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BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

VERBATIM

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AL HELD: The Conversant Artist

Recorded conversations with artists offer unparalleled first-hand insight into the creative process. For Al Held, in particular, the format served as a vital pulpit for communication. Held was never modest in front of the microphone: one oral history interview, conducted in 1975, comprises over ten hours of conversation.

In 1976, André Emmerich interviewed Held, an interchange that underscores an artist-dealer relationship that valued the genesis and substance of works of art over their utility in the market. During their long relationship, which spanned from 1963 until the André Emmerich Gallery was sold in 1996, Held was interviewed many times at his studios by Emmerich, who frequently photographed the artist at work.

In an excerpt from the 1976 interview, Held explains how one might find a language to understand his large paintings of overlapping geometric forms. "Structure" gives way to "simultaneity" and then, ultimately, to algebra, as ways of locating a language by which to describe his recent works.

The twenty-eight-page interview transcript has remained unpublished, and is part of the Al Held archives maintained by the Al Held Foundation. Notations on the typed pages are in Held's hand.



André Emmerich and Al Held in Boiceville, NY, 1973.

absolutely, absolutely no significance into themselves. They're extremely banal, neutral neuters. They're like numbers. Where most traditional geometry, and most of it is not spatial, most is either in terms of adding, subtracting, dividing a plane, sub-dividing a plane, making it cross. Using geometry in terms of the plane of the surface and dividing it and sub-dividing it into different areas in geometric configurations. ~~My metaphor for the geometry that I'm using,~~ you can be cute and call it post-Euclidian geometry. What in essence it is, is geometry used in an algebraic form. So it's the triangle to the square, to the cube, to the cone, to the pyramid as X is to Y is to Z is to B. Not in terms of dividing the triangle on the plane next to the circle next to the square. In terms of those positions. They are in a sense algebraic signs to create structures in space because the space is needed to create their relationships that can be created on two-dimensional vision. It's in that fluidity that those algebraic structures begin to take place. I make no claims to really understanding algebra; I'm using it as a metaphor.

A lot of my terms are linguistic terms in the sense that I'm interested in art as a language and one that speaks. But I don't mean speaks in a literal or direct one-to-one sentence. Those felt structures, those plastic situations that are invented, but invented with some connection to reality.

Side Three

Now we arrive at simultaneity. Where last year when we had this discussion I'd been using the word structure, structure, structure. I'm still very interested in structure, but I still claim that structures have to be invented and felt. Structures - I've used this metaphor before - structure that is ^{like 19th century structures} of being a perfect world, or an equilibrium world - a world that is worked out with the effectibility of man. But a structure that's in flux, fluid, that incorporates paradox and contradiction into the structure as part of the structural entity. Now that, I guess a better word for saying that would be simultaneity. ~~simultaneity~~ not strung out in a series of events, but actually happening at the same time. So on the one hand, again the paradox is, you have a painting that unfolds and it does have time, and it spreads in time. It doesn't spread in time in a linear way in terms of sequential events, but spreads in time in terms of the depth of perceptions that keep flowing back and forth in the same space in the same events.

André: Because the forms overlap and interrelate and interlock.

Al: They complete each other. They complete themselves beyond themselves and other forms take over in terms of the presence of your perceptions.

André: So what we're dealing with really is forms which exist simultaneously.

Al: ~~we're~~ dealing with very banal geometric shapes that have no,

The way.