

THE BUFFALO NEWS

A place where form and space meet

By RICHARD HUNTINGTON
News Art Critic

The modern sculptors working in the late 1960s were famously stingy with visual incident. To them, sculpture was all unadorned geometrical volume. And the simpler this volume the better.

Much earlier, modern architects had the same idea about buildings: strip away to the basics.

Thus it came to pass that a piece of modern sculpture sitting (or suspended, as many were) in the stark space of a modern gallery didn't particularly differentiate itself from that space. Architectural space gave up its usual role as container for sculptural objects and became a participant in the spatial experience of the sculpture.

This commingling of architectural and sculptural space is subtly demonstrated by Simon Ungers' 36-foot red rectilinear column, "Red Vertical," installed in the University at Buffalo Art Gallery's Lightwell Gallery.

The space here is unusual — two-storied and shaped like a generous silo with skylights. Its imposing verticality practically begs for vertical structures. Ungers complies by creating a coordinated spatial situation that makes questions about architectural and sculptural space seem almost intrusive in the face of the measured calm of the installation.

Born in Cologne, Germany, and trained as an architect at Cornell University, Ungers has no problem letting the architectural space have its say. The column asserts itself as a sculptural entity mainly by its bright red color and precise surface. These qualities proclaim it as "an object," but not aggressively so.

The chief visual drama is between the given architecture of the room and this simple upright form. At top and bottom the col-

REVIEW

Red Vertical

Simon Ungers' installation designed specifically for the University at Buffalo Art Gallery's Lightwell Gallery.

At the UB Art Gallery, Center for the Arts, North Campus, through Dec. 31.

umn is indented and painted black to create the illusion that the structure is floating just shy of the building that supports it.

This gentle engagement between column and architecture suggests a remarkable suspension of the usual assertiveness of architecture and sculpture as independent spatial arts — and with it a suspension of artistic ego.

Ungers' work, while it refers to a minimalist past, skillfully avoids the didactic tack of the major minimalists. "Red Vertical" has none of the macho aggressiveness and moral righteousness of, say, a Robert Morris installation.

With Ungers a very restrained drama spreads outward, so to speak, from the column and into the architecturally created space. Private, inward-looking experiences — the bodily associations with verticality, for example — are delicately held in check by "the public space."

In such a homogenized formal situation, egos — both ours and the artist's — are forced to give themselves up to a more convincing sculptural/architectural totality.

Once it exists, this installation may seem all too obvious. Ungers is reviving what today might seem

a used-up aesthetic. Anything with a patiently minimalist look — especially when architecturally situated — is apt to appear retrograde.

But don't be fooled by appearances. The necessary simplicity of "Red Vertical" obscures the work's metaphoric complexity. If the minimalists' motto was "What you see is what you get," then Ungers' must be, "What you see is only the beginning." Ungers uses such very un-minimal things as illusion with the sense that a solid column floats in space. And he uses color — a single color to be sure — but enough to suggest more than mere

architectural demarcation of one form from another.

In Ungers' skilled hands, form, color and actual and illusory space become means to push the viewer into new situations in relationship to the work of art. The play between visual and mental understanding is joined imperceptibly with spatial understanding. And in the process the act of art "viewing" as we ordinarily know it is temporarily, almost magically, held in abeyance.

"Red Vertical" was curated by UB curator Vesela Sretenovic.

Tuesday, June 13, 1995

Page C-5

Huntington, Richard. "A place where form and space meet." *The Buffalo News*. 13 June 1995.

730 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK NY 10019
TEL 446 336 7183
FAX 646 336 7185
WWW.GERINGLOPEZ.COM