

# ARTFORUM

## MARCH, 2003

### PETER HALLEY

by Dan Cameron

DAN CAMERON: Before we talk about the '80s, we should talk about talking about the '80s.

PETER HALLEY: It's interesting, because the '80s were really three different periods: 1980 to 1983 was dominated by the recession and by the emergence of new European painting and neo-expressionism. Then you had the mid-'80s, in which the robust economic recovery spurred the emergence of neo-Conceptualism—which included artists who were showing for the first time, Koons, myself, et cetera, but also marked the first widespread acceptance of artists like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, who were first shown around 1980. Then you had the end of the '80s. After about '88, the economy was less good, the AIDS crisis emerged, and a more direct form of Conceptualism emerged, which defined itself in terms of a critical opposition.

DC: So, in fact, in that ten-year stretch, we're talking about three distinct trends.

PH: Yes, it's interesting to speculate on which version of the decade is going to win. Of course I'm rooting for the more optimistic, glamorous version, namely, the mid-'80s.

DC: One thing that strikes me about the transition from the early to the mid-'80s is this public shaping of the artist as a personality. People like Julian Schnabel, Keith Haring, and Jean-Michel Basquiat were visible in a way that rock musicians and film stars were visible, but by the mid-'80s you saw the artists taking a different kind of relationship to the work. Artists were very glamorous in the beginning of the '80s, whereas the art itself got very glamorous in the mid-'80s.

PH: I'd like to think that a less artsy, more conceptual art that uses Pop materials is more glamorous. I might try to make the case that it's also more elegant if you think of elegance as doing more with less. It used strategies of representation and syntax that were more sophisticated.

DC: I want to ask about your role in the '80s. I think the idea of a painter as a thinker, writer, and theorist came as a real shock to viewers, who were used to painters being only semi-articulate about their aims.

PH: Well, I've never quite been able to figure out how my role as a writer fit in. Even today it concerns me that more artists haven't done more writing. Maybe an artist writing just doesn't make sense anymore. However, when I was a student in the mid-'70s, I was thinking about people like Smithson, Judd, and Robert Morris—all of whom wrote. Not long after I came to New York in 1980, I was introduced to Jeffrey Deitch, then a young guy who worked as an art adviser at Citibank. He had just published an article in Arts Magazine, and I wrote him a note saying, "I really liked your piece, but I disagreed with what you said about such and such." He sent me back a postcard saying, "Peter, that's great. You should do some writing." That gave me the idea, and during the next couple years, since it didn't seem likely that I'd be able to show my work at that time, I began to write. The only person at any of the art magazines who actually read unsolicited manuscripts was Richard Martin at Arts. When he got my first piece, on Robert Smithson, Colab, and New Wave music, he immediately published it. After

that, he published everything I sent him. If that hadn't happened, I would not have become a published writer, I'm almost certain.

DC: I remember distinctly the very powerful impact that it had in the art world once you began writing about abstraction and geometry, and once your texts could be understood as somehow forming a manifesto for the paintings. People were excited by the notion that someone would use their texts as a wedge to state their ideas and validate the artwork itself.

PH: Well, I wasn't exactly aware of it that way. "The Crisis in Geometry" was published in '84, at a time when I hadn't really shown any work. A lot of the texts contain attacks on traditional liberal humanism, with a special emphasis on anything to do with spirituality. I still feel a bit self-conscious about it, because it also meant an attack on what was a truism in the New York art world: that abstract painting was uplifting, or that art could be spiritual. It was a broad attack on dearly held values, but I thought it was needed.

All the French authors I was reading then were, for me, fuel with which to build that fire. My introduction to that French critical writing also burst a lot of my assumptions, as somebody who had been schooled in liberal humanism.

DC: I'm very interested in your memories of the East Village and how the very rapid acceleration, rise, and disappearance of that scene mirrored the '80s more generally. It seemed as if the East Village started with neo-expressionism, peaked with neo-Conceptualism, and then just hit a wall.

PH: I really feel that art then was emphatically political. In 1985, I believed that Francesco Clemente, Schnabel, and Basquiat were, you know, right-wing tools. I felt that their art was a product of Reaganism and that they were trying to reverse everything exciting that had happened during the previous fifty years. And I'm sure they felt something similar about me and about the people I was associated with.

DC: It's the last moment of true polarization in the American art world.

PH: In '81 you had neo-expressionist painting, and you had the Pictures generation, the Metro Pictures generation. During the early '80s, there wasn't much support for the Pictures artists, besides that of other artists. It wasn't Allan McCollum who was on the cover of the New York Times Magazine. The art world in the early '80s ignored them all, with the exception of Robert Longo. In 1985, when the East Village came along, all that changed. The first thing that the artist-run galleries in the East Village did was to schedule exhibitions of those artists. For Peter Nagy, Meyer Vaisman, and Oliver Wasow, it was impossible to see the work they liked at the established galleries, so they started their own [Nature Morte, International With Monument, C.A.S.H.]. They put up shows of Ross Bleckner, Allan McCollum, and James Welling. It's one of those classic stories: The enthusiasm of the younger generation for the Pictures artists fueled interest in them.

DC: The three examples that you cite, which were artist-run spaces—albeit commercial galleries—opted out of moving to SoHo after the East Village was over; they just closed their doors.

PH: When they closed, the East Village was over. But these were not professional art dealers. Their galleries may not have been nonprofits, but you have to remember that with the privatization of the '80s there was really no money for nonprofits. These guys were also all under twenty-five, and the paraphernalia of the nonprofits probably looked unattractive to them. I would liken it to starting a record label more than an art gallery. It really is one of the most remarkable cultural phenomena I've ever witnessed—all these young artists actually thought, "Well, we'll just hang out our shingle and show stuff we like, and maybe sell a few things and keep the space open." There was really no overhead and no machinery of a gallery.

DC: We think of it today as the happening scene. But ten times as many galleries in SoHo were showing what were more or less extensions of neo-expressionism. I'm still bracketing your work, because by the fall of '86 you were caught up in the movement of East Village artists into the most hallowed ranks of SoHo blue chip.

PH: The driving force behind International With Monument was Meyer Vaisman, and in '86 Meyer decided to retire as an art dealer. He had a strong desire that he and his artists would go on to show at one gallery, and that gallery was Sonnabend. I was following Meyer's lead.

DC: That was the moment when the notoriety accompanying International With Monument's roster of artists turned into something much bigger. There was almost a wholesale media feeding frenzy, and I was struck by the fact that the cultural debate got pretty ugly. The vituperation that your arrival was greeted with bore no resemblance to what had accompanied the arrival of graffiti, say, five years earlier.

PH: I know. It was really great. I mean, it was unpleasant, but I felt that we had some provocative things to say about the underlying structure of the world we all experience that most people really didn't want to face. I may not have done a good job of representing the issues, but I wanted to talk about the ideas associated with simulation—the idea that nature and reality had to be reexamined and the new cultural capacity to create simulations of the old reality had to be taken into account. A lot of the work also contained an interesting point of view on consumerism. For me, the most important artist of my generation is Haim Steinbach, along with Cindy Sherman, of course. If you look around the art world today or in 1995 or 1990, there is probably more art influenced by Haim's basic strategies than anybody's except Cindy's. From where we sit, it's often difficult to remember how provocative it is for him to put objects on the shelf, even in 2002, and say, "This is art."

DC: How do you think our perceptions of the '80s have changed, and how would you characterize those perceptions today?

PH: About five years ago, I gave a talk to the College Art Association in which I asked why the early and mid-'80s were still so disparaged in the United States. One aspect of the '80s in New York that I don't think can be ignored is the fact that many of the prominent artists—Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Laurie Simmons, Sherrie Levine, and Ross Bleckner—were part of a sudden florescence of young Jewish-American artists. Like other, non-Jewish artists, they were reacting to being the first generation of Americans brought up in the suburbs, and, by becoming artists, they were trying to decipher their suburban experience. In my view, the artists of Jewish background specifically reacted to suburbia as a kind of diaspora from the city, which caused them to hearken back to a heroic vision of the urban Jewish intellectual—especially to the 1950s and people like Rothko and Newman—at the same time that they were reacting to suburbia. I experienced this as well, but I'm only half-Jewish.

DC: Shortly after the emergence of that generation, questions of racial and cultural identity moved to the forefront of artistic production and critical discourse. I think the role of Jewish identity in the formation of this generation of artists was there and may have been tacitly acknowledged as an aspect of what people were about, but nobody really formulated it as something shared by these artists.

PH: There's still a great deal of hostility toward the period. I don't know whether it means it's bad art, which is certainly possible. I'm open to that interpretation. But there is something that is still uncomfortable for a lot of curators, writers, and collectors. It'll be interesting to see how that looks in another ten years. In the meantime, one of the nice things is that there are a lot of younger people who have come of age finding something in this work—choosing to combine Minimalism and Pop as an interesting position, just as I did. So that's nice.