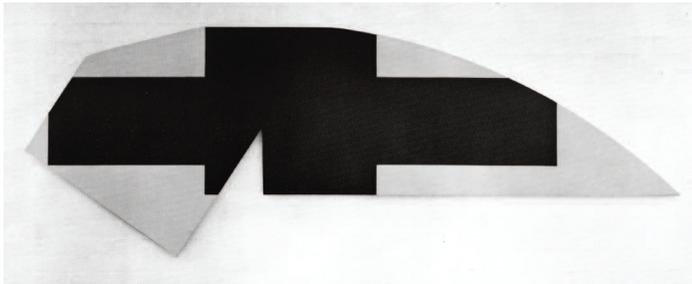


ENTRIES: STYLES OF ARTISTS AND CRITICS

BY ROBERT PINCUS-WITTEN



Ted Stamm, C-DGR-1, 1978-79, oil on canvas, 37 x 109 inches.

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... The crude methodology of the student "crit" runs as follows: a rough sense of the orientation of the work is quickly grasped through a rapid examination—in some work a cursory glance suffices. Next, this rough impression is refined through a mental comparison against the production of artists who established the genre in the first place. The tacit assumption in all of this is that young artists are trying to be like a model of some kind; consequently, they feel pressured because they are not that model.

Many other wrong-headed assumptions—other than emotional harassment—proceed from this pedagogy, the most vexing being the assumption that young artists *confirm* the forms of a previous achievement. In part this is, of course, true—so much so as to be truistic. But the opposite corollary is also true—no matter the derivation or imitation there is also on some profound level a simultaneous *rejection* of the model roiling through the process. For to become the model presumes the young artist is there only to ratify a preexisting mode. Practical experience shows us otherwise. Rare is the young person with such a mind-set.

... All art can do is signify. Signals are admitted of content, are said to have meaning, only through a certain sociological consent though this society and consent occupy but small groups of individuals working in concert. The principle is also true of art put forth in the name of The People, though I am hardly talking about big societies. Indeed, "societal consent" on so vast a scale, on a national or racial scale, on the scale of *das Volk*, amounts to no more than a

consensus-tallying of pluralities and majorities, attitudes that have scarcely anything to do with art but with concerns that are manufactured and manipulated, views that, in the end, are the enemy of art.

There is no meaning *in* an art object other than its own quiddity, its own material presence, that is, as mere neurological stimuli. This is true for a Rembrandt and for a Duchamp. All content-meaning is interpretive, imposed from without the object, from the outside. Style represents the codification of a certain set of signals. I suppose I'm saying that style encodes and decodes these signals for comparatively small groups. Style also presents an ironical stance at the same time—at least for the group I'm referring to, since all art and all style proceed from paradox. Style encodes—as does form—but neither style nor form is the encoding. Unless it is. Words.

When signals fail to obtain, when they grow faint, style is failing, is shifting and a new set of signs is being codified and beginning to be grasped. A sure index that style is changing occurs when boredom and depression accompany the artmaking process, let alone the more public one of art-perception. This grimness, this negative experience, marks the sloughing off of one set of sign systems, one style, for the formulation and emergence of a new set, a new style; new skins for old, new lamps for old, new styles for old. Young artists feel this especially.

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... To Ted Stamm's studio on Wooster Street. His seventh floor loft. faces an air-rights passage above the short taxpayer between two larger loft buildings on West Broadway. For years now Ted Stamm has been the secret observer of the comings-and-goings at 420 West Broadway, but seen from a block's remove.

... Stamm is a 34-year-old autodidact with a tight edge to him—all old jeans, keys, colored handkerchiefs, ten-speed racers. Balding, with late-'60s strands of hair about a lean face, his persona projects a stark s-&-m edge to it—especially as it has been taken up modishly down at the Trucks—lean, mean—though he's not that

way at all. He strikes me rather as quite gentle if a bit single-minded about his work. Like all artists really.

His eccentric black and white paintings derive from Suprematist information, though, in Stamm's case, the imagery grew out of his skillful manual technique long before he learned that it was germane to an historical style. Not that this matters much; but before it does, let me say that ignorance is no excuse.

He paints in shaped series, the titles of which are compact speedwriting names—the way the CPL Y signifies the last name of the painter William Copley. If/u/cn/rdJths... In Stamm's work, for example, "ZYR" stands for "Zephyr," or "DGR" refers to a series he calls "Dodger." The Dodgers refers to the old Brooklyn ball team about which Stamm feels a certain invented nostalgia, since he is Brooklyn-born though he was raised in Freeport, Long Island. (His reaction to mid-Long Island suburban life—"Ugh!") "C-DGR" then stands for the "C-Dodgers," a fused idea negotiating the Concord and the Dodgers images derived from a gratifying memory of sleek aircraft technology passing overhead as he observed in isolation at Brighton Beach. I am tempted to add another association to "DGR"—namely the Artful Dodger of *Oliver Twist*—since "artful" seems a rich allusion to the nature of artists, conjuring an iconography as far afield as Picasso's *Saltimbanques*, though the referent is too fancy for the artist's direct manner.

The series I most like is the "C-DGR" since the elegant horizontal Suprematist imagery is so arbitrarily (so it seems) placed in and on an equally powerful format, an odd pan-handled bladelike shape. The series I like Least is "Wooster" as these too obviously point to Stella of the late '60s as the source. That Stella is an emphatic influence is clear, but beyond so pat a derivation there is Stamm's obliqueness that gets quotations wrong in a tresh way—sometimes. Overt discipleship is simply insufficiently obsessive for him, just too easy.