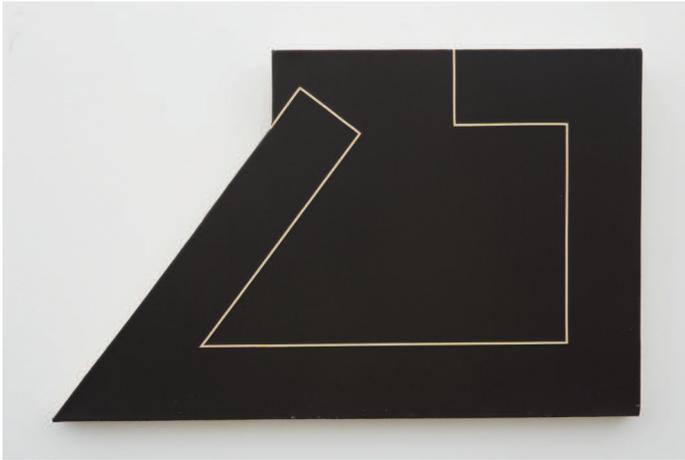


# TED STAMM

MARIANNE BOESKY

BY ROBERT PINCUS-WITTEN



Ted Stamm, 78SW-9, 1978, oil on canvas, 32 x 20 inches

In the late 1970s and early '80s, *Arts Magazine*, now gone, published my journal entries, I hope, showed that criticism was not solely the articulation of issues lurking out there in some theoretical ether but also an activity sharply inflected by the social situation in which it was met. Among those blog posts *avant la lettre* was one devoted to Ted Stamm's then all but unknown paintings. In that entry, published in May 1979, I observed his "lean, mean" racer build—one that belied the congenital heart defect that led to his death from a heart attack just five years later, at the age of forty—and also proposed that his sleek, austere work seemed to augur a new style.

Excised from the studio context in which I first saw them, Stamm's works have now sloughed off their initial stylishness and sit comfortably with our understanding of the day's Minimalist/Conceptualist continuum. Minimalism's pre-executive aspects, the finessing of all the details before the work was even begun, provided the nutrient loam in which Conceptualism first took root. Thus, three decades later, some artists who worked between those two modes—and may once have seemed like flashes in the pan—are rightfully regarded as heavy hitters.

Among the twenty-six works shown at Marianne Boesky were several entries to the 1974-ca. 1980 "Wooster" series. The grounds of many of these pieces are composed of a square abutted on its left side by a smaller triangle, resulting in a quirky

shape said to derive from the contours of a lot formation situated between Prince and Wooster Streets that Stamm could see from his West Broadway studio. Three of these shaped canvases are given black perimeters or collars, resulting in compositions that bring the "Irregular Polygons," 1965-66, Frank Stella to mind. Yet if Stella's shaped canvases embraced color and aspired to implausible spatial readings, Stamm's works of this type are, by contrast, black-and-white and mostly maintain a sense of insistent flatness.

In addition to such large-scale works, the exhibition presented a number of smaller, colored "PW" pieces (a subgroup of the "Wooster" series), as well as a handful of "WW" works of 1978. Variant forms of the "PW" works, these are composed—constructed, really—of horizontal and vertical black lines on white grounds forming shapes that read as abutting elements, rather like large geometric puzzle pieces that finally end up as the controlling "Wooster" shape. There was also one of the related, crisply wedge-shaped 1981 "SLDR" works—"Slider," that is, by way of tossing the excess vowel weight overboard, a trim nomenclature that arguably corresponded to the artist's self-presentation.

The show's earliest pieces, three all black canvases from 1973, inaugurated Stamm's penchant for near-threatening, bladelike constructions. Apart from their Suprematist connections—suprematist geometries suffuse Stamm's tragically brief production—the application of paint to these pieces was dictated by tosses of a die. This is not to say that the six different numbers on a die were assigned corresponding colors to be used when that digit turned up; rather, the numbers determined the number of coats of black paint each piece would receive—John Cage's *I Ching* meets a Minimalist sensibility.