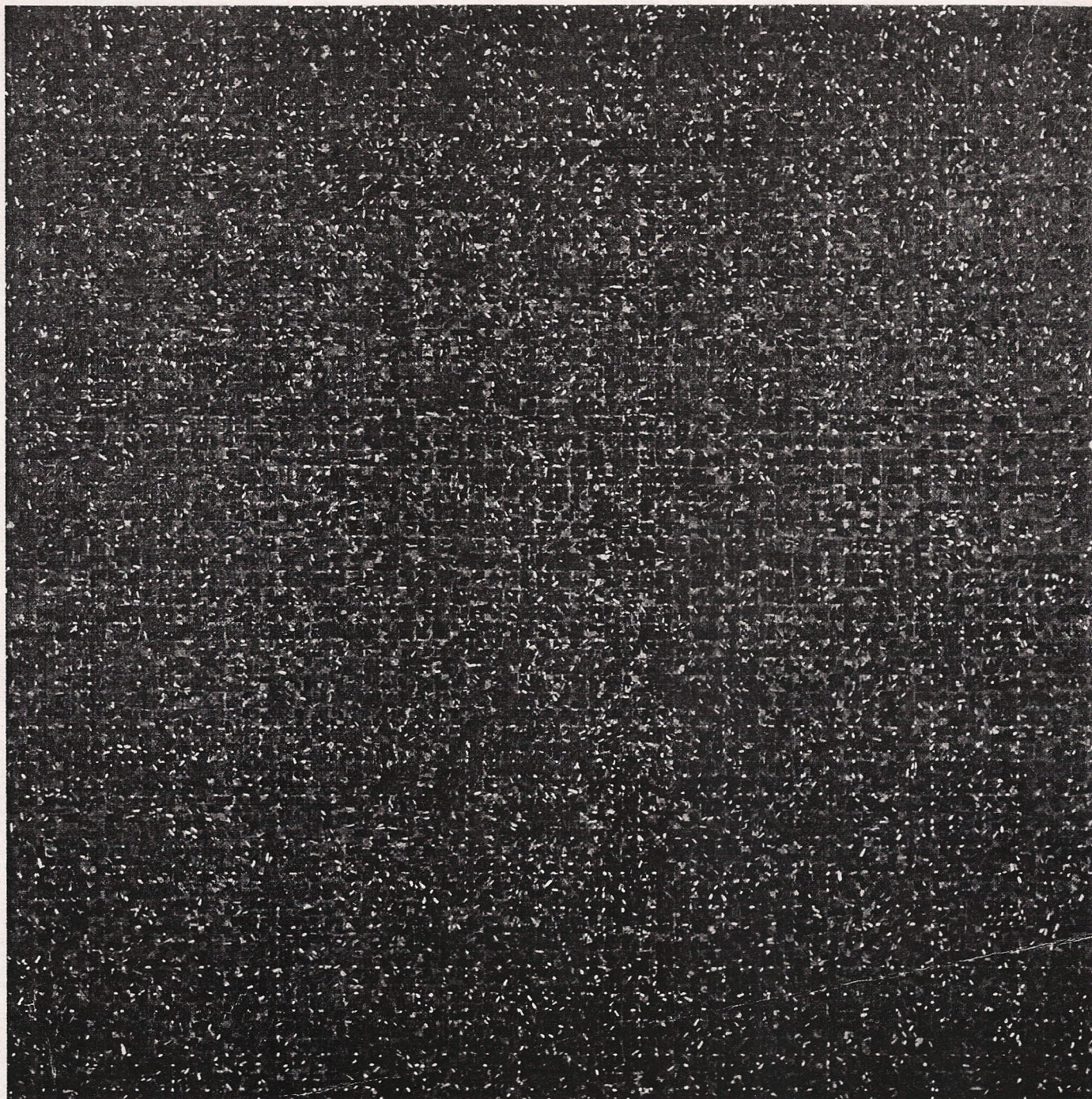


Review of Exhibitions



Kes Zapkus: *Green*, 1975, oil, acrylic and vinyl screen on canvas, 8 feet square; at Paula Cooper.

NEW YORK

Kes Zapkus at Paula Cooper

Kes Zapkus' new paintings are expansive orchestrations of minutely articulated visual fields. Their rhythmic pulse is built from repetitious interlocking patterns—grid, silkscreened dots, tiny flecks, dashes, dabs and strokes—which yield considerable internal variation and yet retain all-over textural uniformity. That the experience of these works is closely reminiscent of music is not accidental. Zapkus was a musician

when he began to study art, and he has long contemplated analogous means of composing or "programming" his paintings. Around 1968, he experimented with color in complicated theoretical relationships approximating 12-tone serial music, and, although the current work avoids such rigid systematization, it is closer in spirit to this earlier phase than to his recent past. Only the blue-gray *Delos Night* recalls Zapkus' last show—in its tonality and mysterious, impenetrable surface calligraphy.

Zapkus' color now is aggressively anti-

illusionistic, factual rather than emotional. The works identify themselves by bold single hues—red, green, yellow or rust, at strident pitch. Small horizontal and vertical strokes, close in value, establish the ground; possibilities for subtle contrast of tone and texture are extended by the combined use of acrylic, oil and vinyl paints—the last for the silkscreening process. Surfaces are everywhere inflected with brilliant contrasting accents that include most colors of the spectrum moving in dizzying optical paths up, down and diagonally, though set-

ting along the regulating axes of the grid. "I stop on a painting once it has a color personality which is self-referential," Zapkus says.

Homage to H.M. is a huge (9 by 30 feet), predominantly white canvas and is his most impressive new work. Its title refers to Matisse's late cut-outs and their play of bright color against white. However, unlike Matisse, Zapkus tries to avoid clearly readable internal shapes, insisting that "a square or a circle is as representational and as loaded with literary reference as a face or a nude." Instead, he uses color in spots so small and densely packed that the marks become expanding, pulsating pattern sequences with a developing rhythmic energy. Zapkus says he had in mind the combined effect of a dozen Mondrian *Broadway Boogie Woogies*. Because of the white ground, *Homage* has a physical transparency that allows glimpses of underlying layers and procedures—a pen-drawn grid, ground strokes in varied off-whites, random spotting, allover silkscreen images printed in white, and of course the bright color notations on top. Each successive layer buries part of what is beneath: the grid itself is redrawn several times, leaving traces of former decisions like ghost lines. In the final stages, Zapkus integrates the painting

with delicate touches which here and there disguise and confound spatial relationships. The shallow space reverberates with deliberate ambiguities of all sorts.

Zapkus' grid had its origin in a series of polyptych paintings he made around 1960. Geometric systems were then emerging as a premise central to Minimal art; however, Zapkus' pictorial goals were (and still are) at odds with Minimalism, despite the highly serialized nature of his work. His paintings are ambitious in their extreme visual complexity (and are occasionally even suffocated by it). By enriching his initial brush and silkscreen gridding with a more intuitive dispersal of marks, Zapkus lessens predictability. The myriad details create pressures for a close-up reading that argues against the weight of the total field and forbids an instantaneous grasp. Extended viewing time is essential to the resonant timbre of Zapkus' work; time yields a contemplative, even meditative, experience.

—Patricia Kaplan