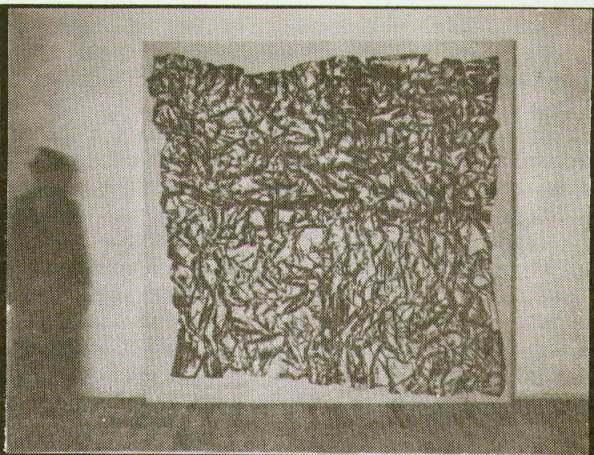
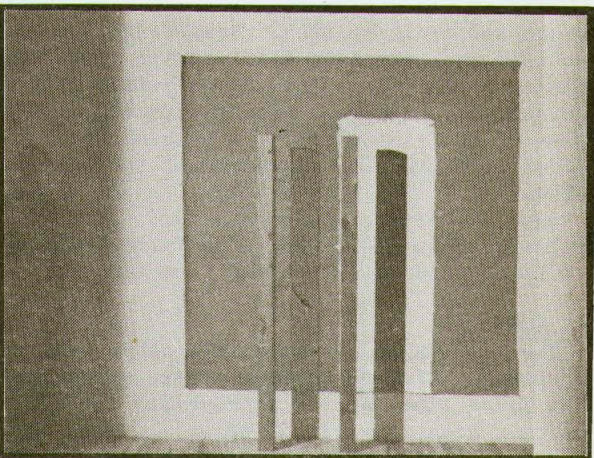


On Surface
1970
MATRIX:
January 27
to
February 27

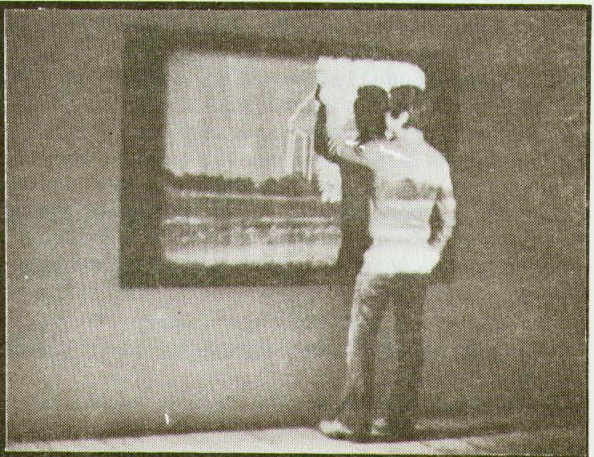


From White to
Black in Color
1977
MATRIX:
March 1 - 21



Filmpresentation
1976-77
MATRIX:
March 1 at
7:30 pm

Hartford Art
School
University
of Hartford
March 2 at
8:00 pm



INTRODUCTION

Benni Efrat is a visual artist who uses a variety of contemporary media to investigate the nature and the validity of human knowledge. His oeuvre is essentially didactic and the participation of the museum visitor is an important part of Efrat's presentations.

Our initial perceptual reading of Efrat's pieces will often misguide us to incorrect assumptions about their physical reality. Further investigation will lead us to revised conclusions and a lingering doubt about the reliability of our empirical judgements. Efrat hopes that we will move from our first awareness to a more accurate and subtle understanding of each work. Says Efrat, "The spectator can become the artist if he supplies all the connections."

Efrat calls his work concrete art. By this he means nothing is to stand between the viewer and the actual physical characteristics of the work. His work is usually non-associative and does not refer to any aesthetic sensibility (although decades from now it will surely look like art of the 1970s). Efrat's pieces do not intend to speak of beauty or nature, of human emotions or transcendentalism. Rather the materials are to be experienced directly and for themselves. Each work stands complete in the viewer's examination of the physical evidence of its existence.

Complementary to this notion is Efrat's abiding commitment to be guided in his explorations by the corporeality of each of the materials and media he uses. Says Efrat, "What I do has everything to do with the materials I am working with." Scrupulously attentive to the essential properties of materials and media, Efrat's work often quietly circumvents customary practices to reveal new and appropriate uses of familiar means. He bypasses traditional expectations in order to expand our awareness of the fundamental nature of the medium itself.

Born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1936, Efrat emigrated to Israel (then Palestine) in 1947. He is an Israeli citizen. In 1966, Efrat moved to London and in 1976 moved from London to New York City.

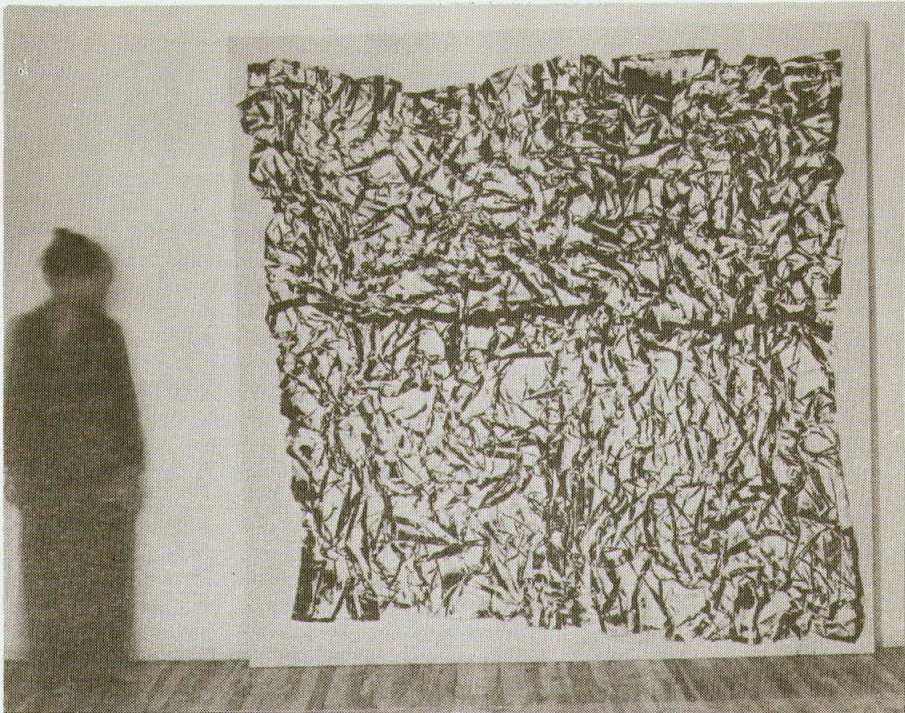
ON SURFACE

The first part of the MATRIX exhibition presents three works from a series called On Surface. These works, being publicly exhibited for the first time, are an appropriate introduction to the artist's concerns. Virtually all of Efrat's mature work deals with what he calls surface problems.

Traditionally the canvas is known as the support and the paint as the surface medium. The canvas has been the stage on which the action takes place. It is most often stretched taut or, in recent years, occasionally tacked or bolted directly onto the wall. In each of the three works in MATRIX Efrat uses two pieces of canvas -- one as the support canvas, attached to a stretcher in conventional fashion, the other as a surface canvas applied to the support canvas.

In Scar, the support canvas and the surface canvas are, in fact, exactly the same size. This equivalency may surprise us for we have little experience seeing canvas bunched and wrinkled in this fashion and in this context. Not only do these two equivalents look different but they also interact with the paint differently. Efrat used long strips of masking tape (later removed) to facilitate the application of vertical and then horizontal black lines across both canvases.

What about the areas in the center which appear to have been left intentionally without a grid? They are a good example of the way in which Efrat, consistent with his attitude about the primacy of



Straight Line, 1970

materials, allows the process to dictate significant aspects of the design. These areas are not the product of a conscious aesthetic decision by the artist. Rather they simply reveal the way in which this wrinkled canvas refused to accept the paint. Efrat uses paint not to fill in a field but to articulate the variety of surfaces that exist when two canvases are so juxtaposed.

And if we are willing to explore this situation even further -- and Efrat hopes we are -- we might consider the way in which these black lines, made of the material we call paint, constitute a new element of surface in the work. This new surface can be defined as all those areas of either canvas which accepted the black paint. Let us return to examine those original unprimed areas of the support canvas which remain untouched by either the surface canvas or the black paint. These "squares" might also be considered surface. Multiple levels in Efrat's work are both literal and figurative.

In Straight Line the surface canvas is exactly twice the size of the support canvas. Here the support canvas is treated wholly as a support for the surface canvas. No paint is applied to the support canvas. The title is derived from the fact that prior to applying the larger canvas onto the smaller one, Efrat painted a straight black line horizontally across the midline of the surface canvas. Once the surface canvas has been condensed into the confines of the support canvas, however, this line becomes less prominent. Efrat then used a roller to apply black paint to the wrinkled surface canvas. The straight line runs in and out of the surface of the piece demonstrating the way in which a line might cover the surface of the surface canvas and yet still not cover the surface of the piece.

In Al Efrat begins with a situation similar to Straight Line. The

surface canvas once again is exactly twice the size of the support canvas. Here, however, the surface canvas is wrapped around the left and right edges of the support canvas. This gesture introduces a note of confusion between what we see and what we finally determine to be the reality of the situation.

As he did in Scar, Efrat again uses masking tape to affect the appearance of a grid. With a roller Efrat paints all areas not covered by the vertical and horizontal lines of the masking tape. The result is one hundred white squares, ten across and ten down. Whereas in Scar the lines were made of the continuous matter of black paint, in Al the "lines" of the "grid" are established by the absence of white paint. Furthermore, close examination will reveal that many of these are not, in fact, continuous lines but rather made of adjacent sections of two physically distinct objects -- the support canvas and the surface canvas.

In each of these works Efrat has used the device of surface equivalents to provoke us into a re-evaluation of our initial empirical judgements. Things which look alike can be different. Things which appear to be different can be alike. What appears to be the larger canvas is actually the smaller one (Straight Line). Elsewhere that which appears to be smaller is, in fact, the very same size (Scar). The support of a piece can also be the surface of a piece -- especially when it is treated exclusively as the support (Straight Line). That which is surface can also be support. Either a line or a grid may be drawn with paint (Scar). Conversely, a line or a grid might find its origins in the absence of paint (Al).

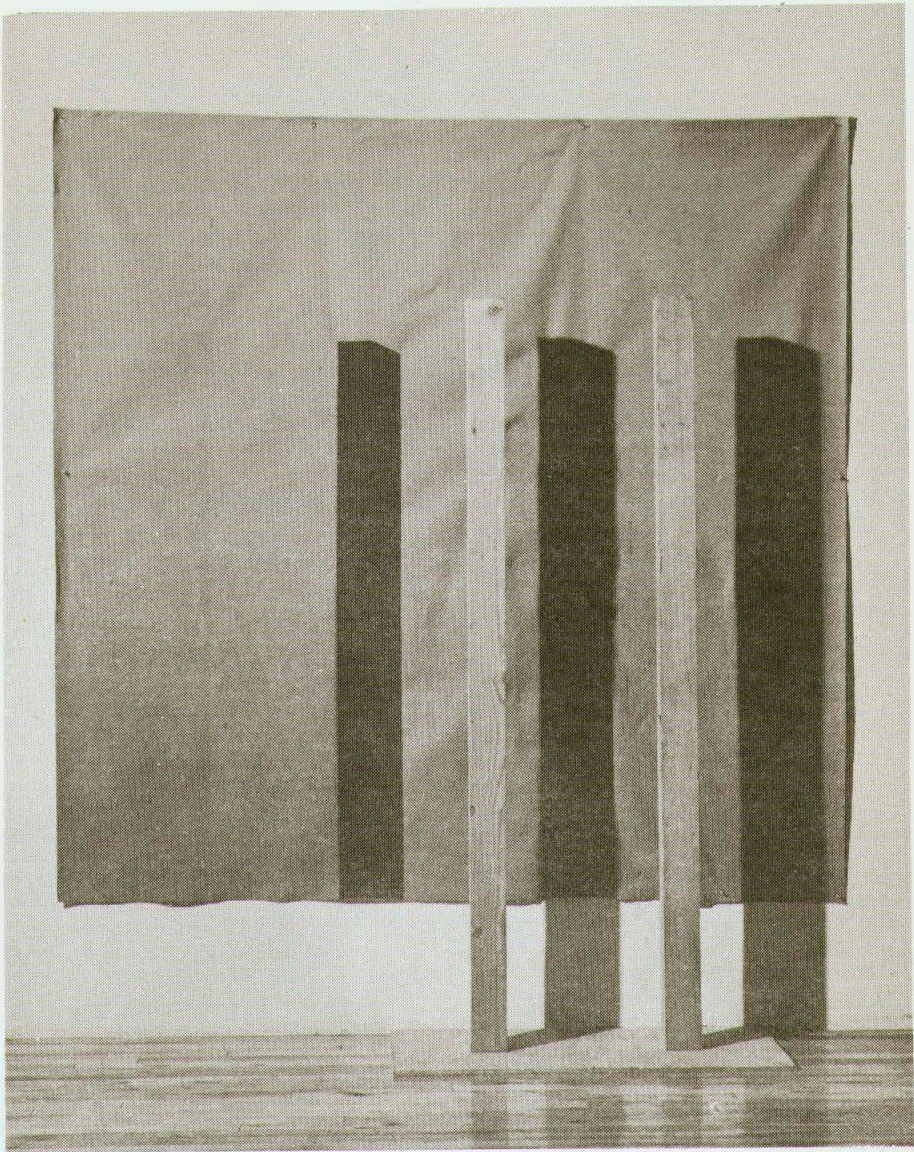
The Atheneum visitor who returns to see the two additional MATRIX presentations of Efrat's work will see that he poses additional surface problems in From White to Black in Color (his shadow and reference pieces) as well as in his Filmperformance.

FROM WHITE TO BLACK IN COLOR

One important mechanism of that complex process by which we try to understand the world around us is the way in which we automatically and immediately filter all stimuli through the cumulative data of past experience. Benni Efrat's series of works called From White to Black in Color remind us how heavily we rely on what we already know to interpret (or misinterpret) what we actually see.

Two pieces from this series, Reference, Shadow with Reference and Shadow and Outsider, are on exhibition in MATRIX (February 27 to late March, 1978). This is the first time these works have been exhibited in the United States. Elegant in their simplicity, each work is composed of rudimentary materials handled by the artist in a straightforward manner. Each piece is made of two vertical wooden poles secured to 18" square bases, a rectangular linen background, acrylic paint and one precisely positioned light bulb. With a light bulb placed at a 45° angle toward the center pole, Efrat casts shadows of the wooden poles against the linen background. Directly on the linen Efrat has painted replicas of the shadow and calls these references. In each work the shadow and the reference to the shadow are actually congruent on one occasion. In both pieces the shadows assume a saliency which successfully rivals the prominence of the physical materials. A tantalizing ambiguity prevails.

When additional light is added to the gallery (and Efrat has structured the installation to allow for a two-way viewing of the works), information is both added and subtracted: the painted references to the shadow become evident and the shadow themselves disappear. Ironically, the references are revealed to be of real material while the areas of shadow were, of course, merely the con-



Reference, Shadow with Reference, and Shadow, 1977

sequence of the absence of light. Belgian curator, Florent Bex, observed that in these works Efrat has not painted the illusion of a reality but rather the reality of an illusion.

FILMPERFORMANCE

In working with film Efrat once again departs from convention to focus the viewer's attention on those properties which are fundamental to the medium: light, time, movement (remember "the movies"), and the multiple rectangles of the screen, the camera frame, the film frame and the projector's frame.

Film's preeminent Silver Screen, however, is conspicuous by its absence. Instead of optimum reflectiveness Efrat chooses the opposite, a black, matte surface. In Filmperformance all films are projected onto a free-standing pedagogic blackboard.

Interjecting himself physically between the projector and the screen Efrat's live actions become the focal point for a dialogue between the artist and the medium. His presence is intentionally disruptive. The artist himself becomes part of the surface of the work when portions of the projected image are abducted by Efrat's own body. Simultaneously he augments and alters the remaining screen image with real chalk marks on the blackboard.

Efrat's live participation confronts the viewer with a poignant situation in which a past action, as recorded by the film process, is synthesized with a live action in present time. As a coda, Efrat's chalk marks remain on the blackboard at the end of each episode. Now remnants from the past, they stand as poetic evidence that the present is but an elusive instant.

The surface problems which we encounter in Efrat's Filmperformance are rich and heady. In these works he insists that we reckon simultaneously with the surface of the original subject matter (be it an urban landscape or the artist drawing marks on a flat surface), the emulsion of the film's surface, the artist's physical presence, the blackboard and the projections it accepts and reflects, and finally, the chalk surface Efrat applies to the blackboard.

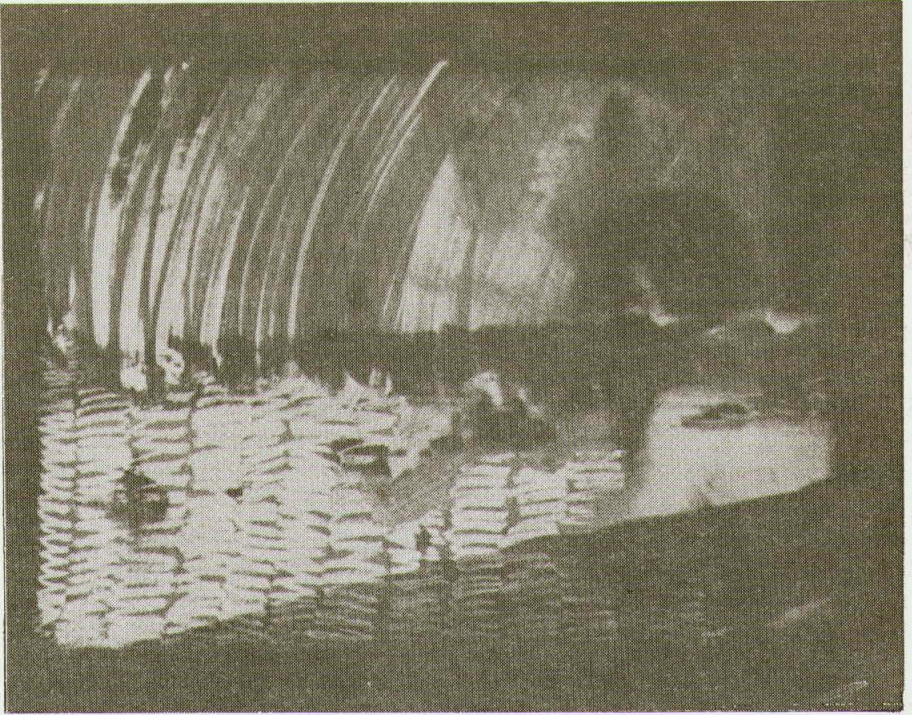
Filmperformance opens with Pastel in which Efrat tries to duplicate the actions of his own image as projected on the screen. Each figure (live and filmic) energetically draws horizontal lines in long vertical columns. Because the film is being projected onto a black surface the projected image becomes more distinct in those areas where Efrat adds white chalk. It becomes difficult to distinguish the filmed marks from the real marks. As in On Surface and the shadow-reference pieces Efrat again engages the viewer in issues of perception and ambiguity.

By the end of Pastel Efrat has changed the screen from black to white. Putney Bridge is projected directly on top of these white markings. Efrat reenters and with a wet sponge wipes the board. This leaves a wet shiny surface whose patterns as it dries attract our attention.

The camera frame remains fixed during the entire film. The movement of cars, boats and people is seen within the context of a static rectangle. With chalk Efrat heightens the visibility of a few select movements: figures walk into and out of Efrat's marks on the lower left, traffic moves along the demarcated bridge, a boat anchored in the Thames sways against Efrat's edges.

Though Efrat's works are usually non-associative, many viewers will think of the Impressionists who favored such subjects and such compositions (Monet's London scene Impressionism-Sunrise was the occasion for the designation Impressionists). These same artists were diligently attentive to the properties of reflected light and human perceptions of it.

Upon the completion of Putney Bridge light from the projector is allowed to pass unfettered through overexposed film. The white surface is bathed in white light taking on briefly the appearance of a



Benni Efrat in Filmperformance (Putney Bridge), 1976

contemporary icon. Called Wiping the Light Rectangular Efrat performs in public the act of cleaning the surface. The viewer regards the rectangle: sanctioned by centuries of art history, integral to the history of photography and film, and foil for so much activity in Efrat's work.

In Matter on the Move, as in Pastel, Efrat once again duplicates his own actions as seen in the projected image. Here, however, two new factors are explored: color and movement. In the film checkerboard squares of color -- red, yellow, blue and white -- are drawn by the artist. In performance Efrat seems to be scribbling matching squares on the blackboard. In creating the film component of Matter on the Move both the camera and the paper were tilted a number of times. This movement throws the colors of the "matching" squares out of register, reminding us that these colors never really matched: because of the way the film process works, Efrat, in his effort to duplicate appearances, has of necessity been using white chalk to reflect each of the four different colors.

Wiping Performance With Film is a black and white film of the artist cleaning the blackboard after an earlier performance. Efrat enters and "erases" the projection on the real blackboard, thus appearing to erase past action and his own image. The Cement Plant is a film in which the movement of the camera takes the lead. One of a group of factory smokestacks is aligned along the camera frame's right edge. In performance Efrat outlines the stack on the blackboard, marking also the expectorated pollutants. The camera then shifts to the right and the subject is again outlined on the blackboard to the left of the first group. This procedure is repeated. With chalk Efrat, in effect, physically tracks the way stations of the panning camera when he notes the "movement" of the

stationary smokestacks in reference to the rectangle of the black-board. By the end of the film accumulated shadings span the screen. From these we must infer accumulated contaminants.

In Adding to Subtract the film shows the artist entering from the left and writing "Adding to Subtract" across the board. In performance Efrat then enters from the left and tries to wipe away the words his own screen image has just written. In Neta, a black and white film, Efrat introduces color in performance. The camera remains fixed on a woman as she meticulously applies a full line of cosmetics -- lipstick, rouge, eye shadow, mascara, etc. Efrat tries to duplicate the results of her gestures with an appropriate color chalk. Each time Efrat seems to be superimposing color on top of the image; in fact, the color is being placed physically behind or under the projected image. When the film is over the whimsical disjunction of the marks which remain record the movements of her projected image across the screen. These marks also signify the way in which film reduces all movement in space to a fraudulent two-dimensionality.

CONCLUSION

The very diversity of Efrat's work is sometimes confusing, often impressive. He is not firmly based in one medium or another. He is not primarily a painter, a sculptor or a film-maker. Rather he is an artist who freely uses all available media (drawing, print-making and still photography along with those others we have seen in MATRIX) to explore what he calls surface problems.

Two important concerns converge in his exploration of these surface problems. Consistently apparent in all of Efrat's recent art making activity is the energy he devotes to plumbing the essential physical characteristics of whatever materials he takes in hand. He consciously uses each medium to study itself. And in each and every instance he confronts the viewer with a situation which questions the ways in which we human beings know what we (think we) know.

AMK

Works in MATRIX

ON SURFACE in MATRIX January 27-February 27, 1978:

Scar, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 96" x 96".

Al, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 104" x 104".

Straight Line, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 96" x 96".

16 mm., black and white, 2 minutes.

8. Neta, 1976, 16 mm., black and white, 11 minutes.

All works in this exhibition have been lent by the artist.

FROM WHITE TO BLACK IN COLOR in MATRIX March 1-21, 1978:

Reference, Shadow with Reference, and Shadow, 1977, wood, acrylic and linen, 89" x 77" x 18".

Outsider, 1977, wood, acrylic and linen, 89" x 77" x 18".

Benni Efrat's Filmperformances, featuring the live participation of the artist, are jointly sponsored by the Hartford Art School, University of Hartford and the Wadsworth Atheneum. There will be two performances in Hartford, one at the museum and one at the University. Admission is free and the public is invited:

Wadsworth Atheneum, Tapestry Hall
Wednesday March 1 at 7:30 pm.

Hartford Art School
Thursday, March 2 at 8:00 pm.

FILMPERFORMANCE:

1. Pastel, 1976, 16 mm., color, 10 minutes.
2. Putney Bridge, 1976, 16 mm., color, 9 minutes.
3. Wiping the Light
Rectangular, 1976, 16 mm., light through overexposed film, 2 minutes.
4. Matter on the Move, 1976, 16 mm., color, 10 minutes.
5. Wiping Performance with Film, 1977, 16 mm., black and white, 3 minutes.
6. The Cement Plant, 1976, 16 mm., color, 7 minutes.
7. Adding to Subtract, 1977,

Special thanks to Bertha Urdang under whose auspices Benni Efrat's work was first exhibited in the United States.

Selected one-man exhibitions:
Grabowski Gallery, London '69;
Mayfair Gallery, London '70;
Israel Museum, Jerusalem '72;
Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv '73,
'75; Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam '74; Bertha Urdang
Gallery, New York City '75,
'77; Palais de Beaux-Arts,
Brussels '76; Whitney Museum
of American Art, New York
City '77; International
Cultureel Centrum, Antwerp
'77.

Selected group exhibitions:
Fourth Biennale de Paris '65;
City of London Festival '68;
Sixth Biennale de Paris '69;
Documenta VI, Kassel '77.

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