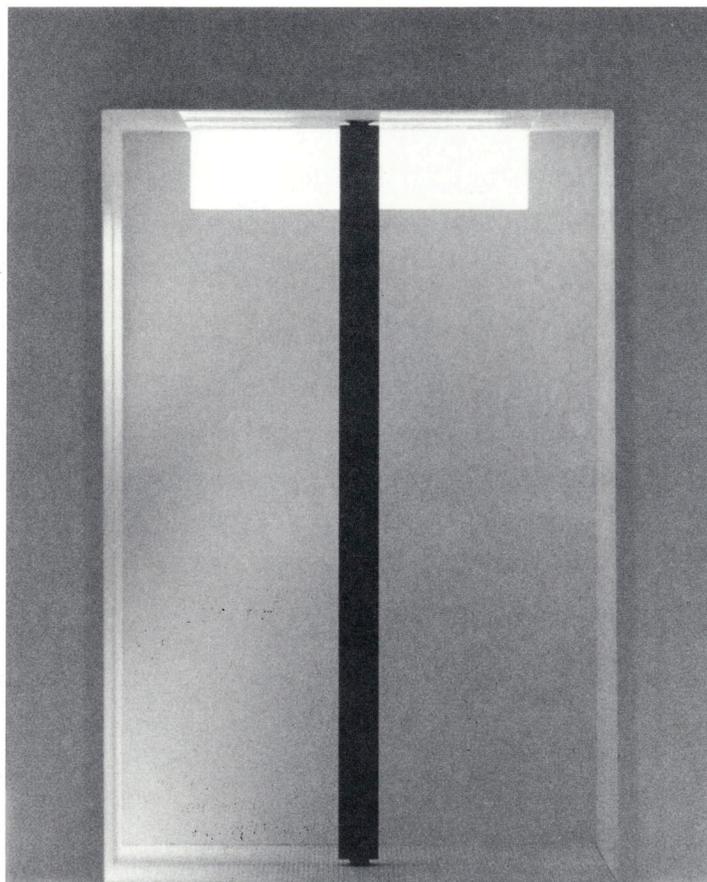


GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO ART GALLERY
RESEARCH CENTER IN ART + CULTURE



SIMON UNGERS
RED VERTICAL

JANUARY 20 TO JULY 31, 1995

Al Harris F. "Keeping Nature at Bay." *University at Buffalo Art Gallery.* January 1995.

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Keeping Nature at Bay

by
Al Harris F.

Simon Ungers' Red Vertical is designed specifically for the Lightwell Gallery, one of three exhibition spaces in the University at Buffalo Art Gallery. This work inaugurates the Gallery's program of long-term installations of works created with the space's unique features in mind: a 36' ceiling, skylights, windows, and a second floor balcony.

Against the background of World War I, some avant-garde artists revolted against subjective art, which they viewed as a product of the rampant individualism causing the troubles of their times. In its place they championed a geometric form of abstraction. This was based on the notion that, by emulating the abstract ideal of machine technology's "perfectionist precisionism," which was equated with collectivization and depersonalization, visual art would lead the way to a utopian life of the future.¹

But as the distant rumblings of World War II became louder and louder, the vision of utopia began to fade, and after the war the avant-garde was too cynical to again place its faith in notions of universal harmony. Instead, postwar modernists such as Rothko and Pollock explored the spiritual and the inner self.

Geometric abstraction didn't make a strong resurgence with minimalism until the late 1960s. Depending on your point of view, minimalist artworks were either the literal end of modernism—completely self-

referential objects which denied any metaphoric meaning—or they were works which ironically took critic Clement Greenberg at his word, making objects which were so absurdly self-referential that they provided a way out of modernism's dead-ended discourse.

During the next thirty years of postmodernism, in which artists turned their attention from nature to culture, the only relevant geometric abstraction that emerged was in the Neo Geo paintings of Peter Halley of the 1980s. But these works were just as skeptical as their predecessors in the 1920s were optimistic.

Now in the 1990s, some artists are rejecting skepticism and turning their attention from culture back to nature. In doing so, they are reexamining modernism. While for the last five



years most of the attention given these artists has been to those who are revitalizing the individualism of abstract expressionism, artists such as Simon Ungers are looking further back to the collective idealism of early modernism.

Since 1991, Ungers has been making works which he refers to as "site constructions."² These works conflate painting, sculpture, and architecture in order to provide us with a "spiritual experience," not in the religious sense, but, as the artist says, in the sense that they heighten our awareness of the total space in which they exist.

In this case Ungers offers us *Red Vertical*, a slender but monolithic thirty-six-foot column in the center of the Lightwell Gallery. The bright red, precision-finished column seems to be suspended between the Gallery's floor and ceiling because its slightly indented ends are painted black.

Ungers notes that he is concerned with details, and that in de-emphasizing one aspect of his work, the column's connection to the floor and ceiling, he

emphasizes another. In this way Ungers' *Red Vertical* can be seen, at least poetically, to defy gravity and entropy, and therefore allude to the idea of timelessness. Ungers' previous site constructions can also be seen as alluding to similar abstract ideals.

In *Post and Beam*, 1991, the artist actually constructed a duplicate of a gallery ceiling's structure, beams, and neon lights on the floor of the gallery. The result

was a space which had a disorienting effect on the viewer, a feeling that Vesela Sretenovic, the curator of *Red Vertical*, has described as one of weightlessness or immateriality.

In *Red Slab in Space*, 1993, Ungers constructed a monolithic

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monochrome in a space which integrated two existing columns as part of its structure. While the gallery space's columns held up the piece, the effect was that the slab could just as easily be seen as holding the entire space together, in a sense, like *Red Vertical*, also defying gravity and entropy.

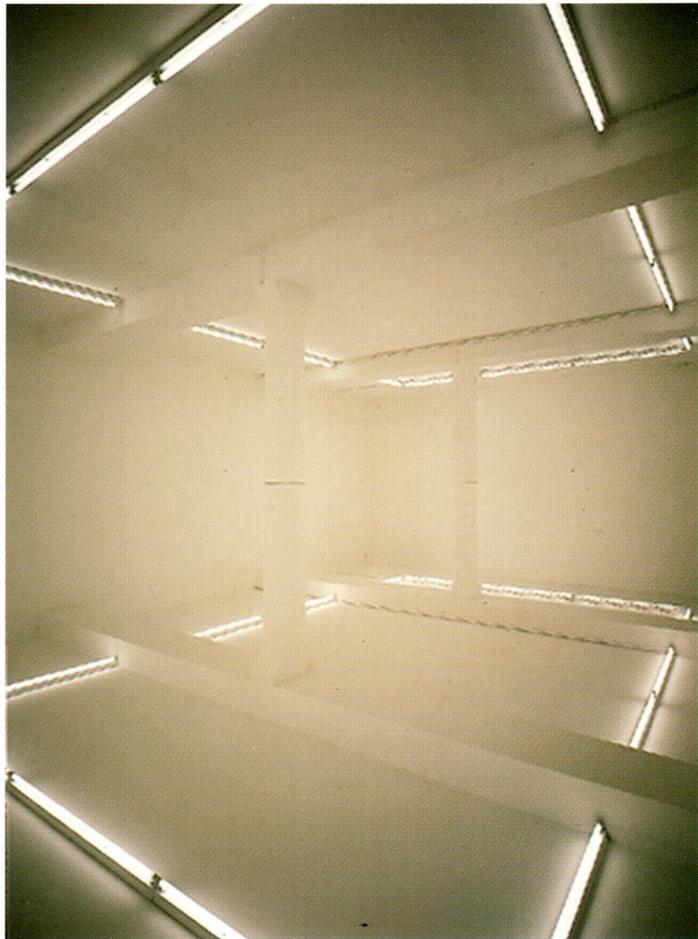
But as with all artists who choose to reexamine and/or synthesize notions from the past, the problem is how to read their work in the present since, as Heraclitus said, you can't step in the same river twice. The early geometric abstract ideals that Ungers' work references displayed a faith in the existence of an underlying nature. For example, Piet Mondrian believed that by "giving clear and concrete expression" to what he saw as the abstract ideal of universal harmony, visual art "could take the lead and point the way to the Utopian life of the future."³

Unlike those artists who wryly quote the past to demonstrate the implausibility of the existence of any underlying meaning, or merely as a way of being innovative, Ungers is sincere. But, since we still can't go back in time, this raises the issue of how we are to read Ungers' work from our position in the present. What kind of utopian goal or underlying nature can and does his work reference in an age of skepticism?

Jean Francois Lyotard offers us a postmodern view,⁴ which while on the surface might seem to be skeptical of utopian promises in the end, paradoxically offers us a way of reconciling our yearning for perfection, for some underlying unchanging nature of existence, in his notion of the sublime.⁵ Lyotard's idea draws from both Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke and their respective ideas on the sublime. From Kant he takes the idea that the sublime is the feeling we get when we come into

contact with an object that is so large, like a desert or a storm, our ability to comprehend it causes a cleavage between what we can conceive and what we can imagine. He concludes that this dislocation in turn provides us with a double pleasure, first due to our imagination's trying to harmonize the object with reason, and, second, because the object functions as a "negative sign to the immense power of ideas." Lyotard refers to Kant's citing of the Jewish law banning images as an example of negative presentation, noting that "optical pleasure when reduced to near nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of infinity."

From Burke Lyotard borrows the idea that "the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening." Lyotard notes that while the beautiful is "a positive pleasure...there is another kind of pleasure that is bound...[to] pain and impending death." He goes on to conclude that Burke believed that "to produce the feeling of the sublime, it is also necessary for the terror-causing threat to be suspended, kept at bay, held back," and thus, "this suspense...provokes a kind of pleasure that is not...a positive satisfaction, but is, rather, that of relief."



COVER: Model of *Red Vertical*, mixed media, 1994. LEFT: *Red Slab in Space*, 1993, mixed media. RIGHT: *Post and Beam*, 1991, mixed media.

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So in a sense the indeterminable, or nature, that Lyotard may be referring to as the sublime is the innate strangeness of those really big ungraspable things like time. And this is where Ungers' "suspended" column can be seen as evoking the sublime. Because the column seems to defy gravity and entropy it does, in a sense, stop time. The reasoning behind this conclusion goes like this: to be in time is to be moving toward the end of time—death. To hold time at bay is to hold death at bay. Therefore the type of heightened awareness that Ungers' column might elicit is the privation of time and thus the pleasure of holding time, death, and nature at bay.

So, in a paradoxical way, Lyotard's notion of the sublime as applied to Ungers work can be seen as utopian. The goal of the utopian modernists was to create an art which de-emphasized the subjective expression of the individual in favor of an art which emphasized collective unity. So in a sense both Lyotard's sublime, which holds nature's nature at bay, and the utopian ideal, which holds the individual's nature at bay, are both, in the end, the same.

For those who have a difficult time swallowing the sublime, another way of thinking about how to interpret Ungers' abstract forms is offered by Claude Cernuschi.⁶ Cernuschi suggests that the new field of cognitive psychology, "a recent discipline that attempts to explain the connections between meaning and cognitive aspects of our physical experience," offers us a possibility of understanding abstract works that were previously viewed as "pure form or disguised figuration."

As an example he cites that "human beings have a proclivity to associate quantity with verticality: more with up," and that when we use

expressions like "raise the discussion to a higher level," or in this case when we equate *uplifting* with spiritual, we "are engaging in metaphorical projection" from the physical to the nonphysical domain. He notes that we make this transference based on our physical experience of the world: "when we add objects to a pile, or water to a bathtub, the level rises."

Using Cernuschi's example, we can read Ungers' *Red Vertical* as transferring its physical associations and thus providing us with an *uplifting* spiritual experience and/or as reinforcing Lyotard's model in materializing the worry of death that always *hangs* over us.

NOTES

¹ Harold Osborne, *Twentieth-Century Art*, Oxford University Press: 1988, p. 524.

² All quotes from the artist are from a series of conversations with the artist during November and December, 1994.

³ Ibid, Osborne.

⁴ Jean Francois Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *The Lyotard Reader*, Ed. Andrew Benjamin, Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1989, pp. 196-211.

⁵ While Ungers doesn't use the word sublime in referring to his own work, he is "not opposed to it being thought of in those terms," and when asked about his choice of color admits that in part it is related to the idea that bright red is possibly the only non-dark color that can evoke the sublime.

⁶ Claude Cernuschi, "The Bodily Basis of Perception: Mark Rothko, Cognitive Science, and Spectator Response," *Abstracts*, College Art Association, New York: 1993, pp. 24-25.

Selected Exhibitions:

Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, 1994

Europe '94, Munich, Germany, 1994
Galerie Sophia Ungers, Cologne, Germany, 1993

Galerie Philophene Magers, Bonn, Germany, 1993

Cologne Art Fair, Cologne, Germany, 1992

Selected Bibliography:

Born in 1957 in Cologne, Germany. 1980 Cornell University, BA in Architecture.

Represented by Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, Sophia Ungers Gallery, Cologne, Germany, Galerie Philophene Magers, Bonn, Germany.

Bonami, Francesco, "Review," *Flash Art*, October 1992, 141.

McDonough, Michael, "Currents: Where Bauhaus and Richard Serra Intersect," *New York Times*, April 28, 1994.

Metzger, Rainer, "Review," *Flash Art*, October 1993, 90-91.

New Observation: Editing Detroit (exhibition catalogue), 1991, 27-29.

Oliveira, Nicolas, Nicola Oxley, and Michael Petry, *Installation Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1994.

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Stein, Karen, "Suit to a T," *Architectural Record*, April 1994.

"T-House," *A Journal of Standards*, September 1993.

W.A.N., "Review," *Domus*, October 1993.

XY Simon Ungers (exhibition catalogue), Bonn: Galerie Philophene Magers, 1992-93.

Curated by Vesela Sretenovic

University at Buffalo Art Gallery/Research Center in Art + Culture Al Harris F. Director
716 645-6912 Wednesday-Saturday 10:30-8:00, Sunday 12-5 Free parking weekends and weekdays after 3pm