

WHEN DOES ART BECOME A VIABLE COMMODITY? WHO DECIDES?

Essay by curator Gregory de la Haba on the occasion of Judy Rifka's Retrospective at PULPO GALLERY in September 2021

When does art become a viable commodity? Who decides?

It took nearly eighty years after the death of Johann Sebastian Bach in 1750 for the world to start tuning-in to his true genius. Herman Melville's literary masterpiece *Moby Dick* was a commercial flop in his lifetime. And it was a French art critic in the 19th century who alerted the world that the 17th century Dutch artist Jan Vermeer was a master worth giving a standing ovation for. Life is dizzying and complicated and fills itself with anomalies, oddities, and things that defy norms and or expectations. Take for example the 50-plus year career of American artist, Judy Rifka, who took the New York art world by storm with her revolutionary *Single Shapes* on plywood paintings at the start of the 1970's. "Every painter who saw them at the time recognized their influence" said the esteemed art critic, Rene Ricard, in his oft-cited, 1981 *Artforum* essay, *The Radiant Child*.

Almost immediately, important collectors like the Vogels and Jean Paul Najjar began buying them. Artists and critics alike praised Rifka's work. In April, 1974, art critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe wrote in *Artforum* that Judy Rifka's *Single Shapes* "dominated the show" [...] and "that Rifka's is the most devastatingly original formulation of painting's identity that I've encountered in some time."

In 1975, The Whitney Museum's curators selected her *Single Shapes* for that year's Biennial and the American conceptual artist, Mel Bochner, selected Rifka's *Single Shapes* for a 1975 show at Artists Space, NYC.

And while extolling on the picture-making virtues of Basquiat, Haring and their fellow downtown, art-scene colleague, Judy Rifka, in *The Radiant Child*, Rene Ricard posited the question: "Is innovation important?" His answer was telling:

“The trick is to make it appear that the innovator ripped it off from you. A good example of this principle is the case of Judy Rifka’s work at the debut of the 70’s. Her Single Shapes on plywood are among the most important paintings of the decade.”

But Ricard, even then, bemoaned the fact that Rifka wasn’t getting her due, writing:

“She could then be called a painter’s painter if feeding ideas to others is what painters do. I suspect it would be a heartbreaking thing to watch others get credit for your invention. Her researches into Constructivist theory were groundbreaking, but a pioneer is never at a loss for uncharted territory.”

So what’s her art worth? Rifka carried on unrelentingly, like time.

In 1983, the German magazine Kunstforum explored the contemporary art scene in New York only to conclude that Judy Rifka is the quintessential New York artist and the “outspoken representative of the post-minimal era.”

Back when the art world was smaller, before art fairs and the internet, Judy Rifka, it seemed, was everywhere. She participated in the first show at the Mudd Club (curated by her close friend, Keith Haring) and at PS1’s inaugural exhibition in Long Island City, Queens; had an entire floor space at the 1983 Whitney Biennial for her large Wallpaper paintings, rocked Documenta 7 in Kassel thanks to the German curator extraordinaire, Klaus Honnef; was included in the infamous Times Square Show, collaborated with the art collective Colab, created multiple design covers for the legendary Art-Rite magazine, had her art on the cover of Art In America, and is in 26 museums and institutions around the world. And from the late 70’s to early 90’s sold hundreds of works through her main dealer, Brooke Alexander, in New York City.

But you wouldn’t believe any of it judging from Rifka’s auction records which are not only dismal they are practically non-existent. But are auction prices the end-all to an artist’s value? Is our final judgement of an artist set-in-stone by the final hammer price only?

So what’s her art worth?

Or did all the influential critics, renowned writers, famous artists and important collectors who admired, purchased, and wrote glowingly about Rifka’s work get it all wrong? Maybe Haring, Ricard, Honnef, Bochner, Gilbert-Rolfe - and the countless

curators - from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn to Kunsthalle Luzern were all asleep at the wheel and made the worst judgements in art history's history when they selected Rifka's art for exhibitions? Maybe their assessment about Judy Rifka's art was abjectly incorrect?

Or was it? We must take a closer look ('in the rearview mirror') because echoes of her magnificent past continue to reverberate...

In a 2007 New York Times review of High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975, Roberta Smith wrote of the "brave if deficient show" that "some inclusions seem almost ludicrous, given certain rather obvious absences [...] of Judy Rifka [...] whose efforts [...] were among the most closely watched developments of the early '70s."

by Gregory de la Haba