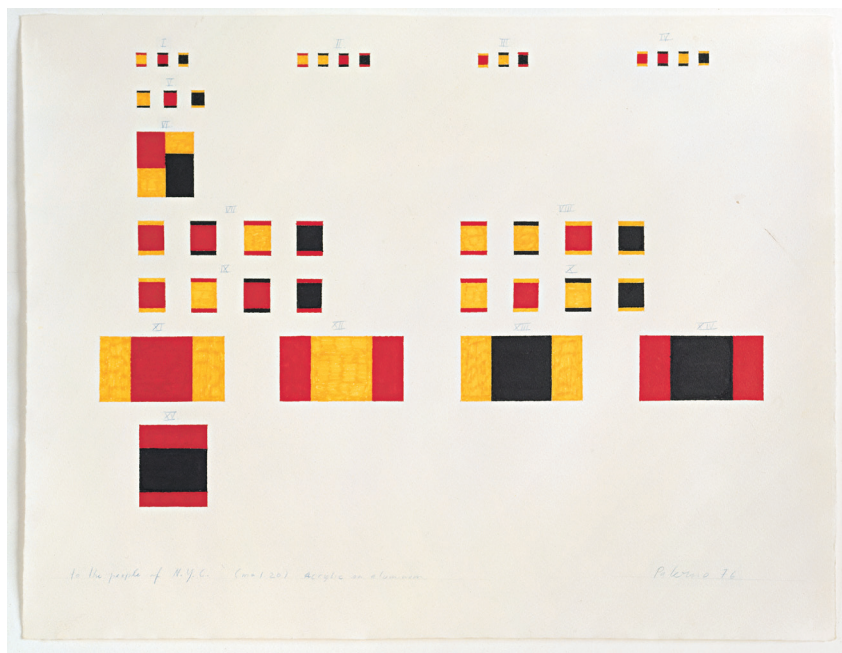


Blinky Palermo
To the People of New York City
September 15, 2018–March 9, 2019



Dia:Chelsea
545 West 22nd Street New York City
www.diaart.org

Blinky Palermo To the People of New York City

To the People of New York City is Blinky Palermo's last work. It was completed in 1976 upon the artist's return to Germany, following a three-year stay in New York City. The title for this painting in multiple parts is derived from a simple dedication, "To the people of N.Y.C.," inscribed on the backs of the work's forty aluminum panels. In scale, size, chromatic variation, and structure, *To the People of New York City* is unparalleled in the artist's oeuvre.

Palermo died suddenly in 1977 and was never able to oversee a public installation of this work. However, he left detailed instructions for *To the People of New York City's* arrangement in the form of sixteen preparatory studies (presented here in an adjacent gallery). The last of these sketches illustrates each of the painted panels in sequential order, providing a codex for this immersive installation. Each of *To the People of New York City's* fifteen sections consists of one to four rectilinear metal panels with variable space between the set, such that the distance between the panels of the groupings must be equal to their respective width. Part VI is the only exception to this rule. It includes two panels that directly abut each other to form the illusion of a single panel. The dimensions of the panels fluctuate from about 8¼ by 6¼ inches to 49¼ by 43¼ inches to 39½ by 78¾ inches, so that the installation can be expanded or contracted to be shown in different spaces while maintaining its internal logic.

Color, like form, shape, and size, functions as a structuring device in *To the People of New York City*. The chromatic vocabulary of black, cadmium red, and cadmium yellow reiterate the efficient internal geometry of the majority of the panels, which are partitioned into three parallel but differently sized bands of color that run either vertically, or as is most common, horizontally. To achieve the internal partitions, Palermo likely painted the central bases of each panel and taped off the framing bars.¹ This process is discernable in the facture of the panels, which reveal the changes in color density and deliberate brushwork. As Gary Garrels wrote in 1987: "Repainting to cover the impressions of taping . . . resulted in slight changes of surface and light refraction. In sum, all of the panels clearly and intentionally appear as rendered by hand, and although carefully planned and worked, minor chance incidents were left evident."² This painterly, handmade effect functions as a counterpoint to the work's industrial supports and seemingly exhaustive systematic combinations of black, red, and yellow. Taken together they evoke the material and permutational aesthetics of the American form of Minimalism that Palermo encountered while in New York.

Prior to his arrival in the United States, Palermo had become one of Germany's most celebrated young artists. He received his artistic training at the Kunstakademie

Düsseldorf where he studied with Joseph Beuys and Bruno Geller. There he also met Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, with whom he shared a concern for the viability of painterly abstraction in the context of postwar German reconstruction. Palermo addressed these questions with conceptual rigor. His first works were small, totem-like “objects,” which consisted of plainly painted canvases wrapped around evocatively shaped stretchers. These were often hung unconventionally in relation to the architecture of the gallery. Next, he produced his *Stoffbilder* (Cloth Pictures), a series of readymade works that substituted the authorial control of the handmade objects for the commercial efficiency of store-bought material.³ Then, in 1968, he began a series of Wall Drawings and Paintings that responded to the architectural frame of the space in which they were presented, collapsing the boundaries between aesthetic object and viewing environment. Palermo abandoned this mode of working when he moved in 1973 to New York, where he began to create his *Metalbilder* (Metal Pictures), which consist of paint applied in monochromatic bands to variously sized, thin, rectangular aluminum supports. *To the People of New York City* is the culmination of this final body of work.

If Palermo’s previous work had been constructed around the meaning of painting in the wake of postwar European cultural, political, and social trauma while working in Germany, his Metal Pictures moved toward the abstraction that surrounded him in the studios, galleries, and museums of New York. The Metal Pictures—*To the People of New York City* in particular—synthesize the formal, material, and phenomenological concerns of American Minimal and Postminimal art with Palermo’s own long-standing interest in probing the boundaries of abstract painting. At the same time, while Palermo’s use of colors borrowed from the palette of his American peers, it also signaled his interest in Native American cultures and the American West,⁴ as well as his national origins. The tricolor hues undeniably recall the various iterations of the German flags that have been produced since the founding of the Weimar Republic in 1919. All of which is to say that while “manifestly American,” as Benjamin Buchloh once (somewhat derisively) described this work,⁵ *To the People of New York City* also represents a uniquely personal synthesis of artistic and personal interests.

Requiring a sizable amount of wall space, the entire sequence of *To the People of New York City* functions as a total environment that necessitates an embodied perceptual experience. Together the forty panels wrap around the gallery, creating a sense of polyrhythmic movement. While signaling the terms of Minimal art, *To the People of New York City*’s syncopated format is also evocative of the variable and improvisational structure of the jazz that Palermo actively followed while in New York.

The breadth of the work choreographs the viewers' movements, pushing them to the center of the room in an attempt to hold the entire work within a single frame of reference. Yet, the format of *To the People of New York City* also questions the very notion of the singular painting, and recalls earlier models such as Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* (1958–66) and Mark Rothko's commission for the de Menil chapel in Houston, while also anticipating the monumentality of Andy Warhol's *Shadows*, a single painting on 102 canvases that was commissioned by Dia and created in 1978–79.

After returning to Düsseldorf, Palermo continued to use metal to explore the relationship between object, rhythm, and schematic arrangement within a temporary workspace in Richter's former studio. It is there that he completed *To the People of New York City*. Soon after his death, the work was installed by Imi Knoebel, who interpreted Palermo's instructions for the New York gallery of Dia cofounder Heiner Friedrich. The work was shown a decade later at Dia Center for the Arts in New York, where it was again installed by Knoebel.⁶ It is a fitting tribute then, that on the eve on of a renovation that will require Dia to temporarily pause its exhibition program in Chelsea, Palermo's dynamic ode to the city and its people is presented in New York for the first time in more than thirty years.

notes

1. Gary Garrels, "Technical Notes and Schematic Outline," in *Blinky Palermo* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1987), p. 26.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.
3. Lynne Cooke "Palermo's Porosity," in *Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977*, ed. Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schröder (New York: Dia Art Foundation; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 20.
4. Blinky Palermo explored the American West with Imi Knoebel in the summer of 1974. Together they visited sites such as the Rothko Chapel (1971), which may have been a point of departure for Palermo's encompassing installation.
5. Benjamin Buchloh, "On Palermo: Benjamin Buchloh in conversation with Lynne Cooke," in *Palermo*, ed. Ulrike Groos, Susanne Küper, and Vanessa Joan Müller (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag; Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 2007), p. 149.
6. See Lynne Cooke, introduction to *Blinky Palermo: To the People of New York City*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly with Barbara Schröder (New York: Dia Art Foundation; Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2009), p. 9.

Blinky Palermo was born Peter Schwarze in Leipzig, Germany, in 1943. He and his twin brother, Michael, grew up as adopted children under the surname Heisterkamp. In 1962 the artist entered the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where he studied with Joseph Beuys and Bruno Goller. In 1964 he adopted the name Blinky Palermo, which he appropriated from Frank "Blinky" Palermo, the manager of American boxing heavyweight champion Sonny Liston. He participated in more than seventy exhibitions, including Documenta in 1972 and 1977 and the São Paulo Biennial in 1975. In 1987 his work was featured in one of the first three exhibitions at Dia's former Chelsea location, which was located at 548 West 22nd Street in New York City. Palermo died while traveling in the Maldives in 1977.

selected bibliography

Blinky Palermo. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1987.

Cooke, Lynne, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schröder, eds. *Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977*. New York: Dia Art Foundation; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010.

Cooke, Lynne, and Karen Kelly with Barbara Schröder, eds. *Blinky Palermo: To the People of New York City*. New York: Dia Art Foundation; Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2009.

Groos, Ulrike, Susanne Küper, and Vanessa Joan Müller, eds. *Palermo*. Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag; Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 2007.

Rorimer, Anne. "Blinky Palermo: Objects, 'Stoffbilder,' Wall Paintings." *Artforum* 17, no. 3 (November 1978), pp. 28–35.

checklist and site map

1. To the People of New York City, 1976

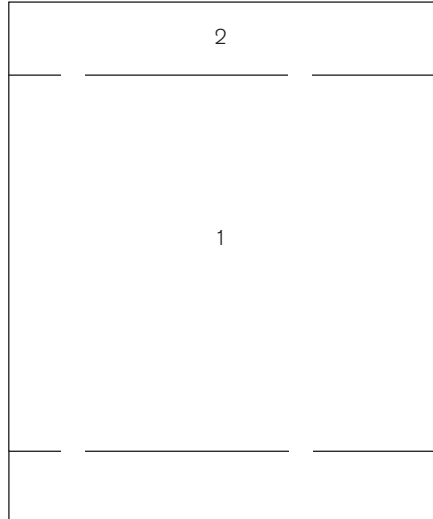
Acrylic on aluminum

Dia Art Foundation

2. Drawings for To the People of New York City, 1976

Pencil and felt-tip pen on paper

Palermo archive



Blinky Palermo: To the People of New York City is made possible by significant support from Susan and Larry Marx. Generous support is provided by Frances Bowes, Nathalie and Charles de Gunzburg, and Marissa Sackler.

Cover: Blinky Palermo, drawing for *To the People of New York City*, 1976. © Blinky Palermo/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Palermo archive