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The Umbrella's Near-Serendipitous Encounter

The grid combines diagrammatic presence and functional versatility. In painting, its deployment once amounted to an optical policy statement, prompting Rosalind Krauss' observation that the grid is what art looks like the moment it turns its back on nature.¹

Eva Berendes takes up the eponymous pattern as an embodiment of two-dimensional space. In her series *Grids* she presents a variety of things – “raw” materials, industrially manufactured components, quotidian and handcrafted objects – on hand-welded metal lattices. It is this rigid structure that gives rise to a sense of relatedness between the seemingly dissimilar items. Disengaged from their functional contexts, a hand-dyed scarf and a sheet of polyurethane reveal a peculiar kinship. Here, folksy and industrial artefacts, the unique and the infinitely reproducible crop up as but two stages of a gradual development rather than irreconcilable opposites. Accordingly, the ostensible dichotomies of figuration and abstraction denote mere states within the terrain of Berendes' compositions. The circular and elliptical outline of a hat is in fact moulded by the body, and in that sense less of a geometrical nature, while conversely, a tie's coral reef-design features the formal abstraction of organic structures.

The grid's neutrality renders it an arena² within which a picture can be enacted. Harold Rosenberg's much-cited description of the canvas as a performative frame aptly describes the quality of Berendes' trellises. Unfolding as a deliberate but open-ended process, the scenery's formation proceeds as a continuous re-arranging of objects on their supporting structure. The chain of decisions regarding proportion and relation implies the artist's body that transcribes its own range of movement upon its vertical counterpart. Berendes' experimental set-up confronts a virtually unlimited quantity of materials – lacking any objective criteria, the artist must make her choice purely based on her personal discretion: random findings from her own household join purposeful orders from the internet. At times, however, a long-sought item may eventually fail to play its intended role in the tangible ensemble of objects and must be dismissed. During the process of pictorial configuration the artist has to attune her awareness to an element's potential with respect to her artistic concern. Consequently, the choice of materials extends the act of composition, while the objects' positioning turns out to be the proverbial walk on the tightrope, with each introduced item newly inflecting the whole setting. Balancing the 'what' and 'how' determines whether or not a relationship evolves between the sum and its parts.

The pictorial elements singled out in the works' titles (a hat, a tie, a tennis racket, an umbrella)

¹ „The grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature.”

Rosalind E. Krauss *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* The MIT Press 1986 p.9.

² „At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.” Harold Rosenberg, *The American Action Painters*, 1952.

allude to the operational resemblance between the black grids and a domestic wardrobe. For from an aesthetic point of view, the comings and goings on this structure designated to hold whatever is put there can be considered a composition. Yet while a wardrobe provides the backdrop for the arbitrary and ephemeral depositing of objects, a close reading of Berendes' various assemblages reveals certain principles with respect to selection and placement: each group of five items includes particular formal, material, and denotative qualities that perform alternations between transparency and opacity, or between rigid and supple matter, to name just a few. The pictorial repertory hints at two painterly traditions. Vessels, floral ornaments and textiles invoke still life's tableware, flower decorations, and drapery, whereas triangular, square, and circular shapes dominate the vocabulary of non-representational art.

By pouring diluted paint down an upright canvas, the painter Morris Louis mobilizes the effect of gravity as a creative agent, thus entrusting part of the compositional work to an entropic process beyond his control. Gravity's shaping impact, confined to the stage of manufacture, dissipates once the paint starts drying, transforming the canvas from an active field of experimentation to a mere trace or testimony.

No matter how clearly a painting distinguishes between sky and earth, above and below, vertical and horizontal elements, gravity's apparent effect is generated by a successful illusion. In painting, the laws of physics fundamental to sculpture and architecture are observed in purely figurative ways.

Similarly, in collage and assemblage, where the combination of heterogeneous materials is a defining feature, the constructive aspects of this linkage are traditionally of minor importance. By looking at screwed, glued or digitally assembled compounds, gravitation does not feature as part of the visual make-up. In Eva Berendes' grid-pictures however, gravity remains the indispensable basis of the complete arrangement, as neither planes nor objects would stay put without. Hooks, magnets, clips and cable ties fastening the individual items literally play a load-bearing role. For the method of bonding figure and ground is not treated as a perfunctory necessity extraneous to the piece, but rather looms large as a visible component, elucidating gravity's impact on the pictorial gestalt. Consistent with many of her earlier works, the artist construes the image and its support as constituents of a symbiotic relationship, in which the individual components preserve their integrity.

When a functional gadget like an umbrella is pared down to its graphic skeleton, a rope is gracefully draped, and a decorative plate intensifies a bin liner's colour and texture, we are confronted with the suspension of certain routines that commonly direct our everyday perception and that anticipate how things are categorized long before they rise into our conscious awareness. The dialogue that plays out on the grids' surfaces regarding the objects' visual abstraction and their actual purpose raises the yet unresolved "just-what-is-it" question: Just what is it that distinguishes matter from product from art? What renders one thing an asset and another an accessory? This is the question holding things in abeyance. At least until it starts to rain.