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for dr. neil clements

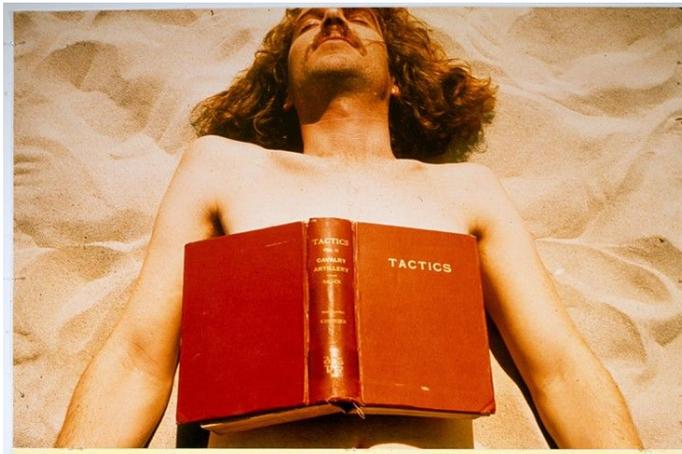
painting and printmaking (year two)

words: 1925

“red 3 ways”

Painting and the Body in the Work of Dennis Oppenheim, Joseph Beuys and Blinky Palermo

During the 1960s and 70s a group of artists began to expand and ultimately redefine the relationship between painting and the human body. American artist Dennis Oppenheim and the German friends Joseph Beuys and Blinky Palermo all agitated at this relationship in their own idiosyncratic manner, and all reached their respective career highs within a couple of years of each other. To demonstrate this commonality in their practice I have selected three works that share a colour theme; red.



READING POSITION FOR SECOND DEGREE BURN
Stage I, Stage II. Book, skin, solar energy. Exposure time: 5 hours. Jones Beach. 1970



In explaining *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn* (1970) (left) Oppenheim speaks of it in terms of a painting. In the act of becoming sunburnt, he lets his body become ‘a captive surface’ - a canvas - which he allows ‘to be painted’ by the sun’s radiation. His ‘skin becomes pigment,’ but the ‘colour change’ instigated ‘registers on a sensory level’ as well as a visual one - he ‘feels the act of becoming red.’¹ This description is at first disarming, as the act of sunburn and the medium of the piece itself seems more a reference to the photographic process than that of a painter - ‘exposure time: 5 hours’ is even listed between the two images. Oppenheim would not agree however, firstly because in his mind the photographs comprising *Reading Position...* are ‘necessary only as a residue for communication.’² In effect the piece is not a photograph of sunburn but the act of becoming sunburnt itself - ‘a radical art that had already vanished.’³ Secondly, Oppenheim was a part of a 1960s-era reactionary movement of so-called photographers

‘against the formal fulness of fine art photography.’⁴ In taking a photograph but declaring it not a photograph but a residue of an act, and then describing that act as parallel to the act of painting he

¹ Sharp, W. and Oppenheim, D. ‘Dennis Oppenheim Interviewed by Willoughby Sharp,’ *Studio International*, 182 (1971), pg. 188

² de Lima Greene, A. ‘Dennis Oppenheim: No Photography,’ *Spot*, 12 (1993), pg. 5

³ Ibid

⁴ Soutter, L. ‘The Photographic Idea: Reconsidering Conceptual Photography,’ *Afterimage*, 26 (1999)

railed against Clement Greenberg's concept of 'medium specificity and formalism'⁵ in painting and dismissal of photography's own 'formal values'⁶ in his acknowledgement and subversion of both ideas. He was 'attacking the law of genre; the aesthetic autonomy supposedly ensured by the pictorial frame'⁷ from an angle that was much later - and famously - dubbed the 'post-medium position'⁸ by Rosalind Krauss. In this we can see Oppenheim is running rings around the traditional signposts of artistic media, and is instead defining the act of painting on a sensual level. He believed all artworks should 'carry the residue of where they have been'⁹ and often drew a link between these narratives and the human body. 'Like a moving snowball the body builds a skin,'¹⁰ he said in reference to *Towards Becoming a Scarecrow* (1971) (right, fragment), any experience is 'clearly read from my outer shell; I have become that direction.'¹¹ The same logic is applied to the painterly process in *Reading Position...* His outer shell became 'a site for conceptual activity'¹² - in being played by an actor his canvas has 'the authority of personal experience.'¹³



Seen through this lens the act of painting must be understood very much as a physical, sensory experience rather than one typified by pigments and grounds. But it is the fact that it is bounded and formed by redness that marks *Reading Position...* as a painting where *...Scarecrow* is not. They are both acts Oppenheim has performed but the latter is not conceptually occupied with colour theory and therefore not defined by its maker in terms of painting. However, the image is not just red it is 'painful' - rendered 'incontrovertibly real'¹⁴ through Oppenheim's bodily experience of its 5 hour gestation period.

Oppenheim's 'shamanistic leanings'¹⁵ were often compared to those of his contemporary Joseph Beuys, who believed artworks are concerned with 'channelling energy from objects'¹⁶ in much the same way Oppenheim spoke of residue. The artists presumably met; Oppenheim performed *...Scarecrow* in Dusseldorf while Beuys taught at its Kunstakademie and they were included alongside each other in issue 6 of *Interfunktionen* magazine.¹⁷ Beuys is primarily known for his involvement in the Fluxus group and their 'happenings' and secondarily for his sculptures and installations, leaving his contributions to



son, 1999), pg. 32

Oppenheim, 1938-2011 (2011)
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otography,' *Afterimage*, 26 (1999)

Oppenheim, 1938-2011 (2011)
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drawing and painting sorely underappreciated. He personally ‘regarded them as some of the most important things that he had done’¹⁸ and an essential part of his ‘comprehensive theory for the organisation of human life.’¹⁹ Admittedly they often took the form of ‘the theoretical clarification process’²⁰ for his other, more fully and laboriously realised work, but as schematics of sorts they cut to the core of his working philosophy. In *The Great Tooth Bleed* (1955) (left) Beuys’ ‘clarification process... swings clearly in favour of painting.’²¹ Like Oppenheim, Beuys’ oeuvre is steeped in bodily concerns. In *Fat Chair* (1964) (below right) his addition to the chair is playfully placed as to ‘intersect the human body’²² in the genital region, and he created many versions of a piece whereby he hung his *Felt Suit* (1970) on a gallery warm to ‘express the idea of human physical warmth.’²³ Like Oppenheim’s residues, the presence and consideration of the human form are writ large everywhere in Beuys’ work. As in *Reading Position...*, *The Great Tooth Bleed* refers explicitly to a painfully real human experience using redness with such relatable human feeling Marianne Stockebrand said the painting ‘might as well be taken as an actual experience’²⁴ and that ‘in any case, one can hardly imagine a more apt depiction of it.’²⁵ This is strikingly reminiscent of Oppenheim’s thoughts on *Reading Position...*, a piece existing as a bodily experience and consequently define in painterly terms, except Beuys’ painterly terms extend here to the actual use of paint. More than paint in fact, *The Great Tooth Bleed* may well contain traces of Beuys’ real blood, as he often incorporated it alongside other odd material like tea bags and wood stain ‘to stress the connection between art and life’²⁶ in his painting. Whether or not this is the grisly reality, the piece carries a very broadly evident ‘residue’ of human activity and is made relatable to the viewer on an empirical and corporeal level as well as a more spiritual one. Beuys’ approach here echoes his teaching on the use of language; that without verbalization we converse in ‘primary sound without semantic content’ that is nonetheless ‘laden with completely different levels of communication.’²⁷ *The Great Tooth Bleed* communicates Beuys’ dental experience without word or representational imagery, but is made no less emotionally legible for it. This non-verbal interpersonal communication was key to his concept of ‘social sculpture,’ and shows how while perhaps just a ‘clarification process,’²⁸ this piece falls into place alongside the likes of *Fat Chair* as a piece of his ‘comprehensive



¹⁸ Stockebrand, M. *Watercolours by Joseph Beuys, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke* (London: Goethe Institut, 1987)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Walters, V. *Joseph Beuys and the Celtic Wor(l)d: A Language of Healing* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012)

²³ Stirling, S. *The Art Book* (London: Phaidon, 1994)

²⁴ Stockebrand, M. *Watercolours by Joseph Beuys, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke* (London: Goethe Institut, 1987)

²⁵ Ibid

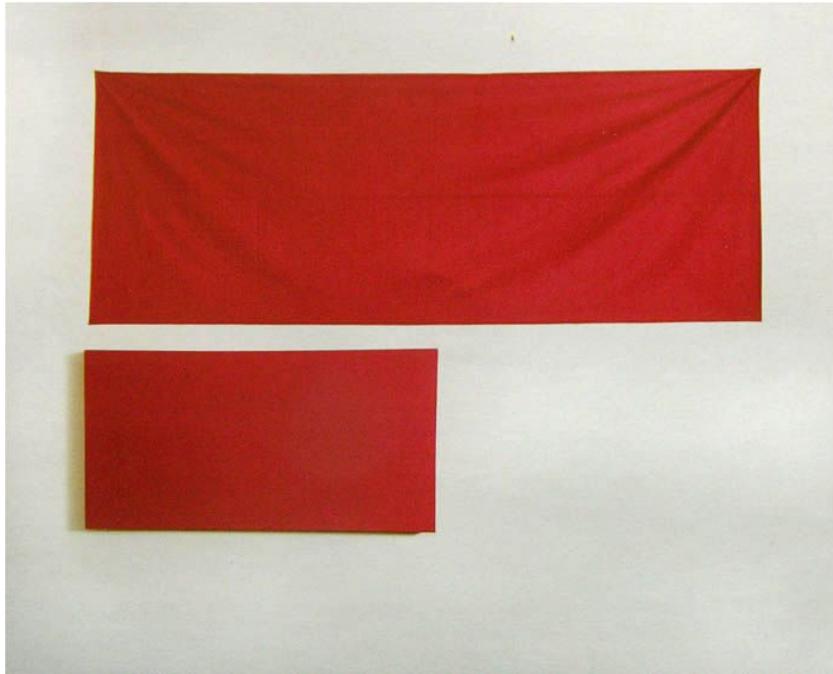
²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Walters, V. *Joseph Beuys and the Celtic Wor(l)d: A Language of Healing* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012)

²⁸ Stockebrand, M. *Watercolours by Joseph Beuys, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke* (London: Goethe Institut, 1987)

theory' for the 'problems of the whole society'²⁹ and the 'organisation of human life.'³⁰

While I feel the particulars of Beuys' *The Great Tooth Bleed* and Oppenheim's *Reading Position...* run parallel, Blinky Palermo's take on painting's relationship to the body displays clear difference while still being rooted in the same physical experiences. Palermo studied under Beuys at Dusseldorf Kunstakademie and it is said he won his tutor's 'closest affinities',³¹ becoming Beuys' star student and leading to 'maintained contact and dialogue'³² after Palermo's graduation. Palermo would also have been present in Dusseldorf when Oppenheim performed ...*Scarecrow*, but like fellow student Gerhard Richter he 'proved resistant' to 'progressive pressures to stop painting'³³ emanating from Fluxus and its



'happenings' (it is worth noting Beuys also resisted these calls despite being at the forefront of the Fluxus movement). The most significant difference between Palermo's catalogue and those of Beuys and Oppenheim is that he 'does not work from a predetermined concept.'³⁴ His work 'translates visual and material reality into aesthetic norms,'³⁵ and it become clear from works such as *Speaker in a Low Voice II* (1969) (left) that considerations of geometry, shared by many famous abstract painters of the time recognisably enter his work. While *Speaker...*

does not take the form of an artistic act it alludes to the human experience and the physical presence of the body in ambiguous ways. Barnett Newman said of European abstract painters that their work 'starts from a sensuous perception which they then transform'³⁶ and opposed to the self-aware intellect of the American Abstract Expressionists. In Palermo's painting there is 'never an absolutely clear statement,'³⁷ his is 'art as the extension of [his] consciousness.'³⁸ Like *The Great Tooth Bleed*, *Speaker...* is not a contrived aesthetic piece but a trace, a residue, of the unravelling of Palermo's sensual experience,

²⁹ Beuys, J. 'Joseph Beuys... Public Dialogue,' *Avalanche*, 9 (1974)

³⁰ Stockebrand, M. *Watercolours by Joseph Beuys, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke* (London: Goethe Institut, 1987)

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

albeit one realised on the traditional wall-based plane. His is an 'expressive idiom that could embrace both the instinctive and the rational' equally, because alongside this ineffable feeling, Palermo, like Oppenheim, is poking those that would define a painting through paint. His 'works amount to poems about painting,'³⁹ for example *Speaker...* consists of a sheet of red fabric pinned to the wall alongside a sheet of red fabric stretched on a canvas. Palermo is engaged in the 'creation of form through colour'⁴⁰ just like a traditional painter - the borders of the red define the borders of the piece. But he 'made a point of suspending his usual bravura technique'⁴¹ of painting - *Speaker...* is devoid of any paint at all, but in its presentation and use of colour it is indistinguishable from a painting as typically envisioned. By comparing the fabric both stretched as a canvas and loose Palermo is questioning when something becomes a painting - is all one has to do is stretch a colour on a canvas? His answer appears to be yes, and maybe it doesn't even take as much as that. This metanarrative about the definition of painting, much like in *Reading Position...*, corroborates *Speaker...*'s experiential and bodily statements. Its 'touchless, candidly boring texture stirs a positive yearning for the absent intimacy of a painter's hand.'⁴² While a trace of Palermo's 'consciousness,'⁴³ in its lack of any trace of the painter's hand the piece draws attention to the role of the painter that other abstract works may not - namely the question of 'where are they?' Through negation *Speaker...* conjures the character of its creator perhaps more vividly than a traditionally painterly work. Also, by comparing the 2 states of the fabric Palermo is drawing attention to the physicality of the stretched piece - the fabric, the redness, has begun to interrupt our space as an observer, but to what extent? *Speaker...* is still wall based and still presenting a flat image, but it is not just two-dimensional it has an assumed body of its own. In a way the loose piece of fabric comparatively does not, the stretch piece makes use more aware of both the body of its maker and our own body in relation to itself. *Speaker...* is not a trace of an event like *The Great Tooth Bleed* and *Reading Position...*, but it is no less a trace of Palermo's sensual experience, and no less comments upon the artist's physicality in relation to itself.

All three artists discussed have come to be revered with somewhat mythic status. Beuys cultivated this very intentionally, but Oppenheim has received this adjective begrudgingly and Palermo unknowingly due to his untimely death in 1977. In fact Beuys has come to be regarded as one of the most significant conceptual artists of all time, whereas the others' outsider status has remained largely intact with Palermo's notability essentially not extending outside Germany. I find these three artists' thoughts on what it means to make a painting enriching of the understanding and appreciation of all painting. Be it in Oppenheim and Beuys' experiential definition or Palermo's sensually negative connotations they all succeed in framing painting not in terms of medium, but instead in terms of the agency of the human body and the overwhelming experience of life.

³⁹ Schjeldahl, P. *The Prodigy* (New York, 2011) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/07/11/the-prodigy> [Accessed 10/12/17]

⁴⁰ Stockebrand, M. *Watercolours by Joseph Beuys, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke* (London: Goethe Institut, 1987)

⁴¹ Schjeldahl, P. *The Prodigy* (New York, 2011) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/07/11/the-prodigy> [Accessed 10/12/17]

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Stockebrand, M. *Watercolours by Joseph Beuys, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke* (London: Goethe Institut, 1987)

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