

Bettina

New York: 1965–1986

November 18, 2023–January 19, 2024

Ulrik is pleased to present the first solo exhibition of work by Bettina (b. 1927, Brooklyn; d. 2021, Brooklyn) in a New York City gallery since her 1980 show with Soho's OK Harris. This exhibition is organized in collaboration with the Estate of Bettina Grossman, directed by artist Yto Barrada, who saved her archive and has been working with it for the past five years.

New York: 1965-86 features work from two of Bettina's major projects: *One Constant. Euclidean to Non-Euclidean Curve* (1972-73) and *Phenomenological New York* (c. 1970s-1980s). These two projects are accompanied by a small selection of work from other series that demonstrate the dual nature of the artist's practice, as both distinctly heterogeneous and deeply interconnected.

A lifelong New Yorker, Bettina (who went by her first name only) traveled in Europe in the 1950s and '60s for her job as a textile designer, before settling at the Chelsea Hotel in 1972, where she lived and worked for nearly fifty years. She took a systematic approach to her prolific and rigorous body of work, rejecting the logic of the singular art object. "Each work is but an element in a process to be woven into a vast world of interrelational hidden meanings," she writes, "whereby each is relative to the other, incidental to each other, interdependent upon each other, unified and shaped according to each other, materialized according to each other into a greater whole." ¹ Bettina's work becomes interconnected—a "greater whole"—through repetition and coincidence within and across her many interdisciplinary projects, which span painting, printmaking, sculpture, film, drawing, photography, text, book making, and more. Using strategies of documentation, accumulation, and organization, she seeks out pattern in everyday life in order to reveal hidden structures that shape the world around us.

Bettina produced a body of work that both engages with and diverges from contemporaneous art historical movements—movements such as geometric abstraction, minimalism, conceptual art, systems aesthetics, and post-conceptualism. While there are clear affinities, Bettina's practice undermines many of the dichotomies that were central to these movements: she was equally attached to the grid as she was to fluidity, movement and change over time; she designed highly conceptual, systematic processes, while retaining a hands-on investment in material and form; she experimented with numerous means of abstraction while retaining the figure; and so on.

The first series on view, *One Constant. Euclidean to Non-Euclidean Curve* (1972-73) comprises a series of wooden sculptures, silver gelatin prints, xerox prints, and handmade books. Each sculpture begins as a flat wooden circle that Bettina then cuts into a series of parallel strips. She then reattaches them by inserting a wooden dowel through the center, so the strips can be rotated around a single, central point. Each object is manipulated before being fixed into place, creating a series of undulating, dynamic surfaces that demonstrate a set of possible outcomes of this process.

As the title suggests, this series reflects Bettina's investment in mathematics, and specifically in non-Euclidean geometry. Officially discovered in the early 19th century, many artists in the 19th and 20th centuries—Duchamp, Cézanne, Moholy-Nagy and Smithson, to name just a few—were interested in the potential for non-Euclidean geometry to reveal radically new approaches to space.² One of the major distinctions between Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry is the latter's rejection of the former's unproven assumption that space is flat. Bettina's series directly illustrates its title, transforming a flat circle—a Euclidean curve—into the curved, variable surface of non-Euclidean space.

Bettina then photographed these sculptures in various settings—on plinths, mirrored surfaces, and in one instance, at the beach. She noted that she hoped these small wooden forms could be translated into large-

scale, metal public sculpture. While the metal versions of *One Constant. Euclidean to Non-Euclidean Curve* have yet to be built, we can see the artist manipulating scale in the photographs by putting the horizon line low to the ground or erasing it with aerial perspective. Through photography, the forms take on a more monumental stature.

The next series on view, *Phenomenological New York* (c. 1970s–c. 1980s), consists of silver gelatin prints, chromogenic prints, photographic collages, and super 8 film. This was one of two major projects Bettina made “about” New York City—the other being *The Fifth Point of the Compass* (1977-85). Both projects focus on activity on New York City streets, but from different perspectives. When describing the two projects, Bettina writes that one was “anthropological” (*The Fifth Point of the Compass*) and the other “phenomenological” (*Phenomenological New York*).^[5] Where *The Fifth Point of the Compass* comprises thousands of birds-eye view photographs of pedestrians on 23rd street, flattened against the grid of the sidewalk, and organized into alphabetical “commonalities,” *Phenomenological New York* focuses on movement on the street as seen through distorted reflections in the glass and metal of surrounding buildings, cars, and windows. Bettina once described her phenomenological work in this way:

“You see I was back in New York, trying to find this invisible secret. And there is a mystery here. It keeps us here. [...] I found it there in the architecture. And I started photographing distortions in the architecture—not straight reflections [...] And, then I found out that [with] movement, along the wall of the building, the reflections changed. Every time you move, it’s changing. And so, I was shooting a four-dimensional sequence of one single constant, which was the building, which was changing as I moved.”^[6]

Here Bettina describes her vision of movement and change in the buildings’ reflections as a glimpse of a “four-dimensional sequence.” Though they are two distinct branches of mathematics, non-Euclidean and n-dimensional (which includes the fourth dimension) geometries have typically gone hand-in-hand for artist’s seeking new spatial possibilities. One feature of fourth dimensional space is the capacity for figures to move through spatial barriers without rupture—a kind of hypermobility.^[7] Through her focus on reflective surfaces, Bettina’s figures and their movements refract onto the world around them.

Looking at the two series side-by-side, one can’t help but see a visual resonance between the ripples of the *Euclidean to Non-Euclidean Curve* sculptures and the undulating forms captured in the distorted reflections of *Phenomenological New York*. Bettina saw these types of visual echoes as both cues for interconnectedness, and as signs of divinity. She saw her own capacity to see pattern, change and movement in the world around her as a gift. “[It’s] important to understand,” she says in an interview in the 1980s, “that when a person is given this reward of seeing something changing before their eyes, and being able to capture it, and make it concrete so that others may understand also—then this is a responsibility.”^[8] Bettina’s investigations into pattern in both the city around her, as well as within her own work, become an attempt to engender a new mode of vision—an offering to the public of a transcendent way of seeing.

—Marina Caron

Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include *Balcon Bettina*, Immanence, Festival d’Automne, Paris (2023); *Bettina: The Fifth Point of the Compass*, The Hessel Museum, Annandale-on-Hudson (2023); *Bettina: A Perpetual Poem of Renewal*, Les Rencontres de la Photographie, Arles (2022); and *The Power of Two Suns* with Yto Barrada at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Governors Island, (2019). Recent group exhibitions include *Bad Color Combos*, Kunsthalle Bielefeld (2023) and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2023), *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, New York (2021), *Artist’s Choice: Yto Barrada—A Raft*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2021) and *Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge*, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg (2020). The monograph *Bettina* was published in 2022 by Aperture, New York, and Atelier EXB, Paris. This book was developed by Yto Barrada and designer Gregor Huber in collaboration with Bettina up until her death in November 2021.

^[1] Bettina Grossman, a manuscript typed by the artist with the header: “Your Moral Right, Your Proprietary Right,” date unknown, Bettina Grossman papers, the Estate of Bettina Grossman.

^[2] Henderson, Linda Dalrymple. “The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art: Conclusion.” *Leonardo* 17, no. 3 (1984): 205–10.

^[3] In a letter she wrote about herself written in the third person, Bettina writes; “In addition she has been working for the past ten years on two projects about New York, one phenomenological, the other anthropological.” Bettina Grossman, a letter typed by the artist addressed to Wilhelmina Cole, date unknown. Bettina Grossman papers, the Estate of Bettina Grossman.

^[4] Bettina Grossman, interview by Juliette Elkon Hamelecourt, ca. 1980, recording, Juliette Elkon Hamelecourt papers, 1911–2000, bulk 1940s–2000, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

^[5] “By the end of the nineteenth century, many authors were touting the superiority of thought that was based on an understanding of four-dimensional geometry, and collectively they established in popular culture the once-esoteric mathematical idea of the fourth dimension. Some propagandists and spiritualists even envisioned a kind of Superhero 4-D Man, who could pass through walls and do similar amazing feats.”

Robbin, Tony. *Shadows of Reality: The Fourth Dimension in Relativity, Cubism, and Modern Thought*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 19.

^[6] Bettina Grossman, interview by Juliette Elkon Hamelecourt, ca. 1980, recording, Juliette Elkon Hamelecourt papers, 1911–2000, bulk 1940s–2000, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.