilot series of three exhibitions at Artists Space during 1983-84. While the Foundation is devoted to contributing to a better understanding and appreciation of Rothko's work, it also became clear that it also could make a significant contribution to the art community by funding exhibitions of work by mature artists. Artists Space is particularly fortunate to be the first recipient of a grant to undertake the latter.

It is with the greatest pleasure that Artists Space is able to present Ernst Benkert's *Mesbes, Crosses, Bars: 1976-1983*, the first exhibition in the series to take place this season. The other artists to be shown this season are Mowry Baden and Sally Hazelet Drummond; all three were chosen by Artists Space Board members Gary Burnley, the artist, and Donald Droll, Associate Director of the Weatherspoon Gallery at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, and myself. The mutually agreed upon criteria required we select artists who have been working at their art for the majority of their lives, and whose work represents a commitment to a singular vision without regard to prevailing fashions.

The first of the many individuals I would like to thank is Ernst Benkert; his enthusiastic response to our efforts has been immensely gratifying. I am particularly grateful to Joseph Masheck, former Editor of *Artforum*, who is currently teaching at Harvard University. Through his lucid text, he has helped us to gain a coherent understanding of Benkert's work. And it was a pleasure to have worked alongside Mr. Burnley and Mr. Droll, to whom I extend my personal thanks. Bonnie Clearwater, Curator of the Mark Rothko Foundation, has been enormously helpful and cooperative at every stage of our discussions; she deserves our deepest thanks for her efforts. I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to William Scharf and the other Directors of the Mark Rothko Foundation, all of whom have been very supportive of this project. Needless to say, the important support from the Foundation has allowed Artists Space to undertake a much-needed program; I would like to express our genuine appreciation to the Mark Rothko Foundation for its belief in Artists Space.

Linda Shearer
Executive Director



Bars, 1982, acrylic, pencil, ink on paper, 30"x22". photo: Pelka/Noble.

TWISTING A STRAIGHT LINE

I never seem to be able to find any room in my pictures for that sensitive, sensuous side, which I feel ought always to be there. Maybe I'm wrong to look for the pictorial qualities of an earlier age in a new form of art. At all events I find my pictures excessively cold, but Ingres is cold too, and yet it is good, and so is Seurat; yes so is Seurat, whose meticulousness annoys me almost as much as my own pictures. Oh, how I wish I had the freedom and the charm of the unfinished! Well, it can't be helped. One must after all paint as one is oneself. My mind is too precise to go dirtying a blue or twisting a straight line.

Juan Gris (1915)

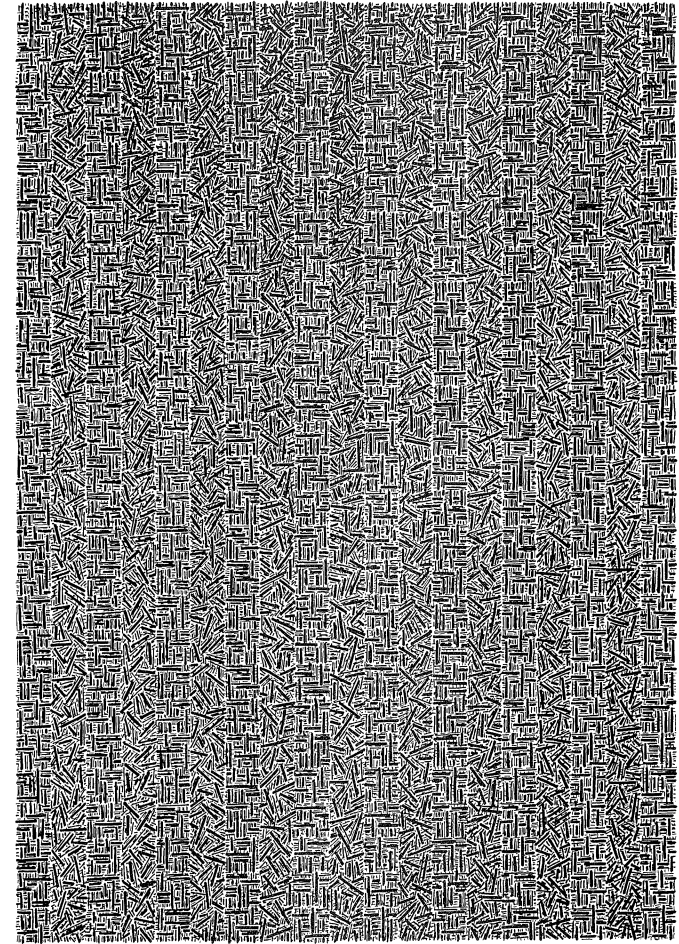
A Note on Benkert

A certain kind of artistic repute gets carried along by former students but would never be considered academic. From what one hears, a teacher as respected as Ernst Benkert might almost be a kind of bodhisattva, exemplifying the very life of art in its deep, this-worldly seriousness. And if one wonders how seemingly "coldly" diagrammatic paintings and drawings, works that might be teetering on the edge of a sheer cliff of didacticism, can have sprung from any "heart," the answer may be that what Benkert has given to others is precisely a sense of artistic rigor.

In itself, the Minimalism of Benkert's work is readily grasped, proceeding as it does by generating naked, uninflected, altogether regular structures that are as self-evident, and if possible as unallusive, as the grid of graph paper itself. This has here, I think, its Bauhaus-like feature, didactic yet fecund, in the sense that the challenge is always to get one more inventive thing out of any system, as if to keep a step ahead of false inevitability. But what can actually be *liked* in such art, as perhaps with chess, is not so much its cerebrality per se as its engagement of an inescapably esthetic selectivity amidst the proliferation of mechanically equal possibilities. Why, after all, should one configuration seem preferable, to the artist or to a given spectator, to any other equally systematic one? Art like this may well be "reductive," but it can also put a fine point on *choice*. Some artists *cultivate by weeding*, which is not quite as simple as what is usually meant by "reductiveness." As clinical as it may appear, and perhaps just for appearing so, Benkert's work shows art as never really more than *semi-automatic*.

Although the relation of Minimalism to the early Russian avant-garde and to Constructivist tradition is complex, comparison could be made between, say, Benkert's drawings on (*hand-drawn*) graph paper and ones done by Rodchenko. Any "cruciformality" involved would be less a matter of possible iconographic affinity than a like symptom, with Benkert and Rodchenko both, of structural rigor in the interest of formal transparency. Such rigor, as evidence of a pursuit of abstract "purity" in a by now classical sense, seems to be what, understandably, those who have studied with Benkert remember best.

Joseph Masheck

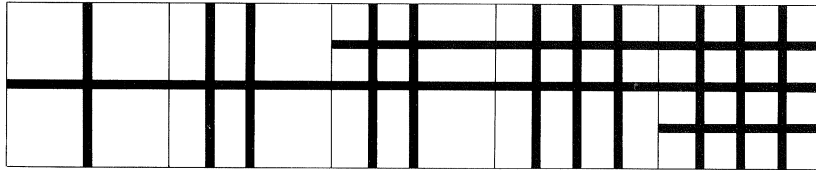


Columns, 1983, ink on paper, 30"x22". photo: Pelka/Noble.

NEEDLEWORK

Piet Mondrian had sent to me in Switzerland, at my request, a selection of his canvases. The customs officer allowed me to export them to Germany duty-free when I told him they were not pictures but specimen designs for needlework.

Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers (1924)



Size Change, 1970, ink on paper, 20"x30". photo: Pelke/Noble.

MY DRAWING

Why do I draw? To make flat what is spatial, still what is moving, quiet what is noisy. In Max Beckmann's words, "To protect myself from the infinity of space," from the world-out-there, chaos, dis-ease, absence of design. Clearly, the basis of my drawing is the need for order and control, and not the need for knowledge or the desire to communicate. It is not even a form of self-exploration, but an activity more like house-cleaning, straightening up a messy desk. The work that results occasionally becomes something more than a simple (or, simply complicated) ordered structure, but I am not really interested in, or greatly affected by that. What matters is the activity itself, the comfort of the systems it generates, the day-in, day-out procedure. When, as sometimes happens, there is a surprise and I am forced to change, to break habit, I accept that as fate, and am pleased, as if I have received a gift.

I'm not much interested in newness for its own sake, and prefer to be part of an old, even outmoded tradition. This is true of my attitude to architecture, music, gardens, clothing, literature and manners, as well as to art. My present is the re-creation of the past.

If I wanted a model for making art, I would look to the growing of trees, an activity demanding great patience and hope. There is nothing more impressive than a very old, strong tree.

ERNST BENKERT (1983)

ERNST BENKERT

Biography

1928	Born in Chicago, Illinois
1946	Joins U.S. Army; duty in Japan
1948-53	Harvard College, Cambridge, MA, B.A.
1956	Attends Oskar Kokoschka School of Seeing, Salzburg, Austria, and Central School of Arts and Crafts, London
1957-59	Attends Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio
1962 to present	Lives in New York City
1966 to present	Adjunct Associate Professor (Art History and Painting), Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY

Selected Exhibitions

One Person Exhibitions

Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, 1980
 P.S. 1, Queens, NY, 1977
 Galerie Swart, Amsterdam, Holland, 1974, 1975

Selected Group Exhibitions

4 at the Arsenal, Central Park Arsenal, NY, 1980
The Square in Painting. Traveling exhibition organized by the American Federation of Arts, NY, 1968
Plus by Minus: Today's Half Century, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, 1968
The Responsive Eye, The Museum of Modern Art, NY, 1965
Vibrations II, Martha Jackson Gallery, NY, 1965
Mouvement II, Galerie Denise Rene, Paris, 1964

Between 1962 and 1971, Benkert participated in numerous self-initiated exhibitions of the Anonima Group, which consisted of himself, Frank Hewitt and Edwin Mieczkowski. They included: Cleveland, 1962; New York, annually from 1964-69; Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1966; Galerie Foksal, Warsaw, 1966; SUNY at New Paltz, NY, 1970; University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, 1971.