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Appreciation

Al Held (1928–2005)

A Maverick in the New York Art World

Irving Sandler

I met Al Held in 1955, when he joined some two hundred young artists who constituted the New York School. They lived and worked in downtown Manhattan and socialized at the Cedar Street Tavern, at the Club (founded by the abstract expressionists in 1949), at bring-your-own-bottle loft parties, and at the galleries in and around East Tenth Street, which were organized, funded, and operated by artists. Held had been an early member of one such cooperative, the Brata Gallery, across Tenth Street from the Tanager, an artist-run gallery that I managed. In 1957 he took part in a group show at the Tanager Gallery, and we began a lifelong friendship.

Like all the artists I knew, Held was poor, but that was of little concern. He assumed, as we all did, that anyone who wanted to be in the avant-garde had to take a vow of poverty. He supported himself by working part-time, moving paintings and sculptures in a large black secondhand hearse, which in itself became a kind of downtown “character.” All that really mattered to Held and his fellow artists was making art—the attempt to realize what Franz Kline called “the dream” of creating great art. Held believed New York was the best place to do that. Having lived in Paris from 1950 to 1953, he knew that the New York School had replaced the School of Paris as the center of the international avant-garde and that he was at its hub. It was important to Held to be with like-minded artists, because, as he told me: “Making art is not just doing your own thing. It means drawing from and contributing to the avant-garde culture of art and using that culture to shape your own art. Otherwise, your art would end up being naive and irrelevant.”

The main social activity of artists in the fifties was talking about art. In his discourse, Held was as serious and utterly honest as he was in his painting. He believed passionately in painting as a high art (which precluded pop art). But he denigrated painting that he thought was in any way derivative, and said so loud and clear (which did not endear him to those he scorned, even if they did admire his work). He was indifferent to figurative art and had no sympathy for conceptual art, performance art, or art that used new media such as film and video, in part because he believed they drew attention away from painting.

I vividly recall the ongoing arguments we had for half a century, which, in retrospect, I think we both relished. Held was a tenacious and inexhaustible debater (and so was I). He would grip the jugular of any idea and wouldn't let go. He and I rarely agreed, except about the significance and quality of his work. Held was optimistic about the state of the world and profoundly pessimistic about the state of contemporary art. I was



Al Held at the American Academy in Rome, 1987

profoundly pessimistic about the state of the world and optimistic about the state of art. However, no matter how heated and acrimonious our arguments were, any animosity was forgotten by the next time we met, and we would resume our disputation.

Held argued not only with me but with almost everyone he encountered in the art world. After 1967 his painting never fit any fashionable “ism,” but its presence and power could not be ignored. It could not be overlooked because it was too original to be pigeonholed. Leading art-world professionals esteemed his work: he was given a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974, and a large show of his recent work at PS 1 in Queens in 2002. Nonetheless, Held was an odd man out, and he felt embattled. His unwavering belief in the significance of his own art forced him to take a combative stance. What caused him his greatest frustration was the misunderstanding of his painting, or so he felt. Critics often wrote that Held’s painting was a science fiction concoction or generated by computer. It was neither. He

meant it to be a commentary on contemporary reality, not an outer space fantasy. Equally important, to the end of his career it was based on improvisation, just as it had been almost from his beginning as a second-generation abstract expressionist.

When I first met Held, he was painting fields of muscular, paint-laden strokes, overall, like Jackson Pollock’s poured abstractions, yet structured, like Willem de Kooning’s. In 1959 Held became dissatisfied with these “pigment paintings,” as we labeled them; they seemed too undefined and equivocal. He recognized that his artistic bent was toward concreteness and clarity. In keeping with his will to clarity, he began to cut away the ambiguous layers of thick paint and to articulate their roughly rectilinear infrastructures. His problem, as he saw it, was to find a new “way of making art.” He realized how when his friend Sam Francis lent him his large loft. Held covered the walls with cheap paper and, following what might be termed a “classicizing urge,” in a surge of energy ringed the room with quasi-geometric, high-keyed abstraction, which he later cut up and titled the *Taxi* series. Soon after, he simplified his forms, made them still more geometric, sharpened their contours, and flattened the colors. He had arrived at what came to be known as hard-edge abstraction. The color forms, not the painterly gestures, now bore the burden of content. Held wanted to transform squares, circles, and triangles—the most generalized of shapes—into specific forms, each of which would possess a unique “personality.” In subsequent work, he made each form different in shape and color and, to further individualize them, strung them out in extended space—creating a new kind of nonrelational or non-cubist pictorial design. He also introduced fragments of letters that suggested billboards and, perhaps with billboards in mind, enlarged his canvases greatly: *Greek Garden*

(1966), for example, measures 12 by 56 feet. Held was not alone in his aspiration to create new post–abstract expressionist styles. His aim was shared by Ronald Bladen and George Sugarman, fellow members of the Brata Gallery, and by his close friends at the Tanager Gallery, realist painters Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein.

By 1967 Held felt limited by the simplicity of his images and suffocated by their flatness. Dissatisfied with the reductiveness of his work as well as the glut of hard-edge and stained color-field abstraction, he felt the need to introduce complexity, space, and volume into his painting. Painting black bands on white grounds and vice versa, he transformed the rectangles, circles, and triangles of the hard-edge paintings into complex networks of open cubes, spheres, and pyramids and pieced them together as if they were masonry. Yet these interweaving volumes kept coming apart and reforming, deconstructing and reconstructing, as if in perpetual flux. Held's "ambition," as I wrote in a book on his work in 1984, was "to create a synthetic art that was additive and inclusive, rather than reductive, an art that combined diverse and often contradictory elements, which, thereby, would yield metaphors for contemporary reality in all its plurality, complexity, and ambiguity."¹ As he once said to me: "I'm not an expressionist. I don't want to get something out of me but instead a truth out there into me." In keeping with his vision, Held rejected reductive assumptions that there are universal and immutable truths in life and in art. Hence he stood opposed to the historic modernist art of the Dutch neo-plasticists, the German Bauhaus associates, and the Russian constructivists and suprematists, who had earlier influenced him.

In 1978 Held reintroduced color into his painting and began to make his structures increasingly solid and bulky. At this time, too, it was clear to him that his paintings weren't going in any of the directions of contemporary art. As a consequence, he began to look for kindred spirits in the history of art, and he found them among early and high

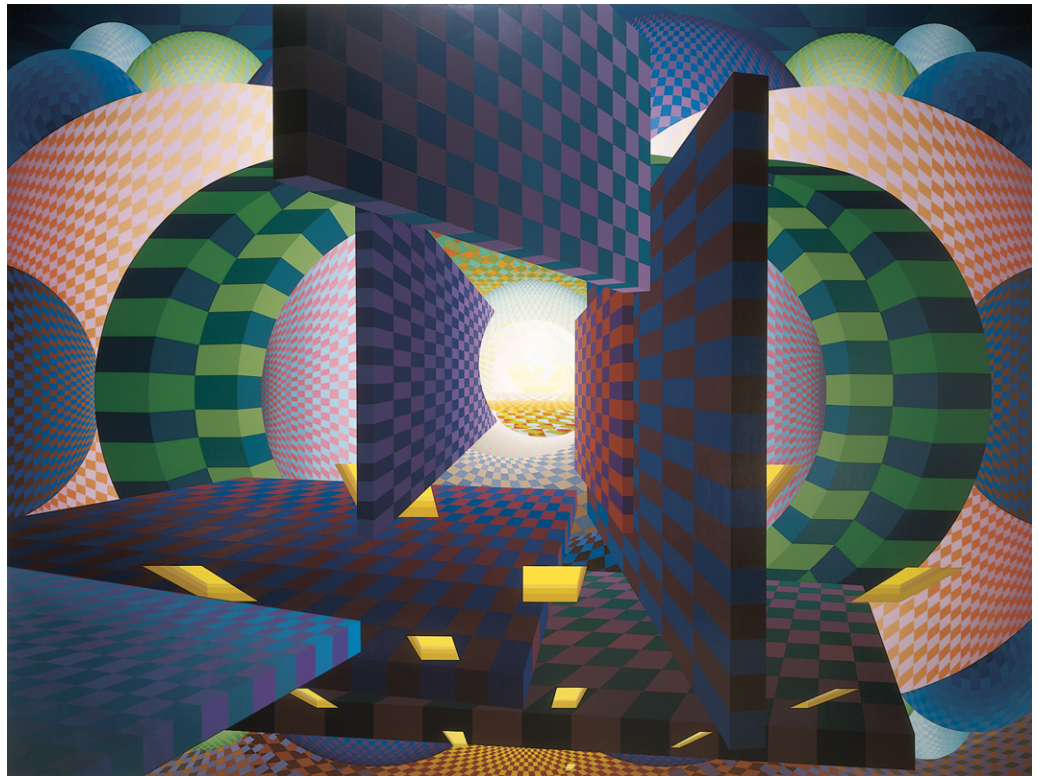
Renaissance painters. This sense of kinship was solidified in 1981, when he went to Italy on a six-month visit. Working in his own idiom, Held replaced Renaissance rooted figuration with destabilized, gravity-defying, abstract structures. Moreover, he reformulated the main space-creating conventions of Renaissance art, fixed perspective and modeling from light to dark. He built depth with solid, thin planes of color and used multiple perspectives that pulled apart in every which way to create a sense of spatial indeterminacy and paradox.

Held, as I have said, was a maverick in the New York art world. In abandoning abstract expressionism, he lost most of its supporters. Moreover, his painting was simply too complex and illusionistic to be acceptable to advocates of stained color-field, hard-edge, and minimalist abstraction. In tunneling into the picture surface, he violated the taboo against illusionism, which was a modernist shibboleth, and he was taken to task by modernists. But Held's work was too nonobjective to be accepted by postmodernists. He found himself in a kind of art-critical and theoretical limbo. In reaction,

Al Held, *Black Nile III*, 1971.
Acrylic on canvas, 114 x 114 in.
Estate of Al Held, Courtesy of
Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Licensed by VAGA, New York



Al Held, *Aperture IV*, 2000.
Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 240 in.
Estate of Al Held, Courtesy of
Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Licensed by VAGA, New York



he turned against all of modernist art, putting it down as outmoded. Despite his alienation, he continued to profess the optimism that modernism proclaimed.

In the last quarter century of his life, Held constructed pictures of staggering labor-intensive complexity and size. To him, his refusal to relax was proof of his message's validity. At the same time, Held painted hundreds of small watercolors (although these too would grow large). They offered his inventiveness and fine hand a new freedom and provided seed for his huge acrylics.

Held felt increasingly alienated from the New York art world and spent more time in his studios in Boiceville, New York, and Camarata, Italy. A workaholic from the first, he found that seclusion suited him. As Judy Pfaff, his former student and lasting friend, recalled about his Italian sojourns: "There he was free, alone in the studio, surrounded by art history and warm light, and the world of ideas."² My last visit to Held in Italy was in the summer of 2004. He was painting watercolors of breathtaking beauty and preparing stunning maquettes for two public commissions in Florida. And to top it off, he and I reexplored the Lorenzo Maitani reliefs on the facade of Orvieto's cathedral. We had no disagreement concerning their greatness.

Photo Credit

109, Photo by Jennifer Johnson,
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery,
New York

Notes

- 1 Irving Sandler, *Al Held* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1984), 13.
- 2 Judy Pfaff, "Al Held (1928–2005)," *Brooklyn Rail*, September 2005, 25.