

Overview

Judy Pfaff: An Involvement with Printmaking

(The following is an extract from a book in progress)

I first met Judy Pfaff in 1981 at the John and Mable Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida, where she was having a show. Two very different artists who had worked at Crown Point, Chuck Close and Robert Kushner, had recommended her as one of the most interesting younger artists they knew so I decided to make the trip to meet her and see her work.

When a friend and I walked into the museum a few hours before the opening, we heard saws and hammers. A

young man trundled a wheelbarrow full of twisted wire through the lobby and we heard from behind the barricade a woman's voice: "Up higher—No. Over there! Move it a foot over to the right." We decided to take a walk on the beach and come back to meet Pfaff later.

Half an hour after the announced opening time the barricade came down and the workers scurried out. Seeing her audience standing there with drinks, Pfaff pushed her hair out of her eyes and blinked. Behind her was *Rorschach*, four rooms full of free-formed

wooden cut-outs, brushy painting on the walls, wires shaped and cascading from the ceiling, tree branches jumping out from corners. As we walked through this expressionist painting in three dimensions, we became more and more exhilarated, almost dizzy.

The next morning I invited Judy Pfaff to make prints at Crown Point Press. She said she was flattered and delighted to be invited and pleased that we had come all the way across the country to see her show. But her answer was, "No, I can't." She went on to explain herself very clearly. "Printmaking is too static for me. I don't make objects. I don't even draw very much. I have to get my hands on something physically, on a

length of pipe, some fencing, something that already exists, in order to begin anything. And I can't think it through ahead of time. I move everything around until it works."

After Judy Pfaff refused my invitation to work at Crown Point Press in 1981, I kept on trying to see as much of her work as I could. It wasn't easy because every work was an installation, built on the spot and taken down after the show with nothing left except photographs. Pfaff's work at the time, she told an interviewer, was about "being there and not being there, integrating. Rather than seeing my pieces as happy, I think of them as ever-moving and changing." Describing an installation of hers at

the Whitney Museum, she explained that it was about fast movement, speed. "People wanted to be able to back up and take it in at one glance, as if it were framed. But I designed the piece to be seen as you ran by, the way people do in museums. I wanted all my work to be seen as a kind of peripheral experience."

Pfaff was born in London in 1946 and came to the United States at the age of 13. After receiving a Master's Degree at Yale (where she studied with Al Held) she moved to New York in 1973. At the time Conceptual Art was encouraging young artists to work with unusual materials and to expand conventional notions of how

art could be made. But the Conceptual Art of the 70s was formally restrained, like Minimal Art which influenced it. Pfaff's work, with its wild and dense formal disjunctions looks now like it began to push sculpture into the 80s.

"Something about the 70s that didn't suit me," Pfaff says, "is that there was pressure for artists to have a signature style, a material, a particular turf. Especially at Yale, students were very much aware of artists who had gone there just before, like Brice Marden and Chuck Close, who had carved out very specific areas for themselves."

I had worked with Brice Marden and Chuck Close at Crown Point in the '70s and felt Pfaff's attitude was very different from theirs. The best way to learn more about her was to work with

her. I got tired of waiting for her to want to do etching, so I asked her in 1985 if she would like to go to Japan and try woodblock printing there. She did want to go to Japan: "I always thought that my work had something to do with Japan, about microcosm, working from detail to detail to the greater whole."

But, I wondered, since she thought etching static, what would she think of Japanese woodblock printing which starts with a drawing made by the artist? She tried to make a conventional drawing, but ended up gluing together several pieces of overlapping mat board on which she had painted. Our Japanese printer made the image flat and when Pfaff got to Japan she directed him to work over it again and again, adding more and more illusions of depth.

Back in New York she made still more revisions. She printed another woodblock on top of the supposedly finished proofs adding another plane at the surface. Although she felt the print turned out well, she was frustrated. "I didn't engage in the process physically," she says, "So when I was invited to return to Japan to make an installation, I used a lot of wood, 3' x 6' sheets, that I cut and gouged like blocks used in printmaking. I was finally able to manipulate the material."

This experience of cutting blocks for sculpture rather than prints led her into a way of making prints in which she started with prefabricated elements, like plywood trim pieces, and added handmade parts, working the way she builds her installations. "I created a method of composing the images from smaller shapes, smaller blocks, that fit together like pieces in a

(continued on page 6)



Judy Pfaff with printer Daria Sywulak working in the Crown Point Press studio, San Francisco

Gallery Exhibitions

The following exhibitions will be on view in our San Francisco and New York galleries.

April 23 - May 30, 1992

San Francisco: Recent Publications including etchings by **John Cage**

New York: *Five Realists:* Bechtle, Gornik, Katz, Mangold and Thiebaud

May 14 - May 18: Chicago International Art Exposition

June 4 - July 18

San Francisco and New York: Etchings by **Judy Pfaff**

June 16 - July 22: Basel Art Fair

July 23 - August 29

San Francisco and New York: Changing Summer Group Exhibition

September 3 - October 17

San Francisco and New York: New Editions by **Bryan Hunt** and **Pat Steir**

New Editions

Half a Dozen of The Other, six new etchings by **Judy Pfaff**, are titled to suggest the continuation of, *Six of One*, a suite of woodcut prints the artist made at Crown Point Press five years ago. Pfaff used the same translucent Japanese hoshō paper in both series, but the prints that comprise *Half a Dozen of the Other* have only a family resemblance to the earlier woodcuts.

Because her new prints are concerned with such issues as light and shadow, water, dust and smoke, Pfaff titled each of the etchings after Leonardo's musings on the nature of phenomena. In some ways the airy, ephemerality of Pfaff's new works harks back to her room-sized installations of the early 1980s, such as "Deep-water," which gave the viewer the sensation of walking through an underwater landscape. At the same time, the imagery reflects Pfaff's current sculptural works that are more open and lighter than previous wall sculptures. These new sculptures are made by amassing woven steel, aluminum and copper, splicing common linear forms, from bedsprings to lamp shades. They are then lacquered with transparent metallic pigments.

The black, grey and silver *De Lumi e Obra* (of light and shadow) is the only monochromatic etching in the series. It is dominated by a concentric cluster of silver circular lines and a larger, more open silver calligraphic pattern traversing the print. Dark grey organic shapes in spitbite aquatint join smaller ovals and circles on the grey aquatint background. Other circles and ovals are handpainted with shiny, metallic paint and are scattered horizontally across the middle of the image. The overall feeling is of speeding elements in a nocturnal sky.

In contrast, *Che Cosa è Acqua* (what is water) evokes a watery world. The light green aquatint background is the setting for linear configurations in blue, green, sepia and amber, some of which suggest underwater plants. A few pink oval shapes are almost lost in the aqueous flux.

Ogni Cosa sō fa Ogni Cosa (everything is everything), in two states, includes, along with colored dots, several circular holes cut into the left half of the delicate paper. A concentric web of sepia lines in the lower right of each of the two prints is joined by similar smaller clusters scattered throughout. A compendium of transparent spitbite organic shapes and linear passages, along with the holes and dots, seems to be in swirling motion. Each state has a slightly different arrangement of colored ovals, some quite large, and State A has a passage of red marks absent in State B. The overall tonality of both prints is metallic and light.

The light brown aquatint background of *Del Fumio e Polvera* (of smoke and dust) is covered with sepia lines and linear drips and runs creat-

ed with a variety of etching techniques. Pearlescent pink and white circular dots provide bright points amid the floating linear elements. Transparency and dynamic movement characterize *Del Flusso e Riflusso* (of ebb and flow), while *Delli Spriti* (of the spirit) has a concentration of activity in the center which then spreads out in attenuated russet-colored cones toward the edges of the print.

Pfaff compares the creation of these evanescent works to "organizing dust on a surface" like magnetized agglomerations of metal filings. This is in contrast to her monumental permanent sculptural installation at the GTE building in Las Colinas outside of Dallas, Texas, which she had completed just before coming to work at Crown Point Press. The 40' high, 60' wide work is of a scale that can easily accommodate an entire mesquite tree welded to its armature.

While working on the *Half a Dozen of the Other* series, Pfaff also completed a long, horizontal print using drypoint and spitbite etching on Japanese hoshō paper. Each of the 10, side-by-side black and white compositions of which *Nella Popilla* (in the pupil) is composed is based on organic shapes. Some are more linear and open, others darker and more densely composed. They can be likened to either constellations as seen through a telescope or simple life forms as they appear under a microscope.

John Cage returned to Crown Point Press for his annual January residency. During his stay, he completed three series of prints. The title of the first, *HV2*, refers to horizontal/vertical and *HV*, an earlier series of monotypes also based on the right angle. For the fifteen images that comprise *HV2*, Cage arranged small copper plates "improvisationally," either in a horizontal or vertical direction, so that they fit tightly within the dimensions of the deckle-edged, handmade paper (11½ x 14½"). All of the copper plates were fragments Cage found around the studio and the number of plates that comprise each print is indicated in the title. The plates bore marks of wear, an occasional "x" (a registration mark

from a previous project), and, perhaps, grease or tarnish, all of which were retained and valued by Cage. Each plate was covered with a lightly etched aquatint to hold the tone and protect what was already on the plate. The color of each geometric area is a mixture of between one and six of the 64 pigments and/or inks on hand. The choice of color in all cases was determined by chance operations based on the I Ching charts Cage uses for all his decision-making. Because of the light etch, the overall color palette tends toward pastel. The series is best described as delicate and quiet, each print being a simple geometric arrangement of muted colors.

Variations III, so named because it relates to two earlier *Variation* series Cage has made at Crown Point Press, is printed on two shades of warm grey Roma paper originally used for Cage's *Global Village* etchings of 1989. As in the earlier *Variation* prints, Cage asked the printers to "smoke" the paper using the method Cage devised in 1985 at the press. The printers set aflame a wad of newspapers and then placed dampened paper on the fire to extinguish it. The smoke and occasional burn marks are recorded differently on each sheet. Next, Cage branded the sheets with a heated circular iron ring and/or an iron bar, again using the I Ching charts to determine the number of brands and their placement. He predetermined that the bar could be used a maximum of three times, and the ring placed on the paper flatly or on its side once each, so that at most a sheet might contain five brand marks. He also allowed for the possibility of no marks. The paper was not flattened at Cage's request. Cage thinks of the creases as an intriguing three-dimensional element. There are 57 images in the series; the number was determined by the amount of paper available. The beauty of these works lies in their atmospheric quality. It is as if the artist snatched a fragment of earth or sky and fixed it on paper. As one critic put it, "Accepting the world's temporary flow, John Cage makes an accurate image of it."

Notes

Anish Kapoor was awarded the 1991 Turner Prize. This prestigious prize is awarded annually by the Tate Gallery, London, to a British artist under the age of 50 for an outstanding presentation of his or her work.

A **Sherrie Levine** retrospective exhibition opened at the Kunsthalle, Zurich, and is currently at the Roseum Museum in Malmö, Sweden. It will end its tour at the Hotel de Paris in June.

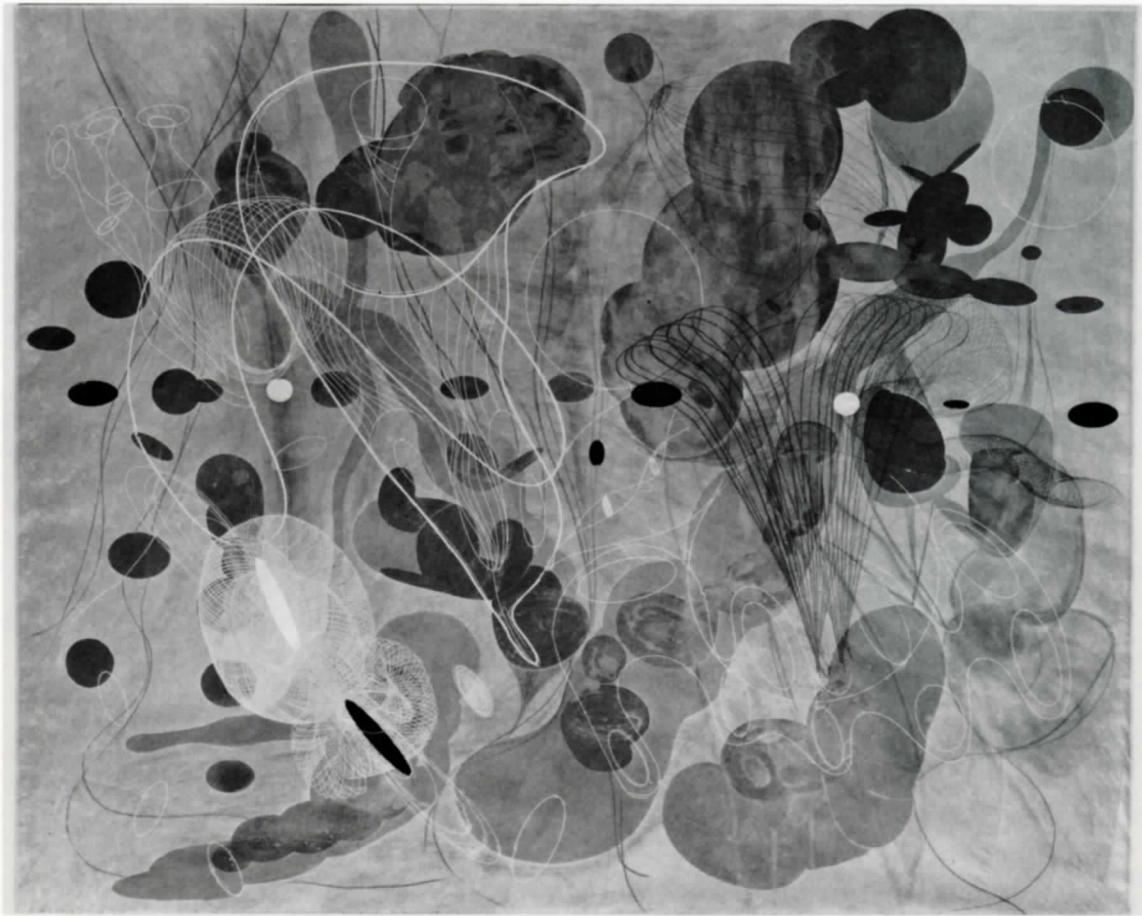
Sylvia Plimack Mangold *Works on Paper* is on view at the University of Michigan Museum of Art through June 7, 1992. It will travel to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Grünwald Center for Graphic Arts, UCLA, the Nueberger Museum, Purchase, New York and the Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Ohio.

Galerie Baudouin-Lebon, Paris, featured several Crown Point Press publications, including etchings by Tony Cragg, Hamish Fulton, Anish Kapoor and Markus Raetz, at SAGA, the print section of FIAC, in Paris last March.

Music
withOut
horiZon
soundscApe
that never
sTops

Without Horizon, the third series of etchings Cage completed during his January 1992 residency, reminded Cage of landscape, which in turn called to mind the above mesostic he had written earlier (mesostic is the acrostic-like poetic form Cage invented); hence, the title of the etchings. Deciding to stay with the number 57, the number of images in *Variations III*, Cage chose 57 edges of thirteen stones, stones he has

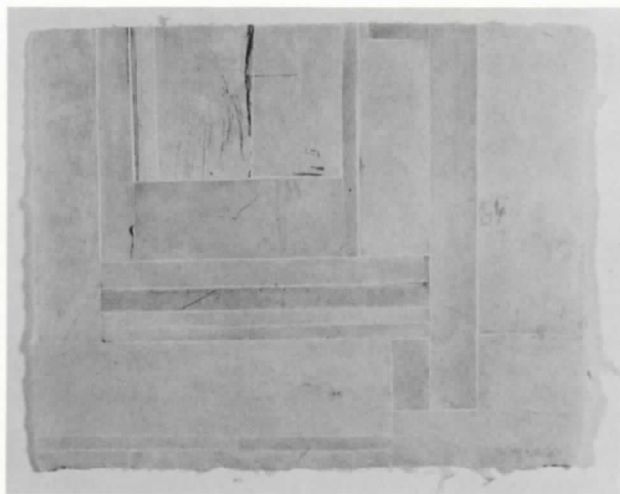
(continued on page 6)



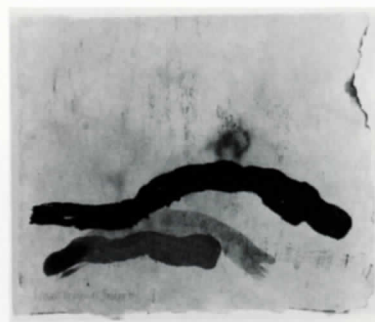
Judy Pfaff, *Half a Dozen of the Other: De Lumi e Obra*, 1991, aquatint, spitbite aquatint, softground, with hand painting, paper size: 42 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 50 $\frac{3}{4}$, image size: 36 x 45", edition 10



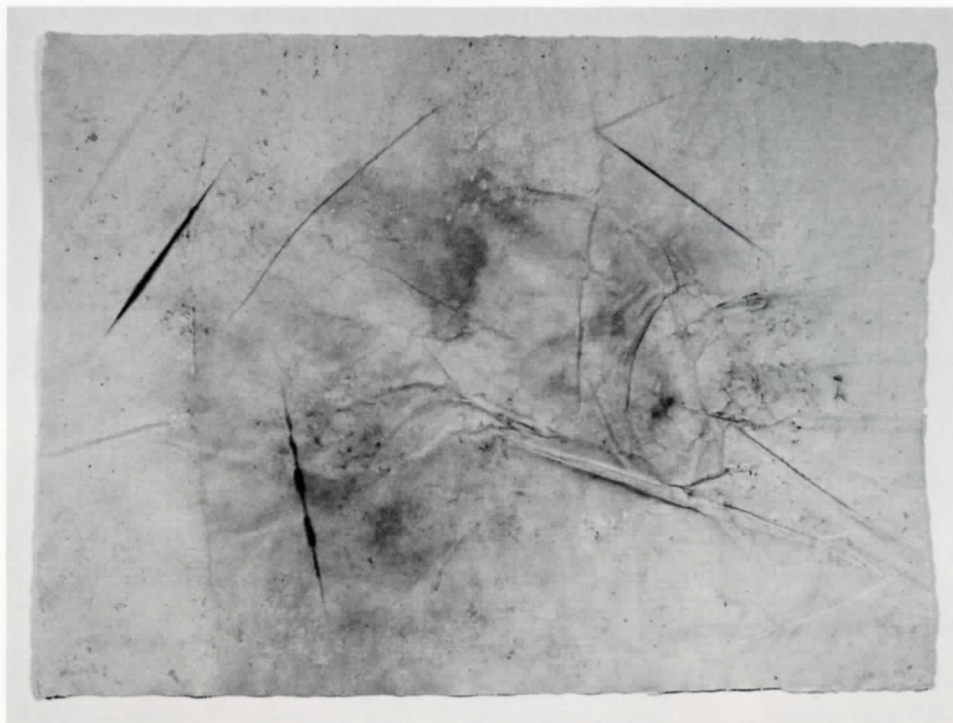
Judy Pfaff, *Half a Dozen of the Other: Che Cose è Acqua*, 1991, spitbite aquatint, softground, sugarlift, paper size: 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 50 $\frac{1}{2}$; image size: 36 x 45", edition 20



John Cage, *HV2*, 1992, 45 realted color etchings in three impressions each, paper and image size: 11½ x 14½"



John Cage, *Without Horizon*, 1992, drypoint, soft-ground, sugarlift, spitbite aquatint and hardground on smoked paper, paper and image size approximately: 7½ x 8½", edition 57



John Cage, *Variations III*, 1992, branding on smoked paper, paper and image size varies: 17½ - 19 x 25¼ - 26¼"

(Pfaff continued from front page)

jigsaw puzzle, rather than using traditional full page blocks," she explains. "I carved the wood pieces for the prints when I was in Maine [summer, 1985]. A year passed before I actually began to create the prints, and then it took a year to make them. During this time the images kept evolving from fruits and vegetables, specific organic shapes, to more generic signs for fruits and vegetables. So, in a way, the prints are transitional from the work done in 1986 to the present [1988]. This is actually the first time I have a body of work that could be considered transitional."

Six of One, a group of six large woodcuts, was published by Crown Point Press in 1987. In 1992, Pfaff completed a series of etchings called *Half a Dozen of the Other*. Whereas *Six of One* seems to me sturdy and practical, I find the new work delicate, sublime. Printmaking now has become an important part of Judy Pfaff's work. It provides an anchor for her installations and wall constructions yet allows her to proceed with prints using the same approach as in her more ephemeral work. "I think one of the things about being an artist is that you should be allowed to test murky, unclear, unsure territory," she says. "Having it all together is the least interesting thing in art, in being alive."

Kathan Brown

Quotations are from conversations or taken from *VIEW*, an interview published by Crown Point Press, 1988

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used as templates in former etchings. Using spitbite, sugarlift, softground, hardground, drypoint and one of 36 brushes or several improvised or traditional drawing tools, Cage drew along the edge of a stone rather than



Robert Kushner, *Hand Painted Daphne (Series 2)*, 1985-1991, hand painted color woodblock print, paper and image size: 32 1/4 x 25", edition 16

around the contour as he has done previously. The technique, brush, and particular stone edge were all chosen through chance operations. Cage concentrated his marks on the lower third of each small piece of handmade, smoked paper

(coincidentally 57 pieces) and limited the number of lines on each print to one, three, four, or five. Given that only black ink was used (albeit 12 different blacks) and that all the marks are linear, it is not surprising that there is an overall unity to the series. What is surprising is the amount of variety one finds from one image to the next. In #54, for example, a broad sugarlift stroke in transparent black arcs across the page, while #50 contains two slim and irregular softground lines intersecting and hovering over a faint spitbite line. The one elegant softground line of #36 suggests a horizon while the burn marks above might be precipitation. Three dramatic spitbite swaths, from light to dark black, characterize #41.

In 1985, **Robert Kushner** made two related ukiyo-style woodblocks in Japan, *Daphne I & Daphne II*. They depict the face of a woman whose features are indicated by painterly slashes of gold, lavender and blue. A collage arrangement of richly colored patterns forms the back-ground. Late last year, Kushner took a group of these prints back to his studio to hand paint. He made three series; *Hand Painted Daphne I*, *Hand Painted Daphne II*, and *Hand Painted Daphne (Series 2)*. The third series is the most lavishly worked. Kushner filled in areas with color, blocked in other areas with moire and gold metal leaf, or scattered glitter over the surface. The result is pure delight. Kushner's masterful meshing of figuration and abstraction, of line and color, of form and pattern is evident in every one of these newly painted images.

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Publisher of etchings and
color woodblock prints

Judy Pfaff

1. *Six of One... Maize*
1987, Color woodcut,
44 1/2" x 69"
Edition: 15
2. *Half a Dozen of the Other...
Del Flusso E Riflusso*
1991, Spitbite aquatint,
softground etching
with drypoint,
42 7/8" x 50 3/4"
Edition: 20
3. *Half a Dozen of the Other...
Ogni Cosa So Fa Ogni Cosa*
1992, Spitbite aquatint
and drypoint,
42 7/8" x 50 3/4"
Edition: 20



Selected Biography:
1992 Professor of Art,
Columbia University, NY
1986 National Endowment
for the Arts Award
1973 MFA Yale University,
New Haven, CT

Selected Public Collections:
Brooklyn Museum, NY

Museum of
Modern Art, NY

Library of Congress,
Washington, DC