

The zeitgeist rumbles and the market shifts; new strata appear and the topographers bend to their work. Lately we have been witnessing the emergence of a generation whose work was buried by the sudden rise of expressionist figuration. While others were rejecting the cerebral prescriptions of a reductionist establishment, these artists sought to carve out a niche in it. Although catastrophic for their burgeoning careers, the return of the figure impelled them to rethink their position and allowed them to work in a less dogmatic manner. Now what looked like bad timing seems to have been fortuitous. Their work appears fresher than it would have six years ago. This group of artists weaned on Minimalism includes not only notorious names like Halley and Taaffe, but a number of others not readily associated with Neo-whatever-you-call-it. Among these is Jan Frank.

The first influence that comes to mind on viewing Frank's recent work is Ellsworth Kelly, but Frank maintains that a stronger force has been Donald Judd. Frank's earlier work addressed Judd's problematic, the foregrounding of how what we know defines how we see, but while Judd used a neutral context to minimize the role of cognition in the act of seeing, Frank explored more loaded contexts. He took the fictive space of the video monitor—the world we see "behind" the screen — and enlarged the resulting irregular polyhedron. Like Judd

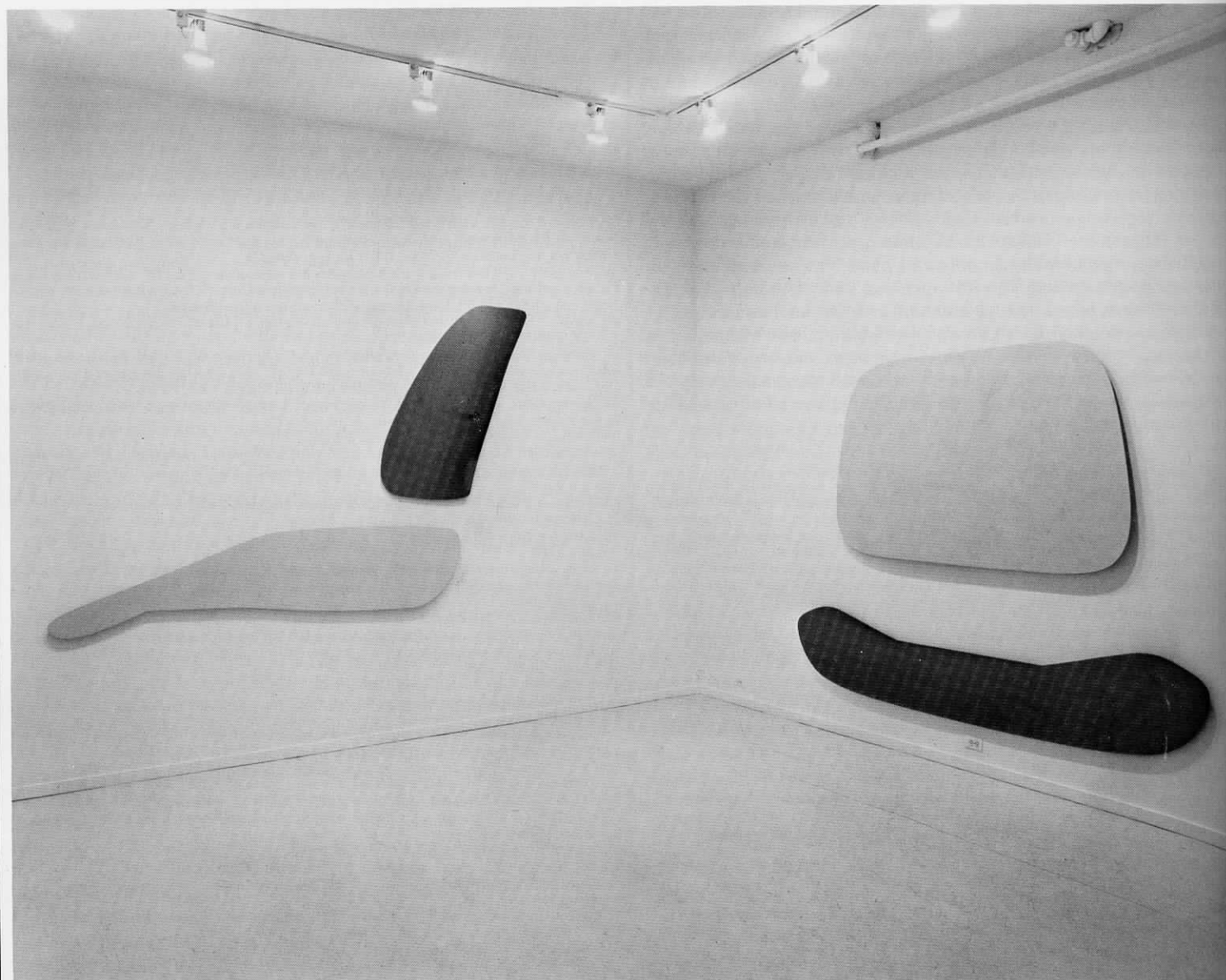
he was using a received form but whereas Judd's boxes derived from a pure and general geometry, Frank's source was cultural and specific. Judd's vocabulary can be seen as both pure mind — objects which represent ideas with only an arbitrary connection to a palpable reality — and as pure material — objects so legible they resist interpretation. This is an opposition Judd does not try to reconcile. Frank operates in a murkier middle-ground with neither pure forms nor absolute opposites. He proposes a cultural exegesis rather than a devotion to essences. In this dialogue with Judd, Frank manifests his generation's indebtedness to Johns and Warhol, even in a Minimalist context. The Minimalists could still believe that advanced artists ought to inhabit an ahistorical universe, pursuing Truth in a vacuum. Whatever their reductionist tendencies, Frank's "video sculptures" are thoroughly acculturated, a quality even more pronounced in his recent work.

Moving away from the anonymity of television monitors, Frank's new shapes derive from two other American institutions: Charles Eames and Frank Lloyd Wright. In a period when everyone has a source, usually some modernist master, Frank's choices are somewhat unusual, a designer and an architect. But given his concern with shape it seems only natural that he would be drawn to these two form-givers of American life. It is affinity rather than a hunger for novelty that has

REASONED AND FLUID: NEW WORK BY JAN FRANK

MEYER RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN
DANIEL WIENER

Jan Frank, Installation (Eames Series), 1985. *Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.*



led Frank to Eames and Wright. Wright once said that his development was conditioned by his desire to "escape from the box" and discover forms more responsive to our inherent needs. Frank too is unsatisfied by a programmatic repetition of forms.

Starting with an Eames chair or a Wright ranch-style house, Frank projects these three-dimensional objects as silhouettes, revealing the flat shape of their volume so that their internal surfaces are implied rather than articulated. The resulting works oscillate between representation and abstraction. His materials — rolled steel and plywood painted with encaustic — give these pictorial wall pieces a sculptural presence. In work where so much emphasis is placed on the edge, one needs to feel that the contour has been *discovered*, for otherwise it runs the risk of being mere diagram. If, as in this case, the form is an outline of a three-dimensional object, there must be a call and response between flatness and depth. With the Wright houses their flat shape is too persistently violated by the receding perspectives of the rooflines. Representation overwhelms abstraction and our reading remains fixed. On the other hand, due to their spatial ambiguity, the Eames chairs offer multiple readings. They might just as easily be alluding to TV sets, grills and fenders of old cars, speech bubbles from cartoons, Arp or Ellsworth Kelly. The twin forms are attracted to each other by an

invisible force, like the tumbling birds in Carpaccio's *Portrait of a Knight*, but one isn't sure of why until suddenly the curved outlines cut back into space and reveal themselves as the seat and back of Eames' bent plywood chairs. It is this delay of recognition that makes them more successful than the houses. By flattening and rotating the chair, Frank has found a surprising number of shapes. This is partly thanks to Eames' sense of design but also because of Frank's own attention to the subtlety of the unseen aspects of this functional icon.

This commentary on the ubiquitous reminds one of Frank's appropriating contemporaries, yet he is not out to deconstruct anything. He may be deriving these flat sculptures from the modern heritage but his work is not an ironic exposition of the interchangeability of styles. Instead it is a conscious exposition of influence in action. He wants to indicate how previous solutions can apply to present problems. In his attempt to free himself from the box of minimalist abstraction he has managed to punch a few air-holes in the box of history. Succumbing neither to nostalgia nor condescension, he has found something positive in American culture and he is more interested in finding ways to continue, than in making hymns to the postmodern impasse. Like his sources, Frank's work is reasoned and fluid, well-proportioned and striking, fresh and durable.

Jan Frank, *Split Level Magic* (Modern Home Series), 1985. Hot rolled steel, 91 x 120". Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.

