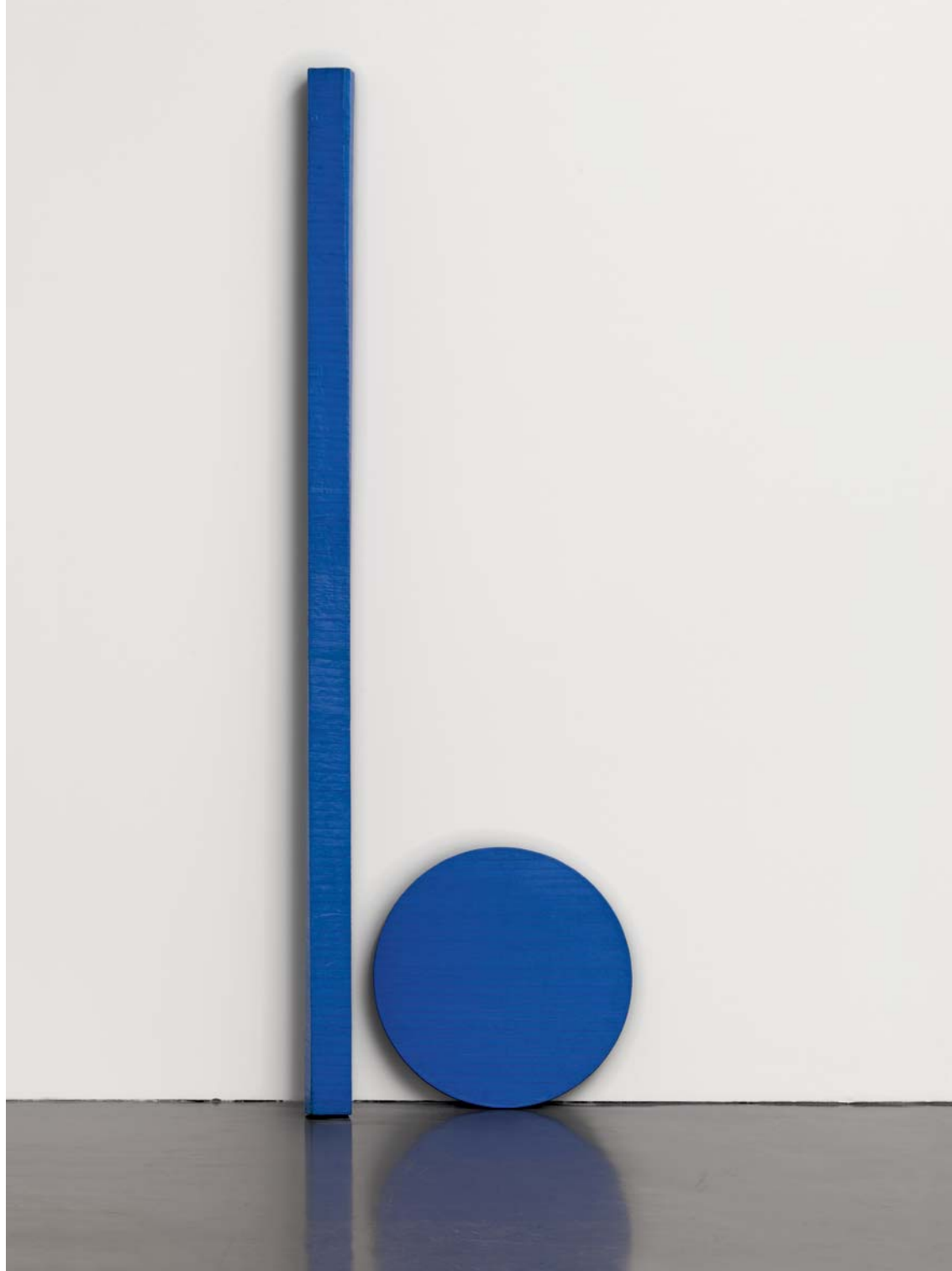**BLINKY PALERMO** RETROSPECTIVE 1964–1977

Cover: *Coney Island II*, 1975. Collection Ströher, Darmstadt. Photo: Jens Ziehe
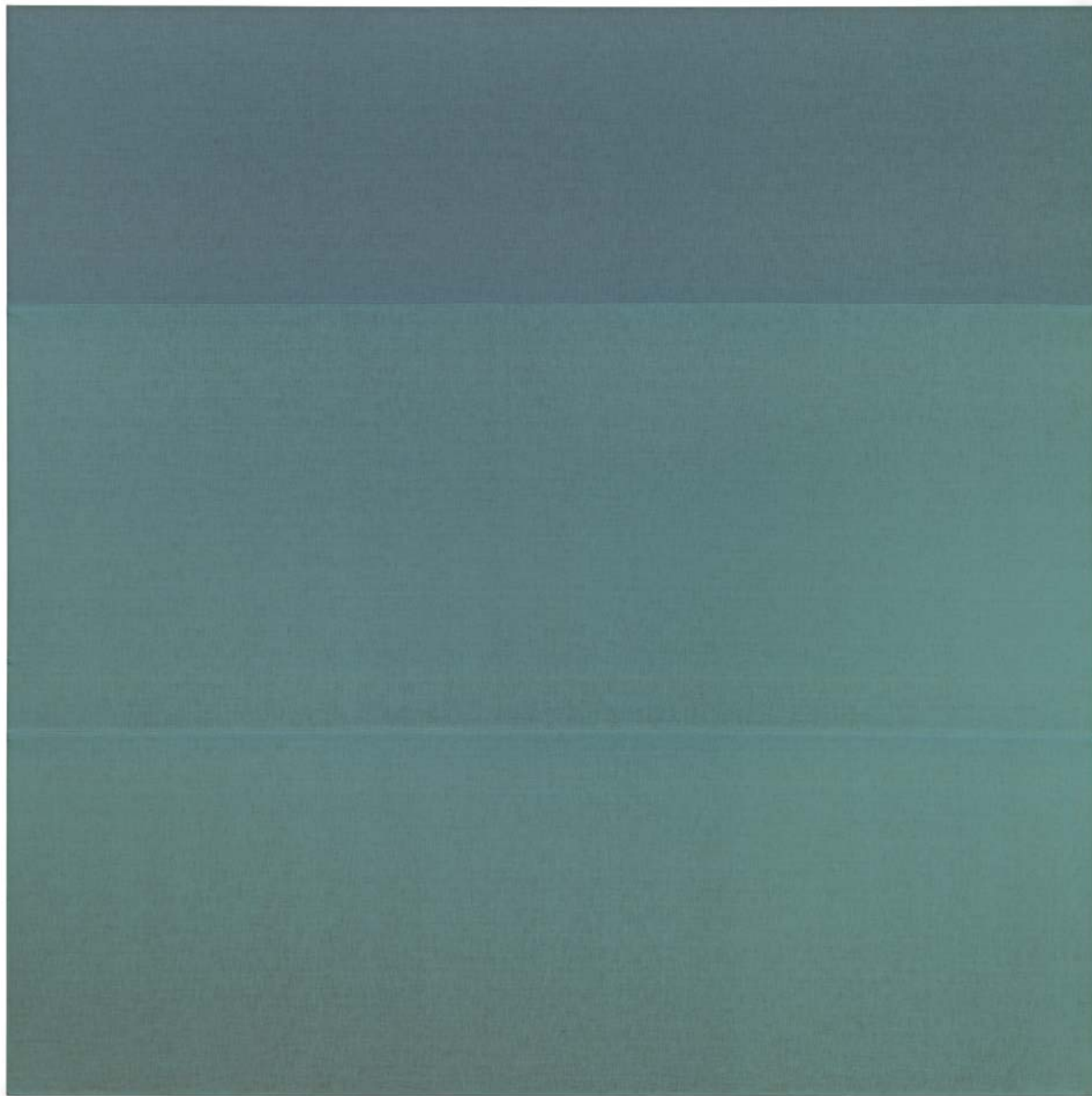
This page: *Blaue Scheibe und Stab* [Blue Disk and Staff], 1968. Private Collection, Courtesy Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Jens Ziehe

"Blinky Palermo" was the name assumed by Peter Heisterkamp shortly after he joined the class of Joseph Beuys at the Düsseldorf Art Academy in the early 1960s. While Heisterkamp's decision to change his identity may have had multiple causes, his deep fascination with American culture, and with Beat literature and Abstract Expressionist painting in particular, played a key role in his adoption of this idiosyncratic moniker, derived from boxer Sonny Liston's Mafioso manager, whom Heisterkamp supposedly resembled. During his formative years at the Academy, Palermo consolidated his painterly aesthetic, stimulated in part by his charismatic and influential teacher and by several young painters then gaining critical recognition, most notably Gerhard Richter. Although eleven years older, Richter would in time become Palermo's close personal friend as well as occasional artistic collaborator.

Palermo remained steadfastly committed to painting during a period and in a context in which that art form was widely contested as a viable mode of contemporary art practice. Throughout his brief career, he retained his early fascination with the work of such revered predecessors as Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. He was nonetheless most directly challenged by those among his peers who were pushing the envelope of painting, questioning not only its conventional materials and traditional format and structure but its very identity. Thus various forms of institutional critique, manifest in the practices of Michael Asher, John Knight, Daniel Buren, and Marcel Broodthaers, influenced his thinking in the later 1960s. An exceptional openness to manifold ways of working, which Beuys famously termed "porosity," permitted Palermo also to engage with the work of contemporary American painters, including Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin, and Brice Marden, as well as with their European counterparts, in particular Sigmar Polke and Richter.

Untitled, 1968. Collection Musée d'Art
Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, MUDAM
Luxembourg. Photo: Jens Ziehe

One consequence of Palermo's "porosity" was his ability to work simultaneously in several modes. Even before leaving art school, he had begun to make what he termed "objects": painted entities often based on found materials that take on quasi-sculptural properties. In contrast to *Blaue Scheibe und Stab* [Blue Disk and Staff], 1968, which is propped against a wall, other "objects," such as *Landschaft* [Landscape], 1968, activate the surface on which they are installed so that the spatial matrix becomes an integral part of the piece itself. On a number of occasions, however, Palermo engaged directly with a given site, and the resulting wall painting or drawing took on an architectural form, as when, in the summer of 1970, he painted a stairwell cornice in the Edinburgh Art School. The frieze of signature blue triangles that was his contribution to a group exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels that same year proved a more decorative intervention. Begun in mid-1966, the *Stoffbilder*, or cloth pictures, constitute a third, distinctive body of work. Sometimes monochrome, sometimes comprised of two or even three hues, these disarmingly radical works are made from lengths of fabric purchased in department stores then stitched together and attached to conventional stretchers. Dispensing with pigment and relying completely on commonplace, ready-made colors, their subtle, often unorthodox chromatic chords reveal Palermo to be a gifted colorist and a singular successor to some of the century's foremost harmonizers, from Henri Matisse to Rothko.
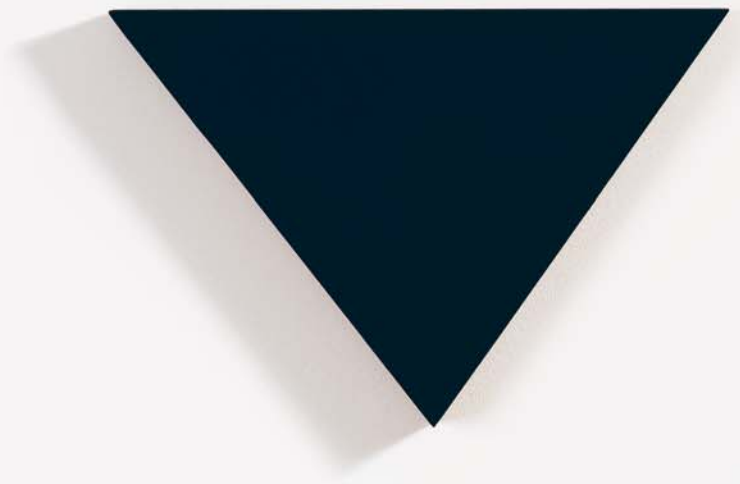
In 1973, all three of these concurrent modes came to an end when Palermo relocated to Manhattan, where he set up a studio that he would maintain for the remainder of his life. After several false starts and a fallow period of more than a year, he began to create multipartite compositions from small aluminum panels cantered slightly off the wall to enhance their intense

chromatic presence. Uncharacteristically, he titled many of these works with the names of places—*Wooster Street*, *Coney Island*, *14th Street*—referencing the city he loved, even though he had failed to receive a level of critical and institutional recognition there comparable to his reputation in Germany as one of the leading artists of his generation.

With his sudden death in February 1977, his work was cut off *in medias res*, as evidenced by the unexpectedly varied paintings assembled in the final gallery of this exhibition. Although his influence extends across several generations of diverse artists, until recently, Palermo has been very much an "artists' artist," that is, primarily admired by other practitioners. While his professional career spans little more than a decade, Palermo's substantial contribution to the history of postwar art is undeniable. Among the hallmarks are a resolute, rigorous, and remarkably independent exploration of the continuing potential of painting as a vanguard art form in an era when it came increasingly under siege, and an unwavering determination to couple painterly pleasures with conceptually based procedures. The first large-scale show of his work in the United States, this retrospective opens a dialogue he had long wished to establish with American painters on their own ground; at the same time, it confirms his abiding conviction that his art is best viewed in an international context, one whose parameters have been shaped by a Modernist legacy rather than by local or nationalistic concerns.

Lynne Cooke
Curator

Mirror Object, 1973. Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Courtesy Palermo Archive, Thordis Moeller, Millerton, New York. Photo: Chris Kendall

HIRSHHORN

BLINKY PALERMO
RETROSPECTIVE 1964–1977
February 24–May 15, 2011

PROGRAMS

Lynne Cooke on *Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977*
Thursday, February 24, 7 pm
Second Level Galleries

Curator Lynne Cooke leads visitors on a walk-through of the galleries, exploring the evolution of Palermo's aesthetic and the significance of his contributions to postwar painting.

After Hours
Friday, April 29, 8 pm to midnight

This spring, After Hours celebrates *Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977* with gallery talks, music, and special performances on the Plaza.

Lecture: Suzanne Hudson on Blinky Palermo
Tuesday, May 3, 7 pm
Lerner Room

A German artist with an American moniker and a enduring interest in the New York art world, Blinky Palermo made the city his home from 1973 until 1976. Suzanne Hudson, art historian and contributor to the exhibition catalogue, discusses Palermo's time in the United States and the context it provided his work.

Meet the Artist: Julian Schnabel
Thursday, May 12, 7 pm
Ring Auditorium

Artist and filmmaker Julian Schnabel discusses recent projects in light of his early artistic influences, including his friendship with Blinky Palermo, whom he met in New York in 1974.

Interpretive Guides
Daily, 10:30 am to 4:30 pm

Interpretive Guides are available in the galleries to answer questions about the exhibition.

Highlights Tours
Saturdays and Sundays, 12:30 pm

Join our docents for tours of the exhibition.

Smithsonian
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden