



William Anastasi, *Untitled. Cardboard piece*, 1963, corrugated cardboard, ca. 28 1/4 x 22 1/8".

## COPENHAGEN

**WILLIAM ANASTASI**  
NIKOLAJ COPENHAGEN  
CONTEMPORARY ART  
CENTER

William Anastasi explores the elementary constituents of art—the viewing space, the viewer, pictorial space and its framing, time, chance, decision, etc.—and thereby plays with artistic cognition in its various forms. This retrospective (and a concurrent exhibition with Dove Bradshaw and John Cage at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde, Denmark) shows his work, with its tenacious ambition to shed all metaphysical pretension, to involve a constant approximation to the real. The wall removal pieces from 1966, for example, where a section of the coating of the wall in the exhibition space is removed (“height and depth variable”), represent a space-clearing gesture that still comes across with a justified longing.

For Anastasi, the medium propagates the medium, as Bent Fausing states in his catalogue text. But ultimately, the question is to what degree art propagates art. Even if some of the work is nearly forty years old, you are still provoked by its weightlessness. Is this the product of old-fashioned aestheticism (“Beauty can be found in anything”), or of a vulnerability that creates an open basis for value judg-

ment, by way of a literalism meant to install no power relationships between things? It seems that the relentlessly analytical, almost Cartesian spirit in which Anastasi has undertaken to explore art and its various aspects has led him to break with conventional definitions of aesthetics while at the same time enriching art with new formal possibilities. His work balances contradictions: erasing aesthetic boundaries while being uncompromising with the form of the specific work; approaching dematerialization while confronting materiality head-on; aligning self-sameness and alchemic transformation; and focusing on the reality of the present moment while grasping the timeless.

Fausing claims that the works incorporating the word “Jew,” which Anastasi began making in the early '80s, introduced an entirely new dimension to his art, namely a political-cultural content added to what had previously been purely self-referential. But it is more interesting to propose that Anastasi recognized a political-cultural dimension to his self-referential work all along, a dimension that emerges in his implicit critique of art and its institution and in the clearly antiauthoritarian stance of his minimal gestures. In this sense it seems redundant for Anastasi to write “Jew” on a canvas. The horrors of this century were already registered in his work, as was the ethical protest against them: His art is a critique of (ideological) fantasy, and it implies the necessity of self-reflexivity in representation.

Thomas McEvelley, in a catalogue essay that amounts to a roll call of artists who have paid unacknowledged homage to Anastasi, sets out to avenge his relative absence from the official art historical

annals. Not all the allegations are as incriminating as others. The dissimulation of originality was already an integrated strategy in Andy Warhol's work by the time he did his first “Oxidation Painting” in 1977—according to McEvelley a rip-off of Anastasi's 1961 urine crater in wet cement, *Relief*. Still, McEvelley succeeds in showing that Anastasi's work has been seminal. His cocktail of high modernist imperturbability and deadpan humor also resonates with younger artists. Jonathan Monk's irreverent spoofs on painting, for example, could be Anastasi progeny. And Rirkrit Tiravanija's early-'90s soup meals purport a congenial literalism—after all, Anastasi calls the scores for his conceptual works “recipes,” and “Homage to the Unknown IV,” 1961, a series of drawings of used toilet paper, is an unambiguous reference to the results of digestion.

—Lars Bang Larsen