

Verena Loewensberg Concrete and Beyond

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THE MAYOR GALLERY

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Verena Loewensberg, portrait by Doris Quarella, Zurich, 1978

Verena Loewensberg (1912-1986)

Concrete and Beyond

by Beat Wismer

“In 1936, I began to produce concrete paintings, and have been working ever since.”¹ Verena Loewensberg has never said much about her art and she has never expressed an art theoretical opinion. Her primary concern always was - in a twofold sense – the concrete picture, as she was, the then 65-year-old painter said in 1977, “obsessed with her painterly problems”². So, it wouldn’t be very helpful, but above all it wouldn’t do justice to the autonomous ambition of her works, if they were mainly understood as illustrations of an aesthetic theory or a concept. Nevertheless, it is of course necessary and right to point out that Loewensberg, along with Max Bill, Richard Paul Lohse and Camille Graser, had been one of the protagonists of the so-called *Die Zürcher Konkreten* since the mid-20th century, and that her painting style was based on a general constructive concept throughout her life.

With her year of birth 1912, like her Zurich colleagues, she no longer belonged to the generation of pioneers of constructive art, whose founding fathers are Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg and Kasimir Malevich, but yet, as founding mothers, must be urgently mentioned Natalya Gontscharowa and Lyubow Popowa, just as all the other, often nameless, women artists who exhibited alongside, on an equal level, with men in a pre-revolutionary Russia in Moscow and St. Petersburg until 1917. If one can say in general and with good reason that the twentieth century was the first century in Western art history, in which female artists played an important role not only in exceptional cases, but also quantitatively and qualitatively, this applies in a very special way to the constructive strand of modern art development. This was highlighted in a major exhibition project a quarter of a century ago, in 1995, in the exhibition “Karo-Dame” (Queen of Diamonds) at the Aargauer Kunsthaus Aarau; the aim was to “pay tribute to the contribution of women artists to geometric art in a comprehensive presentation”³. The exhibition had been inspired by the retrospective of Verena Loewensberg shown three years earlier in the same museum⁴. Within the broad selection of this overview of the century in which female artists are working, in the narrower and wider sense of the word, constructively, Loewensberg positioned

herself in the second main group - after the first with the mentioned Russian female pioneers and before the contemporary group of representatives of a late or postmodern attitude. The oldest in that middle section were classical-modern protagonists of the movement born between 1885 and the turn of the century, such as Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Sonia Delaunay, Katarzyna Kobro or Marlow Moss, the youngest being Bridget Riley, born in 1931. Amongst others, in the generation in between, belong Barbara Hepworth, Aurelie Nemours and Verena Loewensberg. So much in advance, and with this specific example, for a rough art-historical classification.

1936, the year Loewensberg referred to as the beginning, was a decisive moment not only for the artist, but for the entire movement in several respects. She herself was in the right place at the right time then and in the years immediately before. There are a few short remarks concerning the years of her artistic formation: After attending the Gewerbeschule Basel (vocational trade college), where she studied weaving, design and colour theory, she moved to Zurich in 1929, where, alongside further training with a weaver she also began dance training. In the early thirties she made figurative and abstract drawings on paper, and from 1934 she had contacts with various artists. During that period, she got to know Max Bill, with whom she subsequently developed a lifelong stimulating friendship. In 1935 she studied in Paris at the *Académie Moderne*, meeting through Max Bill, among others, various artists in the circle of the *Abstraction-Création* group, including Georges Vantongerloo who became especially important. From 1936 she belonged definitively to the circle of the Zurich avant-garde, participating that year for the first time in an exhibition with two coloured pencil drawings. The exhibition at the Kunsthau Zürich was called *Zeitprobleme in der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik (Time problems in Swiss painting and sculpture)*, which was of decisive importance for the development and reception of modern art in Switzerland. Verena Loewensberg was the youngest participant at the age of 24. The following year, the important artists' association *Allianz* was founded in Zurich, Loewensberg being the only woman present at the time of the foundation; yet, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Meret Oppenheim belonged as well to the *Allianz Vereinigung moderner Schweizer Künstler (Allianz Association of Modern Swiss Artists)*. Even though the official Switzerland was accepting of international modern art in those dark years, when nothing was possible for modern art in Germany and it became increasingly difficult in France as well, for a long time it showed great reservation towards young Swiss art and avant-garde

currents. This began to change with the *Zeitprobleme* exhibition, which stood at the beginning of the highly successful history of Concrete Art, with which its representatives made an important and independent Swiss contribution to the international development of modernity. In Switzerland itself, Concrete Art became a kind of synonym for recognised modern art for almost three decades. During the Second World War, Switzerland became a haven for the constructive movement as a whole; important exhibitions took place in Zurich and Basel, where dedicated collectors were also present. After van Doesburg's death in the year 1931, Max Bill became the spokesperson for the Concretes, and with Sophie Taeuber-Arp, who had returned to Switzerland from Paris, the threads of a multifaceted network that extended as far as Lodz in Poland came together. Like the one generation older pioneer Taeuber-Arp, Loewensberg also came from textile art, and both shared a keen interest in modern dance. In those years Loewensberg developed her constructive attitude and pictorial language with great consistency; she earned her living with fabric designs or later with commercial applied arts. These are the years of formation, with early works of drawings and watercolours which develop more and more from organic floral to geometric. In the early 1940s she taught herself oil painting, and in 1944 created her first work in oil: oil painting remained her first medium until the end, she mastered it to the full, and the much faster acrylic paint was never an option for her. In the same year of 1944, Loewensberg participated in an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel, which for the first time bore the term "concrete art" as its title.

The painter herself spoke of a "versatility of the constructive theme" and, which of course is not to be equated with lack of concept, of the "lack of a uniform concept"⁵: This is perhaps one reason why there is a large number of typical paintings by the artist, but that the typical Loewensberg picture is much more difficult to name than, for example, the typical Lohse picture, also more difficult than the typical works by Bill or Graeser, to which Loewensberg's works are closer. Although her pictures always reveal the origin of their authoress, they are mostly unmistakable individuals. They are also unmistakable in the perfection of their painterly execution, erasing every trace of handwriting. Under a quasi-structuralist focus, groups with specific patterns can be formed, such as the preoccupation with the square, with the circle, with turns and progressions, with the open centre, with purely linear means of design and many others. But years and decades can lie between such "similar" picture formulations.

The paintings remained untitled - the painter felt a title to be more of a burden for the work and the viewer, "because conceptions would be anticipated whereas they really could only emerge from the painting"⁶. Titles of the kind that Bill, Lohse, Graeser, or Vantongerloo set out would, however, be conceivable - "Construction with two circles", for instance, or "Progression of groups" - but Verena Loewensberg wanted to keep her works as open as possible and thus left it up to the viewers to find a title or the conditions of the works' development process. Rather, if they like, they should, with an analytically thinking seeing process find out what the pictorial problem or concept behind the concrete design might have been.

In this sense it is neither easy to speak of phases in her work order, as "anticipations" can be observed again and again in the overview of her oeuvre, but just as often also "revivals" of certain pictorial themes. Counterarguments can be found at almost any point to many assertions. However, around 1960, we can observe an opening of the concrete concept in the narrower sense. Perhaps it's not entirely surprising that it was the time, when Max Bill organised the exhibition "Konkrete Kunst. 50 years of development" in Zurich, uniting the works of a great many artists - from Kandinsky, Mondrian, van Doesburg and Malevich to Mark Rothko, François Morellet and Otto Piene - he propagated, through his selection, a very open concept of Konkret ⁷. Around 1960 Loewensberg must have experienced a time of upheaval or crisis: during 1960 and 1961 only one painting can be dated, in 1962 none at all, but for 1963 the oeuvre catalogue lists over twenty works, more than in any previous year. Towards the end of the 50s, pictorial design emerged with large areas of colour that no longer, as before, only formed the base upon which constructive compositions were created. With this new subdivision of the canvas area into large, yet, monochrome compartments, in the composition with coloured surfaces the figure-ground-relation changes fundamentally, is even abolished (as always in this oeuvre: counterexamples can be found until the end). In this year of 1963, the year in which more works were created than ever before, we find narrow vertical, but also square works, in which we can recognise direct pre-cursors to the simple two-colour compositions of 1971 and 1972 in blue and yellow (see p. 17 and p. 19, Nos. 288 and 306). In the works of 1971 and 1972, on the other hand, we already see in the execution of the boundary between the two-coloured surfaces a glimpse of the principle that characterises Loewensberg's last group of works from 1984/85. (see p. 33 and p. 31, p. 35 and p. 37, Nos. 576, 577, 603 and 606).

Verena Loewensberg had, from the outset, a marked sensorium for colour and a programmatic restriction to the constructivist strata of Mondrian's primary colours would have diametrically opposed her open attitude. From 1963, however, as had become apparent in the previous few years, she became an explicit colourist: until the mid-seventies colour dominates, it is not coincidental, but absolutely equal to composition or construction; in front of many works we may speak of the supremacy of colour. Towards the end of the sixties, however, there are works of a colourfulness which might surprise in view of the painter's sensibility, which might seem almost loud and somehow "pop". (see p. 15, No. 189, p. 21, No. 210, p. 23, No. 348, p. 25 and p. 27, No. 415 and 416, p. 29, No. 436). This development will not only be due to an inner logic of the work process, but also the loud visual phenomena of the then current pop culture: These were the years around 1968, there were student protests and in Zurich youth unrests dominated the scene. A perhaps surprising hint of explanation to this: Verena Loewensberg was a true fan of the latest jazz and from 1964 to 1970 she ran a record shop in Zurich, where the most recent records of American modern and free jazz were also available as direct imports. *City Discount* was more than a record store - the shop became a meeting place for contemporary musicians and jazz fans. It was around 1967/70 when, to cite the best-known example, the graphically sophisticated, stern design of *Blue Note's* covers was replaced by the psychedelic, poppy-coloured, loudly obvious, advertising sleeves for Albert Ayler's or the electric Miles Davis's albums since "Bitches Brew". It is certainly surprising but enlightening and visually attractive to link the two developments.

In the mid-seventies colour calmed down and in 1974/75 an extensive cycle of upright formats with horizontal stripe formations was created. These works, with their exquisite, strongly reduced colourfulness, represent an absolute highlight in the work of this ingenious, magnificent colourist. The formal composition with the differently wide and differently coloured stripes on top of each other is simple, the colour composition however, all the more ingenious, creating a beguiling effect. Shortly afterwards, in 1976/77, an extensive series of two-part works was produced, based on an even simpler composition: For the "Twins", the painter mounted two, individually monochrome squares of 20 x 20 cm directly next to each other in a frame. This series of works represents in various respects an extreme case and exception, but in one respect typical for the painter: contrary to a first impression, she was not interested in monochrome per se, her first and foremost concern always was

the conversation between the colours, with what takes place at the boundary of two colour surfaces. Years later, in 1984, Loewensberg began her now most extensive group of works, dedicated to a principle that is pre-cursed in some of her 1983 works. (see p. 31, p. 35, p. 33, p. 37, Nos. 576 and 577, Nos. 603 and 606). A shape whose surface starts from a square, is placed in the picture's surface of 100 x100 cm, but the horizontal and vertical boundaries of which are interrupted by several more-or-less wide gradations. This results in colour forms which, in the case of the simple ones, have 18 right angles, but up to 28 in the case of the more complicated ones. With these angles, the surface of the inner form is in contact with the surrounding frame form, and vice versa, the surrounding form is in contact with the inner colour surface. The theme of the simple encounter of two colours is taken up again in this series in a much more complex way: There are up to 14 horizontal and vertical, very short or longer boundaries where the two colours collide. It is about this border, about the definition of the inner form by the outer and the outer by the inner, about the balance, the suspension of the centripetal and the centrifugal pictorial forces in a new harmony, about the relationship between intention and extension. The solution in the single picture is limited to two colours, but in the series all possibilities are explored: There are clearly defined colours, in all possible colour contrasts, and there are all restrained, very tonal solutions in almost transparent pastel colours. For once Loewensberg seems to have been interested in playing through a theme. One knows that it was her wish to experience all these pictures side by side in one big room. In her corollary, this series is related to Josef Albers' longstanding preoccupation with the one formally reduced picture type of "Homage to the Square", to whose colour investigation he devoted himself since the late forties.

This extensive group of works with about 30 pictures forms the magnificent conclusion of Verena Loewensberg's extremely rich life's work. They are silent yet challenging images that manifest the great paradox of this artistic work in their ascetically reduced severity and icon-like charisma: The paradox of riches and limitation, of riches within the limitation, the paradox of the simultaneously greatest possible differentiation within the narrowest outer limitation and reduction. Verena Loewensberg worked on this paradox for half a century.

Translated by Renate Nahum

Endnotes

¹ Verena Loewensberg in a questionnaire. Cf. documentation Verena Loewensberg, Swiss Institute for Art Research, Zurich (cited in: Annemarie Bucher, *Konstruktive Künstlerinnen zwischen Paris und Polen*, in: Ausst. Cat. *Karo-Dame. Konstruktive, Konkrete und Radikale Kunst von Frauen von 1914 bis heute (Constructive, Concrete and Radical Art by Women from 1914 to the present)*, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau und Verlag Lars Müller, Baden 1995, p. 130, Note 43

² Margit Staber, Verena Loewensberg: Minutes of a conversation with the painter (recorded in May 1977), in the Graphic Portfolio of Editions Média, Neuchâtel, 1979, p. 4). Quote in: Beat Wismer, *Konstanz und Wandel. Anmerkungen zu den späten Werkgruppen von Verena Loewensberg (Consistency and Change. Notes on the late groups of works by Verena Loewensberg*, in: Ausst. Cat. Verena Loewensberg 1912-1986. Retrospective, Aargauer Kunsthaus Aarau, 1992, p. 65

³ Beat Wismer, *Karo-Dame: Zur Ausstellung (To the exhibition)*, in: Ausst. Cat. *Karo-Dame*, as note 1, p. 2

⁴ Aee Exhibitions Cat. *Verena Loewensberg 1912-1986 Retrospective*, as Note 3

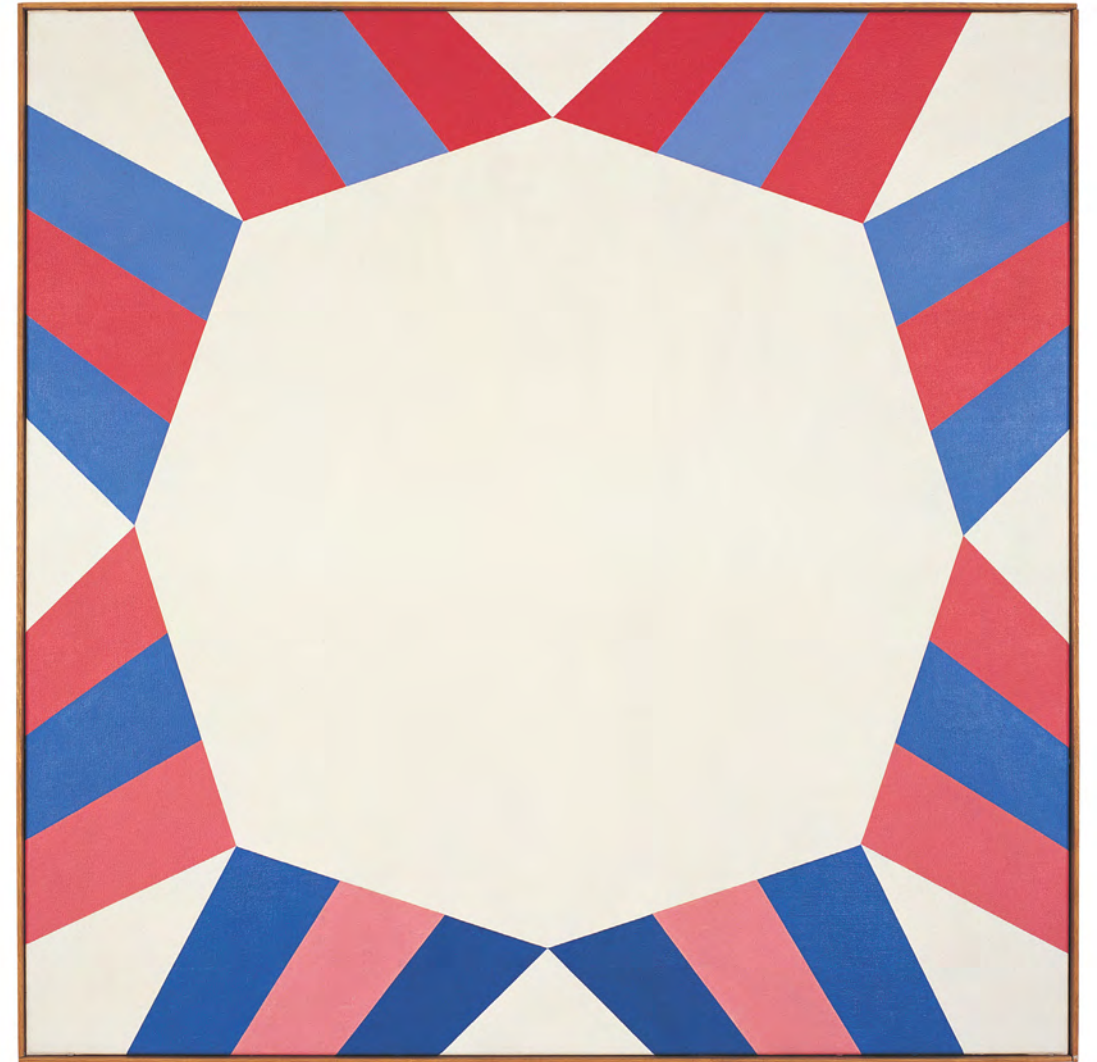
⁵ As note 2

⁶ As note 2

⁷ See exhibition cat. *Konkrete kunst. 50 jahre entwicklung (Concrete art. 50 years development)*, Helmhaus Zurich 1960

Plates

Untitled
1967
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches



Untitled
1971
Oil on canvas
141 x 100 cm
55 ½ x 39 ¾ inches



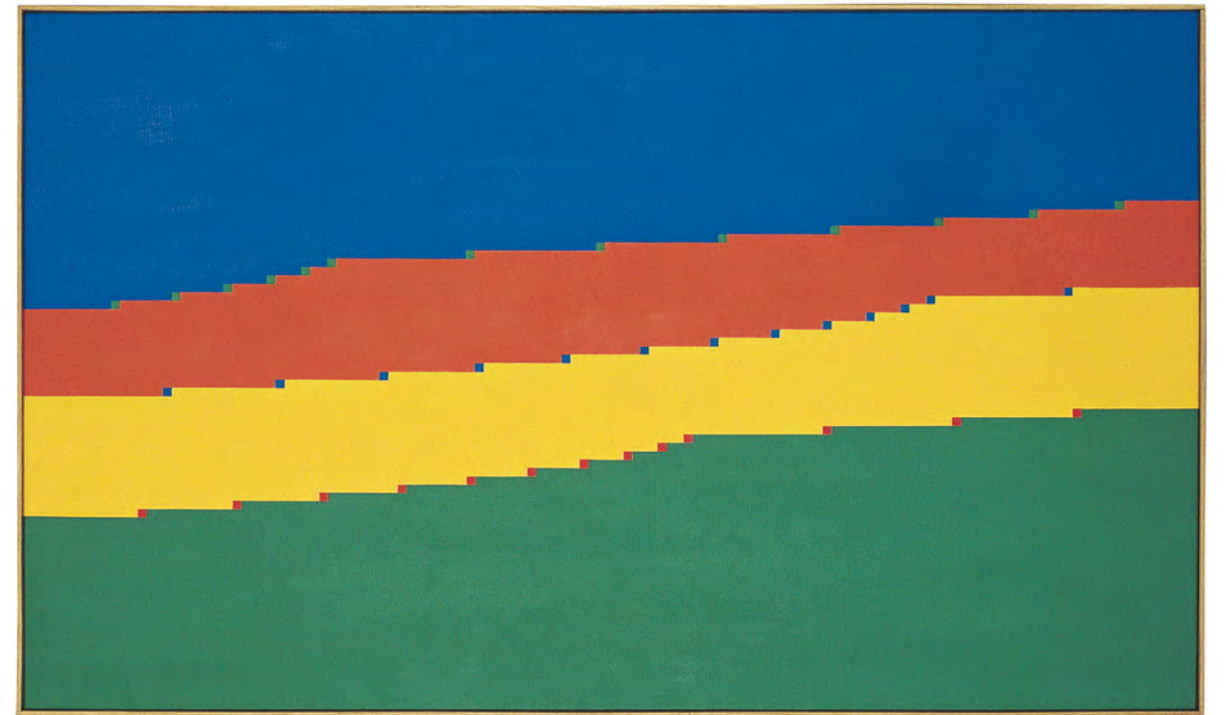
Untitled
1972
Oil on canvas
150 x 100 cm
59 x 39 ³/₈ inches



Untitled
1968
Oil on canvas
150 x 100 cm
59 x 39 ³/₈ inches



Untitled
1973
Oil on canvas
81 x 136 cm
31 7/8 x 53 1/2 inches



Untitled
1975
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches



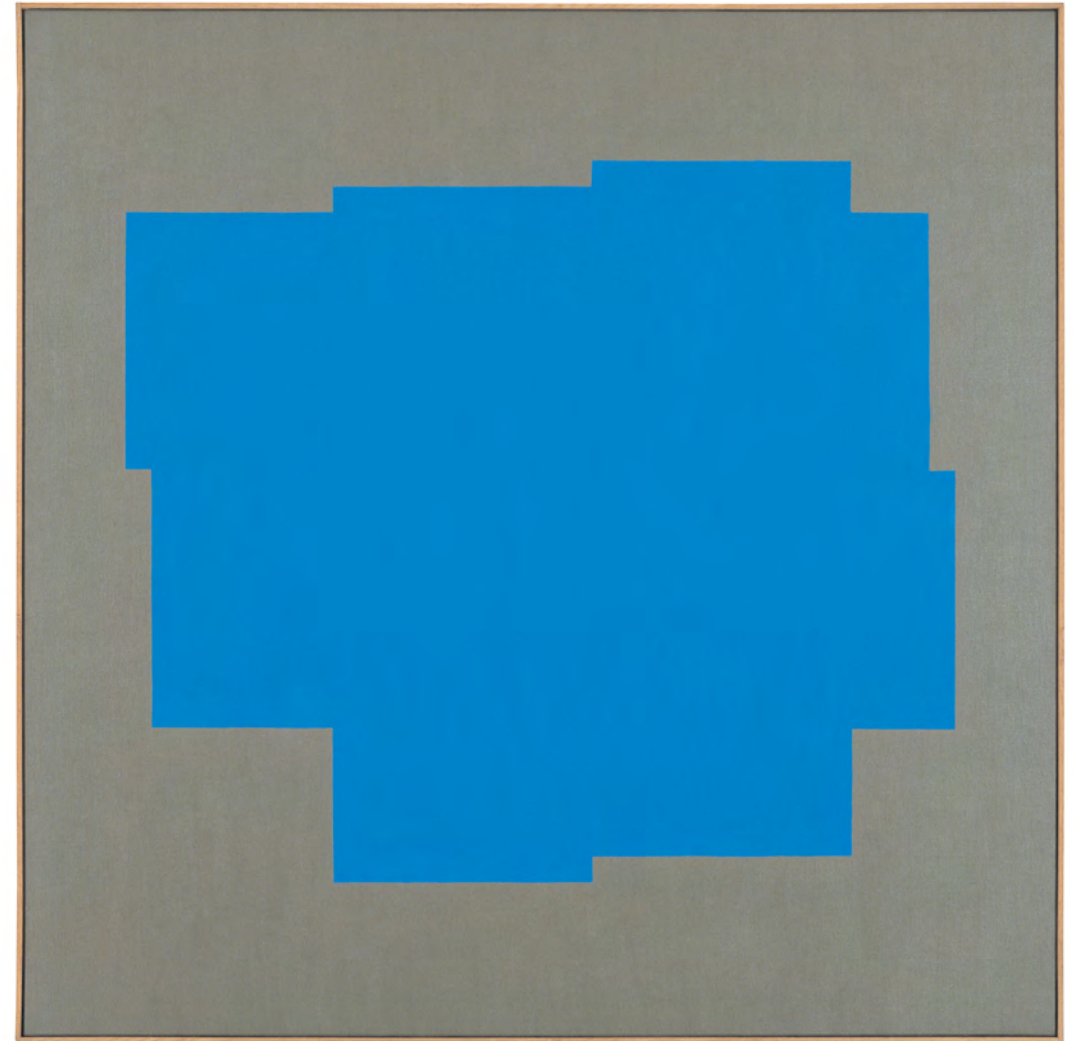
Untitled
1975
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches



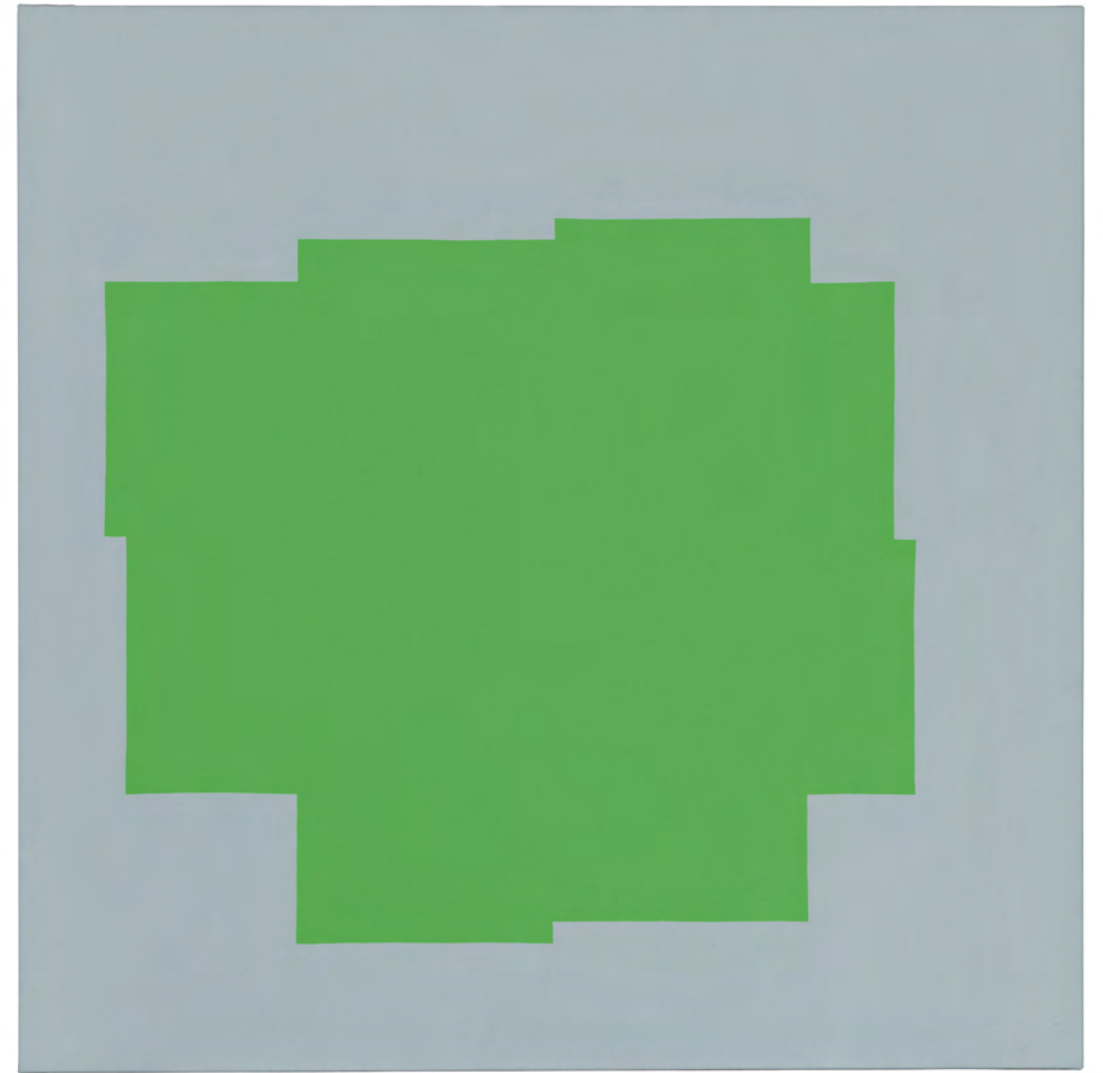
Untitled
1975–76
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 ³/₈ x 39 ³/₈ inches



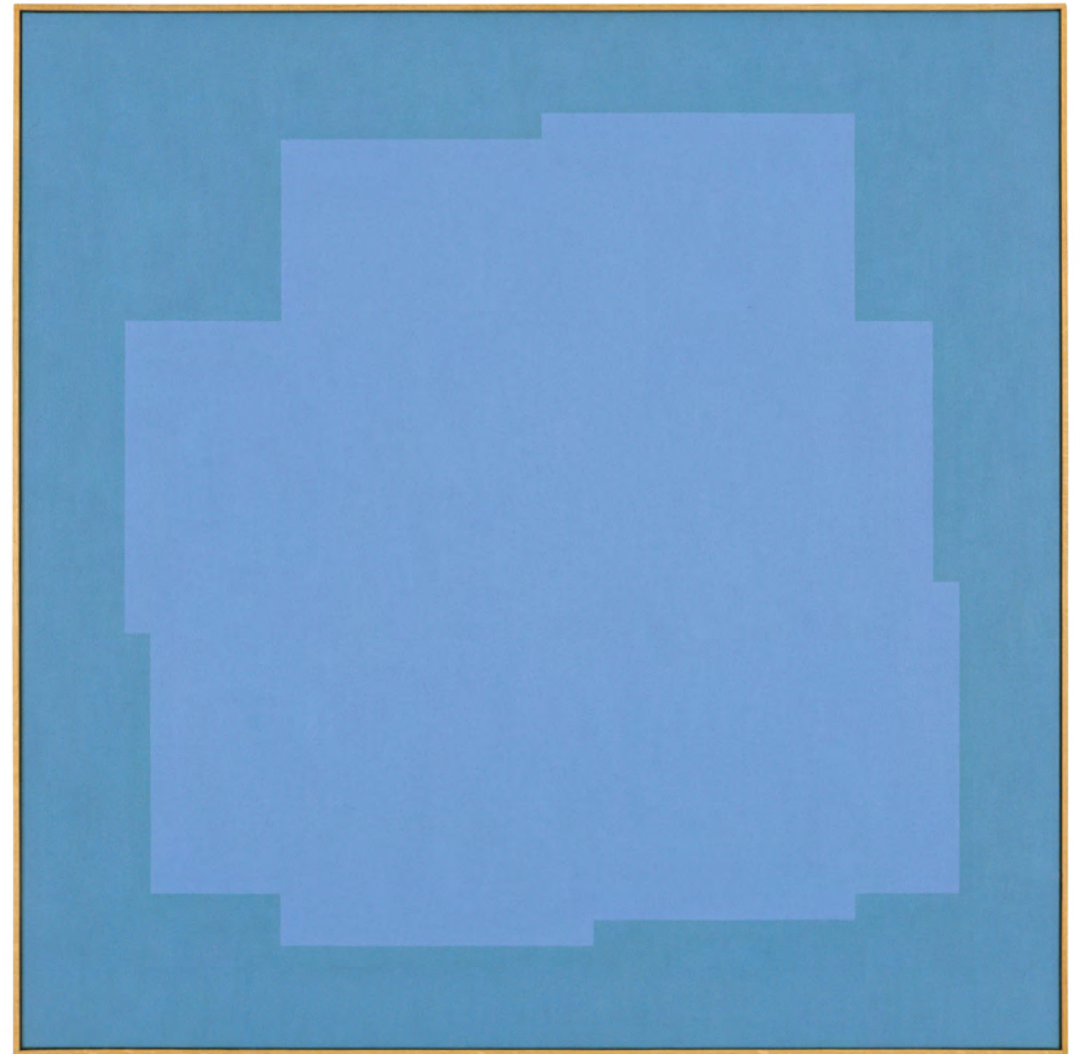
Untitled
1983
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 ³/₈ x 39 ³/₈ inches



Untitled
1983
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 ³/₈ x 39 ³/₈ inches



Untitled
1984
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 ³/₈ x 39 ³/₈ inches



Untitled
1984
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 ³/₈ x 39 ³/₈ inches



List of works

p. 15 *Untitled*
1967
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3⁄8 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 17 *Untitled*
1971
Oil on canvas
141 x 100 cm
55 1⁄2 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 19 *Untitled*
1971
Oil on canvas
141 x 100 cm
55 1⁄2 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 21 *Untitled*
1971
Oil on canvas
141 x 100 cm
55 1⁄2 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 23 *Untitled*
1973
Oil on canvas
81 x 136 cm
31 7⁄8 x 53 1⁄2 inches

p. 25 *Untitled*
1975
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3⁄8 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 27 *Untitled*
1975
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3⁄8 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 29 *Untitled*
1975–76
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3⁄8 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 31 *Untitled*
1983
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3⁄8 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 33 *Untitled*
1983
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3⁄8 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 35 *Untitled*
1984
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3⁄8 x 39 3⁄8 inches

p. 37 *Untitled*
1984
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm
39 3⁄8 x 39 3⁄8 inches

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