

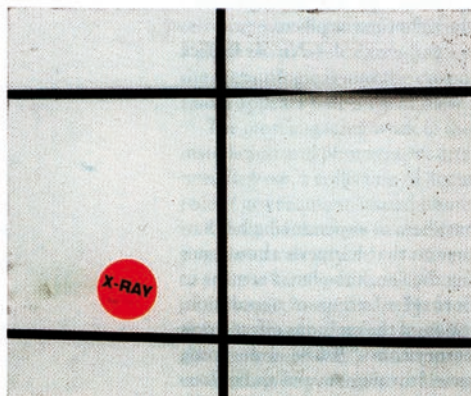
ARTFORUM

JANUARY 2008, p. 281

Karin Sander

D'AMELIO TERRAS

Karin Sander, *Mailed Painting Berlin–New York*, 2007, primed canvas, plastic tape, and sticker, 19¼ x 23¾". From the series "Mailed Paintings," 2006–.



In 1926, Edward Steichen tried to bring his version of Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space*, 1923, into New York on the occasion of the sculptor's retrospective, only to have the work held up at customs on the grounds that it was not art but a duty-entitled industrial implement—a kitchen utensil. As the story goes, Steichen had to pay a heavy tax, as did Marcel Duchamp when he imported another Brancusi some weeks later. The verdict in Steichen's case was subsequently

overturned when a court decreed that, despite its not looking particularly like a bird, the work was "nevertheless pleasing to look at and highly ornamental," evidence that it was made by a "professional sculptor." Redeemed by formalism, Brancusi's abstraction substantiated technique and harbored intention—a kind of saving grace whether it was manifested expressively or not. Quaint—or just typically avant-gardist—as this episode appears, it nevertheless foregrounds the legal and economic inviolability of borders (more so than the questioning of

aesthetics its controversy once implied) and resonates in an era marked by dislocation and the wayward exigencies of exchange.

Karin Sander's most recent New York show reimagined modernist fantasies of fluid transnationalism as, well, mail art. Indeed, Sander's "Mailed Paintings," 2006–, is a series of white-primed, store-bought canvases that the artist sent to the gallery from far-flung locations (Berlin predominates, but Colombia, Japan, Iceland, and Finland also appear). The deliberate omission of any protective wrapping meant that the panels were numbered, bruised, torn, stamped with X-ray and priority insignia, and abraded by stretcher bars in transit, forever branded with the marks of their dispatch. Very much in the spirit of Duchamp's own *Large Glass*, 1915–23, declared completed once broken in transit, each component of "Mailed Paintings" was declared "done" on arrival at the gallery. A kind of telegraphic communiqué bespeaking a diaristic narrative of transport, every airmail sticker or bar code accumulated along the way indexes the work's passage and constitutes its forlorn composition. While *Mailed Painting Colombia–New York*, 2007, has nary a scratch (having been boxed up by FedEx), *Mailed Painting Berlin–New York*, 2007, is bordered by blue tape; *Mailed Painting Berlin–New York*, 2006–2007, and *Mailed Painting*

Helsinki–New York, 2007, are bisected by tic-tac-toe-like grids of plastic straps; and *Mailed Painting Bonn–Gmuden–Berlin–New York*, 2007, is slashed à la Lucio Fontana.

In their vulnerability to the vicissitudes of shipment, the works in "Mailed Paintings" make clear the series' relation to Sander's other work, most specifically the larger series, "The Patina Paintings," 1988–, to which it belongs along with her "Gebrauchsbilder" (Pictures for Use), 1988–. ("Gebrauchsbilder," too, began as a set of blank canvases; but, owing to their unlikely sites of manufacture—settings such as a coal cellar or the deck of a ship—they incorporate traces of their surroundings.) But they also follow from her wall-based interventions, the best known of which involved her polishing sections of walls to a lacquerlike finish, producing a nominal art of the infra-thin. Yet Sander's appropriations extend beyond ready-made materials and institutional sites to historiography, or, more precisely, the history of art history: From Kasimir Malevich or Robert Rauschenberg's monochromes to On Kawara's postcards, "Mailed Paintings" responds to a litany of precedents. But to Sander's credit, even as she inevitably invokes such forerunners, her paintings don't collapse under their referential weight. Instead, what makes "Mailed Paintings" more than merely clever *are* its surfaces, as restrained and "pleasing to look at" as Brancusi's—even without a single mark of paint.

—Suzanne Hudson