

GETTING CLOSER TO PAINTING

A Conversation with Günter Umberg

This conversation with Peter Nisbet was conducted in German at the Busch-Reisinger Museum on 22 May 1997. It has been translated, edited, revised, and annotated with the approval of the artist and the assistance of Tawney Becker.

Peter Nisbet: I'd like to begin with the assumption that there are, on the one hand, aspects of your exhibition that represent a continuity from earlier works or exhibitions, and, on the other, those that are new. I hope we can discuss both. First of all, what in this installation, in this exhibition, in these works, is a continuation? What are the main themes that have concerned you for years that can still be experienced here?

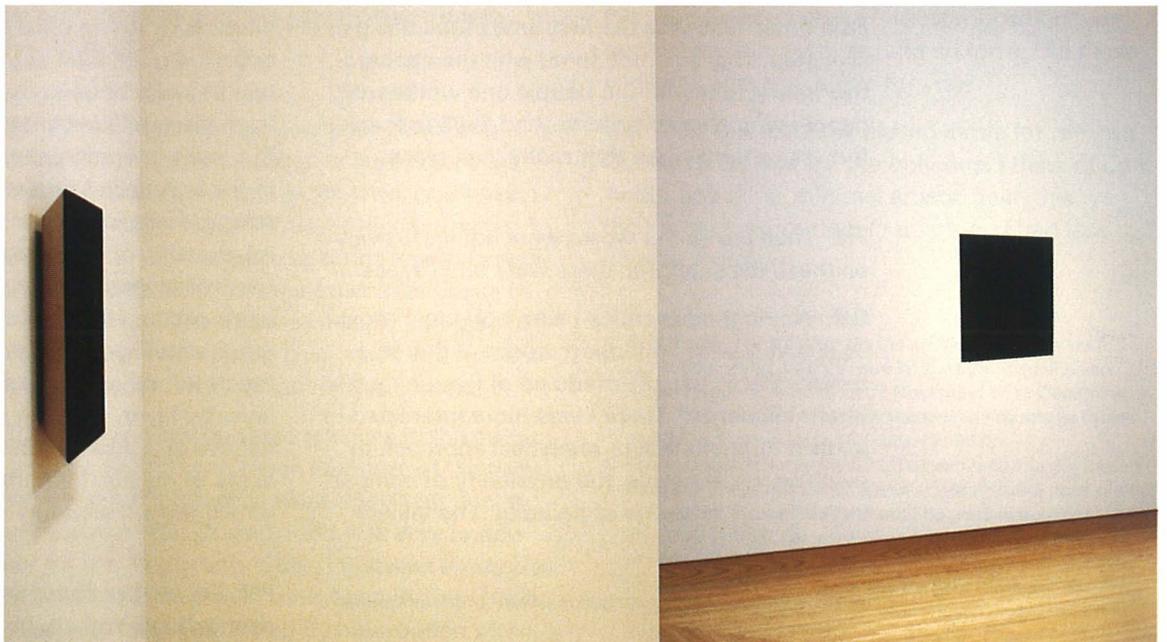
Günter Umberg: A longer-term development is certainly evident in the room that is directly adjoining the permanent collection galleries [installation views a, b, c]. This is a nearly square room into which a new wall has been built, altering the space in a specific way. I did this for the first time in 1985 in my exhibition in Frankfurt.¹ There the space was scarcely suitable for exhibiting paintings. It always had to have temporary partitions, which I didn't like, so I suggested that they build a room within a room. Since then, I have always thought to modify the space as I deemed it necessary. In the Harvard exhibition, I was excited to bring this diagonal into the room

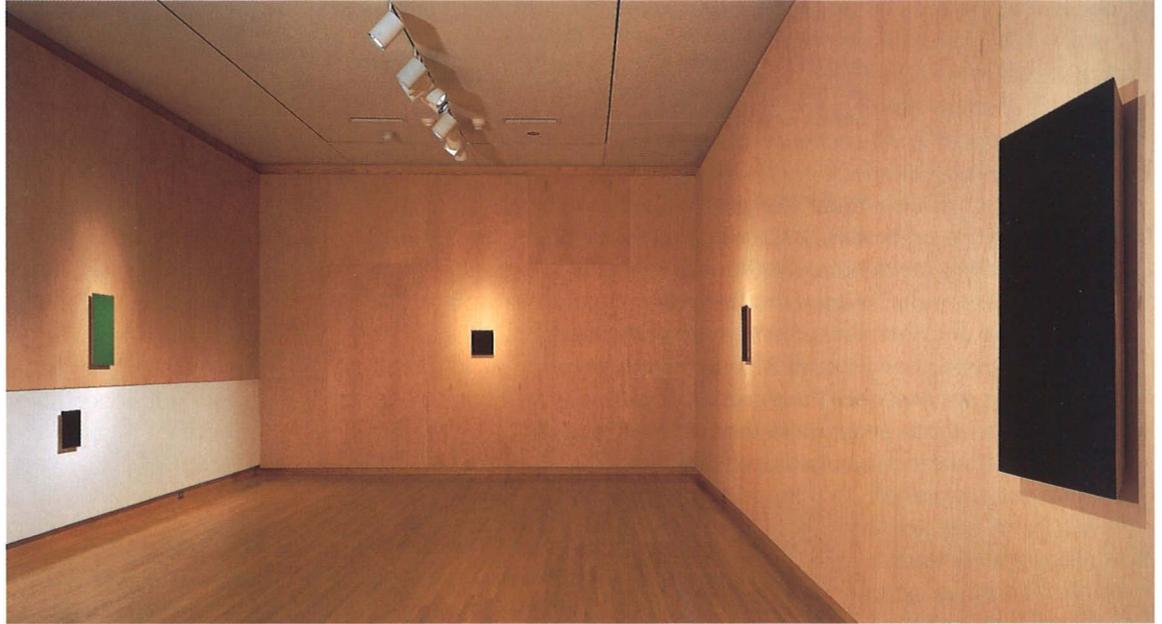
in order to "protect" myself from the other nearby spaces, so that one does not have a direct view of my pictures from the other galleries. A certain isolation is intended here, but an opening is of course there so that one can enter this new space from those galleries. I suggested this angle of the wall because I prefer that the viewer must fundamentally and continually restabilize, redefine, and reorient him- or herself in this space. If parallel walls are not simply given, especially in rather traditional spaces in which one perhaps feels that this room or this type of space has already been around for a long time, that creates a certain disturbance. I think these first impressions are very important.

PN: If such modifications of the space did not occur until 1985, then before this time you worked with the space available as it was and did not change anything. Does the need to alter the space from 1985 onwards correspond with developments in your painting?

GU: Yes, of course that has to do with my painting. The pictures that were installed in this 1985

1. See the installation photographs in *Günter Umberg: Thema Farbe*, exhib. cat., Städtische Galerie im Städel (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 22–29.





space were works with very flat supports. I had exhibited these works quite a bit previously, but I was always left with a sense of dissatisfaction—I noticed that they didn't necessarily work in "traditional" spaces. It had to do with the fact that these pictures had a very strong relationship to the wall, and then also, of course, to the space where the extension of the walls played a very important role. Those were things I first had to learn to work with and around, and that took a little time; 1985 was the first time I took this decisive step. This also had to do with the cooperative interaction with the people one works with, people who also contribute. And 1985 in Frankfurt was a time when that really took place.

PN: Then the earlier works were not exclusively on these flat supports; there were other types...?

GU: No, in the seventies I was working almost exclusively with "multipart works"—that is, a picture that is usually made up of five or six different elements.² There I was more interested in a more fundamental or analytical approach to painting, for example, the possibility of comparing different methods of painting. The viewer

had the opportunity to compare the panels with one another. That also had to do with a certain kind of perception, with a certain attitude of reception. Then at the end of the seventies, in 1978, something changed also in my approach to painting. I returned to the so-called "single picture." That was a very important step for me, of which I am still today very conscious. I think that for me this was a very fundamental step. It was not self-evident in the seventies for the "single picture" to be once again recognized. I was criticized quite a bit at that time, accused by certain painters of being retrogressive in returning from the multipart image to the single image. But I was interested then, also through a change in my approach to painting, in developing a stronger relationship to myself. I wanted the relationship of my person to the image to become closer. For me, that meant that the previous method of painting planes adjacent to each other actually now became a layering of one on top of the other. Through the painting process, layer by layer, painting came closer to me. I believe that also had its repercussions in other areas of my life. I felt that very strongly at the time and I am working on it to this day.

2. Two such works are illustrated in *Günter Umberg: Thema Farbe*, 14–15.

PN: Let me ask about the historical context and connections. You emphasize the difference

between the works before 1978 and afterwards. Can you also identify commonalities between these periods—questions or problems that you worked on in both periods?

GU: Yes, how I handle the paint, how I paint in a very concrete sense. That is a choice that has evolved very, very slowly. Seen in this way, 1978 does not represent a break. Rather a slow, further development was taking place. In doing painting in the mid-seventies, I had used many different tools, not only the paintbrush as I use it today; I used the paint roller and the putty knife, I sanded down the paint, I built up the paint. It was already then a building up in layers, but through different techniques. With the paint roller, the brush, with sandpaper, a painted color emerged that seemed actually more strongly built up in itself, which was not to be seen so spatially, through this simultaneous building up and sanding down. Then at the end of the seventies I thought that, in order for me to get closer to the paint, I had to reduce these different painting processes. Then I began to paint only with the brush and to simplify this process and, through concentrating on this, to try harder to find an emotional closeness to myself. This approach was different from when one takes up one tool after another and has to come to terms with them in turn. That was a more controlled working process than what I do now. Similar processes are used over the years, but they become more intensified, go into more depth than breadth.

PN: A cultural-historical question: When one thinks about German culture in the 1970s, especially about the literature of the time, one speaks of a “new subjectivity” (“*neue Innerlichkeit*”). This was the term used to describe a certain withdrawal into the self, into the inner experience of the individual. This was also heavily criticized at the time. I am wondering how much you feel one could see your development in this context.

GU: I can see few correspondences to the literature, as I did not read much literature of the time. For me, other influences were important. I think that a person like Donald Judd was very important for me. In the late 1960s, I first saw sculptures by Donald Judd. It must have been in 1967.³ Subsequently, I was fascinated by his wooden sculp-

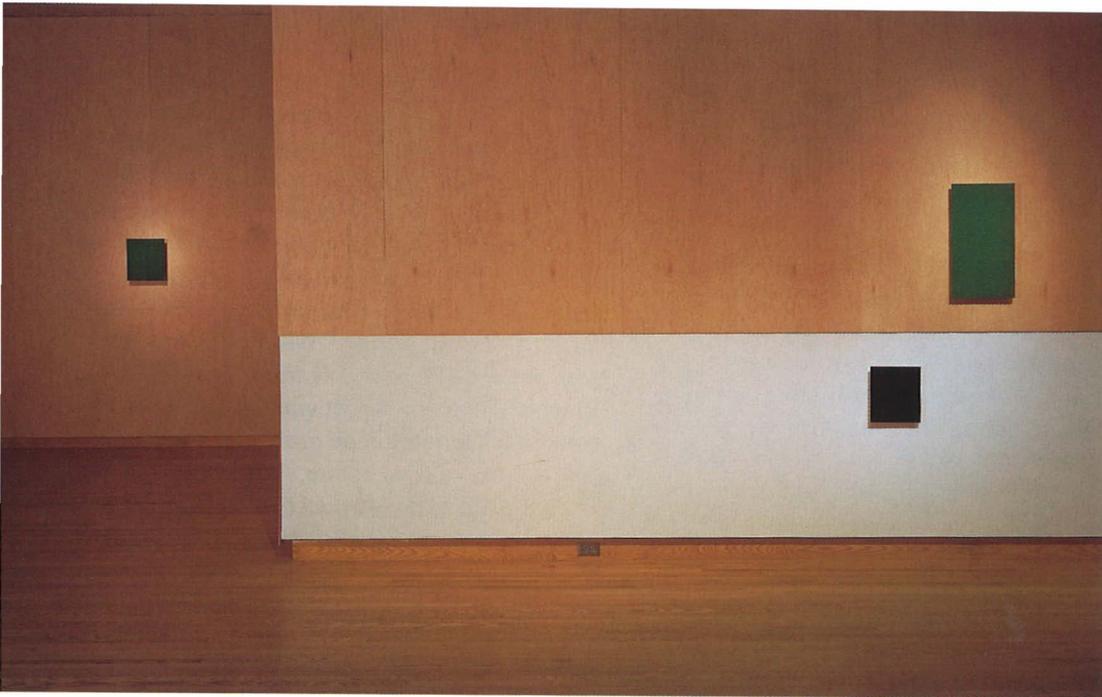
tures, cubes built from plywood planks, because of their organic material. At that time I had also read Donald Judd’s writings a bit; I know that in the 1960s he was very strongly against the European conception of painting. But I had seen something else in these sculptures. I didn’t quite trust his arguments. These sculptures had a lot to do with the concept of image, and they also have something to do with the imaginary. Much later I had a very important experience with Judd’s work. At an exhibition in Wiesbaden in 1993, I saw a sculpture, probably from the mid-1970s, in which medium-height vertical plywood panels ran the full length of the room, set away from the wall about two meters. Angled plywood ran from the top edge of these panels down to the line where the wall met the floor, at an angle of about forty-five degrees. The visitor passed through the room, entrance to exit, alongside the length of the piece, able to look over the top edge down the slope towards the wall/floor line. The viewer’s eye could really flow down the grain of the plywood.⁴ This was a very important experience at the time because it revealed something to me that at first I didn’t think had anything to do with sculpture. I could take that up immediately in my conception of painting. I think that seen in this light Donald Judd remained more of a painter than he would perhaps admit.

PN: Judd speaks about “noncomposition” and nonhierarchical pictures, and so forth. Did these concepts also play a role for you?

GU: Yes, this certainly played a role for me, but Donald Judd was not the only one. I think of Carl André and other minimal artists. Seen this way, the matter was immanent to art, and had less to do with literature.

3. Specifically, the artist recalls the exhibitions *Kompass III: Schilderkunst na 1945 uit New York* (at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, 9 November to 17 December 1967), and *Minimal Art* (at the Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf from 17 January to 23 February 1969).

4. The publication accompanying this exhibition (organized to mark the award of the Stankowski Prize to Judd) does not list or illustrate the works displayed. The work in question probably dates to 1976. For general comments about Judd’s use of plywood and his turn to more environmental and architectural concerns in the 1970s, see Barbara Haskell, *Donald Judd*, exhib. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, 1988), 85–113.



be an object, that it is really a thing in the world, not just a vision, not just a window one looks through, that it is there, very real. These are experiences that are important in my painting.

PN: Now, as we are speaking about European and American painting, I must also ask the question about your exhibiting in a museum that historically has concerned itself largely with German art. Does it concern you to be exhibited in this context? Does German art play a particular role for you? Do you see yourself as a German artist in any way? Or are these very incidental matters?

PN: Do concepts like “European tradition” or “American tradition” play a role for you?

GU: I think that I am a European painter, through and through, even though American artists influenced me very greatly. I think I remained thoroughly European. I must also say, even today, that I believe, for example, Newman and Rothko are dependent on a European tradition. I believe that they were nurtured by European painting, even when they had simultaneously freed themselves from it. I think that it is a question of the perception of color, how a color stands before the viewer, how one can look into a color. We have such experiences when we look at European painting; I see this in Renaissance painting, I see this also in Vermeer, in a portrait by van Gogh (such as the *Self-Portrait* I have just recently seen here at Harvard).⁵ I think we are all actually sitting in the same boat.

PN: Whereas the American tradition is more connected to a certain materiality...?

GU: Yes, that is what generally interested me greatly in American art—this recognition of materiality, that the picture can also at the same time

GU: There are, of course, German artists that I value very highly. Max Beckmann is one. Beckmann, who is very well represented in German museums, is phenomenal in that nearly every painting is very good. I must say that I scarcely know a painting by Beckmann that is not good. That has to do with a certain intensity in the picture, which is very typical of Beckmann. A different kind of intensity is required in looking at a Beckmann picture than perhaps at other pictures—for me it is so, anyway. That has something to do with an emotional quality that plays a very important role in Beckmann’s works. One must add that Beckmann very consciously constructs his pictures. One does not perceive this. I think that when one looks at a work by Beckmann, this recedes into the background. As a viewer, one can enter the picture immediately. I experience this very strongly in Beckmann’s works. Then the work begins to unfold like a labyrinth, not always, of course, but in certain cases. He captures the viewer. I see this not just in the content but also in his purely painterly approach. I

5. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin*, 1888, oil on canvas, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, 1951.65.

see this first in the color, in the handling of paint. That is my entry into these pictures. For example, how the black articulates itself; and green is also a very important color for Beckmann.

PN: Mentioning the colors black and green brings us back to your paintings, after this historical digression. I presume, incidentally, that it doesn't disturb you that Harvard's triptych by Beckmann is installed in the entrance gallery between the two rooms of your installation.⁶

GU: I find this very beautiful. This Beckmann picture is more of a buffer zone for me than any other picture in the collection that I could imagine hanging there. For this reason, this picture is surely not a transition or an aide to transition between the spaces; on the contrary, I very much like this contrast, this abruptness, which has something to do with the severity of this picture.

PN: Black and green ... we and those visitors who have seen your work in other exhibitions are perhaps surprised by the two green pictures that hang in the "second" space [installation views d, e, f]. This is perhaps a good starting point to discuss new aspects of the Harvard exhibition, given that the first room with the diagonal wall represents what you have now been working on intensively over the past decade.

GU: Regarding the first space, I would like also to mention that the light in this room plays a very important role. That is, the light is a light that truly floods the whole. The second room is actually the opposite ... but you asked primarily about the green pictures.

PN: Although I knew that you had been working also with green for several years, and not only with black in its different manifestations, the interplay between green pictures, the maple veneer wood wall covering, and the very subdued lighting in the second room surprised me.

GU: When I painted a green picture, just as when I first began to paint so-called black pictures, it was not a conscious decision for that particular green or that particular black. I was always primarily interested in painting. More decisive is

how color comes to the painting—that is, I do not choose a green in order to bring it into the painting, but I must first paint the green so that it becomes a painting. That is very decisive here. Seen in this way, and speaking of these green pictures, I can say that a different approach to painting has developed along with them. That is, I first work with a ground on these wooden supports; I use this ground in order to build up a volume of color. In this case, I use a red or ochre polymer pigment to build up a ground that I then burnish to a very smooth surface. That is, by the way, a historical painting technique that was employed frequently in Gothic and early Renaissance painting. [...] Then as now, the advantage of this ground is that one can burnish it to a very soft, fine surface, so that one can handle it in a certain way. After this, I have begun to build on the colored pigment, but in many fewer layers than in my other paintings, those on unprepared supports. I have tried not to give the paint (for example, this green pigment) the physical presence that had been the case in my earlier works. That is, the color became ever more immaterial. One can seemingly look through this color to the (in some cases) red ground. This changed attitude toward painting also encouraged me to turn to other colors, for example, the green. I then noticed that between these green works and the black, a certain polarity had developed. Currently, I see this green as very closely connected to the black. I cannot describe it exactly, but an encounter takes place, one that for me approaches a complex concept of painting. I cannot say too much more on that.

PN: So the decision for wood on the walls was another decision, independent of the green paintings?

GU: Yes, these two were different matters. Over the years, I have tried to give more careful consideration to the spaces and their conditions, to how one can find one's place within them, to which sensory experiences a person can have in a space, to what kind of conditions can arise there. And I have had experience with my pictures in the past

6. Max Beckmann, *The Actors*, 1942, oil on canvas, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, 1955.174.

in this regard; this is certainly connected to the great fragility of my works—not in the sense of wanting to protect them from being touched, but I am basically of the opinion that pictures, like people, need protection. In the past I have experienced that I can perhaps make these protective spaces myself. A few years ago I installed a work in front of wooden coffered paneling.⁷ I set the picture deep into one of these compartments, which cast a shadow, giving the picture a kind of protection. At the same time the picture had a certain fragility, as it was hung very low and could be vulnerable to much greater potential damage. But in the present installation, the wood does not have to do with protecting the picture; rather it's a matter of bringing the picture into a specific situation. This increasingly interests me today. And the question also arises whether traditional neutral walls are still useful. These museums that take in not only my works of art, but also those by other artists, are built for general use, and I am resisting such a situation a bit here.

PN: I find that this comparison between the human being and the picture is very convincing and interesting: the picture needs protection, the human being needs protection. Your pictures are so closely connected to the human being and the individual human scale, in the way they are created, transported, exhibited, encountered. I feel that one could speak about your works in terms of ethics. It is in some way about the ethics of actions, the human ethics of how one goes about relating to another individual.

GU: Yes, I think this ethical question does play a role. I do not see the picture as a fully comprehensible receptacle of knowledge. It is not a question of information but very different matters. When one recognizes that it is not about information, then I would pose the ethical question. I would ask what, then, is this about, what is different here? The picture cannot be seen as a repository, but we are truly dealing with an event. It is no longer necessarily about knowledge, it is about other qualities of life, and there ethical questions do play a role.

PN: I was very impressed how much time and care is involved, in the painting of the pictures as in the viewing of them, and then also in the han-

dling of the pictures by museums or by their owners. From the museum's standpoint, one could say that one feels the responsibility to a greater degree with your pictures than with those by other artists. I found what Ann Gibson has written about this very convincing and also very moving.⁸ The viewer only senses some of this effort; the viewer cannot reconstruct your painting process from the picture itself, or reconstruct the difficulties of installation, but some of the care can be felt.

GU: I would never somehow burden the viewer with all this. It would be very bad, for example, if the viewer could recreate my painting methods. On the contrary, I actually try to conceal that. The thing is a picture; it's about something else. It is important that the picture express in other ways what I have done or achieved. But in general, the issue is really the relationship between the picture and the viewer, not only the relationship between the picture and me. At that moment when I have completed the picture, it is freed from me; I no longer exist.

PN: So, there must be two different approaches to experiencing your pictures: on the one hand, in the installation that you create, influencing or altering the space and hanging, and on the other hand, as individual paintings, independent of any context, and transferred to private collectors or museums and shown then in contexts and on walls and in spaces where you have no control at all. Do you find this exciting, a pity, or...?

GU: No, I think it is good ... it is quite OK. When a picture goes into another collection, the owner has a certain responsibility, but this lies really only with him or her. Seen in this way, I think that then basically how an owner goes about handling the picture is right. In the past, I have also installed many works in private collections, and I never forced myself onto the situation. I always respected how collectors handled my works—it is their house, it is their space, they created it

7. This installation formed part of the exhibition *Future Perfect*, organized by Dan Cameron in 1993 for the Academy of Applied Art in Vienna.

8. See especially Ann Gibson, "Exceeding the Aura, Returning the Body" in Hannelore Kersting, ed., *Günter Umberg* (Cologne, 1989), 39–48.



according to their ideas, and my picture is brought into this space. There is a certain acceptance, and, after all, the collectors have to live with this work. I have usually had good experiences even when

my work was hanging close to works by others, in a way I would normally not even consider. But, in the end, the pictures also have the strength to exist independently from this.

FURTHER READING

One publication can be especially recommended to those looking for further reading in English about the artist. The bilingual monograph *Günter Umberg*, edited by Hannelore Kersting (Cologne, 1989), contains excellent essays by the editor ("Painting between Sensuality and Analysis"), Ann Gibson (cited in note 8), and others. There is also a helpful 1988–89 interview with the artist ("Metaphysics Is Dead"), as well as a good selection of color installation photographs of exhibitions (1984–89), and an extensive bibliography. Gibson's rich essay in the monograph can usefully be read in conjunction with a second essay in *Arts Magazine* (October 1986), and Kersting has also published a brief study of Umberg's early drawings (in the bilingual exhibition catalogue *Günter Umberg: Arbeiten auf Papier, 1973–1976* [Mönchengladbach, 1993]). Another substantial interview with the artist, part of which is reproduced here, is translated in the exhibition cata-

logue *Monochromie Geometrie*, exhib. cat., Sammlung Goetz (Munich, 1996). The catalogue *Günter Umberg*, edited by Jochen Poetter (Baden-Baden, 1991), offers English versions of three probing essays; extensive visual documentation of the artist's installation at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden; and a comprehensive bibliography and exhibition history for the artist.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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