

CHARLOTTE POSENENSKE:

ARTFORUM

Galerie Medhi Chouakri, Feb 2008

Last year's Documenta wasn't the first on which Charlotte Posenenske (1930-1985) left a mark. She was present at Documenta 4, in the summer of 1968, though not as an exhibiting artist: She distributed leaflets criticizing art for being "affirmative" and "veiling reality." Earlier that year, Posenenske had decided to end her artistic work and instead study sociology; she later published papers on standardized labor processes.

Shortly after the end of Documenta 12, in 2007, where Posenenske was among those artists repeatedly appearing throughout the various sites of this idiosyncratic mega-exhibition, Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, which has been working closely with the artist's estate since February of last year, showed seven exemplary works by Posenenske dating from the late '60s, all but one of them reconstructions authorized by the estate. The show thus demonstrated that the boundaries between the art world's commercial and institutional spheres are becoming ever more porous, which makes recalling historical positions like Posenenske's well beyond any romantic notion of "dropping out" all the more timely.

Starting in the late '50s, Posenenske's practice traversed the paradigmatic postwar passage from overcoming illusionistic space in abstract painting to making plastic picture-objects to creating serial arrangements in real sites, in the process rigorously leveling out the categorical distinction between the "specific objects" of minimalist sculpture and the use-value of industrial products. Posenenske's multiples were consciously constructed using "poor" materials; eventually she completely stopped signing the works. Using capital letters to designate her work sequences on the model of rationalized fabrication, she produced first "Reliefs," Series A-C, 1967, sheets of folded or bent and then lacquered steel displayed both singly and in syntactical sequences; followed by "Vierkantrohre" (Square Tubes), Series D & C DW, 1967, variable combinations of building elements constructed of steel sheets or corrugated cardboard, joined together with metal or plastic screws and reminiscent of air ducts; and then "Drehfliigel" (Revolving Vanes), Series E, 1967-68, walk-in cubes made of untreated pressboard panels, with side walls that could be opened like doors.

The constructive character common to all of Posenenske's pieces was meant to allow for an active participation on the part of beholders and to break down hierarchical relations both formally and in terms of the materials employed, thus facilitating a reflection on the social conditions of production and the role of art in bourgeois society. In the Berlin show, the building blocks of the four Vierkantrohre on display (two made of sheet steel, two of corrugated cardboard) were slightly rearranged on a near-weekly basis-not surprisingly, however, without audience participation.

As the various derivative stages of relational aesthetics since the mid-'90s have demonstrated, the Utopia of democratic participation in the current art world is either equivalent to a mere simulation of sociality or, according to the rules of distribution in the marketplace, dependent on ownership. Seen from this vantage point, the fact that the relief *Prototyp aus der Serie A* (Prototype from Series A), 1966, the only signed one-of-a-kind piece in the exhibition, is valued at three times the price of the reconstruction of a comparable work (*Diagonale Faltung* (Diagonal Foldings), 1966/2007) appears just as logical as it is counterutopian. In May 1968 Posenenske published a statement in the magazine *Art International*, which, while it marked the beginning of the end of her activity as an artist, and despite the impression of dashed aspirations, speaks to the continued relevance of the questions posed by her artistic practice today: "It is painful for me to face the fact that art cannot contribute to the solution of urgent social problems."

-André Rottmann

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.