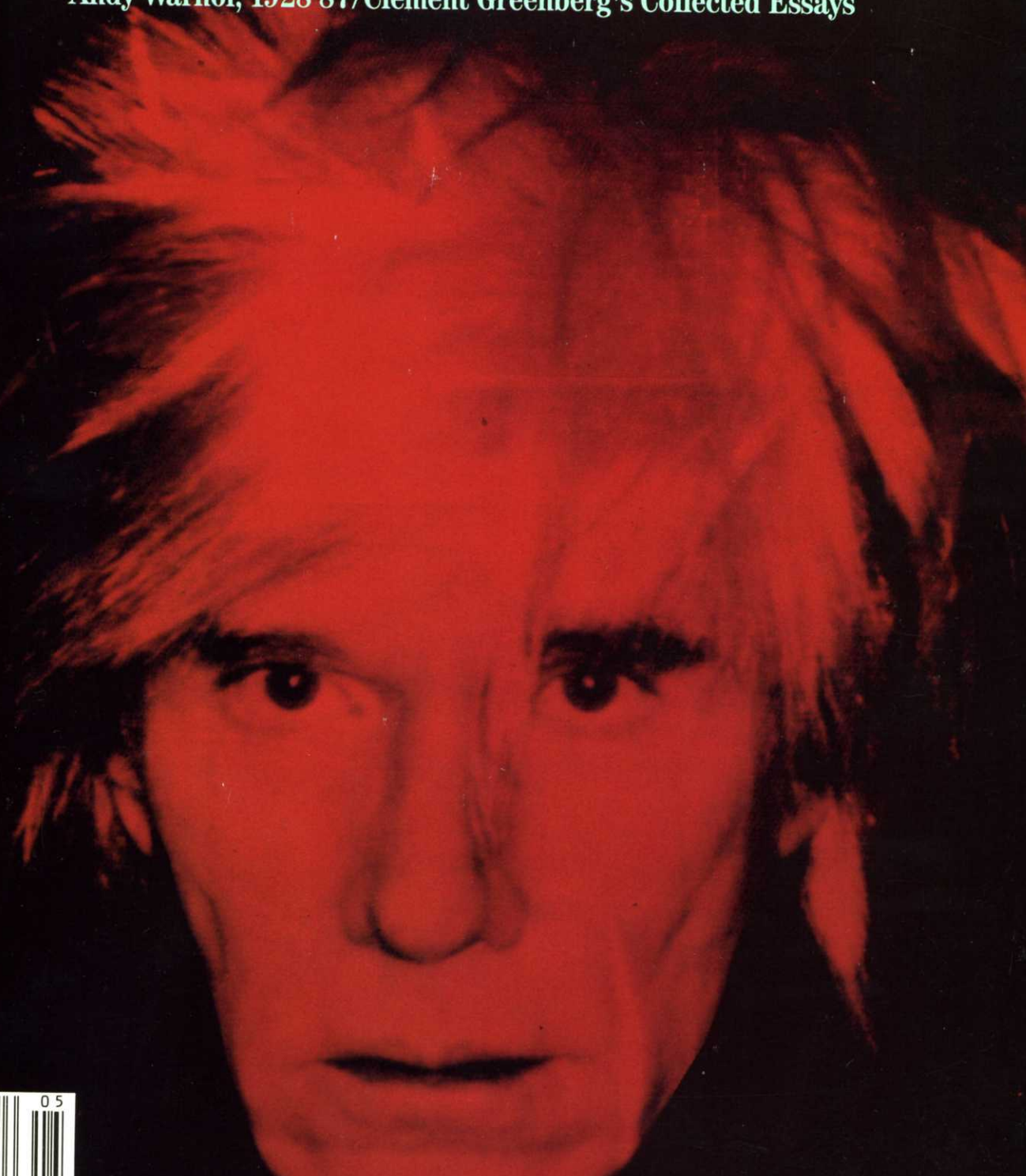


# Art in America

*May 1987 \$4.75*

**Los Angeles '87: New Museums, Opening Shows/8 Artists Interviewed  
Andy Warhol, 1928-87/Clement Greenberg's Collected Essays**







Al Held: *Taxi Cab IV*, 1959, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 107 by 268½ inches; at Robert Miller.

has been that it is more rewarding to look at than to think about, and while this was conceptually his densest piece yet, its similes of dispraise remained a bit undercooked. (As a site-specific work, *art, fashion, and religion* might also have benefited from a relocation: Ladda's work would have had even more point at the Met with its penchant for blockbusters and costume bazaars.) The fact is, though, that asking for subtlety of argument from the kind of work Ladda is doing may be asking for the wrong thing. Part of Pop's strategy was to make cartoons of fancy ideas as much as of received images—and Ladda does just that, with increasing draftsmanly acumen and an unerring sense of the theatrical.

—Holland Cotter

### Lucas Samaras at Pace

With this exhibition, Samaras returns to the motif of the doctored chair, this time fashioned loosely from heavy coat hanger wire, and woven through with all manner of detritus including kitchen utensils, studio tools, colorful beads, plaster statuettes and metal sports trophies. This sort of junk assemblage enjoyed a burst of popularity in the East Village a few years ago as a statement about the perverse fascination of kitsch, or as an ironic commentary on postindustrial society conducted through the medium of its castoffs. More recently, domestic items, albeit now in a new and pristine form, have entered art as a celebration of the commodity fetish. None of this informs Samaras assemblages. His work has

never admitted the kind of distance that would permit irony or social commentary. Instead, he offers images of obsession, a glimpse into the psyche of an artist for whom the world is never more nor less than the extension of his own intensely idiosyncratic mind.

As was the case with many earlier Samaras objects, the prosaic items out of which these sculptures are composed are all tinged with an aura of menace. Carving knives, strings of razor blades and open scissors, bound like prisoners to the wire chair frames, become embodiments of destruction. Forks spread their tines like arching fingers, whether of victim or victimizer

is never clear. An old shoe, bereft of sole and painted green, is stuck with nails, bringing to mind both the prickly self-protection of the porcupine and the arrow-riddled body of Saint Sebastian. Pencils appear in many of these works, sharpened to an angry point and bound together in bulletlike clusters, or blunt and broken and entwined within the wire armature. In one work, even a small tourist's replica of the Eiffel Tower becomes weaponlike, laid on its side and thrusting aggressively toward the viewer.

Each chair assumes a distinctive character. *Wire Hanger Chair (Beads)* is draped with colorful lengths of yarn, glitter-

flecked twine and strings of beads which envelop the armature like a harem girl's partially concealing costume. Near the bottom a pair of fingernail scissors impales a piece of tin embossed with a Chinese dragon, an apt reminder of the potential deadliness of the exotic. *Wire Hanger Chair (Bride and Groom)* can be read as a vanitas. One side is overgrown with fat plastic flowers, whose double connotation of wedding and funeral corresponds to the pairs of wedding couples and twin skeletons hanging from the exposed wire framework of the other side.

While the wire chairs made up the bulk of the show, there were two other categories of work on view as well. In the back room was an arrangement of objects—a real chair and table, several large bowls, a pair of high-heeled shoes perched on a platter—with all surfaces heavily encrusted with glittering glass beads, plastic buttons and rhinestones. These works extend Samaras's characteristic evocation of deadly allure, their sparkling skins suggesting at once the opulence of jewels and an accumulation of underwater organisms clinging tenaciously to sunken treasures. And finally, the gallery walls displayed a group of delicately stippled ink drawings which feature various portraits, figures inspired by classical sculpture and a good number of images of the artist's brooding face staring outward like a half-crazed Russian mystic.

As Gary Indiana points out in his catalogue essay, Samaras's work has never been reducible to any current trend. Instead, despite a wide variety of approaches and mediums, there is a remarkable continuity to his work centering on his preoccupation with the seductions of death, the dark side of sexuality and the frightening abyss of narcissism. Once again, he offers us his view from an edge few of us would wish to tread.

—Eleanor Heartney



Doug Ohlson: *Marker/Regatta*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 60 inches square; at Ruth Siegel.

### Al Held at Robert Miller

Held painted the four large pictures in this exhibition in 1959. Michael Brenson reported in the *Times* that Held packed them away in his studio in



Woodstock, N.Y. and forgot about them. The paintings may be the most improvisational he has ever painted, and while they are or have to be seen now as inevitably transitional, they are paintings of real discovery. As such they contrast sharply with the severely geometric and illusionistic abstractions for which he is best known.

These obviously spontaneous pictures are instinctively quite controlled. Their surfaces literally surge with vitality—only Held's drawings have a comparable factual vividness—but they are governed by a single impulse, by their *touch*. As one follows their orchestration, one seems to make the same discoveries Held made while painting them—the flat geometric signs simply flood the canvas-backed paper surfaces, stacked here, tumbling there, overlapping, breaking clear. But the final effect is of an underlying grid that does not, for the most part, impose any specific coordinates.

The paintings are called *Taxi Cab* (I, II, III, IV) and the largest painting is about 31 feet wide. They are painted mostly with the primaries (yellow predominating) plus black and white, and with a variety of motifs—cubes, triangles and many irregular shapes as well, all boldly drawn. This makes them sound schematized when in fact the signs are vectors—surrogates for the literal gestures of Abstract Expressionism whose "spirit," but not bravura, they seek to emulate and to constrain. It is this particular coupling of intentions, not the geometry of the signs as such, that provides the tension between the surfaces and the shallow spatial declivities that are present by implication.

The guiding spirit behind these paintings is clearly Pollock, not because the paint drips (or rather, leaks) from an edge here or there, but because Held's assault is on the entire surface. It is here that some difficulty occurs because in the paintings' part-by-part construction, the field is often sundered in ways that obligate either line or contrast to hold the pictures together. When the totality of effect is disrupted, their choragic finale does not come off.

This tendency to fragment is

particularly noticeable in *Taxi Cab IV* (hung in the lobby of the Continental Illinois Center nearby, because the gallery quarters were too small). The painting is just *too* black and white; the white, especially, subverts the congregation of motifs which, in the dim light of the lobby, break up like ice floes into slablike masses. *Taxi Cab III* loses its grip on the surface in the middle, but that may be because the left third of the painting is noticeably modular, while the center is much looser. These are the two pictures that one "crops" mentally to preserve the more magnetic clusters they contain. Significantly, they are also the largest paintings in the show. Held sometimes mistakes size for scale, but in the best picture here, *Taxi Cab I*, the field is a function of the directional signs and not an agglomeration of shapes, so they do not divide. Size and scale coincide, sharing the same armature of movement.

In retrospect the paintings seem to mark a critical attempt by Held, who was in his late 20s at the time, to adapt the rhetoric of "action painting" to a new era while sharing affinities with the emerging art of the day. His grid has more movable parts and is certainly more submerged than the one used by Johns (or for that matter, Stella) to achieve an analogous singleness of effect. His

attempt to make something "decorative" out of both Cubism and Abstract Expressionism compares with a similar effort by Robert Goodnough in the later '50s, while the pied ornament Held employs in these singular friezes portends in its ebullience the sassy simulations of dry goods and other commodities of Oldenburg's *The Store* barely three years later. A real style has its own conviction and that of its period, and a real style is what these paintings have.

—Sidney Tillim

### Doug Ohlson at Ruth Siegel

In his new body of work Doug Ohlson demonstrates again his superb control of color, even as he felicitously recombines devices he has used in recent years. Ohlson has developed such a convincing command of his means that even the smallest shifts or choices of emphasis reverberate in surprising, even breathtaking ways.

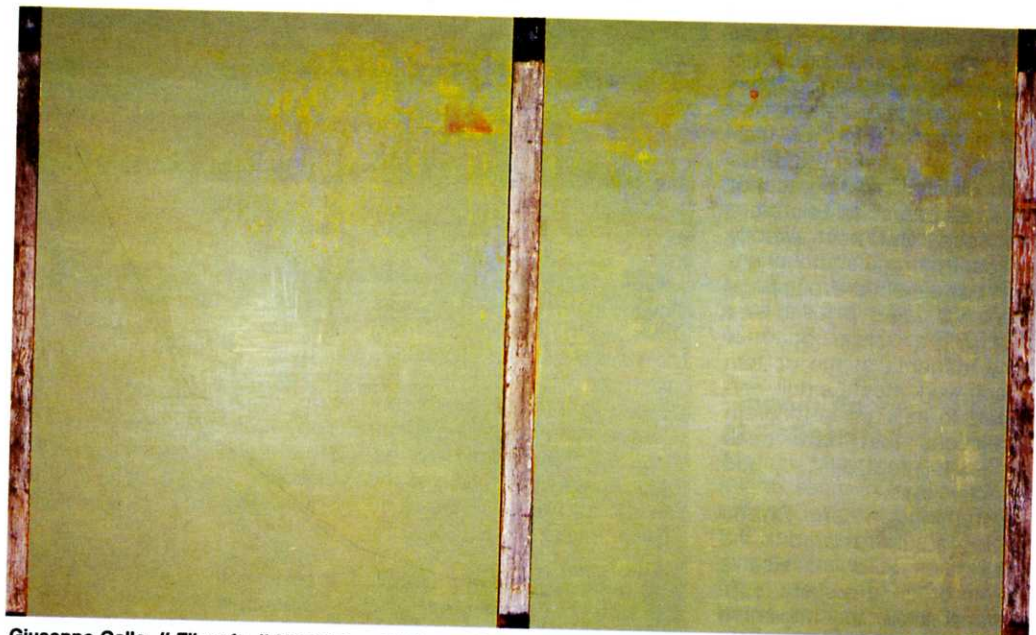
Typical of this new work (as well as older paintings) is the structuring of the geometric forms in the canvas titled *Marker/Regatta*. Rectangular blocks of strong color are stacked, balanced or made to stand on end with the precision of acrobats imitating the vertical and horizontal axes of the canvas. These geometric forms butt up against, overlap or

seem to attach themselves to differently brushed areas of color that have wonderfully ragged or boldly dripped edges.

Also seen in earlier work is the way the large central image is made to hover just inside the edges of the frame. A colored ground, as in *Marker/California*, is visible all around the outer rim of the canvas, and the central image almost quivers within the frame as the blocks of color that compose its outer edge bleed, blur and pull back from attaching themselves to the static frame. While this thin, loosely painted margin surrounding each painting suggests a life or process just beneath the central image, it also works to pull one's attention into the inner structure of the painting which, by contrast, is more tightly composed and fitted together.

Ohlson's consistent use of flat, unmodulated color in each rectangular form causes the eye to seek out the edges of that color area—to go in pursuit of its boundaries in order to establish its limits. This perceptual action gives the edges of each color block a special significance: each colored form reaches its most expressive pitch at its edges, where it either abuts crisply with the edge of another block, flows over the color under it, or feathers and blurs along the sides of the frame.

In *Marker/D'Arcangelo*, for



Giuseppe Gallo: *Il Filosofo, Il Musicista e Il Pittore*, 1986, acrylic and encaustic on canvas with wood, 149 by 250 inches; at Sperone Westwater (review on p. 188).



instance, the blocks of dark green and red that press up against the right edge of the large bright green plane pulsate in the intensity of their contact. So one of the dramas in an Ohlson painting is not only what particular colors are introduced, but how exactly they confront one another. In a pair of small square paintings called *Not titled (A)* and *Not titled (B)*, a similar band of flashy magenta at the bottom of each work meets a dull, earthy red to its right in different articulations that have been joined with great delicacy and distinctiveness.

Everything in an Ohlson painting is subordinated to the demands of color. All else is there in order to present, support and allow the maximum play of this dominant element.

—Walter Thompson

### Ken Sofer at M-13

For all their modest scale, Ken Sofer's abstract paintings on wood panels take on a big chunk of the significant painting of the last 30-odd years. Their jig-cut formats, eccentric but still rectilinear, are post-Minimalist echoes of Stella's early shaped paintings. But instead of following the minimalist practice of letting the outline serve as the basic image (either by filling it up with one color or by repeating it within the field at regular intervals), Sofer returns the interior of the painting to a pictorial function through push-pull arrangements of rectangles reminiscent of Hofmann's spatial tensions. Sofer's space, though, is shallower, his hand is slower and, with a couple of exceptions, his palette is more subdued, variations that recall Jasper Johns, Sofer's third Big Influence. His paint handling definitely has a Johnsian feel, down to those little drips that hang laconically from the last dab and then simply stop.

Sofer's remarkable achievement is to weld these distinct and intimidating influences into a personal synthesis. I think his success is at least partly due to the modesty of the paintings (to flaunt such references would be suicidal). None of the paintings in this recent show is larger than five feet in height or width; most are much smaller—about the size of a man's

chest. The viewer is thus able to assimilate the irregular outline of each picture at a single glance.

A useful comparison might be made with Ellen Phelan, who takes a similar approach to shaped formats and manifests similar influences. Both artists emphasize the object quality of their work while allowing the painting process to narrate the picture's coming into being. But the similarities end there. Phelan's paintings are, for the most part, constructed as landscape-evoking horizontals, their geometry extends only to the shape of the canvas, and the interior painting is freely gestural. Sofer, for his part, reinforces the declarative geometry of his panels with interior rectangles. And while his may be apprehended as a landscape-oriented geometry, the grid of rectangles gives a sense of aerial mapping rather than of a horizon line. Vertically oriented, Sofer's paintings actually suggest figures; their spatial push-pull allows the elements to shift like torso and hip.

Once inside Sofer's paintings, you can get lost in his revealed procedures: the adjustments of color, the variations in scale of the brushstrokes, the evidence of distress (scraping and sanding). I particularly remember the harmonious, high-keyed colors of *Afternoon Fixing*, the deep alizarin red square next to the white in the lower portion of *India*, and the muted checkerboard of *Blue Boy*. Not every painting is as strong as these three. The centered tonsil shape that appears in what I'm told are somewhat earlier paintings (everything in the show was dated 1986) hints at some significance unavailable to you or me, and the handling seems a little less developed. Still, this was a most impressive show.

—Stephen Westfall

### Mike Kelley at Artists Space

Mike Kelley sees his performance art as a method for bringing an end to each body of his work, by bringing aspects of that work alive for one last moment in a theatrical context. Therefore, some of the images featured in his performance at Artists Space, on Dec. 5, 1986, could also be found in

his concurrent exhibition at Metro Pictures or in his recently published book, all three titled "Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile."

In the performance, Kelley stressed certain images—the cave, in particular—in a rapid-fire oration delivered along with actress Molly Cleator. Both performers riffed the topics suggested in the title—idealism, art and spirituality, patriarchy and the state—in a nonnarrative manner, with the clanks and wails of the band Sonic Youth amplifying the disjointed structure of the script. In the dissonant, cavelike atmosphere that resulted, the listener was thrown off-center—vulnerable to Kelley's relentlessly biting poetry.

The cave image appeared in a drawing at Metro—a picturesque site of stalactites and stalagmites. However, any sense of romantic, high-spirited exploration was undercut by the picture's text: "When spelunking, sometimes you have to stoop, sometimes you have to go on all fours. Crawl. Crawl worm." When Kelley incorporated this image into his script the emphasis was placed unequivocally on the debasing admonishment put forth in the text. In the performance, Cleator resolutely strides toward Kelley and commands him to crawl. He gets down and does so. No romance here—just a slightly funny enactment of power and capitulation.

Kelley succeeds in taking us down with him, so to speak, through scene after scene in which language is used viscerally to examine philosophical, political or sexual hierarchies to which we capitulate or in which we are daily complicit. The structure of "white supremacy," for example, is described totemically as "the four races whose zenith is infection," with "black [associated] with feces, red with blood, yellow with urine, white with pus." No resolution of racism is professed—just a vivid confrontation with its rigid oppositional structure.

In some instances Kelley works deconstructively, tampering with particular aspects of a power-infused system in order to shake its stability. Gender identification, for example, is set afloat as he dons a dress, affects a striptease walk, gestures effeminately; at

one point Kelley announces he plays with dolls after watching the prone Cleator spread her legs and wrench open a handbag held between them, out of which pops a Barbie doll with its erect posture and bubble-cut hairdo. Here, laughter may be induced by the crossover images of the dephallicized male and phallic mother, but it is not a laughter that deludes us into thinking that simple reversals of patriarchy constitute serious alternatives.

By the end of the performance Kelley has led us to the most sinister cave image of all—a place where "it's too late for pseudonyms or hideouts . . . in the pit . . . you are there." But to stress only the sinister is to overlook Kelley's extraordinary humor, which lands his performances strategically on the edge of the carnivalesque. By hyperbolizing aspects of everyday speech and parts of the human body, Kelley's comedy draws on the power of the grotesque. But unlike the medieval carnivalesque, which emphasized the liberating quality of the perverse or the debased, Kelley's grotesqueries are weighted toward a critical cynicism. Rather than producing a falsely cathartic effect, his intensely confrontational style makes us see the underlying decay riddling the ideologies—of sexism, racism and the like—that mediate our lives. Yet it is precisely by stopping short of offering moralistic answers that Kelley provokes important questions regarding the complexity of this decay.

—Kathy O'Dell

### Faith Ringgold at Bernice Steinbaum

Ringgold's show was titled "Change: Painted Story Quilts." But in fact this body of work from 1986 represents not so much a change as a logical development of Ringgold's art since the 1960s. The story quilts combine the gridded ranks of frontal, almost "naive" portraits of real and fictional Harlem residents that have inhabited her work since the '60s, the interest in pattern and fabric that emerged in her "Slave Rape" *tanka* paintings and in her "Family of Woman" masks of the early '70s, and the narrative thread of her "Political Landscapes" and soft-sculpture performance pieces.