

**Interview conducted by Christiane Meyer-Stoll, curator  
Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Frankfurt April 20, 2007**

You were one of the artists Rolf Ricke exhibited in the late 1960s and early 1970s. How did you meet Rolf?

I think it was Richard Bellamy who made the contact. I was a student at the University of California at Berkeley and Brian O'Doherty came as a visiting professor. I knew of him because he used to be on television, he had a program about art. I was friendly with my professor, who was taking Brian around and I said to him that I thought I was doing something of interest and I wanted to come to New York, could he recommend someone? He recommended Richard Bellamy. Richard had founded the Green Gallery, which was a very important space. He was the first to show many people who subsequently became prominent. I called with the introduction from Brian O'Doherty. Richard had not seen the paintings at that point, only slides. Richard was key in terms of introducing people, he introduced Rolf to me in New York in the late winter or early spring of 1969. Richard also put me in touch with Nicholas Wilder, an art dealer in Los Angeles. He came to my studio in downtown Oakland during my last year at Berkeley. When I came back to New York, Nick visited me around Christmas 1968. I'd run out of money and I was working at the post office. He offered me a show and a small stipend; I resigned from my job the next day. It was a very exciting time to be in New York.

But you could at least afford a studio where you could work?

Well, this was New York in 1968-69. My first studio was on Leonard Street. It was \$125 a month, and I lived there also. My grandparents had left me a little money that I got when I turned twenty-one. It wasn't very much, but enough that I didn't have to work when I was an art student and I was able to move to New York.

I think originally you were a sculpture student?

Yes, I was studying sculpture at Berkeley. I had to take a painting course and had to think about the possibility of painting. I spent maybe two of the worst weeks of my life-I'm exaggerating of course-grappling with the idea of how to make paintings at that particular time. To do something that did not accept conventions, did not accept things without questioning them. The germ of the idea had come.

Why did you choose Berkeley?

I had studied architecture for two years at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge and I was very unhappy. I decided I didn't want to continue with architecture. At MIT it's a five-year program; in the first year you're in a general group, the second year is much more specialized. In my first year there was a design course run by Richard Filipowski. He had studied with Walter Gropius and had a very particular point of view, very Bauhaus-design oriented, and this turned out to be very important. It seems to me that you need a base and then you can define your position from something; it's very hard to define a position from some amorphous situation. From my experience at MIT I knew very clearly what direction I didn't want to take, and part of this understanding was that I knew I definitely did not want to stay at MIT. In 1966 Berkeley was very much in the news. It had a reputation as a very progressive place and I was ready for a big change. Unconsciously maybe I was influenced by American mythology about going to the west and starting over, and it did work out that way. I had the idea to study art and worry about practical matters later, so I switched to being a sculpture student. I was with the first year students, although I was in my third year of college. I had had exposure to art in New York and very fortunate experiences from working. I never took an art history course but one job at MIT was projecting slides for the art history classes. It was an old projector, very loud, so maybe that was an advantage: I could barely hear what the professor was saying but I did see a lot of images. In the summer of 1966 I worked in the architecture and art library at MIT, where I read a lot of books, among them Robert Motherwell's *The Dada Poets and Painters*. So by the time I went to Berkeley I was self-taught, and had a pretty good background in art after 1900.

You came from sculpture, why did you change over to painting?

As I mentioned, I became a bit obsessed with this issue. I didn't have a background as a painter, but I admired them. I was born in Manhattan, although I moved to the suburbs when I was four. When I got older I came into the city often, so I saw a lot of art in the museums.

So you made a very precise group of paintings and then you made the decision to stop.

I got involved with this issue of painting, it wasn't so much of a decision, more of an obsession but I didn't have any commitment to painting. If people have a background in painting, in the craft of painting, then there is usually the thought, "Well, what's next?" I really had no attachment to the craft, for me there was no point in thinking about the next painting. I did this group of paintings quite completely and then it was finished, I felt I didn't need to do any more. I did make another group of paintings later, but they were very different, from another approach.

What was it like making the paintings? They are very precisely executed.

Yes, but most of the initial ideas for the paintings happened very quickly, then they took some time. But I was a sculpture student and even before I had begun them I had already started another line of work that I picked up again after. So things are often not quite so neat, it's a little mixed up.

What were your intentions with these paintings?

I wanted to do something new and different, I didn't want to accept certain conventions. When I was working on the paintings I couldn't verbalize what I was doing at all, but nevertheless I felt that what I was doing was absolutely right. I remember Marcia Tucker, who in 1969 was a curator at the Whitney Museum, coming to my studio and asking me to explain the paintings and then there was a very long, pregnant silence. Also I wanted to make a contribution. So this was also part of my intention-to communicate something that could affect other people in a positive way. Later I could talk about them. I began to have a more intellectual idea of what I had been doing. As far as I know, the term "deconstruction" did not exist in 1967, but in retrospect perhaps one could say that these works were involved with a deconstruction of painting. I have sometimes referred to them as anti-paintings disguised as paintings, but this only refers to them on a formal level.

There is a story I sometimes relate about the visit to my studio by a friend in 1967. Norma was a tall, striking woman with uncannily sharp intuition. She came to my studio and proceeded to stare at one of my

paintings for about ten minutes. She didn't say a word. Then she abruptly turned her head away and said, "There is nothing there." She indicated that she couldn't look at it any more. Maybe what I am referring to would be clearer with an example. Ad Reinhardt is an artist for whom I feel an affinity. I particularly relate to the paintings he made in the latter years of his life, the square "black" paintings. One could say that these paintings are concerned with the perception of the subtle contrasts of shades of black, but that would be totally missing the point. These works and the repetition in their making are the catalyst for a different understanding, and that cannot be adequately expressed in words; what is conveyed is a state of mind or consciousness.

Several years after I finished these early paintings I had occasion to hear a Buddhist sutra called the Heart Sutra. It is a condensation of Buddhist teaching about "emptiness." Somehow I felt a connection to these teachings and was drawn to them. In retrospect it was not surprising.

Many of Rolf's artists came to Germany and often they produced the works in the gallery, did you make the works for your shows in Europe?

I was so uninformed at that point, I thought showing in Cologne was the equivalent of showing in Oshkosh, something like that. I had two solo shows with Rolf but I didn't attend either of them. Later, I realized that was not such a good thing. That's probably why I made a point to come here now.

Based on a conversation with Lewis Stein  
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