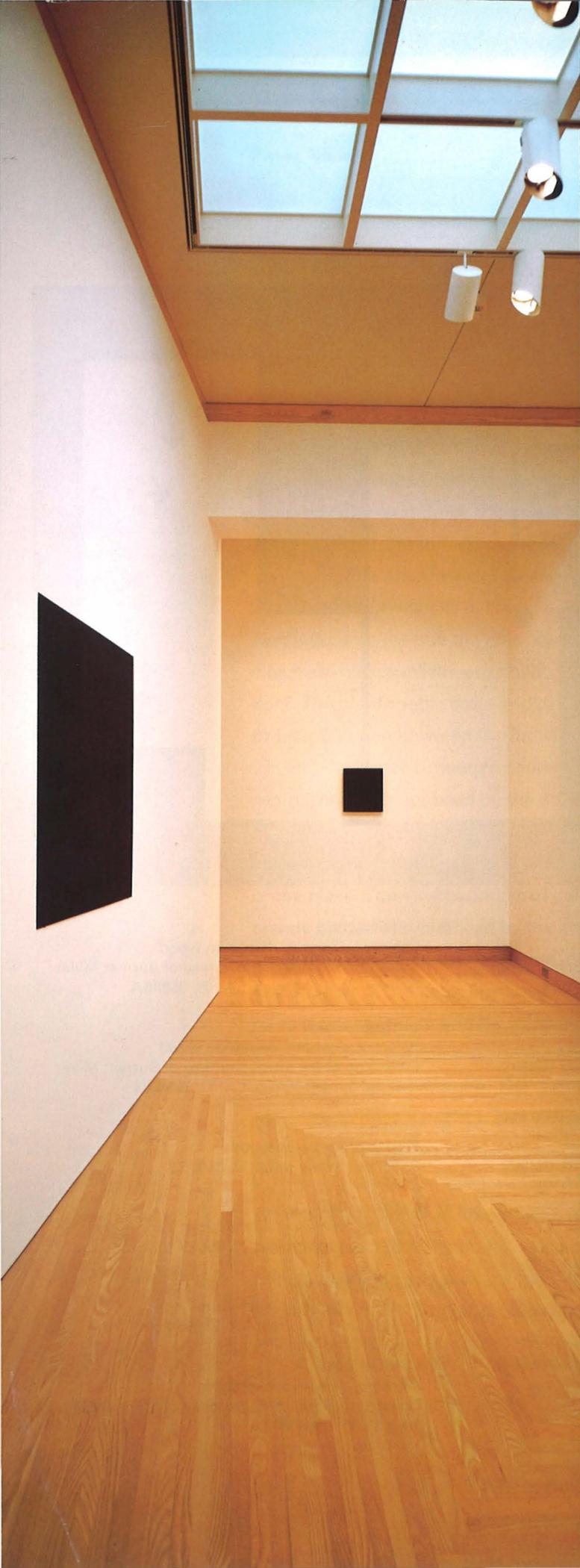


HARVARD UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUMS
GALLERY SERIES NO. 22



G Ü N T E R
U M B E R G

Busch-Reisinger Museum
23 May - 24 August 1997

G Ü N T E R U M B E R G ' S P A I N T I N G S

Peter Nisbet

Günter Umberg's paintings take time, to see and to make. The viewer's efforts at perception match the artist's work on the picture and the pictured color. Both forms of labor are intensive accumulations of experience, visual and bodily. Both engage the self.

The dense, deep, rigorously nonfigurative surfaces of these paintings result from the artist's repeated application of several dozen layers of dark, dry, mostly matte pigments, interspersed with a clear binding material (*damar*), which leaves no trace. The material is arduously built up on nonabsorbent, untextured supports (usually rectangular or near-rectangular in format), with flat aluminum sheets set against the wall and beveled wood panels raising the color surface away from it.

The attentive viewer engages this painted color surface, experiencing the picture somewhere between its granular physicality and its elusive spatiality. Distance, both actual and aesthetic, ensures that the color surface points beyond material (it must never be touched), while closeness closes off the possibility of seeing the dark form exclusively as a black absence of light. The comfortable scale and careful placement (usually one work on each wall) enable a face-to-face dialogue between the individual viewer and individual painting, position and 'opposition.'

Günter Umberg's paintings take space. They activate and occupy their settings. The rooms, however adjusted by the addition of partitions or different wall coverings, are not intended as encompassing installations. The paintings are made without regard to an eventual environment, but they are put in their temporary locations with intense respect for the particulars of the place. The direct address of painting to viewer remains primary, though more or less discreetly guided and nuanced by the artist's interventions. Paths of approach and bodily movement may vary; indifferent, neutral, or static observation is discouraged. Variations in the shape and support of the paintings have recently been joined by explorations of other colors for pictures (such as green) and for walls (such as wood grain).

The specifics of surface and situation in these paintings set impressively high hurdles against any casual attitude. The owner or custodian of these paintings is obligated to extraordinary care in their handling, and virtually nothing of the experience of the work can be captured in photographic reproduction.

Günter Umberg was born in 1942 in Bonn, Germany. He lives and works in Cologne. After an early career in lithography, he turned to painting in the early 1970s, using graphite pigments. In the 1980s, he began using primarily black pigments of various kinds. For six years, he ran an exhibition space in Cologne (the "Space for Painting"), in which he showed the work of artists working on similar problems and issues. He has exhibited very widely in Europe, Asia, and the United States. This is his first solo exhibition in a North American museum.

Peter Nisbet is Daimler-Benz Curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum.