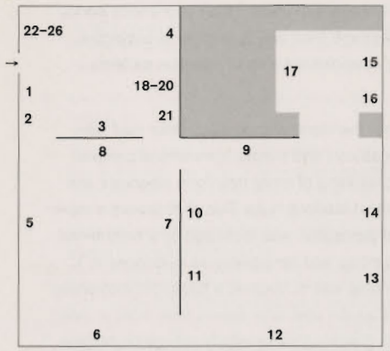
## site map and checklist




1. ***Graph-Paper Painting***, 1962–63
oil on canvas
36 x 36 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Dispositionsfond, 2000.

2. ***Graph-Paper Painting***, 1962–63
oil on canvas
36 x 36 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Dispositionsfond, 2000.

3. ***Untitled* (Black Star)**, 1960–61
oil on canvas
72 x 72 inches
Collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo

4. ***Untitled***, 1962
oil on canvas
72 x 72 inches
Collection of Whitney Museum of American
Art, New York. Gift of Arthur Fleischer, Jr.

5. ***Untitled***, 1969–71
oil on canvas
6 parts, each: 31 x 37 inches
Collection of Museum Ludwig, Cologne

6. ***Untitled* (*Vertical Flanking Diptych—Green*)**, 1966–74
oil on canvas
two panels, each: 96 x 68 x 3⅜ inches
overall: 96 x 145 x 3⅜ inches
Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

7. ***Primary Light Group: Red, Green, Blue***, 1964–65
oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas
3 panels, each: 60 x 60 inches
Collection of The Museum of Modern Art,
New York, Philip Johnson Fund, 1969

8. ***Untitled* (*Double Bar—Red*)**, 1972
oil on canvas
72 x 72 inches
Collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo

9. ***V. Eutopicus***, 1973
oil on canvas
80 x 22 x 4 inches
Collection of Virginia and Bagley Wright

10. ***H. Tenebrosa***, 1971
oil on canvas
22 x 96 ¼ x 4 inches
Collection of Museum moderner Kunst
Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna

11. ***V. Staminodeus***, 1974
oil on canvas
80 x 22 x 4 inches
Courtesy of the artist, Amsterdam

12. ***H. Arcuata***, 1971
oil on canvas
22 x 96 x 4 inches
Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

13. ***V. Speculum***, 1970
oil on canvas
80 x 22 x 4 inches
Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

14. ***H. Orbitaster***, 1973
oil on canvas
22 x 96 x 4 inches
Courtesy PaceWildenstein Gallery, New York

15. ***M. Refractarius***, 1974–75
oil on canvas
42 x 60 x 4 inches
Collection of Gilles and Marie-Francoise
Fuchs, Paris

16. ***Cadmos' Thicket***, 1974
inkless intaglio hand-colored with oil
40 x 30 inches
Courtesy Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York

17. ***Cardinations***, 1974
suite of nine screenprints
each: 28 x 21 inches
Courtesy Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York

18. ***Untitled***, 1962
color and pencil on paper
4 x 4 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Dispositionsfond, 1996.

19. ***Untitled***, 1962
color and pencil on paper
4 x 4 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Dispositionsfond, 1996.

20. ***Untitled***, 1961
color and pencil on paper
4 x 4 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Dispositionsfond, 1996.

21. ***Untitled***, 1960
color and collage on paper
4 x 4 ¼ inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Dispositionsfond, 1996.

22. ***Untitled***, 1962–63
pencil on graduated paper
6 x 6 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Gift of the artist.

23. ***Untitled***, 1962–63
pencil on graduated paper
6 x 6 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Gift of the artist.

24. ***Untitled***, 1962–63
pencil on graduated paper
6 x 6 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Gift of the artist.

25. ***Untitled***, 1962–63
pencil on graduated paper
6 x 6 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Gift of the artist.

26. ***Untitled***, 1962–63
pencil on graduated paper
6 x 6 inches
Collection of Kunstmuseum
Winterthur. Gift of the artist.

cover photo: *Bill Jacobson*

**Jo Baer**
The Minimalist Years, 1960–1975
September 12, 2002–June 15, 2003

**Dia center for the arts**
**548 west 22nd street new york**

**Jo Baer** The Minimalist Years, 1960–1975

Jo Baer's is a singular career. Her commitment to painting, which would be long-standing, matured in the early 1960s via a rigorous examination of its ontology. A young artist arriving in New York on the cusp of the decade, she launched into a stringent inquiry concerning the nature of her practice in a milieu that, over the next fifteen years, would prove remarkable for the caliber of its intellectual and artistic innovation. Aligned with the nascent Minimalist coterie that included Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Robert Mangold, Sol LeWitt, and others, Baer soon proved exceptionally vigilant in demonstrating painting's continuing viability as a radical form of artistic expression.

Challenged by assertions, from Morris and Judd in particular, that painting was moribund, "antique," "almost finished"—in contrast to novel forms of three-dimensional work that were neither painting nor sculpture but "specific objects"[1]—she countered with several radiant series of paintings that were typically grounded in a finely honed pictorial exegesis slyly informed with what Gerard Manley Hopkins called "the fine delight that fathers thought." Beginning in 1963 with the so-called Koreans, these works eloquently repudiate the claim that painting is necessarily based in illusionism and, hence, intrinsically at odds with the materialist, literalist condition then considered a prerequisite of vanguard modernist aesthetics.[2] In addition, Baer fired terse verbal ripostes, most memorably to Morris in 1967, offering a characteristically polemical defense of her practice: "A painting is an object which has an emphatic frontal surface. On such a surface, I paint a black band which does not recede, a color band which does not obtrude, a white square or rectangle which does not move back or forth, to or fro, or up or down; there is also a painted white exterior frame band which is edged round the edge to the black. Every part is painted and contiguous to its neighbor; no part is above or below any other part. There is no hierarchy. There is no ambiguity. There is no illusion. There is no space or interval (time)."[3]

The work of most artists aligned with a three-dimensional form of Minimalism was predicated on a theory of vision heavily indebted to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, at the heart of which is an embodied subject who encounters the world in real space and actual time. Exceptionally, Baer engaged with optical experience by studying physiological perception. Her fascination with the properties and mechanics of retinal visuality, ranging from gestalt theory to such optical phenomena as Mach bands, was deeply informed by her earlier studies in biology and behavioral psychology.[4] Gestalt theory reinforced her inclination to conceive paintings as simple, clear holistically organized shapes—square or rectangular formats with clearly articulated edges that create unified fields whose the structure is immediately discernible. These paintings are, in effect, formed by their structures, since, as she noted, they are "pictures that have their own shapes." She therefore could eliminate hierarchical and relational composing as well as traditional figure-ground relationships, to produce a single-image format with strong visual presence.[5] The immaculate white (and, later, gray) fields read as flat, not spatial, an effect enhanced both by the evident weave of the canvas, which adds richness and density to the picture plane, and by their pristine facture, created from vertically brushed strokes that preclude residual vestiges of landscape space. The carefully calibrated black borders prevent the white surfaces from efflorescing while the intermediary narrow band of vivid color, as seen in *Primary Light Group: Red Green Blue* (1964–1965), serves to modulate and pacify the extreme value contrasts of black and white and also to bind the two together, reinforcing the perception of an integrated image, unitary and flat. In subsequent works, such as *Untitled (Vertical Flanking Diptych—Green)*, 1966–1974, Baer explored further the seminal role she accorded color by injecting intensely fluorescent hues or by graying the color. Varying chroma, as well as tone and value, she elaborated the possibilities offered by working in sets, often composing in diptychs and triptychs, or, occasionally, in open-ended series that could be reconfigured. At the same time, she explored permutations of certain proportions—most notably, a five-by-seven module. Yet, even when resorting to serial and systemic relationships, she realized a work intuitively, subtly adjusting the choice and character of the color with respect to the width of borders and framing elements, the dimensions and proportions of a canvas and its ground, whether white or gray. With their finely tuned, crisp yet manifestly hand-drawn edges, and immaculate facture, these well-wrought paintings betray an exigent craftsmanship that never appears merely mechanical.

Toward the end of the decade, Baer began to probe more closely the relation of the painting to its context, addressing not simply the height of the work from the ground, the optimal distance from which it was viewed, and the requirement of a strictly frontal fixed vantage point, but also the circumstances of its perception. In contrast to Flavin and other colleagues who were beginning to conceive their works contextually, Baer sought to reinforce the autonomy of her paintings so that they did not meld seamlessly with the architectonics of the space. By hanging them unusually low, she ensured not only that they remained independent of their context but also that the spectator dynamically and intimately engaged with the edges, as opposed to, as is more customary, focusing on the centralized field. Acknowledging that no single frontal vantage could fully disclose the objectness of a painting—that is, the relation of the canvas surface to the supporting wall—Baer began to extend the elements framing the edges from the frontal plane laterally onto the sides of the stretcher. In the Doublebar series, the viewer's attention is drawn to sidereal events, activating the spectator's peripheral field of vision, whereas in the Wraparounds, space opens mysteriously behind the picture plane. Standing askance, the viewer perceives the black zone dissolve, canceling the volumetric corner junction. From the front, conversely, the tensely secured field seems even tauter than in previous works. Both visual readings are required. Slippage from one to another is subjective, determined not merely by changing viewpoint but also by stimulus patterns formally encoded in the work.

Pitting the optical increasingly against the literal and physical, Baer next relinquished her ascetically reductive vocabulary and simple, symmetrical compositional formats in favor of a lexicon consisting of more free-form diagonals and curves, plus a wider repertoire of almost luscious hues. This shift toward a more unstable and circumstantial mode of perception was mobilized by a heightened attention to the work's placement, lighting, and temporality, as evidenced in *V. Speculum* (1970), one of the first in what was to become a group of nine related works, whose space seems to rotate as the spectator moves from front to side.[6] Positioned exceptionally close to the ground, their unusually volumetric chassis cast shadows on the walls and floor. Predetermined, such shadows are integral to the design and, hence, critical in any apprehension of the work. Concentrating initially on borders and edges, on the perimeter separating right-angled planes, Baer soon evolved more complex free-form compositions; in *H. Orbitaster* (1973) and *M. Refractarius* (1974–1975), space and surfaces fluidly and elusively mutate, blend, and contradict each other. Though premised on shifting vantage points, these paintings are far removed from the kind of relief or wall works of Judd and his Minimalist colleagues, who used aspectual diversity to counterpoint "the known constant" to "the experienced variable." Tellingly, in her irregular nuanced configurations, what is seen from one position cannot assist in predicting what can be seen from another, and nor can either vantage be readily fixed in memory. Though spectators may be fully cognizant of the circumstantiality in actual place, time, and space of such discoveries, they remain pictorially as much as retinally determined.

As the claims for an abstract art based in self-referentiality appeared increasingly untenable, Baer began to reconsider the nature and function of a nonobjective mode. Her search for a more substantive frame of reference was, once again, singular; rather than dispute issues of representation, per se, she shifted the ground of the argument to questions of signification. *Cardinations*, a portfolio of nine screenprints published in 1974, reconfigures rudimentary motifs based on a prototypal numerical system, Archaic Aryan cardinals, which unlike Arabic numerals, are not arbitrary in form but are diagrammatic and, so, are concrete and realistic. *Cadmos' Thicket* (1974) heralded this line of inquiry, "bridging abstraction" by drawing on ancient alphabets such as Greco-Phoenician (purportedly introduced into the Classical world by Cadmos), Celtic, and Roman letters. In reference to the pilfering, imitation, and misprision that forged the

fundaments of Western culture, Baer imbricated, overlaid, and mutated these characters. Commensurate with the nature of a semiotic system, she adopted a technique—screenprinting—that is inherently reproductive and mechanical, and medium—ink on paper—that functions, conventionally, as a page inscribed with signs in space.[7] Her consideration of letters as signs rather than as forms or images distinguishes her approach from that of such seminal predecessors as Jasper Johns; her interpretation of language as a vehicle of signification rather than as an instantiation of communication distinguishes her approach from that of contemporary Conceptual artists; her understanding of language, per Jacques Derrida, as "a system in which . . . [the] transcendental signified is never absolutely present outside a system of differences," facilitated her transition from a self-reflexive abstraction to work based on myth, addressed from a structuralist as opposed to a narrative perspective.[8]

If in these prints Baer briefly forsook her preferred medium of painting (a move befitting the novelty of the inquiry), she soon found a logical way to bring the excursus back into her customary terrain. Prehistoric cave painting and Paleolithic artifacts provided the point of departure; to her, such works are exceptional within the history of Western art because they belong to no particular tribes or peoples and are divested of all cultural specificity. Moreover, their meanings remain largely unknown, unfixed, and open to debate. Studying their primordial forms and signs, borrowing from their syntax, she began in the late seventies to formulate a notion of a "radical figuration" that would be comprised of pictorial, textual, and image-based constellations, whose radicality was defined no longer in relation to innovation but by reference to the Latin source of the word *radix* meaning *origin* or *root.*[9] Charted in those pivotal prints from 1973 and 1974, this reorientation from an ontology of painting to a hermeneutics of painting prefigured a further repositioning following her emigration from the United States in 1975. They signal her unequivocal repudiation of nonobjective art, which she now considered a form of cultural expression devoid of contemporary relevance.[10]

Immediately following her midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1975, Baer relocated to Ireland. Her self-imposed exile coincided with the moment of her greatest critical recognition.[11] For her, the search for a more substantive art required establishing a keen distance not only from the values, ethos, and ideologies that had dominated the New York art world in the 1960s but also from its wider sociopolitical matrix. She has resolutely maintained this distance, both literally and figuratively, in succeeding years.[12]

L. C.

## notes

1. Judd applied this term to the new work he admired. Written in 1964, "Specific Objects" was first published in *Arts Yearbook 8* (New York: Art Digest, 1965), pp. 74–82. It was often reprinted. Morris's position vis-à-vis painting and vanguard practice was most provocatively articulated in his article "Notes on Sculpture, Part III: Notes and Nonsequitors," in *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967), pp. 24–29. Baer was included in the landmark Kaymar Gallery exhibition in 1964 that launched Minimalist work, and in "Ten" at the Dwan Gallery in 1966, again largely organized by the participating artists themselves, which codified and consolidated the movement.

2. Baer dates her first mature paintings to the summer of 1962. Most of the Abstract Expressionist–related works she made on the West Coast in the late fifties were destroyed on her arrival in New York. Among her earliest extant works from the sixties are two paintings and a related drawing containing stars. *Untitled (Black Star)*, 1960–1961, can be compared to Jasper Johns's works using motifs, such as targets and flags, in which image, size, flatness, and scale all coexist. Baer's subsequent Graph paintings, a series comprised of four works and a number of drawings (of which some dozen remain), were executed in the fall and winter of 1962–1963, and were later included in her first solo show at the Fischbach Gallery in 1966. Observing her spouse John Wesley squaring up drawings for transfer to canvas, Baer began making studies on graph paper used for dance notation. Having integrated the geometric motif into the grid of the paper, so that the area inside the image was of the same order as that on the remainder of the sheet, she felt obliged to transfer the checkered pattern as well as the motif onto the canvas. Since most of these shapes are symmetrical and purely linear in design, their boundaries porous like membranes, she was able to suppress conventional figure-ground relationships, and affirm the flatness of the picture surface.

   For vanguard artists in the sixties the grid proved key to affirming the autonomy of the artwork and the antinaturalism that was emblematic of modernism because, as Rosalind Krauss has noted, it maps the surface of the painting to itself. As the structure of the painting becomes tied to the surface—as it becomes dependent on it rather than merely related to it—it no longer needs to refer to anything beyond the physical facts of the painting itself: it achieves a form of self-referentiality. In these four works, Baer did not dispense with iconic forms, but welded their simple geometric shapes into the surface, structure, and spatiality of the grid. Quickly abandoning this form, which was to prove so fertile for others such as Agnes Martin and Alfred Jensen, she forged a counterpart that embodied its absolute stasis, symmetry, lack of center and inflection—a gestalt in which structure and surface reinforce one another and become interdependent. This saltatory insight was first realized in the Korean series, so named by the visionary gallerist Richard Bellamy because at that time "no one knew anything about Korean art either." (Bellamy, quoted in Baer's annotated biography in *Jo Baer: Paintings 1960–1998* [Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1999], p. 36.) Originally numbering sixteen, of which fourteen are currently believed to be extant, the series was exhibited as a group in Baer's solo show "Paintings from '62–63," at the School of Visual Arts, New York, in 1971.

   For a full exegesis of the role of the grid in modernist art see Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths" and "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Grade and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 8–22, 151–170.) For a discussion of these Graph paintings and drawings see Dieter Schwarz, *Von Edgar Degas bis Gerhard Richter: Arbeiten auf Papier aus der Sammlung des Kunstmuseums Winterthur* (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum, in association with Richter Verlag, Düsseldorf, 2000), pp. 286–289.

3. Baer, letter to Morris, 29 July 1967, quoted in Baer's annotated biography in *Jo Baer*, p. 40. Morris's attack on the "antique" art of painting provoked this letter. (See Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part III.") After rebutting the arguments that would render her practice inherently at odds with the newly evolving aesthetic, Baer offered a materialist account of its ontology: "Consider paint a film of light reflecting/absorbing material, and a colored paint a material which gives a particular, characteristic transmission of light via differential absorption and reflection. Call this reflected quality 'luminance' and measure it in millilamberts. This measure is as real and present as height, breadth, depth; and I find the phenomenon equally sumptuous and convincing. . . . Painted light, not color, not form, not perspective, or line, not image, or words, or equations, is painting. I make paintings which do not represent light, they are light." (Baer, letter to Morris, quoted in her annotated biography, p. 29.)

4. See also her articles "Art and Vision: Mach Bands," and "Xerography and Mach Bands: Instrumental Model," in *Aspen*, no. 8 (Fall–Winter 1970–1971). Widespread interest in gestalt psychology and its potential for visual art was stimulated by Rudolf Arnheim's influential book *Art and Visual Perception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

5. Baer, quoted in Carter Ratcliff, "Jo Baer: Notes on Five Recent Paintings," *Artforum* 10, no. 9 (May 1972), p. 28.

6. Their titles are related to conventions employed in botanical naming, reflecting Baer's passionate interest in orchids. The "V" or "H" refers to the orientation of the work, respectively "verticalis" and "horizontalis," "M" to "medianus"/"modus"/"meso." The second component in these titles is a Latinate term that relates to visual aspects of the work; for example, "Pandurata" implies extension, "Speculum" refers to mirrors, "Orbitaster" to wild curvature, "Arcuata" to arcing, "Refractarius" to bending or curving back strongly, etc.

7. For a more detailed discussion, see John Loring, "Jo Baer," *Arts Magazine* 49, no. 8 (April 1975), p. 70. See also Baer's annotated biography in *Jo Baer*, pp. 47–48.

8. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), p. 280.

9. For a full account, see the annotated biography, in *Jo Baer*.

10. Lucy Lippard, the most discerning critic of Baer's work to date, characterized her position in relation to Minimalism and other forms of abstraction in the mid-sixties when she wrote in a review of Baer's first solo show: "The use of color is crucial to the meditative ambience invoked, bringing the work closer to Reinhardt than to say, Newman. . . . The initial purity of her work will undoubtedly lead to Baer's classification with such absolutists as Judd although the mood is more Romantic than factual and she belongs with quite another group." In "that other group," she identified only Dan Flavin. (Lippard, "New York Letter: Off Color," *Art International* 10, no. 4 [April 20, 1966], pp. 73–74.) With the benefit of hindsight, it could be argued that the absolutism in Judd's art is always undercut with a resonant sensuality; while a subtle élan tempers the declarative in Baer's work. Six years later, when analyzing Baer's new group of works of the early seventies, now far removed from a Minimalist aesthetic, Lippard noted with bemusement that the artist had had little public recognition "although she has one of the most impressive 'underground' reputations in New York among artists and those who listen to artists." (Lippard, "Color at the Edge," *Art News* 71, no. 3 (May 1972), p. 24.)

11. In retrospect, Baer now argues that "All of the so-called abstract artists always have a tissue of meaning. I always did certainly. . . . I meant layers. I meant boundaries. I meant very specific things always." Yet she conceded, "But really, [the shift came because] I wanted more subject matter. I wanted more meaning: . . . the world [had] changed." (Baer, interview by Barbara Flynn, 1987, quoted in the annotated biography in *Jo Baer*, p. 51.) Here she seems in part to be recalling her early landmark encounter with Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953), which alerted her to the significance of boundaries between the self and its milieu, between inner and outer space.

12. In the sixties at least, Baer imputed a political stance to a radical abstract art, as did many of her peers. Thus, for example, she has characterized the paintings of the early seventies by referring to "the sovereignity of the subject and the nature and ramifications of self-determination." (Baer, quoted in Ratcliff, p. 28.) More recently, in an interview in 1995, she reaffirmed that her Minimalist works were "about identity and the rights of individuals to maintain themselves as individuals." (Baer, interview by Linda Boersma, *Bomb*, no. 53 [Fall 1995], p. 63.) Although in retrospect it may seem naïve, such a position was shared by many of her colleagues. What she now repudiates are those aspects of the utopian and idealistic modernist ideology that by the mid-seventies was widely seen to have failed, as Baer herself quickly realized. (For her acute analysis, see "I am not an abstract artist," *Art in America* 71, no. 9 [October 1983], pp.136–137.)

Born in 1929 in Seattle, **Jo Baer** majored in biology at the University of Washington between 1946 and 1949. She then undertook graduate work in physiological psychology at the New School for Social Research in New York, before moving in 1953 to Los Angeles, where she began her artistic career. Following her return to New York in 1960, she created her first mature work in 1962. Included in key exhibitions launching Minimal art in the early sixties, she began showing widely after her first solo show at the Fischbach Gallery in New York in 1966. In 1975 a midcareer retrospective was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, after which she immigrated to Ireland. Since 1983, she has lived and worked in Amsterdam. In 1999, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam presented a major retrospective of her work.

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Funding for this exhibition has been provided by Lannan Foundation, The Richard Florsheim Art Fund, and the members of the Dia Art Council.