

The Elusive Beliefs of Blinky Palermo, Agnostic and Apostle of Abstract Art

by [Ben Davis](#)

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For a major artist, Blinky Palermo said amazingly little during his lifetime about what his particular eccentric brand of abstract painting might mean. As a matter of fact, the more you investigate his work, the more you come to think that this elusiveness is itself part of its meaning. "I pursue no specific direction in the sense of a style," Palermo said in one of his very few statements. "I have no programme. What I have is an aesthetic concept, whereby I try to keep as many expressive options open for myself as possible."

The artists closest to Palermo, like his teacher, Joseph Beuys, and his friend and sometimes collaborator [Gerhard Richter](#), affirm that Palermo was allergic to theory and explanation. And, of course, the very fact that he decided to go by an outlandish pseudonym for his entire mature artistic life — he was born Peter Heisterkamp, adopting the name of colorful American boxing promoter Frank "Blinky" Palermo while in Beuys's class in 1964 — indicates that some fundamental sense of mystery was important to him.

The [current two-part Palermo retrospective](#), split between Bard and Dia:Beacon, gives a taste of just how baffling his multifaceted but uniformly inscrutable work remains. The Bard show centers mainly on his European output of the 1960s and early '70s. These range from oddball ensembles like "Landscape" (1966) — two horizontal wooden slats hung one above the other, painted blue and green to suggest sky and land — to his "Cloth Pictures," which resemble abstract canvasses but are actually made of readymade bolts of colored cloth stitched together.

The Beacon exhibition concentrates on work from Palermo's time living in New York in the early '70s, mainly his "Metal Pictures," abstract works on aluminum that are, like the "Cloth Pictures," often divided into horizontal sections of different colors. The show's climax is Palermo's 1976 opus "To the People of New York City," which incorporates some 40 panels arranged in 15 different specifically mandated clusters, each a different combination of black, red, and yellow squares or stripes. These are, of course, the colors of the German flag, though no panel exactly duplicates its design. Palermo made this tribute after returning to Dusseldorf from the States, shortly before passing away at the untimely age of 33.

In the show's excellent catalogue, much is made of the debate over Palermo's place in art history. American critics have tended to view Palermo as a kind of anti-painter in the line of [Robert Ryman](#) or a sly conceptualist à la [Daniel Buren](#), focusing on his use of readymade materials and citing the site-specific wall drawings he made responding to various institutional spaces (these are represented at Bard via a room of sketches and proposals). German commentators, meanwhile, have considered Palermo more of a romantic. They can point, for instance, to the way his series of abstract metal-panel paintings, "Times of the Day," explores a sense of shifting atmospheric color that may have been absorbed during a 1974 pilgrimage to Houston's Rothko Chapel.

In fact, Palermo's most intriguing characteristic may be the cipher-like way that his work fits both profiles at once. It has been said of Richter that his signature innovation is the way he alternates between photorealism and abstraction, so that the truth of his practice is revealed cumulatively — there is no unified belief in a particular style underneath it all. Similarly, Palermo's motivating mindset is grasped only when you realize how, though each of his individual works suggests some meaning coded within its abstract form, he constantly switches the game that is being played — now referencing landscape, now classic modernists like Mondrian, now industrial materials, now the geometry of the institutional setting,

now the colors of a flag — thereby undermining any sense of an overall method or idea. He is, at last, a skeptic and a true believer in painting all at once.

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