

BARBARA HASKELL: *Each of the pieces in this show is based on a system. Would you describe that system.*

BRENDA MILLER: The system is relatively simple. I use numerical systems to determine the number of impressions which in turn cause different densities. I chose the alphabet because it has every kind of linear mark that you can find. I wanted to see what would happen if I used all these marks—a circle, a curve, a diagonal, a horizontal. The alphabet gave me the size and the shape. First, I use the alphabet in its own order, so there is A–Z in normal sequence. I then start again. On the second impression Z is eliminated. I keep eliminating the last letter until the entire alphabet is stamped in one place from A on top to Z on bottom.

You talked about having three parts to your work, the drawing, the diagram and the wall installation.

Well, the drawing is less of a part. I use the drawings to check out the diagrams. The diagrams act like maps which tell me how to make the installations.

Do you feel your pieces exist apart from their physical manifestations?

They always exist. For me they exist in a number of ways. They exist in a diagram that is the map of the work and they exist when put into their physical space. The Indians in New Mexico make sand paintings which can travel. There was no need to preserve art; the same drawing was passed through the generations, yet each transient drawing was permanent.

What is your view toward materiality? Your earlier string pieces had a strong sense of materials about them, and the rubber stamp pieces have much

less material impact. Is that important at all?

Yes . . . but my sense of materials has to do with finding the best material for the work. The materials are important, but they're not the goal. The pieces are not precious objects. I really wanted to move away from the idea of preciousness.

In the stamp pieces, if you look at the diagram you understand the underlying system, but if you look at the pieces themselves there is a sense of mystery about what exactly the concept or the system is.

The systems are not that complicated, but I do admit I like intrigue.

Do you see the systems as being visually evident in the work?

Yes. They can exist at different times or sometimes exist or not exist in their physical forms, but they are not separate.

Do you use the system as a means rather than an end in itself?

Yes, as a means.

You've mentioned that you think of yourself as a sculptor. Do you want to go into that?

I think of myself as a sculptor although my feeling is that it is unfortunate that we have to be one or the other. When these pieces are finally done they are three dimensional and they are conceived of as three dimensional even in the rubber stamp pieces.

Because of the overlay?

Yes, the impressions cause density. You can see the density.

You mentioned that your first pieces were rugs. Is that how you started out?

No, I didn't, I was a painter. When I stopped painting I began to make

rugs. I was trying to make a very soft surface and still use the same kind of image that I had painted. At a certain point I became less interested in the image and more interested in the back of the cloth. Now I think more about the materials I use as opposed to letting the materials lead me. I think it works hand in hand; you can't help but let your material lead you, but also you can select the material.

You don't seem very interested in color apart from the given color of the materials.

I've chosen to eliminate color because it interferes with the configuration of the piece. Some of the changes are so subtle that any alteration of color would alter the configuration. The first stamp piece I did was in blue ink because I happened to have a blue ink pad. When I finished the piece and I looked at it it disappeared into the wall. The blue pencil is an editing pencil and I use it with that in mind.

You were actively involved with the women's movement. Do you think that influenced the way your work went or your ability to use materials?

In a sense I think that it did. I believe that it allowed me to be more courageous about what I wanted to do. I realized that I had nothing to lose.

You once talked about the fact that your work was literalist, that you were interested in a real space, not an illusionary space.

Yes. I work in a real space. When I make the stamp pieces there are x number of impressions. I did an edition of one of these pieces and it took a while to convince the printer to not just set the type all at once and photograph it. Each impression had

to go through the press, in this case, thirteen times. And it was all printed in black ink and he couldn't understand why it had to be printed that way because it would have been so much simpler to do it the other way and so much cheaper too. He was making more money but he was an honorable man and it took a lot of explaining and convincing that this was very important. You can clearly see the different letters in the different impressions.

Do you use the structure or grid system as a way of working through these ideas about density?

The interesting thing is that I made ceiling/floor pieces initially that made different kinds of densities. I mean, if you had the identical thing on the floor as on the ceiling, the configuration would be very different. When I began working on the walls I began working with a different kind of density. You could leave these big long wide spaces and still create a kind of density.

Do you adopt a system as a means of getting rid of compositional decisions?

Absolutely. I make the initial decision and choose to stay with it. I select a specific "grammar" to work within.

Are any of your decisions about the pieces made empirically, or do you work from an absolutely preconceived system?

Well, both. I first start working with the pieces and they are made because that is what I want to do. I make a piece and then I diagram it and then I work from the diagram. A diagram or piece is capable of generating itself. The plan always exists whether or not it's written down first.

Brenda Miller

- 1941 Born in the Bronx, New York
- 1963 Certificate, Parsons School of Design, New York
- 1965 B.F.A., University of New Mexico, Albuquerque
- 1967 M.F.A., Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana,
Lives in New York City

Individual Exhibitions

- 1974 Samangallery, Genoa, Italy
Arte Per, Rome
- 1975 City University Graduate Center, New York

Group Exhibitions

- 1971 Greene Street, New York. Two exhibitions,
Winter and Fall.

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, "26 Contemporary Women Artists," April 18–June 13. Illustrated catalogue, with introduction by Lucy R. Lippard.

- 1972 John Weber Gallery, New York, "Group Show," January–February. Exhibition selected by Carl Andre; included work by Laurace James, Mary Obering, Nancy Holt and Andre. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Member's Penthouse, "Untitled IV," April.

Kunsthaus, Hamburg, Germany, "Gedok American Women Artist Show," April 14–May 14. Illustrated catalogue, with introduction by Lil Picard.

John Weber Gallery, New York, "Group Show." Exhibition included work by Nancy Holt, Laurace James, Carl Andre, Hans Haacke, Mary Obering.

Kingsboro Community College, Brooklyn, New York.

The Kenan Center, Lockport, New York, "Ten Artists* (* who also happen to be women)," November 17, 1972–January 14, 1973. Illustrated catalogue, with text by Lucy R. Lippard. Exhibition traveled to the Michael C. Rockefeller Arts Center Gallery, Fredonia State University College, Fredonia, New York, January 19–February 18.

- 1973 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, "1973 Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Art," January 10–March 18. Illustrated catalogue.

New York Cultural Center, "Soft as Art," March 20–May 6. Illustrated catalogue, with text by Mario Amaya.

Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, September.

- 1974 Museum of the Civic Center, Philadelphia, "Women's Work-American Art 1974"

The Clocktower, New York, "Discussions: Works/Words." May 11–June 1.

The Women's Interart Center, New York, "Wall Sculpture."

- 1975 William Patterson College of New Jersey, Wayne. Exhibition organized by John Perrault.

Articles

(not including reviews)

Broos, Kees. *Museum Journal*, "een muurobject van Brenda Miller," series 18, no. 5, October 1973, p. 214, illus.

Tower, Susan. "The Object Perceived/The Object Apprehended," *Artforum*, vol. 12, January 1974, pp. 40–42, illus.

Weatherford, Elizabeth. "Crafts for Art's Sake," *Ms. Magazine*, vol. 1, May 1973, pp. 28–32, illus.

Catalogue

Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width. All works are from 1975 and are lent by the artist unless otherwise noted.

Wall Installations

¾ inch rubber stamp with black ink and blue pencil on wall, 52 × 52:

1. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior North
2. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior South
3. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior East
4. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior West
5. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior North
6. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior South
7. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior East
8. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior West

Drawings

Black ink on paper, 17 × 17:

9. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior North
10. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior South
Sperone Westwater Fischer, New York
11. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior West
Nell E. Wendler, London
12. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior East
13. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior North
Private collection, the Netherlands
14. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior South
Sperone Westwater Fischer, New York
15. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior East
16. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior West

Diagrams

Black ink on graph paper, 17 × 17:

17. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior North
18. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior South
19. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior East
20. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Interior West
21. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior North
22. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior South
23. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior East
24. Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior West

December 22, 1975—January 18, 1976

Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10021

Cover: *Diagonal Alphabet (26) Exterior East*, 1975
Photograph by Eeva-inkeri