Depicting Limits: Syntax, Abstraction and Space in Contemporary Painting

Selma Parlour

Goldsmiths College, University of London

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The work presented in this thesis is my own:

Selma Parlour

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Abstract

The central claim of the thesis is that contemporary painting can be productively considered and made through a renewed investigation of syntax. Beginning with a detailed examination of Jonathan Lasker's work, I argue that a recomposed concept of syntax as a critical method distinguishes what I term 'syntactical painting' from modernist formalism and postmodern quotation. Looking to Rosalind Krauss' writing on Pablo Picasso, I discuss the mutability of the sign; and through Tomma Abts' use of shadow I rework Clement Greenberg's pejorative term 'homeless representation' into a positive avenue of enquiry. I then consider an alternative idea of syntax, identifiable in Daniel Buren, Robert Ryman and Wade Guyton, that works from *outside of the frame*. Here, I contend that using real space to critique painting fails to replace internalised invention, and that a continued resistance towards illusion has run its course. In the text, I rethink modernist assertions of objectness over imagery, along with Michael Fried's absorption/theatricality concepts, to propose Duccio's diagrammatic space and Frank Stella's reconciliation of flatness with the frame as models for painting whereby the viewer can clearly experience syntax. Such discussions reveal how certain meta-reflexive operations, which are otherwise largely neglected by critical discourse, can be reappraised via syntactical painting.

The thesis accompanies my painting practice, in which I use soft films of transparent oil to pictorialise the materiality of the prepared field. The paintings are meticulously rendered, and appear as though drawn or printed. I use bands of colour to bring a particular delicacy to the figuring of the frame, which is achieved through transparency and trompe l'oeil illusion. I often conceive of painting as a two-dimensional stage space that curtails fictive distance as it represents it, and as an abstract diagram for the re-presentation of photography's installation shot of painting and the gallery.

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Introduction

This thesis proposes that contemporary painting benefits from being considered and made through an attention to syntax. The task I have set myself in this research is to explore painting's possibilities to find new terrain. The research follows a reworked concept of syntax; and in order to survey its potential, I investigate particular works of art that are each chosen for their use of syntax.

Syntactical painting, in terms of this research, is an analytical method that concerns the conventions of painting, such as painting's structure and the pictorial or internalised traits its form enables. In this way, my concept is analogous to the methodology articulated in Meyer Schapiro's essay *On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-signs* (1969), as Schapiro's 'image-signs' - 'ground', 'frame', 'divisions of the field', 'size', and the physical 'sign-bearing matter' (inked or painted lines, and so on) - are characteristics immanent to pictures in that they constitute the structure of the pictorial. This concept is discussed at length in Chapter 1 of this research, and particularly in relation to a meta-painting by Sigmar Polke, *Die drei Lügen der Malerei [The Three Lies of Painting]* (1994). To introduce and explain my idea of 'syntactical painting', and how depicting the limits of painting can be constructive in both the making and the critical evaluation of painting, the thesis begins with a lengthy and detailed account of the syntactical elements observable in a painting by Jonathan Lasker. Poised on the precipice between modernist and postmodernist painting, Lasker is a pivotal figure for this thesis. His painting *An Image of the Self* (2009) is scrutinised here for its use of isolated component parts - what I call individualised units - that explicitly invite assessment. In Lasker's case, the viewer is invited to assess the deployment of units in terms of the specific details of their arrangement, composition, assemblage and repetition with variation and displacement. These operations are elaborated on further within

my account of Lasker in Chapter 1.

Yet, while facilitating an exceptionally thorough analysis of Lasker's own syntactical approach to painting, this methodology also opens such investigations to the possibilities of constructing counter histories. Although I look within the text to the semiotic studies of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, my idea of syntax chiefly learns from Hubert Damisch's pictorial model in his book *A Theory of /Cloud/* (2002), in which it is used to discuss spatial operations observable in Renaissance and Baroque painting that work in opposition to the visual experience of linear perspective. Comparable to Damisch's method, which sees his premise move from an historical account of the use of space in the Renaissance to a spatial dialogue that encompasses the art of J.M W. Turner and even Fernand Léger, my deployment of syntax enables me to: 1) look outside of accepted discourse; for example, to discuss Lasker's painting practice away from the postmodernist attitudes characteristic of his generation; 2) source artworks based on their syntactical elements alone; for example, to study one isolated László Moholy-Nagy picture away from the workings of his oeuvre; and to 3) work independently from time, style, and medium; for example, to contrast Duccio's pre-Renaissance image construction with Thomas Struth's museum photographs. As a painter immersed in practice-based research, I have felt free to mine contemporary and historic art in this somewhat unorthodox manner, as this strategy provides this thesis with a wide and eclectic range of references. Prioritising visual language over themes and movements has allowed me to move outside of received ideas to ascertain what aspects of painting are reflexively relevant today. This in turn has fed into my own art practice, and the influencing factors observable in my paintings are discussed at length in the appendix: 'Notes on Practice'. Firstly, however, these factors feature throughout the main body of this text by way of my critiques of particular works of art (paintings, but also photographs). These voices serve as visual models selected for what I call their

meta-syntactical elements. One example of this is the idea of conceiving of painting through individualised yet repeatable units (a notion interrogated in Chapter 1), while another example is the use of literal or perceptual transparency to challenge modernism's bias towards opacity (see my Chapter 3). Syntactical painting, then, crosses historical boundaries to provide not only a common thread, but also an analytical construct that makes possible new dialogues between artists as varied as Duccio, Pablo Picasso, Frank Stella, Thomas Struth, and Tomma Abts. This is not to suggest, however, that syntax merely provides this thesis with an ahistorical framework for the grouping together of certain works of art for analysis. What makes these dialogues distinct is the way they identify how syntax has been utilised by these artists as a meta-concept for the making of artworks. Indeed, syntax is not an arbitrarily assigned category for manipulating historical accounts and traversing time/style/medium, as it truly informs the way that I work as a painter.

Of course, syntax is not the whole story. Like any painter, I deliberate over and build upon certain intuitions. These are not free but are reflections of the critical and painting languages I have inherited, languages that have been interpreted many times over before they reached me. As my intuitions have motivated this quest for more understanding, the question is whether they would profit from being theoretically grounded. My methodology in both this written work and my art practice has encompassed two primary avenues, the first investigating painting language itself by conceiving of it through a meta-syntactical lens, and the second responding to my shifting/expanding intuitions. Certainly, my practice is informed by the analysis in this thesis, but it also operates as a catalyst for notions that require further interrogation in order to identify, substantiate or qualify their potency.

My paintings themselves are meticulously rendered through transparent films of oil on linen, and appear as though they are drawn or printed. In works like *Gallery 1*

(2012) (76 x 61 cm) [Fig. 1], I use bands of colour to bring a particular delicacy to the figuring of the frame, which is achieved through transparency and trompe l'oeil illusion. For me, this insistence upon transparency and trompe l'oeil illusion distances my practice from late modernist painting. Like all painters, my concepts are bound by the vocabularies I choose and the means I possess to communicate them. The contemporary currency or redundancy of certain traits and effects also necessitates the painting language I am working from. This thesis covers aspects of painting that are central to my practice, such as units, transparency, coding, depicting space and the idea of painting as a flattened-out cavity; while opacity and gestural mark-making are conspicuously absent from both my research and practice. The critical thinking undertaken here is in direct response to previous discourses; however, it is not always easy to separate which painting actions are measured impulses and which are the result of influence from this body of research. Again, this raises the question of the role of intuition. Although the written part - including the appendix concerning my own work 'Notes on Practice' - goes some way to explain the factors that both generate and govern my approach to painting, there are studio-based decision-making processes at play that are not explained through this critical enquiry. These include my own tastes, my choices of colour palette and tonal effects, and the sensuality and warmth of my painted surfaces. However, I have also found that my studio practice frequently imposes conditions that make sense within the confines of the painting language I have developed. My method of using thin transparent films of oil colour that appear as though they are 'backlit' by the white primer beneath [1] whilst also preserving the texture of the linen (rather than obscuring it under a skin of applied colour), for example, actually restrict what and how I can paint. Literal transparency dictates that I cannot make mistakes because there is no place within the act of painting to hide an error or an ill-judged line. This means that while colour

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1. The white glows through colour causing an effect similar to a stained glass window or computer monitor.

[Fig. 1] *Gallery 1* (2012) oil on linen, 76 x 61 cm.

choices can be tonally manipulated to a certain extent, shape cannot, therefore there are definite constraints to the improvisation that can occur within the making. The adherence to my intuition concerning the possibilities of transparent paint, then, has led to the paintings being largely premeditated. This pre-planning of shape has, in turn, contributed to my concept of painting through individualised units; an idea that has equally been engendered and supported by my use of bands of colour that surround and isolate shapes. My bands are made against masking tape, a process whereby the notions of pre-planning and separation (by the intrusion of tape that is removed) are integral to the act of making. However, my bands of colour also both reference Frank Stella (my proto-painter for depicting the limits of painting), and simultaneously provide the apparatus to introduce my own brand of illusion. The thesis is attentive to such processes, as well as the pragmatics of making, in order to demonstrate the possibilities of this meta-reflexive approach to painting. The overall effect of the research into syntactical painting does not remove intuition from the painting process; instead, the analytical thinking feeds back into intuition (and vice versa) but does not replace it.

Returning to the written part of this research, I argue in Chapter 1 that my recomposed concept of pictorial or internalised syntax distinguishes 'syntactical painting' from modernist formalism and postmodern quotation. Here, I set the scene for this statement by outlining the limitations of previous dialogues, such as the Bauhaus' need to attach meaning to the abstract sign, and Clement Greenberg's censorious version of 'homeless representation'. I also reject postmodernism's empty re-cycling of the sign, and instead draw on Rosalind Krauss' reading of the indeterminate sign in Pablo Picasso's collages. Through these discussions, I arrive at what is innovative about Jonathan Lasker's and Tomma Abts' individual attitudes to painting. These two artists are a generation apart, share few formal traits, and have very different ways of visualising painting, but each can be identified as

drawing upon syntax through reflexive decisions. Lasker is noteworthy for his abstract picture-making, his slowed and exaggerated non-gestural version of the gestural mark, and for his separate and individualised units that speak to painting through the idea that it can be broken down into component parts; while Abts' contribution is evident through her brand of figure/ground exchange and the way that she deftly alternates between literal and depicted relief.

However, this research is not limited to the pictorial art that I champion. In this thesis, I claim that a meta-syntactical interrogation of painting provides a much-needed critical lens to separate two modes of art production: that which works from inside the frame; and that which draws on factors outside of the frame, i.e. the real space of display. While Lasker and Abts serve as examples of the former, I refer in Chapter 2 to Robert Ryman's idea that painting can be made and interrogated solely through an attention to the material. Ryman actively refuses to convert raw materials *into* imagery, and in so doing, the materiality of painting is no longer confined to the frame but can incorporate the materials of real space. Daniel Buren's institutional critique, on the other hand, goes one step further, his striped banners manipulating the syntax of painting to rid painting of its imagery, its frame, and its unique status. In the text, I look to the writings of Piet Mondrian and Donald Judd to investigate how we arrived at the theoretical separation of painting's imagery from its objectness. I also discuss the persistence and prevalence of object-centred 'material syntax', as I term it, which can be seen to inform the work of the majority of contemporary practitioners attuned to syntax-by-way-of-institutional-critique and the postmodernist strategy of painting-as-surrogate (see my sections on Wade Guyton, Joe Bradley and Heimo Zobernig).

My invented terms 'syntactical painting' (see Chapter 1) and 'material syntax' (see Chapter 2) distinguish between practices that prioritise imagery (Lasker, Abts) and

those that prioritise objectness (Ryman, Buren). However, it is important to stress that these terms - as well as my use of 'syntactical painting' to contrast this mode to antecedent rationales (e.g. formalism) - are not used here to suggest an art movement. Indeed, the research pinpoints instances when syntax has previously been misused as a movement. One such example is when Wassily Kandinsky, as part of his lesson planning for the Bauhaus, went beyond syntax to determine that abstract shapes needed to be particular colours [2]. Kandinsky's approach illustrates the bankruptcy of standardising language and limiting painting's dialogue. Essentially, modernist claims such as Kandinsky's worked under the assumption that there is a final language. Here, I adopt Richard Rorty's distinction between a final and contingent language. Whereas the high modernist painters believed in a final language, in Rorty's terms, postmodern 'ironists' recognise the contingency of language [3]. Instead of a movement of decrees and boundaries, the multitude of examples of syntactical operations discussed in this thesis goes some way to demonstrate that there is no single or correct language. Although I am in no doubt that paintings that could be categorised under titles such as 'syntactical painting' (etc.) would make for interesting exhibitions, where seemingly unrelated works could be pitched together for the first time, meta-syntax is not a programme that can be taught or applied to painting; rather it is a gauge, or critical method, that brings to light alternative histories as well as articulating a reflexive critique.

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2. For example, according to Kandinsky's model, an acute triangle 'has a yellow colour within', Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* (1979, originally 1926). Kandinsky, 1979: 72-74.

3. Rorty lists three conditions that his 'ironist' fulfils: '(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.' See Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Rorty, 1989: 73.

While our contemporary moment is inescapable, its analysis in its own terms is an impossible project, as Giorgio Agamben explains:

> Contemporariness is […] a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold it in their gaze. (Agamben, 2009: 41) [Author's italics]

In the spirit of Agamben, I propose that syntactical painting can be radically contemporary in spite of appearing untimely. As a gauge, rather than a movement, syntactical painting avoids setting out a concept of painting that is definitive, and relative to postmodernism, it is vastly more productive. Aside from the fact that painting (that can be categorised as owing to historic abstraction) has not been assessed in this non-programmatic way before, this research is necessary because contemporary painting remains stifled by our postmodern inheritance. In part, this is a consequence of modernism's built-in endgames (Kasimir Malevich, Lucio Fontana, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, etc.) and in part it is down to the medium specificity of the 1950s, which - because of its success - engendered reactions to it (e.g. minimalism, pop art, hybridist modes, and performance). Indeed, since the mid-1960s, a great amount of critical discourse has been outwardly hostile to painting. Other than the stigma that painting fails to satisfy the expectations of much contemporary criticism due to its commodification and its privileged heritage, the core issue is that painting today is frequently dismissed by curators who believe that painting (after the invention of photography) is an anachronistic enterprise that can only be about itself. In contrast, many contemporary painters work with this perception without viewing the status of painting as foreclosed or debased and without any anxiety over whether 'doubt' means that the proverbial baby should be

thrown out with the bathwater.

Of course, this issue is a consequence of our inheritance. Whereas the early modernists worked through painting's technical limitations (e.g. Georges Seurat's viewer-mixed dots of colour and his painted frames, and Paul Cézanne's simultaneous views), after Clement Greenberg consolidated the various modes of historic abstraction to construct his formalist rationale for painting through its self-criticism, painting was left with fewer options, i.e. flatness alone [4]. Following this logic to its extreme, Donald Judd reasoned in his essay *Specific Objects* (1965) that all illusion should be banished from art, and therefore the objectness of the painting became the objectness of the object [5]. In this simple move - which I discuss at length in Chapter 2 of this research - Judd irreparably narrowed the discourse.

In this narrative, Judd is a progenitor of my 'material syntax' and his programme for art subsequently influenced much postmodernist art and criticism. In the postmodernist quotations of the 1980s (e.g. Sherrie Levine, Philip Taaffe, and David Salle), style was reduced to a prop. And with the attending criticism, deconstruction prohibited painting to such an extent that even critics favourably disposed towards painting - such as Yve-Alain Bois - were unable to see a way forward. In this thesis, I elaborate upon the critical texts that my theory of syntactical painting works in opposition to. These include Douglas Crimp's essay *The End of Painting* (1981); Hal Foster's 'The Expressive Fallacy' from his book *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (1985); and Yve-Alain Bois' 'The Task of Mourning' from his book *Painting as*

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4. See Greenberg, C.,1960. 'Modernist Painting', in J. O'Brian, ed. 1993. *Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, The University of Chicago Press Ltd, London, pp. 85-93.
5. See Judd, D., 1965. 'Specific Objects', in Meyer, J., 2000. *Minimalism: Themes and Movements*, Phaidon, London and New York, pp. 207-210.

Model (1990) [6]. In the main, what these texts suffer from is a levelling out of painting. Crimp, for example, has an inability to see any potential in painting beyond the externalised material syntax of Daniel Buren. As for Foster, while some of his claims are legitimate, he reduces painting to a negative criticism of expression, and is equally oblivious to painting's internal syntax. Bois, on the other hand, does offer instances in his *Painting as Model* of a deeper interrogation of painting; nonetheless he is subject to his times and opines a false notion of historical closure.

It is, however, not useful to say that modernism is finished. Writing in 1998, David Pagel comments on the trend of art in quotation marks:

> This insistence on making a mockery of Modernism, first by turning the history of American abstraction into a simplistic cliché, and then by attacking this straw target, goes hand-in-hand with the idea that form and content are separable and that artists' intentions are easily translated into objects. It cynically treats the contemporary world as an incidental footnote to a vaulted history from which artists and viewers have become irredeemably alienated. (Pagel, 1998: 145)

This statement appeared in an essay - *Once Removed from What?* - to accompany a 1998 exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Texas, titled *Abstract Painting, Once Removed*, which Pagel redubbed *Abstract Painting, Once Removed from Postmodern Quotation* [7]. And although this interpretation of the mood in the

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6. See Crimp, D., 1981. 'The End of Painting', in *October*, Vol.16, Art World Follies, (Spring 1981), pp. 69-86; Foster, H., 1985. 'The Expressive Fallacy', in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, The New Press, New York, pp. 58-77; Bois, Y-A., 'Painting the Task of Mourning' in his *Painting as Model*, 1990, MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, pp. 229-244.

7. The exhibition *Abstract Painting, Once Removed* included works by Kevin Appel, Monique Prieto, Pae White, Tad Griffin, Callum Innes, Beatriz Milhazes, Glenn Brown, Richard Patterson, Takashi Murakami, amongst others. Pagel, D., 1998. 'Once Removed From What?', in Colpitt, ed., 2002. *Abstract Art In the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 141-149. (Originally in D. Friis-Hansen, 1998, *Abstract Painting Once Removed*, Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas. pp. 23-27.)

late-1990s seems to point to a shift in attitudes, the potency of modernism's built-in endgames that resulted in postmodernist modes is such that even today painting is frequently dismissed for its anachronistic status alone. While 'making a mockery of Modernism' is no longer the punchline, contemporary artists and critics alike are still battling with the myths and prohibitions of the past.

A case in point is Achim Hochdörfer's essay *A Hidden Reserve, Painting From 1958 to 1965* (2009), in which he tracks the expulsion of painting from advanced critical theory from the 1960s until now. To combat this problem, Hochdörfer advocates a 'hidden reserve' of neglected artists - Jasper Johns, Cy Twomby, Joan Mitchell, Simon Hantaï, and others - which he sees as providing potential for painting beyond the neo-expressionism of the 1980s, with its 'cynical exaggeration, empty pathos, and simulated rhetoric' [8]. While I do not agree with the prospects of Hochdörfer's 'hidden reserve' - bound as it is to the potency of gestural mark making - his choice of contemporary successors is more illuminating. These include Christopher Wool, Amy Sillman, and Josh Smith, each in the shadow of the polemics of the 1960s, and each trying to find fertile ground between rhetoric and intuition.

As with Lasker and Abts, Hochdörfer's successors can each be seen as responding to the possibilities and limitations of their contemporary status in relation to modernism (and its fall from grace) in order to work out what painting can be today. While *too late* for the dictums of the past, what sets apart contemporary art that is engaged with internalised syntax from both modernist and postmodernist forbearers is more crucial than merely establishing a new criteria, since these new tendencies recognise the redundancy of the pursuit of a final language.

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8. Hochdörfer, 2009: 156. See Hochdörfer's *A Hidden Reserve: Painting from 1958 to 1965* (2009) in *Artforum*, Vol. XLVII, No. 6, (February 2009), pp. 152-159.

In light of the limitations of postmodern criticism, I reappraise in this research what kinds of models *are* available. However, rather than carving out an epoch as Hochdörfer has done, I have selected particular images and texts based on their use of syntax and/or their interrogations of modernism [9].

With the artworks themselves, the majority of the choices included here have been intuitively felt. With Stella, Lasker and Abts, for example, the analytical examinations of their paintings are something that have evolved over time as a consequence of my interest in the development of their individual practices. However, other works have been selected as a direct result of the programme of the thesis. While artworks included here by Wade Guyton and Thomas Struth ostensibly fall into this category, the research also leads me to some surprising choices: Georges Brassaï's photograph *Group in a Dance Hall* (1932), Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (1533) and László Moholy-Nagy's oil sketch *Konstruktion Z 1* [*Construction Z 1*] (1922-1923). I have chosen these images purely for the dialogues their operations initiate.

As for the theorists that influence this research, aside from the aforementioned crucial texts by the likes of Meyer Schapiro and Donald Judd, I also look to Piet Mondrian's various writings on the materiality of painting (c1940). In his removal of the frame, Mondrian was the first to bring the context of the art object into bearing, subsequently changing the discourse forever. Clement Greenberg is another central figure cited here; and I reinterpret the critic's pejorative term 'homeless representation' from his *After Abstract Expressionism* (1962) as a positive line of

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9. My list of examples is by no means comprehensive; other versions of this research may have included discussions on Giotto, Georges Seurat, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Anthony Caro, Sol Le Witt, Bob Law, Richard Artschwager, Robert Mangold, Patrick Caufield, Blinky Palermo, Imi Knoebel, René Daniëls, Peter Halley, Jessica Stockholder, Katharina Grosse, Fiona Banner, Louise Lawler, and so on.

enquiry in relation to Abts' use of shading and contouring in her paintings. I also

discuss how Greenberg's call for medium specificity (his assertion of flatness as the

essential quality that differentiates painting from other arts) led to Judd's reasoning in

his *Specific Objects* (1965) essay. Another of the chief theorists I trace is Rosalind

Krauss. Krauss is a key figure for this research, for not only does she discuss

Picasso's collages in syntactical terms [10], and debate the meaning and critical

potency of syntax [11]; she adopts in her early essays, like *On Frontality* (1968) [12], a

semiotic model to work through Greenbergian formalism. Though if I do not follow

Krauss through other aspects of her extensive scholarship - for example, her

adoption of psychoanalytical approaches - it is not solely because her interests do

not align with my own. Over the decades, Krauss' theoretical journey consistently

maps the ideas of the time; however, as she pursued postmodernist criticism, her

faith in formalist investigations dwindled, reaching a tipping point in her essay of

1972, *A View of Modernism* [13], and with this shift in priorities, works like *On Frontality*

were largely forgotten. Nevertheless, this line of criticism from Krauss raises some

interesting questions for painting that are certainly worth revisiting. Similarly, Michael

Fried is another author cited within this research from whom we encounter aspects

of an evolving theoretical standpoint rather than gaining a complete survey of his

thinking. I draw predominantly on four texts from Fried's extensive catalogue, for they

each provide my thesis with contentious or supportive concepts: *Shape as Form:

Frank Stella's New Paintings* (1966); *Art and Objecthood* (1967); *Absorption and

Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1988); and *Why*

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10. Unlike other scholars who *read* the newsprint of Picasso's collage fragments in relation to social history. See
Krauss, R., 1998. 'The Circulation of the Sign', in *The Picasso Papers*, Thames and Hudson, pp. 23-85.1
11. *Using Language to do Business as Usual* (1991) is an essay by Krauss in which she takes Michael Fried to task
for confusing, or rather attempting to reconcile, syntax with instantaneously understanding an artwork. See Krauss,
R., 1991. 'Using Language to do Business as Usual', in Bryson, N., ed., 1991. *Visual Theory*, Polity Press,
Cambridge, and Blackwell Publishers, Oxford. pp. 79-94.
12. Krauss, R., 1968. 'On Frontality', in *Artforum*, (May 1968), pp. 40-46.
13. Krauss, R., 1972. 'A View of Modernism', in *Artforum*, (September 1972), pp. 48-51.

Photography Matters as Art as Never Before (2008) [14]. While I may not always agree with Fried's reasoning, these texts prove invaluable in the progressing of my argument in Chapter 3: 'Depicting Space'.

After examining painting's syntactical possibilities through language/abstraction (Chapter 1), and through the real/material (Chapter 2), my final chapter discusses syntax's bearing on fictional spatial constructs. Here, I look at specific works by Duccio, Hans Holbein the Younger, Henri Matisse, László Moholy-Nagy, Al Held, Frank Stella, Thomas Struth, and Andrew Grassie in order to reconcile my concept of syntactical painting with strategies of depicting invented space and the meta-syntactical re-presentation of art and context.

Putting aside the fact that Duccio's medieval diagrams of space in his *Maestà Altarpiece* (1308-11) may well have appeared realistic in his day, I introduce in Chapter 3 my idea that truncated box/room/stage spaces have the power to pictorially signify the limitations of the medium (as a flattened-out cavity). The contemporary significance of pictorially replicating painting's limits stems from the fact that it was the acute awareness of the limitations of painting (as a set of inescapable flaws) that led to Judd's invented concept of *specific objects*, thus casting painting into doubt. Instead of contriving yet another way to counter painting's deficiencies, I look instead to how artists can use depiction to celebrate painting's structure.

One such artist is Frank Stella, who conceives of painted areas as defined and

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14. Fried. M., 1966. 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings', in *Artforum*, Vol. V, No. 3, (November 1966), pp. 18-27; Fried, M., 1967. 'Art and Objecthood', in *Artforum*, Vol. V, No.10, (Summer 1967), pp. 12-23; Fried, M., 1988. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of Chicago Press; Fried, M., 2008. *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University, New Haven and London.

isolated units [15] and who uses the frame as an ideological mechanism for picture construction. Within my dialogue on Stella, I explore his use of inside/outside space in his shaped canvases from the mid-1960s. Stella's Irregular Polygons are especially noteworthy, as although they are overtly concerned with objectness and display (using the gallery wall itself as the 'background'), we see how they also prioritise depicted shape over literal shape. In this chapter, I also consider how Stella's concentric bands of colour in his maze painting *Hyena Stomp* (1962) represent depth whilst simultaneously dissolving the illusion.

The contextual space of display is also interrogated in this chapter, and here I discuss Struth's large-scale museum photographs of painting and the gallery, and Andrew Grassie's small painted replicas of photography's installation shot. Both these artists draw on syntax to make context the work of art; however, they are not models for this research because single-point perspective tends to replicate a normative model of space as opposed to analysing re-presentation. While these artists critique the separation between the viewer's space and the artwork's space, I conclude that faithful representation is too immersive a device to further painting.

Finally, running through Chapter 3 is an extensive critique of an obscure oil sketch by Moholy-Nagy, which I use as a conceptual hinge to draw on ideas such as modernism's assimilation of transparency, and Jacques Derrida's notion of mimesis, as well as the role of contrary information to sabotage the viewer's suspension of disbelief [16]. Whilst historically anomalous, I have selected *Konstruktion Z 1 [Construction Z 1]* (1922-1923) for this analytical treatment, as the piece contains a

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15. 'I always leave a space, because I don't want the confusion of shapes. *I want the independence of each unit*, so it has white on each side. It is painted independently. Each item is doubly independent. Nothing touches anything else.' Stella interviewed by Kennedy, 6th November 2009; see Kennedy, 2010: 18 [Emphasis added].
16. By making a correlation between Moholy-Nagy's simulacrum and Hans Holbein the Younger's eccentric skull apparition in his painting, *The Ambassadors* (1533).

multitude of effects attuned to syntactical analysis, such as: literal transparency; perceptual transparency; frontality versus an oblique angle; figure/ground; size; discontinuity; the original and the simulacrum; re-presentation and an image in and of an image; and so on. It is through this profusion of mixed messages that *Konstruktion Z 1* fails Mondrian's programme for art, and subsequently corroborates the paradoxical nature of syntax: that there is no correct or final language. In one sense, *Konstruktion Z 1* is almost Salle-esque; an ahistorical mélange for treating accepted and banished language equally: Moholy-Nagy here testing Mondrian's directives on frontality by setting out units of information that obey his prohibition on diagonals alongside embodied acts of rebellion. More likely, Moholy-Nagy violates such terms as he completely misunderstands the language he is dealing with. Nevertheless, through the hindsight of my attached critique, Moholy-Nagy's atypical piece becomes the prototype for self-reflexive meta-paintings like those by Polke, Stella, Lasker and Abts analysed in this research.

Chapter 1

Syntactical Painting

Introduction
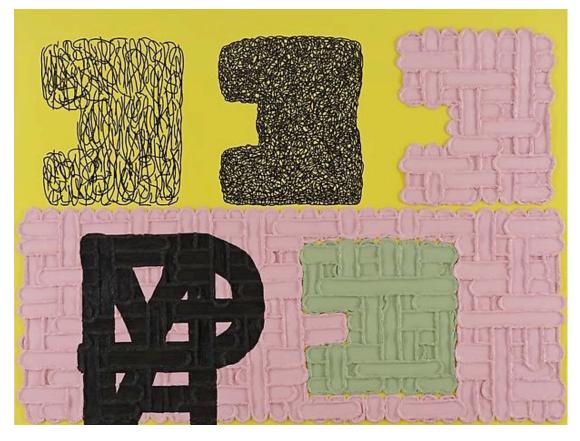
In this chapter, I explore an understanding of 'syntactical painting', which is to say that the investigation concerns painting that declares and scrutinises its conventions (formal and internal elements) in order to determine their functioning in pictorial construction. The chapter situates the art of Jonathan Lasker as representative of a syntactical approach that positions abstraction (or rather a set of effects which can be delineated visually and historically as abstract) as adaptable. As I explain, the mutability of a sign refers to a sign's ability to foster alternate or unfixed signification.

The chapter examines the writing of Rosalind Krauss, Hubert Damisch, and Roland Barthes to shed light on this consideration of syntax as one that is separate to linguistic models. I discuss a meta-language of abstract painting (the quotation of antecedent art) and a meta-language of picture making, also explicating Schapiro's 'image-signs' (elements immanent to pictures) and Krauss' 'abstract logic' (the structure of oppositions). The chapter locates Pablo Picasso as an interrogator of pictorial syntax as subject matter, and looks to the ethos of the Bauhaus to speculate why later artists withdrew from syntactical considerations. In order to identify a rationale for contemporary thoughts on syntactical painting, the chapter also considers the role of representation in meta-painting through a critique of a work by Sigmar Polke, and the role of illusion and figure/ground exchange through a critique of a work by Tomma Abts.

Lasker's Invented Vocabulary

The wonderfully controlled and materially exuberant *An Image of the Self* (2009) [Fig. 2] is an archetypal work by Jonathan Lasker that exemplifies his playful and considered approach to painting. The following paragraph attempts to outline the pictorial elements that demonstrate how this painting is primed for syntactical analysis.

A large oil painting on linen in landscape format, *An Image of the Self* features a flat, yellow ground upon which six large shapes in black and pastel shades are placed. The painting is divided by its pictorial components; firstly, horizontally just above the centre, with three shapes positioned along the top half and three grouped below; and secondly, by colour, line, and texture: three black shapes whose volumes are holed, and three sweetly-coloured, thickly-painted shapes whose compactness obliterates the ground from view. The components in the bottom half of the painting are fused together either because they overlap or because they are encased, while the yellow ground is almost completely obscured by the largest shape in the painting: a wall-like, rectangular shape of pink paint, laid as a compressed grid of ludicrously thick, knitted-together brushstrokes. The brushstrokes are not brushstrokes in the conventional sense; the straightforward application of paint lays bare the medium's literal materiality, its denseness, opaqueness, and texture. The excessive thickness of the paint looks as though it might even require an armature to remain attached to the prepared field, and is emphasised further by: 1) the artist's method, where the gathered surplus of paint is a result of the pressure defining each stroke [see 'Detail view', Fig. 2a]; 2) the strength of the lattice (with the regulating and restraining pattern of the grid providing a sensible construction for the repetitious mark); and 3) the allocation of a large proportion of the painting being given over to this direct and extravagant approach to paint application. The large, rectangular shape is both a

[Fig. 2] Jonathan Lasker, *An Image of the Self* (2009), oil on linen, 206 x 274 cm.

[Fig. 2a] Detail view.

plinth and a substitute ground, and housed within its body are two smaller shapes. The left-hand side (as the viewer looks at the picture) is dominated by a figure of broad, black line. Mapped onto the thick surface of the 'wall', this shape adds no further texture, acting instead like graffiti defacing the ordered façade. To the right-hand side, and compiled from an equivalently thick network of brushstrokes to the rectangular shape that holds it, the viewer finds a green shape characterised by what could be read as a missing piece. This shape is snugly fitted within its Styrofoam-like packing case, and is part of the rectangular shape except for its colour and the defining character of its brushstrokes. The three shapes that reside in the top 'space' (the yellow ground) hover off the rectangular shape below; they vary in consistency yet are unified by their placing (in relation to one another and in their proximity to the 'plinth' below), and by their similar size and shape (as slightly elongated versions of the green shape). Two of the shapes are made of a tangle of thin, black, looped lines. The leftmost shape's mass is the sparsest; broken lines - mainly vertical - jumble together, leaving visible much of the ground. The central shape feels slightly larger for containing more matter; here the lines have multiplied and compacted to form a matrix, blocking out most of the ground except for small pockets. The last version of this shape, larger-still, makes a developmental leap away from looped line, and consists of the same thick, pink paint of the rectangular shape, as if it is the legitimate owner of the space inhabited by the green shape below.

Lasker's declaration of the components of his painting as separate units invites this level of detailed investigation, for within this articulated separateness a shape is easily locatable and contrastable to others. The upper-based trio and the green shape below, for example, can be categorised as belonging to the same family or system of shapes. And while equivalence and inter-relationships test the reproducibility and transferability of shapes and their constituents (line, texture, colour), the idea of an original also comes under scrutiny, as a shape is mediated

(compromised or bolstered) by the presence of its duplicate. The sign, then, is codified by the system of signs (rather than by an external resemblance). Of his practice, Lasker writes:

> I often think of my paintings as a form of image kit or perhaps as jigsaw puzzles, which offer components of paintings as clues pointing the viewer, not to a finished narrative (as when the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle completes a picture of Notre Dame), but rather to a self-awareness of how one construes a painting. (Lasker, 1998: 19)

The choice of the word 'construe' here is interesting for its implication of syntax. Lasker's image-kit idea, where pictures *picture* pictorial construction, utilises the abstract sign. However, this is not an abstract painting. Rather it is syntactical painting that is at once tied to the legacy of modernist painting whilst manipulating its parameters to find new prospects. To begin to explain this, what follows maps a contextual background for Lasker's practice.

After the opaque surfaces of Byzantine art, the prepared field as smooth, flat, and contained provided the perfect apparatus for the virtual annihilation of the picture's literal flatness (i.e. Renaissance perspective). In pictures of three-dimensional things, the picture plane must appear perceptually transparent, as the space necessary to describe volumes must seem deeper than the literal surface, so that referential entities can exist in a world the viewer finds familiar. In an oversimplification of painting's path to modernist flatness, we can comment that as abstract shapes are not bound by the same sensible constraints, the development of abstraction was synonymous with the possibilities of painting's literal opacity.

Abstraction's conception is further illuminated by one particular story concerning Wassily Kandinsky, who supposedly entered his studio one day to find one of his

paintings lying on its side and propped against the wall. With the new orientation, the image's represented things became incomprehensible, enabling Kandinsky to consider colour and shape away from literary references. Kandinsky realised that the objectness of painting affected the image, and he wrote: 'Now I knew for certain that the object harmed my paintings'[1]. Joseph Masheck, in his essay *The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness* (1976), explains that: 'it was the epiphany of his painted canvas as an object […] that inspired Kandinsky to work out a system of non-objective pictorial *content* inside the objective work of art'[2].

The idea of painting-as-object set modern considerations apart from 1) the tradition of easel painting, which had valued the image over and above the materiality of the medium[3]; and 2) the constant threat of photography (as an image without objectness[4]). Abstraction, therefore, became the means and the sign for a specificity of painting that saw imagery as secondary to the material.

Retrospectively, Clement Greenberg, in his seminal essay *Modernist Painting* (1960), collated such thoughts to deduce painting's flatness (the two-dimensionality of its support) as the quality that separates modernist painting from other art, i.e. from sculpture. It therefore followed that flatness governs the kind of space that can be explored within painting. Greenberg wrote:

Modernist painting in its latest phase has not abandoned the representation

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1. Kandinsky, in his *Reminiscences* (1913), quoted in Masheck, 1976: 93.
2. Masheck, 1976: 93 [Masheck's italics].
3. 'It is very hard at first sight to appreciate the design of a picture by a highly realistic artist - Ingres, for instance; our aesthetic emotions are overlaid by our human curiosity. We do not see the figures as forms, because we immediately think of them as people.' Clive Bell, from his book *Art* (1914), quoted in Masheck, 1976: 93.
4. I discuss the transparency of photography in Chapter 3 of this research.

of recognizable objects in principle. What it has abandoned in principle is the representation of the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit. (Greenberg, 1960: 87)

In an earlier critical essay, *The Crisis of the Easel Picture* (1948), Greenberg championed a decentralised picture that 'relies on a surface knit together of identical or closely similar elements which repeat themselves without marked variation from one edge of the picture to the other' (Greenberg, 1948: 155). This attention to flatness, epitomised in the work of Jackson Pollock, negated figure/ground hierarchy [5] and asserted painting's structural opacity - i.e. its objectness - over and above its facility for pictorial imagery and illusionistic space.

To arrive at a theory of flatness, Greenberg assimilated the subversions and deconstructions of the past into a neat historical account. The efficiency of this model for art, and the idea it solidified of objectness as its own terrain, prompted various reactions, some of which left art bereft of painting (minimalism, institutional critique, and so forth). Such reactions were conceivable only because Greenberg had tamed history. Or to paraphrase Thierry de Duve, Greenberg's *Modernist Painting* transformed the 'sacred vocation' of the artists of the 1940s and '50s into a 'coherent aesthetic and historical rationale', i.e. 'the academicization of Abstract Expressionism'. De Duve explains:

> The extended series of abandonments, destructions or deconstructions, of
> pictorial conventions, which Greenberg described as building up the history of

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5. This is not to imply that Pollock relinquished all possibilities of figure/ground. Separate to his works like *Number One* (1948), which can be categorised in Greenberg's terms, Pollock also rethought figure/ground through the figure as a negative space. In his painting *Cut-Out* (1949), for example, Pollock had cut away a large, central part of the painted field; and in *Out of the Web* (1949), he cut out several shapes. Of this particular act, Michael Fried has written that the absent shapes in *Out of the Web*: 'seem to swim across the field and even to lose themselves against it' (Fried, 1965: 18). See Fried's *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (1965).

> Modernist painting were no longer presented as revolts or subversions, but rather as the establishment of a secure area of competence. This could only appeal to a generation of artists who needed to shake the oedipal weight of their Abstract Expressionist elders […]'. (De Duve in Guilbaut, 1990: 246) [6]

In other words, the ostensible coherence of Greenberg's account provided a target against which younger artists could pitch their practices. After late modernism, the linguistic and semiotic models of textuality (that had been present all along but not yet popularly interrogated) became major sources for critical reflections on art. With minimalism (Agnes Martin, Sol Le Witt, Robert Mangold, Robert Ryman, etc.), we saw a tendency towards impoverished-looking artworks, where simplicity enabled the examination of material components. And later so-called postmodernism asserted itself as another deviation from the established paradigms, with ironic appropriation as the chief device called upon to radicalise an art object largely thought of as without potential in the wake of the dominant ideologies of the past (i.e. Abstract Expressionism). An excellent example of this is Allan McCollum's plaster-cast surrogates. These were not paintings but cast multiples of absent pictures (with the picture frame and picture painted in black enamel). With the idea of painting as an empty signifier or prop, the notional end of painting once associated with the arrival of the monochrome was zealously applied to all painting. And once irrevocably tainted, pictorial language became outmoded, with the rhetorical critique of artists like Daniel Buren trumping formal considerations.

In Lasker, however, we find a late modernist painter for whom flatness and objectness presuppose the pictorial. Since the 1980s, Lasker has mined from abstraction to re-present painting to an audience accustomed to receiving it with

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6. De Duve, in his *The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas* in Guilbaut, S., ed., 1990. *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945-1964*, MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts. London, England. See also Rosalind Krauss' essay *A View of Modernism* (1972).

cynicism. For many, the theoretical disintegration of medium specificity seemingly took with it all possibilities for abstract painting, so that painters in the 1960s and '70s reportedly looked either to figurative styles or left painting altogether. The 1980s and '90s saw a fresh engagement with painting, but only so long as it was 'at a remove' [7], and we can think of this trend as postmodern 'conventionalism' [8], where painting was 'produced as the *sign* of painting' [9].

This reduction of material practices to a set of conventions or quotations - Sherrie Levine's 'inflected reproductions of modern master images' [10], for example - was prevalent at the time Lasker emerged. Malevich's zero form, Greenberg's modernist reduction, and minimalism's reaction to it paved the way for reductive extremes and the attendant assertion of painting's end, as outlined by Douglas Crimp in his essay *The End of Painting* (1981): that 'painting' (with an origin and essence) could not go beyond the monochrome [11]. The mood this generated was so stifling and pervasive that even critics favourably disposed to painting - like Yve-Alain Bois in his book *Painting as Model* (1990) - could not write about the medium without upholding the apocalyptic overtones of Crimp and others. Yet in assessing Lasker's art, we can detect a stand against attempts to rid art of the image, and the image of its constituents, as well as a wariness of the refinements and absolutes of historic and 1960s formalism, and a rejection of postmodernism's distortion of the medium to negate the medium. Awake to the loss of innocence yet unhindered by proclamations of the end, Lasker felt no need to legitimise painting. Consequently,

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7. To accompany an exhibition in 1998 at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas titled *Abstract Painting, Once Removed,* David Pagel, in his essay *Once Removed From What?* (1998) comments on art in quotation marks.
8. A term used by Hal Foster, which he attributes to Craig Owens; see Foster's *Signs Taken for Wonders*, 1986: 111.
9. Ibid. Foster adds an interesting bracketed coda to this statement: '(rather than, as with Ryman or Marden, in historical involvement with its material practices)'.
10. Foster, 1986: 107.
11. In his *The End of Painting* (1981), Crimp defends the art of Daniel Buren and Robert Ryman and criticises a faith in painting that falls outside of painting-as-object. His ideology is discussed further in Chapter 2 of this research.

unlike the direct appropriations of many of his peers (Philip Taaffe, and the like), Lasker's quotational mark-making and shape-making built on a generalised language of historic abstraction for more than stylistic ends.

Lasker has described his approach as 'tracing my own identity through a couple of layers of convention' [12]. Borrowing from Abstract Expressionism, Lasker analogises antecedent motifs so that the spontaneity and particularisation attached to *this* brushstroke, or *this* looped line, becomes a codified meta-language. An attention to the grid, the bold, black line defining only itself (rather than a depicted volume), the floating shape (defying natural order), the featuring of materiality (e.g. the loaded brushstroke), and so on, all become reusable tropes. The sign of 'the artist' with the free flow of an automatic line is likewise brought into question, as gesture here is managed and restrained, with scribble and brushstroke stunted and manoeuvred to represent the filling of space through a slowed draughtsman-like exactness. In this calculated and practised way, Lasker's invented vocabulary exploits the elements of historic abstract painting; and through their physicality, reproducibility, and placing, his units are both arbitrary (without resemblance as such) and motivated (familiar and comparable within the logic of the pictorial).

That being said, to speak of Lasker's invented vocabulary in terms of units is not to imply that they are analogous with Mondrian's units of transposable rectangles of colour. In Mondrian, the black-line scaffold of the grid homogenises the surface space to decentralise the image, and so each rectangle of colour is relatively easy to imagine as existing prior to meaning and as interchangeable. While still comparable and repeatable, Lasker's units (if we can refer to them as such) each have a role as

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12. Lasker interviewed by David Ryan in 1997. Transcript courtesy of David Ryan.

an individual, making them far more disposed to picture-making. Through the individualised unit, Lasker re-works modernist painting; but further still, as his invented vocabulary uses pictorial syntax as the basis for the work, Lasker is responsive to the conventions of the medium.

Beyond his approach to brushstrokes and automatic lines as figures of speech, this is exemplified in the way that his flat image-kit shapes identify with the literal flatness of the prepared field. With this in mind, it is interesting to note how Frank Stella characterises a comparable operation in the paintings of Raphael: 'Raphael's figures function as trompe l'oeil cutouts, bright on the front with a blank, black side turned away from the viewer'[13]. I would suggest that this silhouette-like quality, locatable in Raphael and Lasker alike, deliberately emphasises the artificiality of the sign. And in addition to signifying two-dimensionality, Lasker's cut-outs are also isolated, and therefore do not segment one another. This means that they are easily transplantable, and that there is no burden on the viewer to complete the image[14]. Essentially, the image is flat, intact, and frontal, with all the information directly open to the viewer for observation. Similarly, Lasker arranges his shapes to the margins of the painting's limit-frame, thus giving the impression of a whole picture rather than a framed 'view'. This at once uses the image (albeit an anti-illusionistic one) as the means to underscore objectness.

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13. Stella, 1986: 28. Stella's dialogue on Raphael in his book *Working Space* (1986) is pitched so as to illustrate the genius of Caravaggio's volumes, with their 'brilliantly rounded back sides' (Stella, 1986: 28). However, if we consider Raphael's paintings outside of their historical context, we can say that Raphael's theatrical flatness - in paintings like his final piece, *The Transfiguration* (1518-20) - is a direct response to the medium he works with as flat and frontal to the viewer (a frontality that is further signified by Raphael's symmetrical organisation of imagery).

14. In physiological study 'amodal completion' describes disconnected regions that 'complete behind the occluder' (see Rubin's *The Role of Junctions in Surface Completion and Contour Matching*, 2001: 339). The viewer does not *see* completion, but can conclude that it is there from the information that is visible, i.e. cognition takes over from perception. In Lasker, shapes are one-sided and face the viewer for unobstructed viewing. If shapes do obstruct other shapes (as with the broad, black line shape in the bottom half of *An Image of the Self*), then such shapes are typically holed, this giving the viewer access to the knowledge of what is 'behind'.

Through such examples, we see how an attention to syntax is explicitly articulated within Lasker's work, his meta-practice alerting us to characteristics of painting that we might catalogue as:

1) The flat and contained rectangular field (signified by a homogenous ground, and by shapes that fit inside it in their entirety, i.e. shapes are not cropped by the painting's edge).

2) A flat, opaque, all-over ground (indisposed to perceptual transparency) where shapes are placed *on top* as opposed to existing *within* 'space'.

3) Size and repetition, i.e. shapes that are both far too large for the space they inhabit (implying that they are restricted and set forward), and that are the same size as one another (to suggest they are comparable).

4) Separation: where shapes do not segment one another. This safeguards against both a loss of visible information (so the viewer does not complete the image), and a relative diminishment that could suggest a depth of space.

5) Frontality, where flat, silhouette-like shapes (without volume) face the viewer.

6) Colour: artificial, itemised (separate and un-blended), and for itself (rather than to flesh-out volumes).

7) 'Drawing', represented by looped lines, and practised mark-making, typically in a variety of styles using differently-sized brushes (but not combined within one shape).

8) 'Painting'; and paint as a literal substance over its traditional descriptive use, (re)presented here by absurdly thick paint.

9) The filling in of demarcated areas, stated as an act through the use of relatively small marks compared with the surface area of the shape in question, or by comparable shapes made by different means.

10) Pictorial organisation (e.g. shapes housed within others, or shapes that obey/disobey gravity).

11) Coherence (through comparable units, colour, and repetition), and emphasis (by

colour, strength of line, or by underlining or framing [15]).

12) Figure, ground, substitute ground, and figure/ground reversal [16].

Historical analyses of painting's non-mimetic conventions and attributes, from Heinrich Wölfflin's structure of visual meaning [17] to Hubert Damisch's theses for or against a semiology of painting [18], have sought to classify painting in such terms. However, these texts are somewhat dry and ahistorical. While my methodology appears to borrow from such models, it is not my goal to determine an art or style or to qualify the logic. Similarly, unlike Greenberg's all-encompassing interpretation of art through the elimination of what he observed as nonessential, the above list of

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15. In works like his *Reasonable Love* (2007), Lasker draws a framing box around shapes.

16. Figure/ground reversal is something Lasker investigates more keenly in works like his *Animal Progress* (1995) and *For the Eye* (1996).

17. Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (1950, originally in 1932). In his discussion on the art of the Baroque, Wölfflin used five pairs of opposing formal systems to expose the shifts of style in art between the 16th and 17th centuries: linear and painterly; plane and recession; closed and open form; multiplicity and unity; clearness and unclearness. It is worth noting that Greenberg looked to Wölfflin in an analysis of Still, Newman, and Rothko, and described their paintings as a synthesis (though this is not to imply a reconciling) of painterly and non-painterly, 'or better, a transcending of the differences between the two' (Greenberg, 1962: 129). Lasker's paintings, meanwhile, in their declaration of the traits and ingredients historically defined as relevant to painting, can be seen as both parodying Wölfflin's formal language, and as examples of the oppositional pairing crucial to his determination of visual meaning.

18. Damisch's *Eight Theses For (Or Against?) A Semiology of Painting* (2005). Damisch sets out eight theses for or against a semiology of painting. He: 1) Asks if there is a 'truth' of painting, and determines that painting's semiology exceeds the limits of painting. 2) Discusses the performance between the specific 'masterwork' and the network 'painting', asking if painting can be analysed in terms of system(s). 3) Discusses whether the signs of painting ('motifs, marks… traces, touches, imprints') can be perceived as semiotic units. 4) Discusses the language system of painting, where units characterise the system as such by way of spacing, positioning, framing, lighting, treatment, etc. 5) Considers Saussure and Panofsky and how the image is 'made to signify a thing different from the one the eye sees' (see p. 263). 6) Posits that even if we follow Emile Benveniste's conception of painting (semantic significance to the exclusion of semiotic significance), a 'good part of the programme of a semiology of painting' has already been 'realised under the title of Iconology' (even if Panofsky understood it as a 'Science of Interpretation') see p.264. 7) Considers what Damisch refers to as a 'register of perception', where the image for Panofsky was dependent on the symbolic level. 8) Determines that there is a semiotic level of painting but one that does not let itself be led back to the agency of the sign or image. Damisch also discusses Charles S. Peirce's 'iconic surplus-value' which states that an icon has a 'distinctive fundamental property' that through the observance of 'other truths' (concerning the object) suffices in determining its construction, but also that it has a pictorial surplus-value which is specific to painting (see p. 267). By this, Damisch means the way the system 'painting' poses the question of the signifier as visible and readable even though we are not to trust interpretation.

characteristics is applicable to Lasker's particular idea for painting; and while elements are transferable and may well speak to painting's autonomy, the forming of a list is but a reasonable, critical response given the way in which the artist approaches painting through the concept of invented vocabulary.

Lasker is key to my line of reasoning, for although we can say that Robert Ryman's approach to the literal qualities of materials explicated the vocabulary (possibly making Lasker's art tenable) [19], Lasker makes the most enterprising use of this inheritance. By way of his picturing of modernism and his transformative use of its signs as tropes, he asks what we can extract and convert as a basis for new ideas.

However, although Lasker's meta-painting is an extremely successful model, it is bound to modernism's (such as Pollock's) acknowledgment of the objectness of painting. And to escape this framework of opacity, we must look to broader descriptions of painting.

Polke's Transparent Diagram

One of the most thorough semiotic studies for painting is Meyer Schapiro's essay *On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-signs* (1969). While the impetus here chiefly pertains to hermeneutics and the iconographical qualities of representational art, Schapiro discusses painting's 'image-signs', i.e. characteristics immanent to pictures in that they constitute the structure of the pictorial. Schapiro's 'image-signs' are: 'ground', 'frame', 'divisions of the field', 'size', and the physical 'sign-bearing matter' (inked or painted lines, and so on). For

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19. Ryman's approach to art production is discussed at length in Chapter 2 of this research.

example, his critique of the image-sign 'ground' addresses the fact that the prepared field signifies the representation as such. Schapiro discusses the evolution from the rough and boundary-less stone ground of prehistoric cave art and its palimpsest-operation to our familiar perception of the organised and artificial field as smooth and contained. The author notes how this 'fundamental change in art' is 'basic for our own imagery, even for the photograph, the film and the television screen', and remarks how imagery has adapted to the paper or paper-like ground, offering by way of an example the solid filling of the background in children's drawings. Schapiro goes further to explain the success of the prepared field as an image-sign in his discussion of the monkey-painters, whose activity as artists is recognisable as such because they are given 'devices that belong to civilisation': paper and colour. [20]

Schapiro's illuminating syntactical analysis identifies that the imposed structural influence of the 'image-sign' upon the mimetic or allegorical denotations the artwork means to relay is an irreconcilable problem. However, image-signs are problematic only if one is blind to the representation *as a representation*. In a semiological discussion on the art of the Renaissance and Baroque, Hubert Damisch has argued that it is all too easy to forget the paradoxical nature of representation: 'that it is never more assured, as such, than when it openly presents itself as a representation' (Damisch, 2002: 63). In his book *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting* (2002)[21], Damisch embarks upon an analysis to 'define the specific semiotic function that constitutes the mainspring of pictorial production' (Damisch, 2002: 14). Damisch's theory of /cloud/ is a revised conception of history that considers depictions of clouds as an alternative spatial construct to linear perspective. And when discussing Correggio's use of /cloud/ (principally his frescos in the cupolas of

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20. See Schapiro, 1969: 224-225.

21. Damisch writes /cloud/ between slashes to indicate the term as a pictorial signifier as opposed to a painted reality, or a referent (i.e. a real cloud).

Parma from the 1520s), and Zurbarán's /cloud/ (in his two-tier compositions),

Damisch explains that /cloud/ was not used for purely mimetic or decorative ends:

> /Cloud/ is not necessarily depicted in such a way that it resembles a 'real' - or
> rather, a 'natural' - cloud. Its volume, its consistency, its very solidity declare
> that the functions assigned to it are not solely descriptive. […] it provides the
> material, if not the means, for a construction […]. The illusion - if that is what
> it is - is played out on another level: that of representation, in the theatrical
> sense of the term, produced by means of painting, painting that is […]
> organised in such as way as to be a representation of a representation.
> (Damisch, 2002: 64)

Through Damisch, we see that representation's iconography is perhaps not as potent

as its theatrical possibilities. To expound upon the specifics of the theatrical model

and the semiotic agents that facilitate it, it is apposite for us to turn to an operation of

syntax that differs from Lasker's in its taxonomy.

Die drei Lügen der Malerei [The Three Lies of Painting] (1994) [Fig. 3] is one of

Sigmar Polke's delightfully eccentric 'transparent paintings', where the picture

surface is a semi-transparent polyester fabric that leaves the wooden support - and

(to some extent) the wall upon which it is hung - visible. A large work in landscape

format, the painting shows a depicted landscape alongside a further strip of fabric

decorated with an all-over pattern of coloured handprints. The principal components

of the landscape image comprise a similarly-sized tree and mountain, and both of

these are dissected, the wooden stretcher intruding upon the image of the mountain,

whereas the tree image is sliced into pieces according to its features: roots, trunk,

and branches. Below, and parallel, to the central horizontal crossbar of the stretcher,

and spreading both behind the mountain and between the roots and trunk of the tree,

is the horizon line of the landscape's plane. The strip of fabric is external to the

picture, and is opaque, its repeated pattern and its position suggesting a piece of

[Fig. 3] Sigmar Polke, *Die drei Lügen der Malerei [The three Lies of Painting]* (1994), resin and lacquer on polyester canvas, partly printed, 300 x 400 cm.

wallpaper, or a curtain or blind obscuring the 'view'.

Polke's decision to make the material surface of the prepared field in *Die drei Lügen der Malerei* literally transparent speaks to his mischievous undertaking of *exposing* the structural conventions of painting. Polke uses literal transparency to re-present the idea of painting's perceptual transparency, using a see-through field to signify painting's opacity [22]. That Polke has coated his sheer fabric in clear resin also leaves little doubt that the surface (and the frame and grid structure of the visible stretcher bars) plays to the inherent (but typically discreet) mimesis of a window (with its implied 'view'). Now, while Alberti's window metaphor for his perspective formula concerned that of an open window (as an ideological framing device [23]), it is easy to appreciate the dialogue Polke is satirising here. However, rooted within this ludicrous meta-concept for painting is the suggestion that the re-presentation of painting's structure is one that totally flattens a depicted 'view' to a structural 'window'. This is achieved by an unprecedented reconciling of the pictorial with the material.

To begin to explain this, let us look to Jörg Heiser's critique on *Die drei Lügen der Malerei*, for although his assessment sets the scene for us, Heiser is so preoccupied by Polke's irony that he misses the potency of the analysis at hand. Instead, he demonstrates, by default, how misreading effects can deflate painting's potential. Polke's title - *The Three Lies of Painting* - can be interpreted as a challenge to decipher such lies, and Heiser has taken up the invitation [24]. Indeed, he goes on to

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22. Literal and perceptual transparency are discussed at length in Chapter 3 of this research.

23. As the first to codify painting in his *De Pictura [On Painting]* (1435) Leon Battista Alberti describes his approach: 'First of all, on the surface I on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen […] (Alberti, 1972: 55, originally 1435). The virtual space of Alberti's window metaphor does not address the transparency of the window but the window as a framing device; see Masheck's *Alberti's Window* (1991).

24. The first lie of painting for Heiser is illusionistic, three-dimensional perspective; the second is that of composition and the Golden Section; and the third is faithfulness to materials; see Heiser, 2008: 128-130.

propose a fourth lie: that decoding the three lies in order to provide insight is a lie.

> But not even the idea of 'three lies' is the truth, as the biggest lie is the fourth
> - that of total transparency, of decoding the 'three lies', of a genuine insight
> into the mechanisms of the painter's method, hinted at in the joke of a
> mountain that is 'analytically' broken down like the tree, as if we might learn
> anything more about the mountain if its peak is chopped off, or about painting
> if it reveals its ingredients. (Heiser, 2008: 130)

Unsurprisingly, I find this last statement unhelpful, and in fact Heiser's example goes some way to prove my point. The mountain depiction does not behave in the same way as that of the tree; its peak is not 'chopped off', but rather the stretcher's newly visible horizontal crossbar pretends to occlude part of the depiction, so that the image is now received as *behind* the structure.

Polke's literally transparent surface facilitates his theatrical reassessment of pictorial occlusion. Occluded shapes are those blocked from the viewer's gaze by shapes placed in front of them [25]; in *Die drei Lügen der Malerei*, however, the depiction of the mountain is such that it appears segmented by the horizontal crossbar of the support. The visible bar here goes further than disrupting the viewer's suspension of disbelief; seen as in front of the mountain depiction, a typically invisible material element - which is literally behind the image - is presented as a pictorial effect.

Aside from the flattening of 'window' to 'view', and the material into a pictorial element, another lie concerns how Polke's material operations divulge the medium's illusionary effectiveness. To make this apparent, Polke turns not to referential

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25. (Not that the viewer assumes hidden shapes cease to exist; see Kepes' *Language of Vision: Painting, Photography, Advertising-Design*, 1967: 76.)

mimesis as such but to a mimesis that mirrors the material's capacity to lie, i.e. his printed hands look painted and the painted landscape looks printed. This misdirection is further explored by jokes, such as the possibility of a code or sign-language embedded in the handprints, the separation of the mountain into bottom and top (the top section plausibly describing a mountain 'in the distance'), and the itemised tree depiction, which can be read as punning Gestalt theory by offering the structure of the sign through its parts. Umberto Eco has described a theory of the lie for us, noting that, as an operation of substitution, *'semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie*' [26]. Eco discussed 'a referential fallacy', rejecting any relationship between a referential *truth* and a sign function: *'Every time there is possibility of lying, there is a sign-function*: which is to signify (and then to communicate) something to which no real state of things corresponds' (Eco, 1976: 58) [Eco's italics]. Ferdinand de Saussure, meanwhile, asserts in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1998, originally 1916) that the linguistic sign is a two-part compound: a *signifier* (the material form of the sign), and a *signified* (not a thing, but the concept of a thing, or the concept it represents). The signification of the sign is separate from the material form *internally* (i.e. the two-part compound is not the link between a sign and a referent). Polke can be seen as parodying this concept in his separating out of the material form of the sign. In other words, he uses depiction as a pictorial substitution spelled out as such, i.e. as a flat diagram to re-present representation. The success of this operation relies upon the exploitation of certain expectations; something Polke reveals in his stratagem of representational separation (for example, where the parts - roots, trunk, branches - rely upon the recognition of the whole sign: tree). Saussure's first principle of general linguistics is that the linguistic sign is arbitrary because the link between signification and signal is arbitrary, which is to say that the signal (or word, or *sound pattern*) is

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26. See Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1976: 7 [Eco's italics].

unmotivated in relation to its signification (an object) [27]. Unlike the linguistic model, however, pictorial signs are motivated [28], and this visual motivation (resemblance) individuates the sign. Yet it is important to stress that an insistence on denotative depiction (even from a place of knowing) plays no part in painting's syntax, and therefore, in contrast to Lasker's abstract model, Polke's witty syntactical game applies additional information to syntax in order to denigrate it.

The Mutability of the Sign

This brings us to a core issue for historic abstraction. As neither arbitrary nor motivated, neither substitutive nor distinguishable, an abstract sign is one that lacks a conventionally definable signified. As pioneers of abstract painting, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky responded to the problem of the either/or of abstraction/subject by seeking a subject equal to that of representational art's denotative sign. The Bauhaus and its 'community of guides' have been described as: 'interpreters of the visual as tokens of a fundamental optical and structural order that had been obscured by centuries of literary allegorism' [29], with Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook*

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27. See Saussure, 1998: 66-69. Saussure stated: 'The signs used in writing are arbitrary. The letter t, for instance, has no connexion with the sound it denotes' (1998: 117). Saussure notes that the word arbitrary must not be taken to imply the free choice of the speaker, as once chosen, a signal cannot be freely replaced by another. As an inheritance from the past (an inheritance society is usually content with), the 'invariability' of the signal is formed because of 1) the arbitrary nature of the sign, 2) the great number of signs necessary to constitute a language, 3) the complex character of the system (because the system has rationality, meaning it is unable to change at will), and 4) that 'collective inertia resists all linguistic innovation' (Saussure, 1998: 71-74). However, the passage of time that ensures continuity also facilitates change. This 'variability' occurs because of *a shift in the relationship between signal and signification*' (1998: 75) [Saussure's italics].

28. Saussure is careful to note that the symbol is never entirely arbitrary (as 'they show at least a vestige of natural connection between the signal and its signification'), and onomatopoeic words 'might be held to show that a choice of signal is not always arbitrary' (Saussure, 1998: 68-69). Derrida, in his interrogation of Saussure in *Of Grammatology* (1997, originally, 1967), explains that pictographic writing is contradictory for Saussure; see Derrida, 1997: 32.

29. László Moholy-Nagy quoted in Klee, 1953: 9.

(1953, originally 1925), and Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* (1979, originally 1926) epitomising an inductive dialogue, giving rules to shapes and their placement. In their eyes, this *interpretation* of shapes was a technical analysis serving to broaden the consciousness and possibilities of the formal language of painting. Klee aimed to enlighten his students on reading form as a reductive sign or code of nature, while for Kandinsky, painting's recent liberation from 'practical meaning', i.e. from representing nature, demanded that 'an exact scientific examination be made about the pictorial means and purposes of painting' (Kandinsky, 1979: 18).

Kandinsky decreed that an acute triangle 'has a yellow colour within', whereas the 'passiveness' of an obtuse angle gives 'a light blue tone' [30]. Clearly unaware of Saussure, Kandinsky rationalised a theory for his art that functioned to protect his abstract language from being perceived as *merely* abstract, as *merely* arbitrary. Within this misapprehension, Kandinsky failed to appreciate that colour cannot be codified beyond what convention dictates (hence the need for a key in the form of a guidebook of sorts). Colour can be reminiscent and descriptive, what is often termed as 'local', but in itself it is not a sign and is not open to semantic analysis. Attaching a semantic explanation to shape and colour meant that Kandinsky fixed the signification of the sign; a folly that can be further clarified through a consideration of Picasso's collages.

Pablo Picasso was arguably the first to interrogate syntax as a subject for art. As Rosalind Krauss has argued in her essay 'The Circulation of the Sign' in her book *The Picasso Papers* (1998), Picasso used the image-repertoire of representation to communicate formal elements as subject matter. One collage selected by Krauss for her discussion is *Violin* (1912) [Fig. 4], a charcoal drawing on paper of a violin with

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30. See Kandinsky, 1979: 72-74.

two pieces of scissored newspaper, the textual content of which is displayed in the normal horizontal fashion, the lower piece interrupted by the continuation of the drawing onto its surface. Krauss describes Picasso's collage fragments themselves as indeterminable, proposing that the viewer's reception of the fragments and their contents (for the newspaper pieces, their lines of writing) depends upon the context in which they are presented. In the case of the lower fragment in *Violin*, the left edge becomes the carved profile of the violin, its lines of writing perceived by the viewer as the graining of wood: 'Thus the piece becomes the support, or signifier, for a visual signified', Krauss explains, 'they produce a meaning: the *density*, the *opacity* of a physical object, here, a violin' (Krauss, 1998: 27).

Although Krauss discusses single plays [31], she writes: 'the play is always most brilliant when the reversals are pairs' (Krauss, 1998: 65), as the system at play is 'a rule of relativity' (Krauss, 1998: 27). Elaborating on the operation of pairing in *Violin,* Krauss explains how the two fragments of newsprint are an unalike pair, twins with a common edge, having been scissored from the same sheet, with one fragment flipped so that each piece's common and notched edge is on the left. Krauss outlines how the circulation of the sign alters the signification, and with these twins the circulation is made operable chiefly by the placing of the fragments. At odds with the solidified fragment of the violin, its twin (the fragment above) becomes, due to its placing, the 'background'. Just as the curved left-hand side of the piece below describes the body of the violin, the curved left side of this fragment describes the space behind, and Krauss describes how the printed textual content of the fragment aids this visualisation:

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31. For example, the foreshortened trapezium canting into depth, which signifies 'the *transparency* of the collage system itself' in Picasso's *Bottle and Wineglass* (1912); see Krauss, 1998: 66, 68.

[Fig. 4] Pablo Picasso, *Violin* (1912), pasted papers and charcoal on paper, 62 x 47 cm.

In this position, the newsprint's lines of type now assume the look of stippled flecks of graphite, the painter's visual shorthand for atmospheric surround. A new place then summons forth a different sign: *light* it declares, or *atmosphere.* (Krauss, 1998: 27-28) [Krauss' italics]

What was seen as solid graining of wood in the piece below is now atmospheric shading, so that the 'same' sign represents *both* figure and ground. For Krauss, this is the brilliance of Picasso, for the two opposed meanings come from the same physical sheet of newspaper:

Figure and *ground* become this kind of contrary here, joined and redoubled by *opaque* and *transparent* or *solid* and *luminous*, so that just as one fragment is, literally speaking, the back side of the material from which the other was cut, the circulation of the sign produces this very same condition, but semiologically, at the level of the sign: *front, solid, shape; behind, transparent, surround*. (Krauss, 1998: 28) [Krauss' italics]

The fragments are equivalent but because of the circulation of the sign, signification has shifted. Picasso's game in *Violin* relies upon the two fragments' relationship to one another, Krauss' assertion being that this duality, and the shift between sameness and difference state that the sign's fixity of resemblance - 'what a semiologist would call an iconic condition' - has 'slipped away' (Krauss, 1998: 28).

One can align the manifestation of the sign as unfixed in Picasso with what Roland Barthes has described as the 'structuralist activity', where one recomposes an object in order to make certain functions appear [32]. In essence, Barthes' semiological analysis determines the unifying system, or grammar, that binds elements together; he writes:
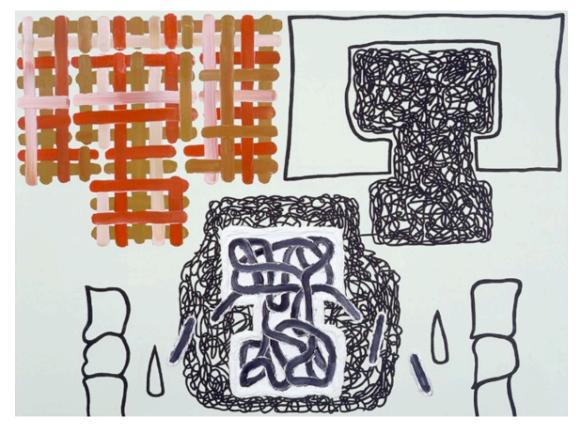
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32. See Barthes' *The Structuralist Activity*, 1963: 216.

> The goal of all structuralist activity […] is to reconstruct an 'object' in such a
> way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning […] Structure is therefore
> actually a *simulacrum* of the object, but a direct, *interested* simulacrum, since
> the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible […].
> (Barthes, 1963: 214-215) [Barthes' italics]

By way of an example, let us turn to another of Lasker's paintings, *Variable Identity*
(2001) [Fig. 5], for although in its size, colour, and execution it is less satisfying than
the manicured *An Image of the Self*, this earlier work demonstrates more exactly a
meta-syntactical interrogation of the indeterminable sign.

Variable Identity is home to collections of shapes that invite two sets of basic
analogies; what we could refer to as: category 1) those shapes that are similar in
technical approach but not in silhouette, such as shapes comprised of a tangle of
black, looped line; and category 2) those shapes that are similar to others in
silhouette, regardless of the technical approach, such as the way in which the shape
in the top right-hand area of the painting (that looks like an 'I') finds partners in the
lattice of coloured brushstrokes and in the thick paint shape towards the bottom of
the painting (with broad, looped-line interior) [33]. Focusing on just the most significant
pairings, there are two operations that deserve our attention. The first is that of
symmetry, for the mirroring that occurs in *Variable Identity* implies the image in its
entirety, rather than a sectioned-off view. The second is that of the unalike pair: the

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33. Here, it is perhaps interesting to note that Barthes uses Saussure's linguistic model to discuss cultural
phenomena other than language. Barthes, in his *Elements of Semiology* (1964), outlines the different categories of
'system' and 'syntagm', and he uses examples, such as garment or furniture systems, to further explain each
category; e.g. the 'system' is a set of garments which cannot be worn at the same time (as their variation
corresponds to a change in meaning) and the 'syntagm' is the juxtaposition of garments (skirt, blouse, jacket); or the
'system' is a set of the stylistic varieties of a single piece of furniture (e.g. a bed), and the 'syntagm' is the
juxtaposition of different pieces of furniture in the same space (bed, wardrobe, etc.); see Barthes, 1964: 58-88, 63. If
I were to apply Barthes' semiology to Lasker's shapes: my 'category 1)' would be organised by the 'syntagm' (items
in a chain, for example; in Barthes' furniture system this would describe units in the same space: bed, wardrobe,
etc.), and my 'category 2)' would be organised by the 'system' (different styles of bed); see Barthes, 1964: 63.

[Fig. 5] Jonathan Lasker, *Variable Identity* (2001), oil on linen, 76 x 101 cm.

pairing between the black, looped line shape in the top right-hand area and the shape comprised of the same black, looped line, below and centre. The recomposing Barthes speaks of is especially noteworthy in this pair because within this functioning there are three correlations that signify it: 1) the technical approach or material substance of both shapes is the same; 2) the lower shape acts as the substitute ground and frame for a shape similar in silhouette (if not size and material) to the upper shape that concerns us (as if one was cut from the other); and 3) the shapes are physically linked (by a thread). In stating that the material or silhouette of units is equivalent or distinct, Lasker compels the viewer to compare characteristics, and in emphasising this equivalence through components that the viewer can agree are moveable and replaceable, he recomposes the signification of the sign.

The mutability of the sign relies upon painting's elements being observed firstly as isolated units, and secondly as units whose effect shifts depending upon context. I will return to the importance of this functioning, but first let us consider the role of interpretation this analysis challenges.

Like Lasker's interplays in *Variable Identity*, Polke's *Die drei Lugen der Malerei* can also be seen as containing a pairing. With both the tree and mountain placed on an equal footing, side-by-side, and depicted the same size as one another [34], Polke invites the viewer to make a direct comparison. However, in the visual pun that the mountain is cut *like wood* (like the tree) *by* cut wood (the stretcher), representation is

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34. In light of Polke's equal scaling of the tree and mountain in *Die drei Lügen der Malerei*, it is worth noting that Schapiro distinguishes two sets of conditions in the size of visual signs in representational art: 1) as a function of visibility and value, for instance, in the grading of figures in Western medieval art, where Christ (as the figure with the greatest signification) is the largest, the evangelists then smaller, and the prophets smaller still; and 2) the size of different components of the image relative to real objects which they signify, and relative to each other. Schapiro goes on to discuss how objects of different sizes in reality have, in some archaic arts (as in children's drawings), been shown as if to be of equal height. See Schapiro, 1969: 235-236.

yet again called into question, as both tree (cut wood) and mountain (cut stone) are 'paint' (re-emphasised by Polke in his allowing of the paint to run). Through Polke's playful use of the denotative signifier, we see how depiction can muddy the understanding of form and the interpretation of signs. This is an important lesson because of our collective habit of *believing* images (i.e. suspending disbelief in order to relate to the illusion of three-dimensionality, and thereby ignoring image-sign conventions and the materiality of painting). And Krauss has challenged those who conform to such an interpretation by outlining the failings of literally *reading* the textual content of Picasso's newspaper cuttings, and thus reading signification that is external to the visual.

Krauss writes how scholars (David Cottington, Patricia Leighton, and others) have argued for the relevance of semantic content [35]; for Krauss, however, the political voices from within the newspaper's text are superfluous, and are certainly not the artist's statement: 'we need to acknowledge', she states, 'that textual fragments join with the other signifiers in these collages and circulate along with them' (Krauss, 1998: 40). In an earlier work, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1986), Krauss also stresses that it is crucial not to confuse the signified with a referent, and writes how Pierre Daix makes this mistake: 'Daix is careful to subdivide the sign into signifier and signified - the first being the affixed collage-bit or element of schematic drawing itself; the second being the referent of this signifier: newspaper, bottle, violin' (Krauss 1986: 32). However, it is important to note that there are parts in Picasso's collages that are unambiguously semantically fixed; for example, it is necessary for the viewer to receive the violin as such in order to determine 'the graining of wood' (figure) as different to 'atmosphere' (background). A designated signified (from a self-evident referent) brings with it social exchange (i.e.

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35. For example, see Cottington's *What the Papers Say: Politics and Ideology in Picasso's Collages of 1912* (1988).

without recognition we can not determine codes or signs), although recognition is not attached to figuration per se, as substitutes do not have to have iconicity [36].

In actuality, through his functioning of the sign, Picasso elucidates the changeable nature of signification (as the act or process of the sign [37]). Again, the fluctuation of the signified, as both 'the graining of wood', and as 'atmosphere', exposes the ineffectuality of attaching a fixed semantic to the visual sign. The point being that: 'By giving everything a name, it strips each sign of its special modality of meaning: its capacity to represent the conditions of representation' (Krauss, 1986: 40) [38]. We have observed this *theatre*, as Damisch calls it (the representation of a representation), at work in Polke's *Die drei Lugen der Malerei*. However, I have also noted that in abstract art there is no referent to affix the label, and to further explain the significance of this, let us return to Saussure. I have discussed the relations of units and 'grammatical facts' that best describe the 'operation of linguistic oppositions', as 'in a linguistic state, everything depends on relations' [39], but this operation has a further revolution. Saussure states: '*In language itself, there are only differences*', and he continues: 'although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the differences holds, in a language there are only differences, *and no positive terms*' (Saussure, 1998: 118) [Saussure's italics]. Krauss expands upon this, writing: 'Meaning is not visualised as the result of the positive

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36. Ernst Gombrich's famous hobbyhorse as a stick, for example.

37. Barthes writes of the significant correlation: 'The signification can be conceived as a process; it is the act which binds the signifier and the signified, an act whose product is the sign' (Barthes, 1964: 48).

38. For instance, Krauss discusses the reduction of the sign to the semantics of the 'proper name' (e.g. Robert Rosenblum's *reading* of the labels in cubist collage to identify the objects so labelled; see Krauss, 1986: 31). She writes: 'the sign-as-label is a perversion of the operations of the sign. For the label merely doubles an already material presence by giving it its name' (Krauss, 1986: 33). Krauss further explains that form became historically devalued through its use as a theoretical mechanism, the label affixed because critics confused the lack of iconographic imagery (designated signified) in historic abstract painting with formalism. Krauss discusses the impact of critical interpretations that positioned historic abstraction as decorative (or subject-less), explaining that the art-historical tendency towards 'the logic of picture theory' could not accommodate 'significations generated from relationships of pure difference' (Krauss, 1986: 238).

39. See Saussure, 1998: 120-121.

value of *a*, but only of *a*'s relation to *b* […] *a* is more accurately characterised as *not-b*' (Krauss, 1986: 238). For Krauss, the subject of abstraction is this operation of absence, or what she terms 'abstract logic', and she qualifies this:

> The great Pollocks, like the great Mondrians, operate through a structure of oppositions: line as opposed to colour; contour as opposed to field; matter as opposed to the incorporeal. The subject that then emerges is the provisional unity of the identity of opposites: as line becomes colour, contour becomes field, and matter becomes light. (Krauss, 1986: 239)

From pure difference, therefore, we gain provisional unity. Krauss refers to Pollock's characterisation of this operation as 'energy and motion made visible' and 'memories arrested in space', and notes what Lee Krasner described as 'unframed space' [40]. Provisional unity, then, relies upon the binary of figure/non-figure, and the 'absorption of the 'image' into the dialectical structure' (Krauss, 1986: 239).

Homeless Representation

In looking to the possibilities of provisional unity after Pollock, one might consider David Salle's paintings from the 1980s, for Salle literalises the arbitrary and indeterminate aspects of the sign by merging pictorial elements. Salle's version of painting adopted what was termed in the 1970s as a 'flatbed picture plane', meaning that pictorial information is arranged, not to the visual experience of natural order, but approximating that of a bulletin board [41]. Like Polke, Salle courts the idea of

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40. See Krauss, 1986: 238-239.

41. Leo Steinberg used his term 'flatbed picture plane' to critique the assemblage pieces of Robert Rauschenberg and the like. See Steinberg's *Other Criteria* in Harrison & Wood, 1992: 948-953.

sabotaging high art [42]; yet, rather than separating out the components of visual language (like Polke and Lasker), he layers referential imagery, confusing one disconnected signifier with another, a collaging which results in the cancelling of signification. However, despite textual dislocation, Salle's model is not compatible with syntactical analysis. This is because his paintings are all about the extreme disparities between quoted images, therefore his individual component images always remain semantically fixed, and the viewer is not invited to see divergence or referential ambiguity. My model, however, relies upon a sign's ability to both shape-shift and relate to other comparable signs, and in the paintings of Tomma Abts we find: 1) the selection of signs tied not to external resemblance but to the functioning of other signs (a functioning that generates and relies upon resemblance within the pictorial sphere); and 2) a provisional unity that comes from her brand of figure/ground exchange. Like Lasker, Abts compresses the picture into a single, shallow plane, but if her spatial arrangements and vocabulary are reminiscent of historic abstraction then they are adopted and adapted from Constructivism, Vorticism, Orphism, or perhaps El Lissitzky's *Proun* series, for Abts' components are not distinct, but are simultaneously distinct and cohesive.

Abts' serene and expertly crafted *Folme* (2002) [Fig. 6] is a small painting in oil and acrylic on canvas that seems almost carved rather than painted. Its imagery presents a continuous circuit of two interlocking paths; and, as if mapping infinity, the eye can trace one path and be seamlessly taken to the adjacent one. The circuit is made of coloured arcs that appear to bridge over and slide under other arcs, each bridge causing a break in the visual continuity, and in two cases casting blurry-edged

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42. Foster, in his book *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (1985), has described Salle's paintings as 'a formulaic display of dead, dispersed images with charge enough only to damp out any connection or criticality', and also writes that 'Salle parades this schizo dispersal of the subject as a theme' (Foster, 1985: 134).

[Fig. 6] Tomma Abts, *Folme* (2002), oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 38 cm.

shadows that darken the ground 'beneath'. While four relatively small arcs are comprised of a thin wash of burnt orange fusing into burnt umber, so that the paint's thinness and transparency make it possible to detect the texture of the canvas through the paint, the rest of the arcs and the surrounding 'space' are made of considerably thicker opaque paint in a variety of warm greys. These sections are characterised by ridges in the surface that either emphasise a border, or travel across both the arcs and the ground, oblivious to the changes in image or colour. In the multiple applications of layered paint, Abts obscures areas of the painting, previous workings only signified by these lines of accumulated paint that are the raised residue against absent masking tape. However, Abts' ridges are far from superfluous, as the viewer can determine from them a history of making (whether or not the story they tell is faithful).

The choreographed overlapping and trompe l'oeil in Abts' work make it difficult to consider her components as units. Despite that signification shape-shifts depending on the signification of other parts, Abts' elements are not all that transferable. If actually substituting one of Lasker's signs for another is problematic, then Abts' language is completely resistant to re-use outside of the system in which it operates. This is perhaps due to how hard she works to harmonise an image that is effectively teased out of a palimpsest of labour-intensive acts, and also the level to which she uses a flattened abstract space in conjunction with shadows.

In his essay, *After Abstract Expressionism* (1962), Greenberg wrote of the infiltration of the nonessential into his rationale for painting. For instance, he struggled with the 'furtive bas-relief' of the painted surface of Jasper Johns, which took flatness too far towards objectness for Greenberg's taste. Another problem was what he termed 'homeless representation', meaning: 'a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones'

(Greenberg, 1962: 124). For Greenberg, tonal modulations, and pictorial modelling or contouring corrupted painting's flatness. Through Abts, however, I see homeless representation as a positive field of opportunity for painting. Abts' use of trompe l'oeil illusion works alongside her experiments with paint and surface. The proposed image and the handling of the material are performed within the same breath. It is as if the dominant concerns of contemporary art (since Pollock) had not consigned pure difference, illusionism, and figure/ground relationships to history. Visual shifts between ridges of opaque colour and the shaded areas in paintings like *Folme* make her works both opaque paintings in the modernist tradition *and* sites open to reassessment. And unlike Lasker (whose pictures to a large extent obey Greenbergian flatness), Abts does not feel limited by the proclamations of the past; hers is an approach that freely merges materiality with illusion.

In the borrowing of a device from figuration, Abts explores illusion, deceiving the viewer through false shadows. 'Depth', however, is not the objective. In *Folme*, the sections of burnt orange compound the ruse, their descriptive highlights strategically placed to suggest conflicting spatial operations. Of the four arcs we can characterise in this manner, two seem flat, and two seem arched. The uppermost arc bows outward towards the viewer (and is accompanied by its shadow upon the ground 'beneath'), while the arc to the viewer's left seems to be painted as if to indicate that it bows inward and away from the viewer (though it appears strangely flat, despite its shading). However, the most intriguing operation takes place between the two lower shaded arcs. The one on the right-hand side engages in the same operation as the uppermost arc (bridging the ground), and yet this time its companion is shaded, as if to suggest that the bridging arc has been lit from the right and outside of the painting and that its shadow has been cast onto the body of the flat arc. This is noteworthy for two reasons: 1) as the shadow of one arc falls across the surface of another, the viewer is told that one part of the surface mimics a projection into three-dimensions

while another area is definitively flat; and 2) as a shadow is a transient phenomenon caused by a factor external to the painting (a light source), a shadow (as both a sign for depth/projection and flatness, and as a decorative flourish) is a trompe l'oeil effect with an implied temporality. What makes Abts' visual play so startling is that when we compare the two lower shaded arcs with the two upper ones, we see that the sign has not been modified to any great extent; as with Picasso, the placing and the contextual relationships govern the identity of what occurs.

Folme is a particularly interesting painting because interior and exterior space, light and dark tones, opaque and transparent paint, hidden and exposed layers, and depicted and literal relief are all comparable elements that spark provisional unity. And most notable is how Abts' circuit declares itself as a device or armature for the application of signification through its perpetual nature as a *machine* [43] and the way in which this image relates to the four sides of the painting's rectangular frame. Indeed, Abts' investigations take place not solely between illusion and tactile surface, or from the tactical deployment of illusionary and descriptive signs (like shadows), as from the very outset syntax is declared in Abts' approach to painting, each of her works conforming to the same small size and portrait orientation. This imposed rule-making tells us that Abts is concerned with how to instigate and convey a set of limiting conditions in the creation of paintings. [44]

Ultimately, figure/ground exchange in Abts' paintings is more rigorous than in Salle's,

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43. It is interesting to note that Annibale Carracci called Correggio's banks of clouds 'machines' for their continuous composition; see Damisch, 2002: 5.

44. However, a bizarre and trivialising development within her practice - observable in her solo exhibition at GreenGrassi Gallery, London (04/11/11 - 14/01/12) - sees Abts interfere with her own rule-making to slice her 48 x 38 cm canvases into two separate halves. *Hepe* (2011) is seemingly 'cut' into two at a diagonal horizontal, while *Heit* (2011) is 'cut' vertically (off centre). One wonders at this extreme reaction to her self-determined limits; surely a change in size, scale, or palette would provide a means to test parameters and methods without this seemingly aimless mutilation of the prepared field?

not because the sign in Salle is constrained to referential entities, but because his superimposed spatial activities are arbitrarily arranged. Salle places cultural references in abstract space so that his signifiers are untied from sensible construction (i.e. gravity); however, although 'space' in Salle facilitates the circulation of the sign, it fails to influence. Abts' palimpsest in *Folme*, on the other hand, is regulated by her final occlusions with opaque paint, where 'space' is not a ground under figures, but appears as though the last element applied.

The linguistic model as outlined by Barthes is useful here because: 'the combination of the signs is free, but this freedom […] remains under supervision' (Barthes, 1964: 69); the point being that a supervision of sorts is observable in Abts, and in Lasker, and that this supervision contributes to the functioning of the sign. Barthes writes:

> […] the syntagm is a combination of signs, which has *space as a support*. In the articulated language, this space is linear and irreversible (it is the 'spoken chain'): two elements cannot be pronounced at the same time […] each term here derives its value from its opposition to what precedes and what follows […]. (Barthes, 1964: 58) [Emphasis added]

The syntagmatic structure (i.e. the linguistic analysis of syntax) centres on the functioning of units in arrangements, and most commonly relates to speech; however, in applying this idea of space-as-a-support to images, it is easy to locate a correlation with Lasker's use of abstract space and sequential ordering. In *Variable Identity*, comparable shapes appear as though suspended in 'space' whilst being attentive to the limits of the frame; while in *An Image of the Self* - although Lasker's pairings within the same family of shapes are also syntagmatic - the staging of the shapes 1-2-3 in a row (within the flat ground colour as space-as-a-support) facilitates our perception of them as a group of deliberately articulated signs, each with its own role.

Syntactical Painting: New Terrain

It has been said that: 'The mistake lies in thinking of abstract art as something in particular, when it is interesting only insofar as it is *not* something in particular, but simply a way of manifesting the desire for painting in as naked a way as possible' [45]. While abstraction's particular/non-particular status is a specious argument today (for it is ineffectual beyond a generalising terminology), if we grant that the material 'nakedness' of painting is a modernist goal and post-modernist effect - traceable in one form or another through the monochrome, Mondrian, Pollock, Frankenthaler, Rothko, early Stella, Ryman, Buren, and so on - then through Abts, 'nakedness' is no longer a presiding issue. Instead, Abts uses a reflexive syntax to trade naked truth for illusion in order to interfere with the literal materiality of painting.

At odds with modernist painting's homogenisation of the picture plane (making 'ground' significant and leaving 'figure' out of the picture), invented vocabulary such as Lasker's 'things of paint' [46] and Abts' 'flattened polygonal volumes' [47] provides a basis for painting that is consistently concerned with the potential mutability observable in the functioning of painting's parts (i.e. the structure of oppositions). The individualised units I have discussed in Lasker's paintings demonstrate the potentiality of adaptable signs, while Abts' technical method of building the image and surface through layers of supervised impulses also expands painting through her use of repetition, her merging of depicted and literal relief, and her concept of the image as a machine for the circulation of the sign. Yet it is not only that the functioning of the arbitrary/motivated sign operates strategically within Lasker's and

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45. Barry Schwabsky in 1997, quoted in Colpitt's *Abstract Art In the Late Twentieth Century*, 2002: 181 [Schwabsky's italics].

46. David Moos' catalogue essay, *Things of Paint: The Work of Jonathan Lasker*, 2007.

47. Heiser, 2008: 107.

Abts' specific contexts, but that the modes of invention they use reflect the syntax of painting. The conveying of meta-languages (such as conventionalising abstract painting, the gestural mark, and pictorial construction) position this conception of syntax as a consistent investigative means for the consideration of painting, and Lasker's tropes and Abts' homeless representation both utilise an internalised or pictorial syntax that greatly differs from the object-centred externalised or material syntax indicative of both modernism and postmodernism. This is new terrain.

We have seen that the bias of Kandinsky's evaluation of abstraction (with the need for a handbook) fixes the signification of the sign, applying signified to signifier regardless of the context of said signifier. However, in Picasso's approach, which accepts the arbitrariness of the sign, context varies a signifier's signification. Polke's *Die drei Lügen der Malerei* illustrates for us the possibilities of this play within the syntax of denotative depiction, as a referent-bound signifier is separate and at odds with what is signified. Lasker's and Abts' original contribution, meanwhile, resides in their acknowledgment of 'differences *without positive* terms' (Saussure), as well as in their recognition of Picasso's circulation of the sign (through which the sign can signify formal elements and Krauss' abstract logic). This, coupled with their use of the pictorial as a familiar depictive theatre to stress that abstraction as such does not transcend or break through convention or representation, means that through this methodology I elicit three claims for painting: 1) that invention is conceivable as such because of structure (be it governed by formal, spatial, or oppositional supervision); 2) that invention, shifts in signification, and structure all benefit from a language that is open to, and accentuates, a pictorial or internalised syntax; and 3) that, while analogous with modernist painting, a consideration of syntactical painting (as the source of an artwork) engenders a new model for painting that sits outside of historical parameters.

Chapter 2

Material Syntax

Introduction

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I noted that the literal transparency of Polke's surface in *Die drei Lügen der Malerei* enables him to re-present the binary between painting's material opacity (its objectness), and the virtual transparency of the image. As I explained, Polke uses the syntax of transparency to transform an *invisible* material fact (the stretcher bar) into a visible pictorial effect (that occludes part of a depiction). In other words, materiality is utilised for inventive means. In order to fully comprehend why this move has pertinence, what follows looks to the writing of both Piet Mondrian and Donald Judd to explicate the ideology of the past that turned modernism's acknowledgment of objectness into Minimalism's programme for art. From here, I look to Daniel Buren's institutional critique, and Robert Ryman's itemisation of the elements of painting, to discuss how painting is trapped by the logic that follows objectness to an extreme.

This diversion away from the inventive pictorial/internalised syntax of Lasker and Abts explains another syntactical mode of art production, where syntax is still used to generate an artwork, except that the impetus is from *outside of the frame*. Here, I discuss the work of Wade Guyton, using his printed monochromes to work my way through possible interpretations that might align his practice with a critique that is more fertile than that of Buren's. And if it is difficult to fully substantiate such readings, then my dialogue on the seductive hold of critiquing-painting-through-style-and-display - observable in the synoptic artworks of Joe Bradley and Heimo Zobernig - goes some way to illuminate why.

Syntax Outside of the Frame

Viewers of naturalistic paintings in the Western tradition are accustomed to receiving the sign 'frame' as a supplement to be dismissed. This is because we habitually read picture frames as objects that disappear in the process of making art appear. Resisting this dismissal is the frame's spatial impact on all within its boundary: a frame visually recesses the pictorial information it encloses. Yet if we consider Piet Mondrian's extraction of the additional frame convention, we see how the loss of the frame affected this aspect of the image, and in turn presumed a different activity of viewers, i.e. they no longer looked *into* paintings. In 1943, Mondrian wrote:

> So far as I know, I was the first to bring the painting forward from the frame, rather than set it within the frame. I had noted that a picture without a frame works better than a framed one and that the framing causes sensations of three dimensions. It gives an illusion of depth, so I took a frame of plain wood and mounted my picture on it. In this way I brought it to a more real existence. [1]

In discarding the picture frame to conceive of painting as set forward from the wall, Mondrian substituted the contextual space of the frame with the contextual space of display, so that internalised illusion was traded for objectness and a sense of the architecture of art's surroundings. In essence, the scrutiny of form enabled the metaphorical picture to be taken literally. The replacement of imagined disappearance with the frame's actual disappearance brought painting into the realm of the viewer, and therefore the practical and figurative segregation of inside (art) as apart from outside (non-art) dissolved. Painting still had a limit-frame but the image

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1. Mondrian, writing about his diamond-shaped canvases to James Johnson Sweeney in 1943; see Mondrian (Holtzman and James), 1987: 357.

itself was not *behind* it. Mondrian went on to state:

> To move the picture into our surroundings and give it real existence has been
> my ideal since I came to abstract painting. […] I feel painting can become
> much more real, much less subjective, much more objective, when its
> possibilities are realized in architecture in such a way that the painter's
> capabilities are joined with constructive ones. [2]

Although Mondrian's ideology was very much fixed to painting [3], with this position in
mind we can equate his project with the minimalist development that took place two
decades later.

Soon after Greenberg's retrospective *Modernist Painting* (1960) that centred on
flatness and the delimitation of flatness as the quality specific to painting (epitomised
in the all-over unity of Pollock) [4], Donald Judd, in his essay *Specific Objects* (1965),
conceptualised a conclusion that ultimately discarded painting for its two-dimensional
pretence at three-dimensionality in favour of the three-dimensional object [5].

Judd took issue with how painting - no matter how flat - was always a collection of
spatially-arranged parts that inevitably compromised art's material wholeness; and
so by way of engineering a theoretical rivalry between the object and the sign, he
invented a new literal art. As three-dimensional, hollow, and constructed out of
planes, Judd's own symmetrical boxes are examples of his concept for a new
category of art that was neither painting nor sculpture [6]. For Judd, such works
combated the illusionism of traditional art by (supposedly) refraining from evoking

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2. Ibid.

3. As Mondrian puts it: 'I came to the destruction of volume by the use of the plane.' Mondrian (Holtzman and James), 1987: 357.

4. Also see Greenberg's *After Abstract Expressionism* (1962).

5. Judd himself had made paintings until around 1960.

6. Although Judd looked to artists like Claes Oldenberg and Robert Morris.

phenomena external to the material. This perversion of Greenberg's formalist ideology for modernist painting resulted in the subsequent removal of painting itself from the art object, painting merely being the last thing to go as all metaphorical information was forced out.

As painting's propensity for pretence had been exorcised, Judd's efforts to exaggerate the spatial debate to a state hostile to painting affected the place of display. If Greenberg's version of modernism used the exclusion of fictive space to consider flatness, then objectness is what followed, and with it came a reflection on the space of art's surroundings. Rather than an isolated world foreign to the space outside of it (as with easel painting), this seemingly frame-less art used the three-dimensional box space of the gallery for context. The modernist white cube gallery - as 'unshadowed, white, clean, artificial', and as an 'evenly lighted 'cell'', with its 'limbolike status', and its value as a place where 'art exists in a kind of eternity of display' [7] - provides a fitting backdrop to this context-reflexivity that matches impoverished artworks with impoverished context. And while Judd paved the way for divergent practices that could not be accommodated within the modernist remit, his intent to rid art of the sign introduced a kind of architectural admission that saw the gallery space contribute to the structure of art, and the viewer included in the contextual framing space of the art object.

Of course, specific objects were not the only experiments at this time that looked outside of the frame; for example, Robert Rauschenberg's 'combines', i.e. his reliefs or freestanding assemblages (as neither painting nor sculpture); or as Rauschenberg succinctly put it: 'It begins with a painting and then sort of moves out into the room' [8].

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7. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, 1999: 14-15.
8. Rauschenberg in 1960, quoted in Branden W. Joseph's *The Gap and the Frame*, 2006: 46.

A similar operation can be found in Jasper Johns' flag paintings rendered in encaustic, where the American flag - as a flat object - was depicted to confines of the limit-edge of a painting (as flat and frontal) so that there was no background to the picture. This meant that the background became the wall itself, and through the transformation of the once-neutral wall into a component, the image became an object. [9]

Another example is discernable in the work of the B.M.P.T. art 'group', whose artists Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni came together for a brief time in mid-1960s Paris with the shared aim of demystifying painting. Through artworks of simple pattern and neutral forms, the B.M.P.T.'s collaborative aim was to create an art free from references (i.e. from history), which did not obey the traditional structures or codes but instead questioned authorship and the norms of painting and display.

Signatures

Reducing the artist's role to a conveyer of only one mark, the four artists of the B.M.P.T. each chose an easily repeatable individual motif that was to be their anonymous signature, Buren's being vertical, regularly-spaced, stripes (in black and white, colour and white, or colour and transparency). And away from the collaboration, Buren continued with his striped-cloth and paper banners that superficially represent a concept of painting in the spirit of the readymade. Upholding Duchamp's deconstruction of authorship, Buren's idea is that the stripes can either

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9. I discuss the idea of the wall as the background in relation to Stella's shaped canvases in Chapter 3 of this research.

be temporarily displayed outside of the museum, meaning that the institution cannot predetermine the art object [10], or that they can be displayed within the institution itself so as to comment on its influence from a place of complicity and visibility. In other words, as factory-made textile banners, painting has not only left its unique status, it has left its frame, and wall, and its architectural box to decorate the museum exterior (and it can even flap in the wind).

To look outside of denotement and pictorial effects, Buren uses the 8.7 cm-wide vertically striped material that is generally used for shop awnings, the regularity of its pattern consistently displacing imagery through repetition. In posing as a painting, this absurdist act employs a non-sign to rid art of the sign. Exploiting intertextuality [11] enables Buren to distance his idea of art from art history, syntax, then, being a means to analyse institutional systems. However, as the artworks this esoteric attitude generates have now been reabsorbed by the museum (as representative of a cultural mindset of institutional critique), interrogation has been rendered ironic and impotent by a validation from that which it sought to criticise [12].

As an evolution of Mondrian's removal of the frame, the material syntax utilised by Judd and Buren in their individual critiques on painting denies all illusion/invention within the frame to expose the actuality of objectness. However, while Judd and Buren looked past paint and surface, Robert Ryman has worked hard since the

10. In 1923, Nikolai Tarabukin, in his *From the Easel to the Machine*, wrote that: '[...] museum art and the museum remains the formative influence dictating form, the reason and the special purpose of creation' (Tarabukin in Franscina and Harrison, 1982: 141).

11. 'Whatever the semantic content of a text, its condition as a signifying practice presupposes the existence of other discourses […] This is to say that every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it.' Julia Kristeva quoted in Jonathan Culler's *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, 1981: 105 (Source: La Révolution du Langage poétique,1974: 388-9).

12. It has been said that a Duchampian strategy can be conventional, not contesting the institution so much as turning the artist into an institution. Andy Warhol is Hal Foster's avant-gardist turned into an institution; see Foster: 1985: 19.

1950s to reveal the truth from within painting's material form.

Ryman paints under the premise of denying the conversion possibilities of the raw materials of painting, or as he states: 'I am not manipulating the paint into an illusion of something other than what paint does' [13]. Whilst working as a guard at New York's MoMA, Ryman spent a lot of his time looking at Mark Rothko's paintings, and he has spoken of their 'nakedness' of structure, surface and light [14]. To make painting naked, Ryman's project extracts from modernist thinking to reduce painting to its component parts. It is important to note, however, that thinking of Ryman in these terms is not to imply that Ryman's paintings are reductive, only that their fullness comes from a lightness of touch, and a quietness and compactness that invites close inspection [15].

While working almost consistently with what is arguably the territory of the monochrome - a small square format - Ryman enacts analysis after analysis of what occurs when painting's elements are starved of metaphor, and are instead organised as a set of unadorned ingredients. However, though Ryman's art is frequently compared to that of Kazimir Malevich or Ad Reinhardt [16], he is not driven by absolutes; for unlike the monochrome, a typical Ryman painting is concerned with the cataloguing of small moves necessary to render an image and the small differences that influence the syntactical rhetoric of an image. For example, in examining his practice, one wonders whether Ryman might ask himself questions

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13. Ryman quoted in Suzanne Hudson's *Robert Ryman: Used Paint*, 2009: 240 (Source: David Carrier and Robert Ryman, 'Robert Ryman and the origins of his Art', Burlington Magazine, 139, no. 1134, September, 1997: 632-633).
14. Ryman quoted in Robert Storr's *Simple Gifts*, 1993: 13.
15. Equally, the concern for Ryman is not with perfection, for his touch sets him apart from those minimalists who strive for impeccable surfaces (Agnes Martin or Alan Charlton, for example).
16. In response to those who might casually compare Ryman with Malevich or Reinhardt, Storr cautions that 'gross formal comparisons between works can lead to false explanations of their genesis and meaning' (Storr, 1993: 38).

like: *what happens if the surface plane of a painting is partially filled with tightly-packed small, regular, white oil paint brushstrokes?* Perhaps leading to: *How might these brushstrokes behave differently from painting to painting?* The answers provide a lifetime of opportunities, for example: *perhaps marks would blur towards the limit-edge of the frame* (as in the thinly painted *Series 9 (white)*, 2004), *or stagger clumsily (yet somehow exactly) towards the limit-edge* (as in the thickly painted *Untitled*, 1980-2003), *or fragment around a flat white centre whilst being prohibited from reaching the four corners of the frame by ruler-drawn pencil squares* (as in the thick-on-thin paint observable in *Van* 1993), and so on.

In a way, Ryman follows a kind of Kandinsky-esque scientific examination of pictorial means, except that instead of applying an invented 'science' to make sense of abstract shape, Ryman revels in the literal behaviour of paint and painting procedures. If Kandinsky's idea replaced one code (representation) with another (abstraction by way of an ideological guidebook), then Ryman's literalist undertaking seeks painting without code. What becomes coded within painting, however, is the contextual space of display. For example, Ryman makes visible the typically invisible fixtures that secure an artwork to the wall [17]. With the fasteners evident, he draws the viewer's attention to that which otherwise in painting is typically overlooked. Furthermore, it has been said that: '[Ryman's paintings] open onto and often explicitly annex the light, space, and walls of the galleries in which they are sited as part of their compositions' [18]. Unlike Buren's motif that sets art apart from its

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17. In discussing his painting *Monitor* (1978), Ryman has said: 'In this work, I used metal fasteners to make the painting project from the wall. All my canvases at this time extended off the wall a few inches. It seemed to make them actually closer to the wall curiously […] because you saw it attached, and you saw it coming off the wall, but it was also very much part of the wall. It was important it had an immediate relationship with the wall plane […] I wanted it to really look like it and the wall were together.' Ryman in Hudson, 2009: 226 (Source: Kinley, Zelevanksky, and Ryman, 'Catalogue Notes', p.164). With regards to Ryman's fasteners, see also Storr, 1993: 33.

18. Suzanne Hudson, in her text *Robert Ryman's Pragmatism*, 2007: 123. This is not to imply that Ryman's paintings are site-specific; see also Storr, 1993: 31; and John Chilver's *If Display Becomes Materiality*, 2012: 115-117.

architecture, the gallery for Ryman becomes another element of painting, so that those things that are outside of the frame - e.g. metal fasteners - are just as important as brushstrokes.

In Chapter 1 of this research, I intimated that Lasker's image-kit approach learns from Ryman's syntactical breakdown of the components of painting. If Ryman exposes the material of modernist painting by refusing to use it expressively, then Lasker converts this non-expressive material into signs for picture making [19]. Essentially, Lasker's art is rigorous in its response to Ryman's literalist reaction to Abstract Expressionism (rather than a direct reaction itself). Aside from adding to the explanation of Lasker's slow re-presentation of the mark, this analysis goes some way to highlight the anti-picture quality of Ryman's own method. Indeed, I have always marvelled at Ryman's abstention from transformation, and his ability to still engage with the pictorial despite his subordination of the picture. It is as if his paintings exist in a netherworld, neither monochrome nor object nor image. Yet unlike others from his generation who reused one diminished signifier to empty the image of its equivalences (e.g. Buren), Ryman deals consistently in painting's parts. However, unlike Mondrian's comparable units, Ryman itemises brushstrokes or the frayed edges of fabric, as if such elements were peculiar to him. Ryman has said: 'There is never a question what to paint, but only how to paint' [20].

The anomaly within this mathematical study of painting's-phenomena-as-strange is

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19. Lasker himself, however, states that he considers his use of paint as literal. In his *Complete Essays: 1984-1998*, he speaks of paint as a device 'to thwart the potential narrative'; Lasker writes: 'Paint has a peculiar capacity to become a locus for an experience of the actual, the concrete, in opposition to the depicted, the imagined' (Lasker, 1998: 19). While the literal quality of paint is explicitly apparent in Lasker's practised brushstroke, I believe his use of trope converts literalness.

20. Ryman quoted in Hudson, 2009: 245 (Source: Ryman in Elayne H. Varian, *Art in Process IV*, New york: Finch Collage Museum of Art, 1969).

the imposition of his signature, for in the late 1950s and early '60s Ryman found he could use the non-syntactical signature *syntactically*. Signatures are, and are not, elements of painting; they signify the maker within the image yet they are isolated from the pictorial and are read as invisible. However, just as Ryman's paintings oblige the viewer to realise that the artist uses white rather than makes white paintings [21], Ryman does not *sign* his paintings. His signature is not to represent the artist in the traditional sense (connoting authorship, value, the finished product, and so on), but to signify itself as an element of painting, its special significance being that it is an element that can be seen without code. In other words, Ryman uses the ultimate fixed sign so as not to evoke a sign. We can find evidence for this in Ryman's intelligent *Untitled* (1959) [Fig. 7], where the golden and thickly-painted signature acts as a hinge between the raw cotton ground, chosen for its 'Naples yellow colour' [22] (a bare patch of which accompanies the similarly coloured signature), and the dense, white brushstrokes that obscure the rest of the material surface. The fixed sign RRYMAN disallows the mutability of a drawn line while re-presenting a component of painting (for although separate from the pictorial, a signature is an image-sign). Further still, it declares the formerly invisible to be a focal point, as RRYMAN sits proud within a sea of hurried, brittle, unordered, and indistinctive marks. The white brushstrokes fit around RRYMAN so that the signature is no longer an addition, a speedy flourish, or afterthought, but a careful and integral part of a painting; and indeed, it seems to have been painted slowly, deliberately, and to have come first rather than last. Moreover, the use of a written language with letters contracted to sequential ordering means that the viewer can trace the direction of the artist's brush, and therefore, the *how* of painting is made all the more

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21. In an interview with Ryman, the perceptive David Batchelor intimates that Ryman does not make white paintings but uses white in painting; see Batchelor's *On Paintings and Pictures: In Conversation with Robert Ryman*, 1993: 45.
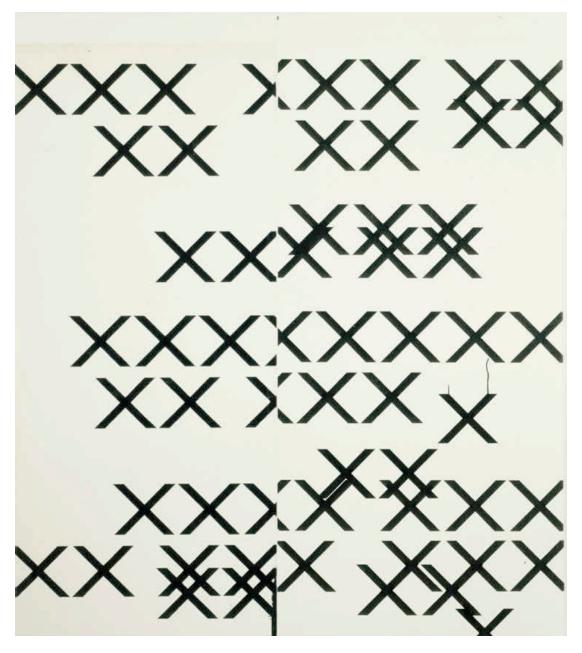
22. See Ryman, quoted in Storr, 1993: 70.

[Fig. 7] Robert Ryman, *Untitled* (1959) oil on cotton canvas, 110.6 x 110.6cm.

explicit. For Ryman, the verticality of the signature makes it 'more abstract' [23], though I would contend that this new orientation also makes the signature structural, and coupled with its size (programmed by the width of the brush), placement, and colour, enforces its presence as a figure/non-figure. While not quite an image-kit, this is painting as a diagram of conventions and of 'how'.

While I have made a case for Lasker as the successor of Ryman's syntactical practice, Wade Guyton must certainly be another candidate; except that Guyton does not transform Ryman's ledger of painting, but rather reduces art to the one sign and then sets about revelling in the limited possibilities. However, although clearly invested in the 'how' of painting, Guyton's approach seems to owe more to Buren's stripes than to Ryman's signature, for while Guyton's printed X paintings analyse a sign loaded with culture (for example, X can mark the spot, denote a kiss, and is a focal point), they also represent a nameless and transferable signature that is anonymous and repeatable [24]. At the same time, X symbolises cancellation, and in works like *Untitled* (2006) [Fig. 8], it is as if painting's pictorial code has been replaced with mechanical gestures of programmed destruction, or as if a universal mark now supplants painting. X is not a sign but a sign placeholder with the power to eradicate the sign, the paintings becoming documents of anti-information. Within his invented language of repeatable signs (which includes another symmetrical letter: U), Guyton also prints images of fire, and one presumes these too connote for the artist similar iconographical references to destruction and potential re-birth.

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23. Ryman has stated that he used the signature because it is an accepted part of painting and that he sees the signature as an opportunity to make a line, claiming that its use on its side makes it more abstract, the abstract name providing an opportunity for a line that was not mimetic. (Ryman talking to Storr in 1992; see Storr, 1993: 70).
24. Another practice notable for its use of 'X' is that of Bob Law. Law's *A Cross for Me and a Cross for You* (2003) shows an X and a plus sign side-by-side and 'etched' (with the end of a brush) into black paint. Law also made minimal works in which he put his signature, and the title and date, on the front of the painting. See Alison Green's text in Daniel Sturgis' *The Indiscipline of Painting*, 2011: 50-51.
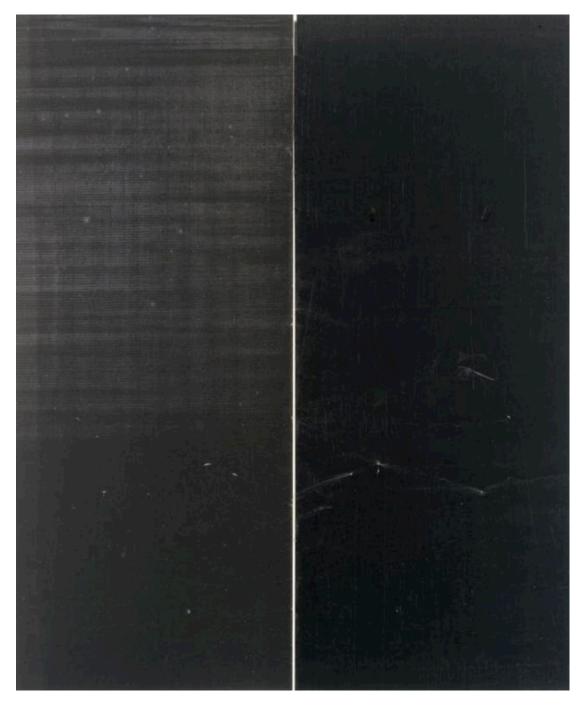
[Fig. 8] Wade Guyton, *Untitled* (2006) Epson UltraChrome inkjet on linen, 178 x 156 cm.

Aside from their appearance in paintings, Guyton's X and U signature motifs have travelled into the space of the gallery as sculpture (or rather, as pseudo specific objects) [25]. Guyton also uses furniture as art, placing tables, and rows of colour-coded chairs - for example, *Untitled Action Sculpture (Five Enron Chairs)* (2007) - in the gallery space so that the viewer cannot fail to incorporate the syntax of the real space around them at the same time as they receive a work of art. Seen in such a context, painting becomes merely another element of spatial décor.

Guyton's Fold

As a disciple of Warhol's removal of the handmade, Guyton's method of painting production involves folding factory-primed canvas in half and forcibly feeding it through an Epson UltraChrome large-format inkjet printer [26]. The task requires the equipment to work harder than its design remit so that the ink is interestingly flawed, meaning that once unfolded and stretched, Guyton's paintings are both machine-made and nuanced. *Untitled* (2008) [Fig. 9], with its dense and scratched photocopy-like surface, is a typical example of what this process manifests. Its variations are not aesthetic choices but mechanical glitches, the result of reprinting, or an ink cartridge running dry. The image reveals its production, and in turn the image production declares the limitations of the medium and technology. The fold is necessitated by the size of the canvas in relation to the size of the printer, causing the painting to be

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25. For example, Guyton's U sculptures - e.g. *'U' Sculpture (v. 6)* (2007) in mirrored stainless steel, and measuring 61.5 x 55.9 x 136.1 cm - are floor-bound sculptures of a 'U' letter that is seemingly stretched (like a trough) to extend backwards into depth, this act transforming a two-dimensional sign into a three-dimensional object.

26. Johanna Burton, in her *Rites of Silence: On the Art of Wade Guyton* (2008), explains the other governing factor of the work: '([…] There is also the single digital 'source' that is the foundation of all the monochromes - an image file on Guyton's computer with the hard-core-sounding name 'big-black.tif,' which, when opened, reveals a comically unassuming little black rectangle.)' (Burton, 2008: 367). The paintings then are repeatable hardcopies of this one digital file.

[Fig. 9] Wade Guyton, *Untitled* (2008) Epson UltraChrome inkjet on linen, 213 x 175 cm.

seen as two panels split by a slim, vertical seam of unprinted space.

To critique painting, Guyton uses a system of rules equitable with painting. In one sense, he uses the image as a neglected element to be emptied in favour of a system by which to make art anonymous (as with Buren), and yet on the other hand he uses an anonymous process to add a sensual or temperamental aspect to the processed image. Johanna Burton has commented on this in her *Rites of Silence: On the Art of Wade Guyton* (2008). Burton outlines for us how Guyton's art relates to that of Buren by way of Crimp's infamous essay *The End of Painting* (1981), and astutely points to the inevitable poles of 'homage and violent erasure' (synonymous with the story of art from the last century) that his monochromes, or rather *ostensible* monochromes [27], allude to:

> Guyton's recent series of black paintings nods, if mutely, towards this crossroads, in which engagements with the discursive history and profiteering usurpations of it look more and more similar. For if today it is impossible not to recognize the lessons handed down by Buren and others, it is likewise impossible not to see how those lessons themselves have been incorporated as a kind of affirmative content. If the language of 'abolishing a code' [[28]] has itself *become* a code, what can one say in retort or even in response? (Burton, 2008: 368)

Disappointingly, with this last statement - in what is an otherwise insightful and rigorous essay - Burton bows to the rhetoric she quotes from; yet she rightly notes that this mode of incorporation is tantamount to the built-in end games of the past. Aside from Guyton's relationship to Buren, we can trace the problem back to an early

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27. Burton writes: 'But let's not forget that these are ostensible monochromes only. They are, none of them, fully resolved, not *really* monochromes because the measure of their success rests largely on their gesturing to monochromeness without ever really getting there'. Burton, 2008: 368.
28. Burton here is quoting Daniel Buren; see Burton, 2008: 366.

Frank Stella and the logic of his black-stripe paintings and metallic paintings that - through their blankness and regular patterning - supposedly rest on the precipice between painting as an object and as an image. This precipice symbolises the shift from modernist painting to minimalism, where the once-notional end of painting was taken literally (solidifying painting as an architectural emblem). To simplify this immense topic, I propose two co-joined lineages, both of which contributed to this legacy, albeit through vastly different approaches. The first is pictorially syntactical, and comes from Mondrian: Despite its flatness, Mondrian never considered the monochrome [29], instead learning from Cubism's independent establishment of pictorial elements [30]. Of his formal analysis, Mondrian wrote: 'by understanding the relativity of everything, we gain an intuitive sense of the *absolute*. Moreover, the relativity, the mutability of things creates in us a desire for the absolute, the immutable' [31]. This required '*consistent development*' [32], therefore his idea for painting can be seen as non-reductive and as a precursor to Ryman's [33]. The second, however, looks only outside of the frame and takes from the monochrome, Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Buren. Superficially, Guyton's printed black paintings fall into this camp; however, to arrive there he adopts a Ryman-esque ritualistic sensitivity to materials.

The issue at hand concerns the fact that before abstract painting unequivocally revealed itself as a genre of painting rather than its essence, a driving force behind modernist painting was the ambition to demystify; painting might be *pure* or *spiritual* but its core rationale was most easily explained through its materiality. This received

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29. Bois has commented on this fact; see Bois 1990: 240.
30. See Mondrian's writing c.1940 in Mondrian (Holtzman and James), 1987: 380.
31. See Mondrian's *No Axiom but the Plastic Principle* (1923) in Mondrian (Holtzman and James), 1987: 178.
32. Mondrian in *Blown By the Wind* (1924) in Mondrian (Holtzman and James), 1987: 181 [Mondrian's Italics].
33. Of course, Ryman works under the premise of immutability.

opinion is difficult to endorse today, in part because Ryman's literalist response to Abstract Expressionism's acknowledgement of the literal (e.g. Pollock's enamel drips) took materiality to its analytical extreme. To find a way through the resulting language of trademarks (Buren's stripe, Guyton's X, and so on), perhaps we might look to the immediacy of Guyton's spontaneous but machine-made glitches, or his impersonal surface reframed as sensuous?

There is conceivably another aspect to Guyton's method that diagnoses his specific mode of syntax, and it has to do with the unprinted seam that runs down the centre of each black painting. Focusing upon that stretched-flat fold, we might consider that while each of his monochromes is unique and is on canvas, painting is not the only medium dissected here, with photography also under scrutiny: Not only due to its mechanical means of production, but also for the sense of doubling.

To explain my point, let us turn to Craig Owens' illuminating essay *Photography 'en abyme'* (1978) where Owens analyses a photograph by Georges Brassaï (aka Gyula Halász). To paraphrase Owens' description of *Group in a Dance Hall* (1932) [Fig. 10], the photograph shows two groups of two couples, the first group occupying the 'real' space of the image and doubled in the mirror, while the second group sitting opposite occupies *only* the space of the mirror (for we see only a detached hand holding a cigarette in the 'real' image space). Therefore the subjects in this group are severed from their bodies and exist for us only as reflections that are attached to the first group, so that each figure finds their virtual double (an operation echoed by the figure's costume, pose, and gesture). Owens writes:

> Because of the absolute symmetry of the two groups, the couples seated on the banquette appear as if poised between parallel mirrors mounted in series, so that the distance - both physical and psychological - that separates them in reality is collapsed. Space thus is drained from the image, the effects of

[Fig. 10] Georges Brassaï, *Group in a Dance Hall* (1932).

doubling may no longer be located within the space of the world, but only within the flatness of the photograph. The double image appears to have been generated by an act of internal duplication, a literal folding back upon the photograph itself - the mirror suggests not only a reflection, but also a literal crease in the surface of the print. To double by folding, however, also implies the leaving of a deposit or trace on the surface thus manipulated, as in those familiar symmetrical imprints of blotted ink. Thus, the duplication that occurs within this image suggests the specifics of the photographic process itself. (Owens, 1978: 74)

Although no mirroring of reality or Rorschachian duplication takes place in Guyton's monochromes, his mechanical process and the fold (as both a required and imposed convention) engage with the image's pliability to describe its own limits and social form. Whereas the Brassaï is shot at an oblique angle to separate us as viewers from taking part in the mechanism of the image of an image (by featuring in the mirror), Guyton's paintings are anthropomorphically frontal, as if one panel is there for each eye. The reciprocation this implies shifts the impetus of the fold from the state of image production to the state of viewing (i.e. frontality, by way of the vertical stretched-flat fold, alludes to a viewer). It is this state of viewing that separates Guyton from the intellectual one-liner of Buren's stripe (which empties the sign of all pictorial code), and instead likens his approach to Ryman's painting-bound interrogation.

That being said, the other concept suggested by this discourse is the flat space of painting. If Brassaï's mirroring *drains space from the image*, Guyton's fold is revealed as a trademark that restricts syntax to outside of the frame. Therefore, if the syntactical reduction in Guyton proves inadequate it is because in order to negate 'painting', the artist had to first imagine 'painting', and his idea learned from the monochrome, and from Buren's stripe, and was therefore one that was starved of an internalised syntax of codes, comparables, and figure/ground illusion.

The Limits of Critique

Whether locatable through Christopher Wool's printed gestural mark, Tauba Auerbach's flattened material creases, Josh Smith's self-promotional signature, or Matt Connor's colour-field quotations, the last ten years or so have seen an influx of art that reclaims endgame scenarios to exploit painting's denigrated status [34]. And in Joe Bradley and Heimo Zobernig, we find other contemporary artists locked into this specific dialogue with the past.

Like Lasker, Bradley approaches high modernism through the possibilities of using its components in a humorous kit form. Bradley, however, is not concerned with the pictorial; instead he exploits painting-as-object by re-presenting the shaped canvas as an abstract figure that mirrors the viewer. In works like *Untitled* (2006) [Fig. 11], Bradley offers up painting as both a material object and as a metaphor for the re-presentation of what it is to view a painting in relation to our own bodies. To do this, he parodies the anthropomorphism of Judd; assembling store-bought, thinly-stretched, roughly-painted monochromes as colour-coded units for construction. Bradley arranges his stretchers on the wall from the floor up, resting, so to speak, on two 'legs'; painting then, as a reflexive cut-out. While the differently coloured parts here are comparable, they are not pictorial.

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34. For a critical opinion on how such work relates to the past, see Achim Hochdörfer's *A Hidden Reserve: Painting from 1958 to 1965* (2009). Hochdörfer discusses the work of Christopher Wool, Jutta Koether, Amy Sillman, and Josh Smith, relating their practices to *a hidden reserve* of painting (Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Joan Snyder, and the like). Hochdörfer maps a historical account of the polemics of the1960s, such as those surrounding Fried's notion of literalness and 'transcendence' (optical illusion); and, looking to the semiotics of the painterly mark, he draws a correlation between a neglected period in painting's past (1958 -1965) and new considerations where: 'The repressed paradoxes and contingencies of painting's history - its phantasms - become the preconditions for the development of new images' (Hochdörfer, 2009: 159).

Zobernig, on the other hand, quasi-directly sources from the syntaxes of modernism to make new art. For the last twenty years or so, he has been borrowing from the visual systems of Constructivism, Neo-Plasticism, Abstract Expressionism, and Minimalism, to make two and three-dimensional works that reconstitute visual styles in order to situate abstraction in a contemporary art context. It has been said that Zobernig refers to his work as an 'encyclopaedia of painting' [35], and indeed his approach demonstrates that when art is reduced to a list of visual language systems it risks becoming a set of vapid moves; yet in looking to archetypal modernist painting (e.g. Mondrian) for his quotations, Zobernig keys into its amenability to syntactical analysis. However, what Zobernig takes from modernism is not pictorial syntax, as utilised by Lasker or Abts, but a theatrical cataloguing of style. Michel Foucault's term 'archaeology' is useful here as it describes an organisation of history that provides an understanding of what led to current knowledge. Foucault's '*episteme*', therefore, is at odds with the supplementary evaluation that inevitably modifies as it records [36]. Zobernig's archaeological method strips modernism down to contrive a coda from its models and orders. This approach is synoptic for its discursive appraisal of history that takes place through the re-contextualisation of the grammar of modernist paradigms without using that grammar to expand the discourse.
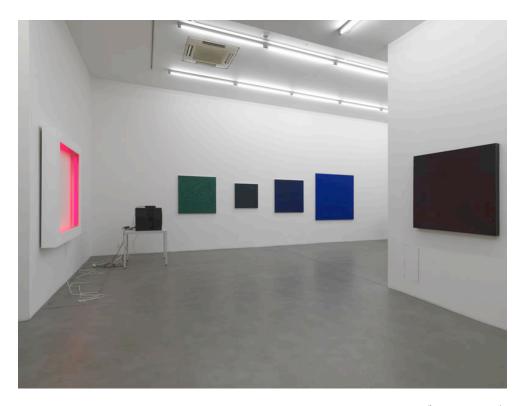
With the gallery as a theatre, Zobernig's replica grids, diamond grids, stripe paintings, and his economically-made versions of minimal objects are props; they are signs for modernism, signifying the recyclability of protocols or the transferability of negations. However, as Zobernig is well aware, that a model is extractable does not necessarily mean that it comes cleanly. With the monochrome, for example, we

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35. See Baldon's *From (A)rt to (Z)obernig and Back Again*, 2009: 50.
36. See Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1970).

[Fig. 11] Joe Bradley, *Untitled* (2006), acrylic on canvas in four parts, overall dimensions approximately 206 x 69 cm. (*Untitled* is wall-hung but rests on the gallery floor.)

[Fig. 12] Heimo Zobernig, Installation shot of *Monochromes* at Simon Lee Gallery, London, 14th October - 21st November 2009.

have a modernist sign that both epitomises and annotates modernism by inferring an absolute. The monochrome replaces pictorial comparisons with the idea of blankness, and so it is a modernist emblem for objectness, and is non-syntactical.

In his 2009 exhibition titled *Monochromes* [see Fig. 12], Zobernig *applied* syntax to the monochrome by characterising it as a cipher whilst expanding its textuality. Through Zobernig, the monochrome becomes a site for an interrogation that works from beyond the frame. On entering the *Monochromes* exhibition, the viewer does not view a monochrome painting (say, as an ideal); instead, he/she walks around the gallery space comparing signs that re-present our relationship to history. Although a gallery full of re-appropriated grid paintings and the like can seem to present a similar modus operandi, the total negation of pictorial syntax in the monochrome makes it especially persuasive as the sign for a re-reduction devised from repetition. Zobernig uses seriality to undermine the monochrome's definitiveness, and manipulates the fact that blankness - once diluted by retrospection - presupposes an addition of text. Faced with the logic of the monochrome, Zobernig asks what can be put back into painting, and for his answer he looks outside of the frame.

Whilst Zobernig's specific reworking of the monochrome is an intelligent, even witty, reaction to the limits of its ontological form as an 'arbitrary object' [37], because his practice in general adopts such a methodology with little prejudice it seems to somewhat diminish what occurs here. As in Bois' criticism of what he calls manic (celebratory) or melancholic mourners in 'our simulacral era' (Bois, 1990: 242),

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37. In *Modernist Painting* (1960), Greenberg wrote: 'The essential norms or conventions of painting are also the limiting conditions with which a picture must comply in order to be experienced as a picture. Modernism has found that these limiting conditions can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object […]' Greenberg, 1960: 89-90. See also Thierry de Duve's discussion on Greenberg's idea of the arbitrary object in relation to Stella's black paintings of 1959 in his *The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas* in Guilbaut, 1990: 244-310.

where the artists of the 1980s (Peter Halley, Philip Taafe, and alike) were trapped by a failure to mourn modernism [38], Zobernig seems seduced by that which he denounces. For Bois, salvation comes only with our belief in 'our ability to act in history: accepting our project of working through the end again, rather than evading it through increasingly elaborate mechanisms of defence […]' (Bois, 1990: 243).

There are aspects of Zobernig's practice that are analogous with Ryman's; for example, when Zobernig paints the side edge of the frame of an otherwise bare, white canvas a loud colour so as to draw the viewer's attention to an aspect of painting that we are not traditionally meant to register. However, in applying an archaeological method indiscriminately (to the syntactical and non-syntactical), Zobernig's installations use the starting point of 'a monochrome' the same way as 'a Mondrian grid', homogenising the developments of the past and their contextual influence on the present. To treat them equally is to overlook that the method - even an 'encyclopaedia of painting' - takes from only one aspect of the modernist lineage: the monochrome, Duchamp, Warhol, Buren. Like Guyton, Zobernig's determination to take painting outside of itself makes him blind to the limits of critique.

Yet such limits are palpable in a recent shift in Zobernig's priorities. Following on from his 2009 *Monochromes* exhibition, Zobernig's 2012 London exhibition *Heimo Zobernig* took its inspiration from the 2010/11 Picasso exhibition at Kunsthaus in Zürich, which was a recreation of Picasso's first museum retrospective exhibition held there in 1932. Rather than the museum, exhibition, or the recreation itself taking centre stage in Zobernig's quotation, Picasso's pictorial language is investigated. This implies that having exhausted the commentary on painting's objectness (e.g. applying syntax to the monochrome), Zobernig retreats into Picasso's pictorial

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38. See Bois' *Painting as Model*, 1990: 229-244.

language in order to rediscover what is invigorative about the internal space of pictures. While I would contend that he does not succeed in reworking Picasso in any meaningful way, in the retracing of Picasso's lines and spatial relationships, Zobernig can nevertheless be seen as attempting to reconnect with the possibilities of syntax *inside of the frame*.

Chapter 3

Depicting Space

Introduction

In the last chapter, I contended that the tendency towards a stylistic context-reflexivity learned from the history of painting's objectness-turned-critique - and observable in Buren, Guyton, Bradley, and Zobernig - has limited prospects for painting. Further to this, it seems apparent that literalness for literalness' sake is no longer a potent tool with which to critique painting. Beyond the fact that Buren's stripe motif resists being subsumed into history, there is little to be gained from continuing to read it in terms of painting, as his banner-functioning-as-prop is so successful. The reproducible quality of Buren's material syntax - as an easily transferable language - has validity in its acknowledgement of the contemporaneity of the art object as a global sign. While painting and its relationship to the museum may have engendered the work, the art market as a whole is now interrogated. If the critique of painting by way of painting-as-object has developed into a critique of the market by way of props-as-global-signs, it seems purposeless to maintain painting's inclusion.

As contemporary painting's relationship with modernist painting is irrevocably mediated by the postmodernist reactions that cemented the dominant attitude of painting-as-object, a site other than material syntax must be located. This is not to imply that a chasm of disinterest surrounding painting-as-image has existed from the mid-1960s and '70s until now, where illusion has been given no credence, only that painting has suffered through a lack of robust and serviceable examples of pictorially syntactical painting, this in turn leading to a dearth of rigorous analysis. Indeed, despite its intentions, one particularly inadequate instance of challenging painting-as-

object's authority did its best to sabotage the idea to such an extent that Douglas
Crimp actually used it to support his claim of *The End of Painting* (1981): Barbara
Rose's curatorial project *American Painting: The Eighties* [1]. While I have only seen
reproductions of the works included, Rose's choices are somewhat baffling, and
Crimp's indictment of the exhibition as 'hackneyed recapitulations of late modernist
abstraction' [2] seems a reasonable response. If Rose teaches us anything, it is that a
defence of painting must be fuelled by more than an innocent championing of
abstraction through a vague stand against photography and 'slick painting styles' [3].

The failings of *American Painting: The Eighties* are all the more marked when we
consider Rose's enquiring stance only twelve years previously. In her essay *Abstract
Illusionism* (1967), Rose discussed the work of Ronald Davis, Darby Bannard, Frank
Stella, and Jules Olitski (amongst others) to examine the paradox discernable in their
painting practices, where flatness is characterised in order to be violated by an
illusionistic act that ultimately does not establish any illusion of depth. She writes:

> In these instances it is necessary that the illusions in the paintings appear
> mutually contradictory, because as long as it receives contradictory
> information, the mind understands that it is dealing, not with actual space, but
> with a purely artificial, imagined space. (Rose, 1967: 37)

Rose refers to this invented space as an 'imaginative projection' that bears 'no
relation whatsoever to reality' [4], and she names several operations that evoke it,

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1. *American Painting: The Eighties* was held at the Grey Art Gallery, New York, in 1979 and included paintings by
some forty artists, including Richard Hennessey, Howard Buchwald, Louisa Chase, Bill Jensen, and Thornton Willis.
The exhibition toured to Houston, Nantes and Paris, Helsinki, Aachen, Vienna, Tel Aviv, Budapest, Warsaw, Bari,
Genoa, Barcelona, Lisbon, and Madrid. Today the exhibition is held in its entirety by The Shore Collection.
2. See Crimp, 1981: 73.
3. See Rose, 1979: np. Here, I assume that Rose is referring to realistically-rendered mimetic painting.
4. Rose, 1967: 37.

such as: a surface that contrasts both matte and glossy finishes (meaning that light is both absorbed and reflected); and a reversible illusion (not of figure/ground, but where the same shape can appear to both cave inward and project outward).

In my argument in Chapter 1 of this research, I presented Lasker's trope, Polke's use of the (invisible) material support as a (visible) pictorial effect, and Abts' shadows and projective illusion as meta-effects that set painting on a new path. Further to these, and in opposition to painting-as-object and its amplified branch of material syntax, I make in this chapter a claim for the significance of depicted space. Here, I discuss Duccio's box space, László Moholy-Nagy's use of transparency, and Thomas Struth's museum photographs, in order to assess the textual reflexivity of pictorially syntactical depictions of space. While I position Frank Stella as my proto-painter of syntactical painting, I do not follow Rose's intuitions as outlined in *Abstract Illusion*ism. This is because Michael Fried's comprehensive critiques concerning Stella, Minimalism, and recent large-scale photography, provide this thesis with more exacting frameworks from which to build my own investigation into the significance of depicting artificiality.

The Flattened-out Cavity

Before the advent of Renaissance perspective, and as one of the first to experiment with picturing architectural settings, Duccio di Buoninsegna, in the individual panels of his magnificent *Maestà Altarpiece* (1308-11) [Fig. 13], utilised a closed space where the opportunity for fictive space in each panel was blocked by a pictorial theatre conditioned to the conventions of the medium.

John White, in his book *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (1987, originally 1957), explains that nearly every one of Duccio's *Maestà* panels adopts a foreshortened frontal setting, but that this does not imply a lack of interest in the development of space: 'It only shows that the development takes place within a framework which is more strictly regulated by the flatness of the picture surface'[5]. In his discussion of the central panel in the predella of the front altarpiece, titled *The Presentation in the Temple*, White pinpoints a consequence of the restricted space: 'The bold truncation of the main space both at the top and bottom, and on either side, aims at an inclusion of the spectator […]' (White, 1987: 81). The depicted architecture in the form of a frontally organised (and therefore symmetrical) Gothic arch follows the literal framing edge of the panel to emphasise the sense of enclosure. White also writes how the arch looks out 'into the gold leaf distance' (White, 1987: 81), yet he does not examine whether the opacity of the material

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5. White, 1987: 78. Indeed, architecture is not the only mechanism Duccio draws upon to limit depicted 'space'; he also used his figures to prove the opacity of his medium. In the lower scene of *Christ before Annas, and Peter Denying Jesus* [Fig. 14] (*Peter Denying Jesus*), the standing figure has an arm outstretched as if to grasp the balustrade. This illogical positioning links the figure to the architecture of the surroundings; the viewer, although perplexed by the distance between the figure and the stairs, is visually rewarded, as the shape symbiosis prompts the eye to seamlessly move from the foreground to the background scenery, reducing the distance between depicted objects. If the figure itself cannot physically travel up the stairs from this position, then the viewer's eye can. As Damisch reminds us: 'the representations of paintings refer not only to the natural order of sensible appearances but also, and often primarily, to the instituted order of spectacle that culture sets up for itself, in many different guises' (Damisch, 2002: 63).

interferes with this reading. In actuality, Duccio's gold leaf background creates a very separate identity from 'distance', a word that surely implies a view of potentially far-reaching perceptual transparency; the gold leaf is rather a distance placeholder that plays to the literal opacity of the prepared field. Yet gold leaf is not merely opaque, it reflects light, and in so doing it presumes the space in front of the painting (i.e. the space of display), and with it a representative viewer.

From these observations, we can appreciate how Duccio's reflexivity replicates the limitations of his medium, through: 1) the use of a truncated space that acknowledges the literal surface of the support; 2) the use of depicted architecture to enclose space and attend to the constraints of painting's rectilinear framing edge; and 3) his gold leaf distance placeholder that homogenises the background into an opaque plane whilst drawing the viewer's attention to the image's social function.

It has been said that Duccio constructed buildings and rooms to give a contextual framework to his figurative scenes so that contemporary viewers could relate to the Bible stories [6]; but more than this, Duccio used his commission to experiment with the way in which spatial signs influence visual storytelling. Architecture not only provides the means to organise, it states organisation as a subject; for while walls and floors partition one scene from another, the architecture here is often incongruous with the figurative order, e.g. doors are detached from buildings, archways frame archways (or simply darkness), decorative moldings are arbitrarily assigned, or windows are illogically placed, and so on. Putting aside any symbolism in these structures, one can discern Duccio's fascination with framing open and closed spaces.

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6. See Christiansen's *Duccio and the Origins of Western Painting*, 2008: 23-25.

[Fig. 13] Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Maestà Altarpiece* Front and Back (1308-1311), gold and tempera on wooden panel, 213 x 396 cm approx. Commissioned for the Cathedral of Siena and installed in 1311; now in Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana del Duomo, Siena (except for those panels lost or sold).

Left: [Fig. 14] Duccio's *Maestà* panel: *Christ before Annas, and Peter Denying Jesus* - see [Fig. 13] Back altarpiece, lower centre, third from the right.
Right: [Fig. 15] Duccio's *Maestà* panel: *The Entry into Jerusalem* - see [Fig. 13] Back altarpiece, lower centre, far left.

Duccio's favoured two-tier composition (where scenes are stacked) is further proof of this; for example, in the twin panel of the *Maestà* titled *Christ before Annas and Peter Denying Jesus* [Fig. 14] [and Fig. 13, back altarpiece, lower centre, third from the right], where inside/outside are treated the same way, the upper scene (*Christ before Annas*) is visible to us only because part of the building is missing (as in a doll's house where the front façade lifts away or opens like a door). The room-construct is a depicted box space that reiterates painting as a flattened-out cavity, thus relating to the first two points on our list of self-reflexive traits (flatness and the frame). As for our third point (the gold leaf 'distance' as evidence of an awareness of the social function of the image), Duccio's panels demonstrate other effects that acknowledge painting as an anthropomorphic enterprise, such as frontality (where the image faces the viewer directly), symmetry (which likewise suggests the image as a whole), and verticality (which, like symmetry, mirrors the human body).

Although the stacked scenes of *Christ before Annas and Peter Denying Jesus* speak to verticality, Duccio's pictorially ambitious panel *The Entry into Jerusalem* [Fig. 15] [and Fig. 13, back altarpiece, lower centre, far left], with its gold leaf 'distance', illustrates another spatial method, where the idea of distance is something that climbs the opaque surface of the panel. The format of *The Entry into Jerusalem* is alone within the *Maestà* but we can detect a correlation with the aforementioned *Christ before Annas and Peter Denying Jesus*, for the latter goes without the thin, red divide that typically draws a line between two-tier compositional settings [7]. These two vertical panels are not isolated for their formal similarity; the majority of the scenes are seen from the left [8], and Duccio repeated many of his pictorial formulas.

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7. See Florens Deuchler's *Duccio Doctus: New Readings for the Maestà,* 1979: 543-544.

8. A lack of conflicting viewpoints gives a unifying whole. With regard to the composition of the back altarpiece, White explains that there is no attempt by Duccio to balance the design symmetrically; instead, unity is achieved through composition, colour, and the consistent direction in which the light falls upon the architecture. See White, 1987: 78.

And while historians have used narrative and syntax concurrently to make informative speculations on the reading of the poly-scenic grid arrangement of panels in the back altarpiece [9], the correlative ordering of the Passion cycle cannot compare to use of the pictorial here, and its conveyance of the limits of the material.

Why this critique on Duccio? A viewer stationed in front of a painting's prepared field is attentive or subservient to its paradoxical structure as a flattened-out cavity, and its social function as an object made for observation. A depicted box space is a construct that we typically associate with a subservient operation of viewing (as with easel painting), for perspective is a well-proven mechanism for delineating a realistic illusion of space (that transcends painting's material structure) [10]. In Duccio's day, his new depictive theatre may well have appeared as through spatially realistic, however, to *our* eyes his pre-Renaissance style is spatially artificial [11]. When we look

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9. For example, Florens Deuchler's *Duccio Doctus: New Readings for the Maestà* (1979).

10. 'In order to guarantee a fully rational - that is, infinite, unchanging and homogeneous - space, this 'central perspective' makes two tacit but essential assumptions: first, that we see with a single and immobile eye, and second, that the planar cross section of the visual pyramid can pass for an adequate reproduction of our optical image. In fact these two premises are rather bold abstractions from reality, if by 'reality' we mean the actual subjective optical impression.' Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1991: 28-29, originally 1924-25). Alberti understood the importance of extending his (open) window metaphor to include the viewer, for he wrote: 'The suitable position for this centric point [the point where lines of perspective meet] is no higher from the base line than the height of the man to be represented in the painting, for in this way both the viewers and the objects in the painting will seem to be on the same plane' (Alberti, 1972: 55, originally 1435, book 1). The frame, and the framework of perspective, separate the viewer from the represented 'world' and hold the viewer in the act of viewing, yet the immobile eye is still able to judge distance and can travel near and far (see Panofsky 1991: 31). In her book, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (2006), Anne Friedberg writes of 'the effect of window-gazing' (Friedberg, 2006: 35), meaning that the Renaissance viewer in front of the painting was: 'immobilized by the logic of the system' (Friedberg quoting Lew Andrews in Friedberg, 2006: 35) (Source: Lew Andrews, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art: The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative*, Cambridge University Press, 2001: 35).

11. The key difference between pre-Renaissance and Renaissance space relies on the degree to which the viewer is able to relate to the space depicted. It has been said that Alberti's (open) window metaphor for his perspective formula placed *new* restrictions on the viewer. Friedberg relates Dagobert Frey's account of the difference between the Gothic viewer and the Renaissance viewer. Frey describes the successive narrative of Gothic painting as 'like a film before the observer', whereas the mono-scenic Renaissance painting detailed a single frame frozen in a single moment of time, as in a photograph. However, Friedberg (working from Andrews) notes that poly-scenic painting is consistent with Alberti, as his window metaphor does not preclude continuous narrative; see Friedberg, 2006: 36.

at Duccio's construction of space we cannot equate the pictorial space with our own, as we do when we observe pictures with single-point perspective; instead, we experience syntax more clearly because the diagrammatic structure of an evidently-drawn map of spatial depth distances the viewer. With Duccio, we are not immersed in the pictorial, for the abstracted space makes us all too aware of structure.

Duccio provides a way for us to rethink drawn spaces and consider a framework of space that does not emphatically conflict with flatness. Furthermore, as a depicted box space is finite for the walls that contain it [12], a painting that utilises its symmetrical scaffold has not only the potential to schematically mimic the idea of painting as a flattened-out cavity, it can simultaneously speak to the architectural box that holds it (e.g. the gallery). We can say then that the image of a box space is a sign for painting's painting-reflexive and context-reflexive form.

In support of my claim that thinking of painting through a schematic re-presentation of the prepared field as a flattened-out cavity can benefit painting today, let us first extract what is relevant from a more recent history. While Duccio's symmetrical box space sets the scene for us, Henri Matisse's *L'Atelier Rouge* [*The Red Studio*] (1911) [Fig. 16] serves as a bridge to the more recent developments that I will discuss shortly. Some of the attributes that make *L'Atelier Rouge* such a good example of meta-syntactical reflexivity include: its space as an interior; its simplified outlines that signify drawing; its homogenising ground colour; its flattening of objects; its use of opacity and transparency; its abstracted space (as Matisse's lines of perspective do not correlate); and its employment of space-as-a-support through its autobiographical subject (i.e. as an image of images and their contextual space).

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12. With representations of exterior spaces, the viewer stands at the (open) window and looks out to an imaginary outside (to a sectioned-off view of infinite space), where a horizon represents an 'elsewhere'. With paintings of interiors, however, the potential for a conceptual 'elsewhere' is extinguished.

[Fig. 16] Henri Matisse, *L'Atelier Rouge* [*The Red Studio*] (1911) oil on canvas, 181 x 219.1 cm.

In this depiction of Matisse's own studio (which was not red [13]), a blanket of intense colour confuses the walls with the floor, flattening the drawn space of a room to the surface of the painting. The viewer looks down into the enclosed interior, which includes representations of Matisse's paintings, sculptures, and ceramics, which are solidly filled, while the architecture and furniture are delineated by only a thin outline of bare canvas so that their flattened volumes dissolve into the red ground as if they were literally transparent. Matisse pictorialises the viewer's visual capacity to figuratively see-through some elements and focus on others; except that here the artist controls what we see and what we gaze past, and ultimately decides that what we should see is the colour red, and art (with the represented paintings as the only 'windows' to an 'elsewhere'). Greenberg said of *L'Atelier Rouge* that it was 'perhaps the flattest easel painting done anywhere up to that time' [14]. Greenberg had pitched his idea of a flat, all-over picture (as with Pollock) in comparison to the easel picture's box-like cavity [15]; however, Matisse here uses flat colour and a diagrammatic spatial depiction to reference both painting's two-dimensional pretence of three-dimensional space, and painting as an (two-dimensional) object.

Unravelling Materiality

In Chapter 2, I discussed the writings of Mondrian and Judd to explain the modernist development that saw the literal implication of real-world space supersede that of art's facility to depict space. However, around the same time as Judd's idea made painting's fictional cavity into a literal three-dimensional object (thereby including the

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13. See John Elderfield's *Matisse in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art*, 1978: 86-87.
14. Greenberg quoted in Elderfield, 1978: 88.
15. See Greenberg's *The Crisis of the Easel Picture* (1961, originally 1948).

viewer as a performer), Frank Stella was reconciling objectness with the image.

In the mid-1960s, Stella made forty-four mural-sized paintings using shaped canvases (four paintings of each of his eleven configurations) [16]. Each of these shaped canvases, known as his 'irregular polygons', contains two or three (and in one instance four) simple, hard-edged, geometric shapes of colour in flush juxtapositions. Alongside the shapes, thick bands of colour either encase a shape entirely or snake around part of it, emphasising one section of a depicted or literal edge. Colour, by means of synthetic and fluorescent paint, is loud, and becomes a sign for the infiltration of high art with popular culture (because Day-Glo colour resists associations with nature). More to the point, to establish colour as an explicit subject it needed to be overstated (perhaps even the size of advertising hoardings), and coupled with the expansiveness of a single area filled with one single colour, this required commercial materials. If historic wall-sized paintings created a theatre through life-sized figuration, then these works use scale and size to magnify the intensity of colour before the viewer.

Each area of colour in these works is formed from straight lines, is solid and flat, and is isolated by Stella's method of paint application, which entails an ultra-thin line of raw canvas (including a pencil line, as the placement of shapes is marked out prior to painting), with a feathered edge caused by paint bleed. Yet while Stella borrows

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16. Each painting is individually numbered, and named after a town in New Hampshire (e.g. *Moultonville I*, or *Conway IV*, etc.). The repetition of the 'same' painting in four different colour-ways enabled experimentation into how colour influences the interactions of shapes (through perceptual variation). If we were to hang two paintings of the same configuration side by side we would see how the colour choices can push a shape 'towards' the viewer, while a different choice (in the same shape of a different painting), means that the 'same' shape 'recedes'. Beyond the visual push/pull, such a simple premise in the wake of Abstract Expressionism invites dialogues on authenticity. Or perhaps one might consider how the knowledge that shape is consistent, while colour is not, affects the viewing.

directly from Matisse's thin line of bare canvas [17], he uses it in a very different way. For Matisse, the unpainted line was a negative outline that melted away to confuse figure and ground, shape and space; for Stella, however, the unpainted line is a gap that definitely separates shapes. Of this mechanism that 'cuts' colour, Stella remarks:

> I always leave a space, because I don't want the confusion of shapes. *I want the independence of each unit*, so it has white on each side. It is painted independently. Each item is doubly independent. Nothing touches anything else. [18]

As with Mondrian, isolated units equate each shape along the same plane to reiterate the flat object quality of painting, and yet paradoxically, Stella's depicted shapes are also able to engage in figure/ground relationships. This is because, unlike Matisse's amalgamation through colour, Stella's shapes are also isolated by colour, shape, and size. For example, when confronted with the considerable and spirited *Tuftonboro III* (1966) [Fig. 17], it is easy to see the large, irregular area (or what could be called a rectangle with a missing corner) as the background to the superimposed triangle shape. Aside from the shapes as units (delineated as such by the cut of raw canvas), this reading is predominately determined by the viewer's readiness to interpret an emphasised shape as a figure [19]. However, it also relies upon the accompanying bands. What we see as a triangle with an inside/outside of red and yellow is actually a red shape enclosed within a band. This yellow frame is only separable if the viewer relates it not to the triangle but to the other band that winds around half of the painting. Of the R-shaped band in the *Tuftonboro* series,

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17. In an interview with Brian P. Kennedy, 6th November 2009, Stella states: '*The Red Studio*. That's where I got all my ideas. That's where the black paintings came from' (Stella in Kennedy's *Frank Stella: Irregular Polygons*, 2010: 95). Kennedy relays for us the influence of Matisse's *L'Atelier Rouge* on Stella (see Kennedy, 2010: 95-98), but he fails to consider how the unpainted line behaves differently in the work of each artist.

18. Stella interviewed by Kennedy, 6th November 2009; see Kennedy, 2010: 18 [Emphasis added].

19. As the triangle shape is regular, compact, and its colour is more vivid than that of its irregular counterpart.

[Fig. 17] Frank Stella, *Tuftonboro III* (1966) fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas, 280 x 280.67 x 7.62 cm.

Stella has said: 'The band is obviously a spring and is going to propel the triangle out. The triangle is pushing back, but the spring has the ability to push it out' [20]. Beyond the amusing spring quality that would see a shape leave the painting, the band here performs another function. As Stella explains:

> It's pretty much a pictorial problem. The band holds the shape of whatever kind of imagined rectangle this was, so I've got it holding this triangle, but I don't want to keep outlining indefinitely, or I lose this openness. The open space at the bottom and right side allows you to get a sense of the triangle being pushed in, but also having space to be able to go out of it. So there has to be an open edge. And so the mitred edge [of the band] was a way of dealing with that to open it up at the bottom. [21]

If the end of the band (in the bottom left-hand corner of the painting) had met the bottom edge at a right angle, Stella would have risked the openness conveyed in the lower half of the painting [22]. Instead, the mitred end fixes the band to the area of colour in such a way that it is attached to 'space' but does not close off 'space'. In addition, a straight end to a band means that it can run off the painting; a mitred end, on the other hand, is a centripetal device that restricts the image to the structure of the limit-frame. [23]

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20. Stella interviewed by Kennedy, 6th November 2009; see Kennedy, 2010: 28.

21. Ibid.

22. This mitred end of the R-shaped band in *Tuftonboro III* also corresponds to that of the other end of the band that is itself mitred to follow the angle of the triangle shape/band. This repetition also aids the implication of propulsion that sees the triangle shape pushed outside of the picture.

23. In his archival book *Frank Stella: Irregular Polygons, 1965-66* (2010), Kennedy gets close to making some interesting points about Stella's bands and how they stabilise the image; however, his aimless, and I would say incorrect, comparison between Stella's bands and Barnett Newman's zips diminishes his argument; see Kennedy, 2010: 94. My favoured reading of Newman's zips - keenly articulated by Bois - supports my point. Bois sees a Newman zip: 'as a pole to which we could attach our gaze in the way in which Turner attached himself to the mast of a ship during a tempest. But to fix it would mean to isolate it completely from the global field, to ask ourselves what we see there, and in doing so to lose the ground on which is based our perception as a whole, i.e., the spatial reference of our body' (Bois, 1990: 203). That Stella's chunky, isolated bands with their mitred ends both frame shapes and zigzag around pictorial space, means that they work from a very different premise, *i.e. they are syntactical, not sensory.*

The force of Stella's playful-yet-interrogative shaped canvases relies completely on the delimitations of open and closed space facilitated by the bands (as enclosing structures), and their mitred ends (as signifying containment whilst playing to openness). However, a mitred end also portrays an illusion of depth.

Mondrian's version of modernism illuminates what is at stake here. Mondrian abhorred the visual influence of the depicted diagonal, believing that a diagonal arrangement of drawn lines destroyed painting's compositional equilibrium. Of Theo van Doesburg's use of depicted diagonals, Mondrian wrote: 'The relationship with architecture and its vertical and horizontal dominants is broken' [24]. A depicted diagonal line is unbalanced to the viewer's upright engagement with a painting, and concurrently with the upright aspect of walls and rooms that house paintings. It seems that, for Mondrian, lines must follow the planarity of painting and the viewer's balanced relationship to it. Mondrian, however, had no such complaint about the diagonal orientation of painting's structure, and of his own square paintings hung diagonally (as symmetrical diamonds) he stated:

> Only the borders of the canvas are on 45-degree angles, not the picture. The advantage of such a procedure is that longer horizontal and vertical lines may be employed in the composition. [25]

By this, I take Mondrian to mean that the diagonal orientation of a square enabled horizontal and vertical drawn lines that were longer in length than the sides of the limit-edge itself, so that lines could hypothetically reach farther than the confines that conventionally-orientated frames could permit. In affecting not only external balance

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24. See Mondrian (Holtzman and James), 1987: 357. Mondrian felt so strongly about depicted diagonals that van Doesburg's use of them was one of the reasons Mondrian broke with the De Stijl Group. (At the time of this statement, Mondrian was working on (the never completed) diamond painting, *Victory Boogie-Woogie*).
25. Ibid. For Mondrian, a square (and not a rectangle) is necessary for symmetry/balance to be maintained.

but also the internal implication of fictive space, (as with lines of perspective, the eye travels along depicted diagonals and *into* invented depth), depicted diagonals fundamentally corrupt the integrity of the picture plane. And so, in the shaped canvas as a diamond, Mondrian had found a way to constrain the sign 'diagonal' to an operation of flatness that did not compromise his re-conception of painting made possible by his removal of the picture frame [26].

Mondrian's wonderful logic transformed the sign for 'depth' by expelling the diagonal from the pictorial space to the reaches of the literal limit-edge. In contrast, what follows here explains how Stella uses the shaped canvas to confuse literal shape with depicted shape.

There are three connotations to the fact that Stella's shaped canvases do not conform to the limits of a rectangle, but instead break free from the norms of easel painting to assert a limit-edge that is seemingly determined by the shape of its parts: 1) that the painting resists containment by a picture frame supplement; 2) that the viewer cannot dismiss the limit-edge (as in the habit of dismissing picture frames); and 3) that the painting is not set back from or *into* its framing edge, but rests proud of the wall. The shaped silhouette against the gallery wall expands the figure/ground relationship of traditional pictures by situating the gallery itself as a background to the painting's structure as a figure.

However, despite these declarations of objectness, only portions of the depiction in Stella's shaped canvases actually correspond to the support. This means that although the viewer reads a shape of colour as derived from the eccentric limit-edge, its boundary is largely fictional, and shape comes not from construction but from

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26. See my section on 'Syntax Outside of the Frame' in Chapter 2 of this research.

drawing. Michael Fried, in his perceptive essay *Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings* (1966), writes of Stella's pictorial inventiveness and the success of depiction in signifying shape, for without it the viewer would see one of Stella's shaped canvases not as shapes but as a seven-sided polygon:

> The beholder is, in effect, compelled *not* to experience the literal shape in its entirety - as a single entity - but rather to perceive it segment by segment, each of which is felt to belong to one or another of the smaller shapes that constitute the painting as a whole. (Fried, 1966: 23)

Fried concludes that it is ineffectual to make distinctions between literal and depicted shape in Stella's shaped canvases, as neither takes precedence. And with this statement, Greenbergian modernism's emphasis on materiality over depiction begins to unravel. Whilst materiality was declared as primary and inescapable by the shaped canvas itself, Stella not only attached the descriptive functioning of drawn shapes, he also used the pictorial to fictionalise construction. This act destabilises abstract painting's independence from association, as depiction *completes* materiality. The viewer cannot read the modernist assertions of form without believing the nonmaterial components over and above the literal components.

Stella realised that an attention to objectness did not have to come at the cost of the pictorial; and in this respect, Stella's shaped canvases work as late modernist diagrams for testing and exposing the limits of modernist ideals. There is further evidence for this in the dynamic *Wolfeboro II* (1966) [Fig. 18]. At over four meters tall, this painting has a two-tier structure composed of a trapezium enclosed by a pale yellow band and a larger polygon partially framed by a light orange band. With only the right-hand side of the limit-edge exposed to shape (i.e. not reiterated by a band), this side of the painting becomes a sign for openness, and offers an unobstructed view into colour. In contrast, the left half of the painting is totally

[Fig. 18] Frank Stella, *Wolfeboro II* (1966) fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas, 407.1 x 253.8 x 10.16 cm

contained, and therefore the red colour within the band is set back from the viewer. The open/closed red shape, by reaching to both the upper and lower ends of the painting, syntactically flattens classical picture construction of foreground and background, where the lower point is the 'front' and the upper point is 'far' from the viewer. By equating 'behind' to 'far' and 'open' to 'foreground', Stella flattens and spells out the pictorial functioning. To reiterate that a schematic portrayal of depth is being exercised here, Stella's lower shape can be seen either as a trapezium or as a rectangle retreating into a fictive distance. However, as the band (as a frame) refutes perspective by remaining a consistent width (i.e. no foreshortening occurs) - and likewise for the Duccio-like steepness of the angles - flatness is the dominant reading. If a trapezium is a perspectival device for planning an illusion of depth, in Stella's hands it signifies a flat sign for the cancelling out of depth.

Codifying Transparency

I have said that in depictions of interior spaces, the creation of fictive space has a limited depth, and that this reiterates painting's structure as a flattened-out cavity. Another important characteristic of the box space, however, is that the three-sided structure presupposes the existence of a fourth wall, which spans the entire painting but is absent, so as to enable a viewing of the interior. In theatre, the fourth wall is part of the audience's suspension of disbelief, so that *breaking the fourth wall* - say, by an actor addressing the audience directly - is a correlation we can make to modernism's promotion of technical effects over illusionistic ones, and moreover, to objectness itself (whether manifested through Mondrian's loss of the frame, Stella's shaped canvas that incorporates the wall in a figure/ground relationship, or Judd's specific object that includes the viewer). In contrast, the closed nature of a box space - where the frontally-organised architectural container emulates the structure of

painting as a symmetrical, framed, and flattened-out cavity - is only open to the idea of observation (i.e. it opens towards the facing viewer for the act of viewing) [27]. The importance of this stage-like space should not be underestimated, as it looks to pictorial syntax to: 1) implicate the architectural box of the viewer's space and signify painting's social function; and 2) the imaginary and invisible fourth wall of any depicted box space replaces the literal surface plane of the painting with an analogy of transparency. The depiction of a room implicates *looking through* the transparent fourth wall, which in turn implicates the pictorial surface as glass, i.e. as a flat screen, as obstructive but optically penetrable, as largely invisible, and as reflective.

From such a line of reasoning, we glimpse how the theoretical possibilities of transparency are potentially extensive, and yet such concerns - which I would state are fundamental to painting - have not previously been analysed in terms of modernist painting. Indeed, part of this claim on space comprises my idea that it is productive today for us to rethink modernism, and particularly Stella's vocabulary, *but through transparency* (an idea that was previously proscribed). We will come to the box space again in due course, but first to transparency.

Josef Albers, in his *Homage to the Square* series of small paintings (and prints), assessed colour relations (of three or four colours) through four concentric square designs in hundreds of different colour variations and combinations, as if to formulate a syntax of colour [28]. However, in his book *Interaction of Colour* (2006, originally

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27. As in the open room-space in the top half of Duccio's two-tier panel, *Christ before Annas* [see Fig. 14].

28. For a more interesting model for working out - or rather, for contriving - a syntax of colour, one might consider Kenneth Noland's exploration of colour away from shape. Noland used an elongated canvas of horizontal stripes, so that the viewer looked along colour. In her essay, *On Frontality* (1968), Krauss describes Noland's large works such as *Stria* (1967) and *Via Light* (1968) as: 'twenty-foot lengths of canvas pulled taut by the radiant distension of colour' (Krauss, 1968: 46). Krauss goes on to note that because it is impossible to experience a discrete shape in such paintings (as colour is shapeless, i.e. it is a one-dimensional line), 'any attempt to focus somewhere in the painting results once more in the illusion of colour turning away from view' (Krauss, 1968: 46).
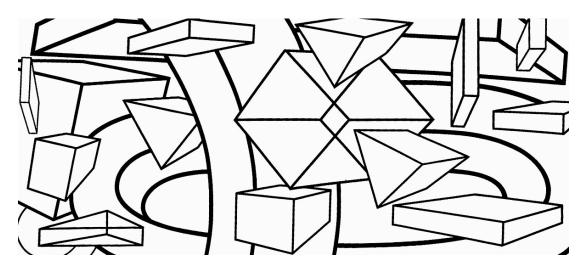
1963), Albers devised a series of small experiments involving juxtaposing coloured sheets of paper to invite his reader to take part in an analysis of what happens when colours sit alongside one another. Some of Albers' enquiries involve how different colours can be made to look identical; however in the experiment that interests us - see [Fig. 19] - two sheets of colour seemingly overlap to create a third colour. I say *seemingly* as Albers' simple exercise is visually deceptive; what appears at first as two literally transparent sheets of paper layered together to create their colour mixture are actually three opaque sheets, with the central colour as the approximated, imaginary blend of the two outer colours. By scissoring and arranging three sheets of scrap paper to make it appear as though two transparent colours overlap, Albers created a sign for literal transparency from opaque sheets that pictorialise the operation of transparency, i.e. he made opaque colour appear as though see-through. Albers' focus was to learn and teach what happens when we make colour choices [29], and by breaking down pictorial illusion into a series of syntactical operations, and by counterfeiting the literal transparency of colour, he demonstrated how colour deceives, and how perception is susceptible to the substitution.

Although it is a somewhat oblique example, Albers' syntactical assimilation of literal transparency goes some way to illustrate the modernist codification of illusion.

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29. Albers' analytical methodology built upon concepts outlined in Gestalt psychology. Parallels can be made between Albers' own findings and those, for instance, of Wolfgang Metzger. In an analysis configured in terms of the prägnanz tendency (referring to the law of simplicity where figures are recognised in their simplest terms), Metzger explains that the perception of transparency is dependent upon how figures and their borders are arranged. See his *Laws of Seeing* (2006, originally 1936), Metzger, 2006: 123-125. For a discussion on the links between the Bauhaus and Gestalt psychology and the extent to which Kandinsky's and Albers' own teaching owe to Max Wertheimer and others, see Roy Behrens et al, *Gestalt theory and Bauhaus: A Correspondence* (2011). For another comparable work on colour, see Wittgenstein's *Bemerkungen Über Die Farben [Remarks on Colour]* (1978). Wittgenstein made a list of intuitions on colour; for example, he asked: 'Why is transparent white impossible?' (1978: 19), and stated: 'Transparent could be compared with 'reflecting''(1978: 36). *Remarks on Colour* is an enjoyable collection of thoughts, but like Albers' empirical approach, its use as a means of syntactical analysis is limited.

[Fig. 19] Colour sheet example from Albers' *Interaction of Colour*, 2006: 97.

[Fig. 20] Al Held, *Noah's Focus II* (1970), acrylic on canvas, 350 x 762 cm.

Another useful example is Al Held's elongated paintings from the early 1970s. Held used colourless line drawings to work out how the viewer experiences either flatness or perceptual depth. In mural-sized works like *Noah's Focus II* (1970) [Fig. 20], Held's (hand-drawn) black lines of varying widths form a diagrammatic mesh of 'empty' geometric shapes of different sizes (predominately large arc shapes and smaller cube shapes). The shapes have convex points but they are not volumes; rather they act as two-dimensional drawings to approximate three-dimensional representation (and its faux invention of space through containment and the gaps in between). Therefore, for the hollow appearance of the schema of lines, the sense of inside/outside becomes reversible and illusive; and likewise, for the multiplicity of perspective cues, the sense of depth strived for by each shape is flattened by the collective. The alternation of inside/outside suggests a kind of Bonnard-like operation; yet, unlike Pierre Bonnard's use of entropy, (where inside merges into outside), Held defines his points of occlusion. Some shapes use a relative blankness (what we might think of as a lack of information) to occlude one another, i.e. they are conspicuously opaque. In other instances, however, the shapes appear transparent (as with the large, central cube shape), so that the viewer can see sides of a shape that would typically be obstructed from view by the sides 'in front'. This transparency leads to optical shape-shifting, or it collapses a reading of volume, both operations throwing into doubt how the viewer is supposed to read shape.
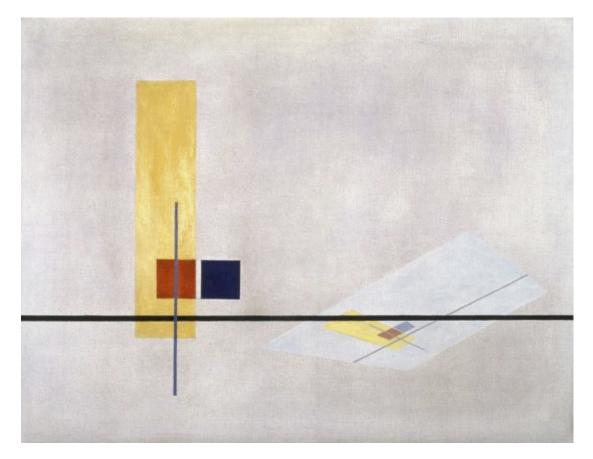
Such ambiguity is analogous with Stella's diagrammatic representation of shape and 'space', and I will return to this point, and to Stella, later in this chapter. First, in order to work out how transparency might be of critical value today, what follows is a detailed critique of an abstract artwork from the 1920s. While it is an uninspiring work that has an anomalous status within modernist theory, it is interesting for its failure to understand cubist opacity and the frontality it presumed. Therefore, rather than a modernist painting, it is an obscure visual experiment, or perhaps even a surrealist

hypothesis. Yet despite its prosaicness, it provides this thesis with a helpful catalogue for the effects that both literal and perceptual transparency have on the functioning of pictorial elements.

László Moholy-Nagy's *Konstruktion Z 1* [*Construction Z 1*] (1922-1923) [Fig. 21] is an oil painting (over a pencil drawing) on canvas. The picture can be seen as containing a collection of shapes (lines and coloured rectangles) on a pale grey ground, and a skewed, faint miniaturisation of this scene that includes an imitation of the ground's rectangular field. As if to underscore the arbitrariness of the sign, the shapes themselves are unremarkable except for their blatant two-dimensionality, and the bizarre suggestion that they owe their form to a misreading of Mondrian. As a syntactical proposal for painting, however, the presentation of ostensibly similar and opposing shapes sets painting's opacity alongside its fictive possibilities.

The functioning of the sign in *Konstruktion Z 1* is reliant upon the discernable characteristics of each grouping, and so the influencing factors can be allocated like so: big/small; near/far; fixed/floating; opaque/transparent; frontal/oblique; upright/twisted; saturated colour/washed-out colour; surface plane/perceptual depth; and so on. The juxtaposition of divergent signs invites the viewer to make comparisons between what might be interpreted as the instigating image, or authentic, and its simulacrum: what can be seen as a visual echo, or a reflection of sorts. The picture, therefore, contains a re-presentation of itself. To a degree, one could say that the simulacrum works in accordance with atmospheric perspective [30]; yet it is also embedded, *mise en abyme*, and while its potential for recurring infinitely

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30. Atmospheric perspective (also called aerial perspective) is found in historic Chinese and Japanese painting, where the 'distance' is faint or hazy (and typically adopts the tones of the background, e.g. the blue of the 'sky'). Notably, Damisch tells us that with Chinese painting there is no transcendence between 'earth' and 'sky'; see Damisch, 2002: 217-218.

[Fig. 21] László Moholy-Nagy, *Konstruktion Z 1* (1922-1923), oil over pencil on canvas, 75.5 x 96.5 cm.

is not played out (i.e. there is no further recursion into the abyss) [31], it is undeniably

an image *in* an image and an image *of* an image.

As its mimicry is perverted, the simulacrum does not straightforwardly re-present,

transparency and distortion instead composing an apparition. Damisch tells us that

within the figurative order of painting born out of Alberti's (open) window metaphor,

where the viewer sees a portion of extensive space:

> […] laws analogous to those that govern empirical space also apply in
> figurative space, so any flouting of those laws takes on the *aspect* of a
> miracle or a supernatural event, and the 'realism' of the system is thereby
> confirmed, if not strengthened, by any contradiction created at the symbolic
> level. (Damisch, 2002: 84) [Damisch's italics]

The viewer reads the simulacrum as an apparition because, when compared to the

opacity and fixed nature of the shapes in the foreground, it is transparent and has no

means of support; with transparent space-as-a-support, the apparition also aids in

the effect of 'a fake depth in which all references to the surface from which the

figures stand out are abolished' (Damisch 2002: 106). Moreover, the apparition is

ethereal; it is as if a light is shining onto the surface plane of the picture from outside

of the picture (and from the left-hand side of the viewer) and this light travels through

the figure and ground as if they were made of coloured glass [32], causing the image to

be cast (a perception of the surface *as glass*, aided by the diagonal placing of the

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31. Perhaps it is the oblique setting of the simulacrum that prohibits the *mise en abyme*. In my discussion on
Brassaï's photograph in Chapter 2 of this research, I stated that the oblique angle shut the viewer out of the mirror's
reflection; oblique space then cannot be looked into if a state of frontality has already been somehow confirmed. In
other words, paintings offer a restricted space of one view (where the viewer cannot peer around a corner). The
implications of this are explored later in this chapter in relation to Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533).
32. As Damisch reminds us: '([…] The stained-glass window was quite literally the first painted 'window', but one that,
it must be said, was designed not to allow the view to open up onto the beyond, but rather to play with and make the
most of the light that passed through it).' Damisch, 2002: 106.

additional image). The simulacrum becomes a stylised reflection on glass, and a reflection on the picture plane. Although such a reading forgives the wrongness of the depiction (asking the viewer to receive the copy as a placeholder for such an operation as well as mentally correct the visual information in order to make sense of the image), through this misrepresentation the viewer is once more engaged in considering his/her own receptiveness to illusion.

I will continue my examination of *Konstruktion Z 1* later in this chapter, but first it is central for us to acknowledge the contradictory aspects of transparency that the analysis has so far raised (for example, that perceptual depth conflicts with literal transparency). What follows looks to Frankenthaler, and again to Stella, to further explain some of the ways in which modernism (as fundamentally unreceptive to 'depth') subsumed transparency.

Opacity, along with smoothness and containment, is what makes the prepared field amenable to the invention of transparent space; and yet mediating between opacity and perceptual transparency is literal transparency, which has a contradictory epistemological effect that places it at odds with its imaginary counterpart. Although an illusion of depth happens when paint is lit from behind, so to speak, transparent paint is a faithful tool; it *is* transparent, and by itself does not re-present transparency. With the addition of a film of transparent paint, the literal surface is exposed and therefore optical plays are halted by the viewer's attention being drawn through colour, only to be brought back to the literal surface plane and its material texture. Transparent colour, therefore, is both see-through and an agent of opacity. With the monochrome (the ultimate opaque painting), the pictorial surface re-presents the literal surface, yet they become equivalent, whereas with pictures, pictorial surfaces live separately from literal surfaces (i.e. they are typically *behind*

[33]), unless the two are somehow bonded. Helen Frankenthaler's transparent colour washes on raw canvas are an example of this. What Frankenthaler identifies is that for an illusion of perceptual depth to be successful, it should be spatially infinite. Frankenthaler leaves the spatial differences to colour perception alone by firstly considering colour away from the loaded brush (and the making of defined contours or conventional modelling), and then by separating out her washes and refraining from overlapping (as overlapping fixes depth). In so doing, Frankenthaler equalises figure and ground, and opens painting to the viewer's unrestricted perception (rather than constricting space) whilst allowing the materiality of the raw canvas surface to feature in its own right [34]. Literal transparency, therefore, both facilitates [35] and cancels the illusion of depth.

Frankenthaler had found a way to rationalise transparency within the modernist conviction. In Chapter 1 of this research, I discussed how Greenberg's theory for painting precluded the representation of three-dimensional space; surviving his idea of 'flatness', however, was the 'opticality' observable in a new kind of abstract art that learned from Pollock but that stressed openness and colour; in essence, illusionism solely through colour. While Fried mirrored Greenberg's feelings that the colour-field paintings of Jules Olitski, Kenneth Noland, and Morris Louis addressed 'eyesight alone' [36], Greenberg himself also characterised late modernist paintings that explored opticality as: 'Harking back in some ways to Impressionism, and *reconciling*

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33. Lasker's pictures are, of course, on top the surface; and Abts' shapes both project, and step into a shallow 'depth'.

34. In her book *Helen Frankenthaler* (1975), Barbara Rose notes that as line does not create shapes, value contrasts can only imply a partial illusion of depth, i.e. the eye is prevented from perceiving depth by the contradiction of the textured canvas; see Rose, 1975: 62. Rose also writes how Frankenthaler's use of staining identifies the figure with the ground, eliminating any duality between them; see Rose, 1975: 70.

35. As transparent paint offers evidence that no overlapping occurs (i.e. opaque shapes might be occluding one another).

36. See Fried's *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*, 1965: 37.

the Impressionist glow with Cubist opacity' [37]. Later, and as if in direct response to this narrative, Op Art codified illusion by playing to perceptual transparency, but only as far as a faithfulness to two-dimensionality would permit.
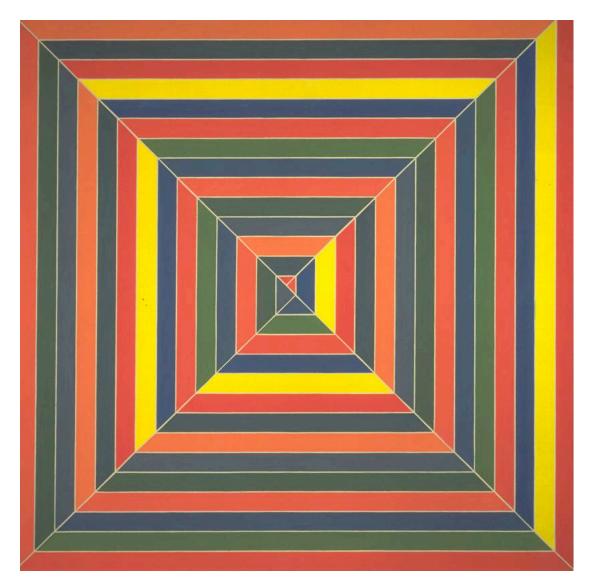
As not strictly part of either the colour-field or the Op Art canons, Stella's square canvases from the early 1960s offer us an ideological hinge between opticality and its flattening, thus providing this thesis with a vigorous example of schematised illusion. *Hyena Stomp* (1962) [Fig. 22] is a large canvas (approx. 2 metres square) whose configuration of only bands creates what the viewer sees as a pyramid or a box of projective space (either travelling towards or away from the viewer). Unlike similar works by Stella from this time, where bands were organised to the logic of the frame to infer that squares were concentrically set within squares like 'camera-bellows' [38], *Hyena Stomp* breaks up the sense of a 'square' of colour within another, repeated again and again, by using the cross-sections of the painting's frame to cut each band, presenting the opportunity for additional colour plays (as each 'square' becomes four bands). If, in his shaped canvases, the mitred ends of Stella's bands transformed the band's operation of closure into one of openness, they perform another service in *Hyena Stomp*, which is to confirm that no overlapping occurs [39]. Within this flat space, the mitred ends and maze design produce four striped triangles that pose horizontal bands against vertical ones [40]. This patterning is attended by the sense of an illusionary spiral of colour towards the centre of the

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37. Greenberg, in his *The 'Crisis' of Abstract Art*, 1964: 181 [Emphasis added].

38. Fried's description of Stella's concentric square paintings from 1962; see Fried, 1965: 45. It is also worth noting Fried's term 'deductive structure', used by him to describe artworks by Noland, Olitski, and Stella where the pictorial structure bears a relation to the framing-edge; see Fried, 1965: 23.

39. With ends mitred, the bands are clearly adjacent and therefore exist on the same visual plane. Even with Stella's thin cut of unpainted canvas separating each band, opaque bands that finish in T-junctions might be perceived as overlapping one another.

40. Although each cross-section does not tally with a corner, each angle of the mitred ends of the bands registers as having been arrived at from the four corners of the frame.

[Fig. 22] Frank Stella, *Hyena Stomp* (1962), Benjamin Moore colours on canvas, 195.5 x 195.5 cm.

painting, which is itself equivocal, as the diagonal determines its own centre in two places. With two focal points, all the logic of the piece is skewed, and the claim for a centre of the painting (evoked by the regular reduction from the square frame) is misrepresented by depicted alternatives. The idea of a centre in two places, and the spiral configuration it initiates, results in the diagonal lines of raw canvas not meeting all four corners of the painting, and on the right-hand side of the painting the arrangement accommodates what appears to be an extra band (providing the spiral reading with a beginning/end). Although this remainder dislodges the coherence of the structure, it is colour that greatly complicates and animates this work.

While Fried posits that Stella's paintings of concentric bands are: 'structures which are in radical opposition to the flatness of the picture-surface implied by the regularity of the stripe-patterns' [41], what Stella presents here is not a single-point perspective but a demonstration of how perspective can be used for its mathematical systemisation of space, i.e. as a spatial diagram over its allusion to transparent depth. That the viewer cannot see both the flat image and the illusionary image at the same time initiates a visual play akin to the duck/rabbit illusion; however, the ambiguous image in Stella is concerned with the diagrammatic re-presentation of illusion rather than fooling the eye. In other words, rather than engaging in a visual flip akin to that of the central 'transparent' cube [42] in the aforementioned *Noah's Focus II* (1970) by Al Held, Stella syntactically references this possibility of visual language. While the viewer walks alongside Held's elongated diagrams, thereby reading the cubes from a multitude of angles, much of Stella's success here relies upon the frontality his frame-locked image presumes. My point here is that Held's mesh, and Op Art's patterns of regulated imagery that pulse or undulate before the

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41. Fried here is actually referring to Stella's concentric square paintings, like *Cipango* (1962); see Fried, 1965: 45.
42. While it is impossible to see both aspects of Jastrow's duck/rabbit illusion simultaneously, the 'transparent' cube - known as the Necker cube - is also visually ambiguous and can be seen to have two 'fronts' and no depth cues.

viewer's relaxed gaze, are both constrained to flatness, while with Stella, perception oscillates between a represented depth and a dissolving of illusion.

Detached Space

Returning to the peculiar *Konstruktion Z 1,* we can discern other visual plays that are worked through here. First of all, we can say that Moholy-Nagy uses fictive space to affirm the two-dimensionality of images, for his experiment pictorialises the flatness of the image he works with. Through the divergent functioning of two collections of similar and comparable shapes, the artist elects not to depict two-dimensionality versus the mimicry of three-dimensionality, but instead sets out two-dimensionality versus two-dimensionality in three-dimensional space, i.e. the simulacrum is not a volume but a suspended, flat sheet. The abstract quality of his shapes further facilitates this as they do not relate to an external referent but only to each other, therefore we are not asked to consider some real-world volume flattened, but flat shapes on a flat surface versus flat shapes on a flat surface in illusionistic space. Even as *Konstruktion Z 1* describes the dualism of influencing functions (near/far, fixed/floating, etc.), it limits the exercise and confines illusion to a version in keeping with the conditions of the prepared field as flat.

A related question concerns the repetition of the abstract model. In his *Dissemination* (1981, originally 1972), Derrida asserts the idea of a truth agreement between resemblance and a re-presentation of a thing, and an internal division within mimesis as a self-duplication of repetition itself [43]. Mimesis, Derrida tells us, either 1) signifies the presentation of a thing, where its visible face or theatrical mask reveals as much

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43. See Jacques Derrida, 1981: 204-206.

as it hides, and - as mimesis itself does not exist unless a thing is doubled - to emerge, it must appear, reveal, or unveil itself; or 2) it sets up a relationship between two 'terms' so that it can be more readily translated as an imitation: 'The two faces are separated and set face to face: the imitator and the imitated, the latter being none other than the thing or meaning of the thing itself, its manifest presence' (Derrida, 1981: 206). From this, we see that *Konstruktion Z 1* is an abstract painting that invents and houses its own referent, allegorising resemblance in the process.

The idea of an image of an image is one I will revisit momentarily, but for now let us turn our attention to other responses to *Konstruktion Z 1*, which might include a romantic reading, where the simulacrum sets illusionism adrift (perhaps a farewell statement to pre-modernist space). Or the painting might be situated as an oppositional claim, and an affirmation for the logic of the axis of the rectangle as robust, its manipulation transient by comparison. Either way, as a diagram the visual play engages two noteworthy operations. 1) The open/closed frame: where the repetition of the ground in the simulacrum obliges the artist to define its edge, compelling the viewer to consider the apparently open limits of the painting's limit-frame as closed. 2) Viewing as subject: in signifying and separating the actuality and illusiveness of the painted surface, and by calling on the viewer's readiness to accept the mimetic representation of a phenomena *external* to the painting (as a reflection cast from outside of the painting, or glass under the influence of an imagined light source, perhaps), the viewer is made aware of his/her own space and light (time of day?) as he/she stands in front of the painting.

This enquiry brings us to another possible interpretation, where Moholy-Nagy's simulacrum is conceived of as a diagrammatic adaptation of the kind of perspective Holbein used for his visually-eccentric skull in *The Ambassadors* (1533) [Fig. 23]. In this contextually anomalous piece, Holbein's 'skull' famously interrupts the logic of

[Fig. 23] Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors* (1533), oil on oak, 207 x 209 cm. (The National Gallery, London.)

his otherwise frontally-organised picture and obliges the viewer to participate, because meaning is obtained when the viewer steps to the side. Of course, in applying a similar reading to *Konstruktion Z 1*, the simulacrum does not reveal signification if the viewer steps to the side. The abstract sign only acts as a placeholder for Holbein's visual game (and in actuality the viewer is not required to physically move in order for recognition to occur); conceptually, however, it does demonstrate how the framed view and the internal organisation of shapes can influence the viewer's position before an image.

Konstruktion Z 1 inverts Holbein's spatial arrangement (with the 'authentic' information in the foreground and the variance behind). However, unlike the idea of an apparition - which although at odds with sensible order is easily understood alongside it - Holbein's interactive anomaly risks painting itself. Of this particular incongruity, Charles Harrison writes:

> Like scare quotes around a sentence, it shifts the truth-value of all that the surface contains […]. How strange a thing to conceive; something which could only be realized if the painting were irreparably transformed - the carefully achieved illusion of its instanteity, its 'presentness', damaged beyond repair by the representation of its contingency. (Harrison, 2001: 198, originally 1991)

Moholy-Nagy's simulacrum sinks into the void, and complies with pictorial logic; the warped skull image on the other hand has a perspective of its own. Tarnishing the picture, Holbein's skull in anamorphic perspective cancels the illusionary function of the painting itself, throwing irrevocable doubt upon the perceptual transparency and the mimesis of things. Despite all the labour-intensive detailing of the represented objects - the fine writing on the globes, the flecked marble floor, the lavish fabric and fur - the viewer can no longer suspend disbelief, i.e. the skull exists outside of reality (as if without a referent).

Moreover, if the viewer chooses to move from the logical, reciprocal, frontal position before the painting, to the place in the gallery from where the smear becomes recognisable as a skull (towards the right-hand side of the painting), he/she can no longer see the rest of the picture properly. As we can not see from more than one viewing point, nor peer around depicted things, the viewer must decide whether to comply with the frontality and symmetry of the painting to continue the face-to-face dialogue with the painted ambassadors, or to move in order to work out what is happening with the anomaly. The viewer, therefore, is meant to disassociate the two visual operations, thus implicating the context of display.

This brings me again to Fried, who has composed other routes to disassociation for us. In his book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1988, originally 1980), Fried describes how, in paintings from 1750s and 60s France, a figure or group of figures appear oblivious to everything other than the act of their absorption (an absorptive pastime, for example), the importance of this absorption being that it leads to the *exclusion* of the viewer before the painting [44]. The aloneness of the figures then implicates the painting as a whole relative to the viewer [45]. This is what Fried calls a negation of the viewer's presence 'to establish a fiction that no one is standing before the canvas', to which Fried applies the paradox that: 'only if this is done can the beholder be stopped and held precisely there' (Fried, 1988: 108). If the painted figures are conscious of being seen by us then they conform to this pejorative concept of theatre, an idea that Fried takes from his earlier essay *Art and Objecthood* (1967). Here, Fried conjured a suspect conclusion to the reasoning of the idea of theatricality in order to criticise Judd's *Specific Objects.*

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44. See Fried's summary of this point, 1988: 66-68. (The antithesis of this would be the portrait, as the sitter's presentation is one to be beheld; see Fried, 1988: 109.)
45. See Fried, 1988: 109.

Fried's agitation was down to what he saw as the literalist 'war' against not only modernist painting but also art as such [46]. In essence, Fried surmised that minimalism had a theatrical relationship with the viewer (for Fried, this degrades it to non-art), whereas works by Olitski and Louis distanced the viewer or treated he/she as if they were not there (fulfilling Fried's program for art).

The degree to which art acknowledges the reciprocity between itself and the viewer, and absorption's ability to defeat such theatricality, are not problems for this thesis; what interests me is the related issue of how an image can pictorialise itself (as an image/object), and in order to interrogate the syntax of the image in respect to its ontology, its social function, and its context, what follows looks to Fried's writing on contemporary large-format photography. First, however, a final word on Moholy-Nagy's diagram.

The image of an image in *Konstruktion Z 1*, where the authentic image is parallel to the surface as glass and the simulacrum spins off into the fictive distance, considers painting as an aquarium, where the entire context for the simulacrum is the atmospheric fullness of the instigating image. That is to say that the text for the duplication occurs within an image, so that there is no *outside* and the representation of the text is the relationship between an invented referent and its simulacrum. This is what makes the banal *Konstruktion Z 1* so astonishing, and it is an operation that completely relies upon the transparency of the ground. An image of an image typically obliges the inclusion of a supplementary text that defines the image as such. This is apparent in photography's installation shot, as the image (the photograph) contains both an image (e.g. a painting on a wall) and the architectural text of the gallery space that holds it.

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46. Fried, 1967: 21. In opposing minimalism's theatrical objectness, Fried calls for the individual arts to remain intact.

Art Institute of Chicago 2 (1990) [Fig. 24] is one of Thomas Struth's museum photographs; an oversized (184 x 219 cm framed) colour photograph, it shows an installation shot of a gallery (in the Art Institute of Chicago). In the middle distance on a partition wall hangs Gustave Caillebotte's oil on canvas, *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877) (212.2 x 276.2 cm), and behind it are smaller paintings in gilt frames hung on the back wall. As well as the permanent furnishings of the room (such as the low-hung barriers, and the partition wall with its notched crest), the space contains several visitors photographed from behind while they view the paintings.

Struth's *Art Institute of Chicago 2* is an image of an image where the frontality of the symmetrically-presented room speaks to the idea of viewing. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that many historical examples of paintings that explore the conditions and theatres of painting through meta-reflexive subject matter adopt a frontal setting [47]. In paintings like Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), Gerard Dou's *Self Portrait* (1650), Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur L'herbe* [*The Luncheon on the Grass*] (1863), and Seurat's *Les Poseuses* [*The Models*] (1887-88), the organisation of the image effectively confronts the viewer's viewing. However, with Struth, frontality is not the proposal of a direct relationship between represented figures and the viewer, for reciprocation here is mediated by the installation shot. The installation shot is fundamentally closed to us, i.e. we are not those photographed viewers.

In his book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008), Fried describes Struth's museum photographs as depicting two 'uncommunicating realms' or 'worlds' (Fried, 2008: 119): that of the painting, and that of the museum or church in which they hang. Fried's reading of Struth is in opposition to claims (those of Hans

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47. Or to be more technically accurate, we could borrow John White's terms: a frontal, foreshortened frontal, or softened oblique setting; see White, 1987: 27.

[Fig. 24] Thomas Struth, *Art Institute of Chicago 2* (1990) Chromogenic process print 184 x 219 cm framed.

Belting and others) that these photographs investigate the *correlations* to be read between the two 'worlds' [48]. Fried writes:

> [What] Struth's photographs give us to see is […] the disconnectedness - the ontological disparateness or separateness - of the respective worlds of the painting or paintings they depict and of the photographs themselves, neither of which worlds can be identified with our own. [49]

To begin to explain why Fried's insight is so significant, we have to look to the materiality of both painting and photography. The latter, it has been said, is the most transparent of the art mediums [50], for when we look at photographs the mechanism for reproducing the sign is invisible, as the photographic image is one unmediated by code (i.e. conventions that need to be learned) [51]. According to Barthes, although there is a reduction (proportion, perspective, colour) from object to image, it is not a transformation [52]. And Krauss has written:

> Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object. (Krauss, 1986: 203)

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48. See Fried, 2008: 115-119.

49. Fried, 2008: 122. Fried elaborates: 'In one sense, of course, what I have been describing is a property of photographs generally. However, Struth's museum photographs subtly but insistently thematize that property by directing attention to a crucial similarity between looking at paintings and looking at photographs, namely that the viewer is no more invited to enter the space of the photograph than he or she is invited to enter that of a painting' (Fried, 2008: 124).

50. Greenberg writes: 'Photography is the most transparent of the art mediums devised or discovered by man. It is probably for that reason that it proves so difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable function as document and act as art as well.' Greenberg quoted in Fried, 2008: 372 (Source: Greenberg's *The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston*, 1946).

51. Although, as Elizabeth Chaplin points out in her *Sociology and Visual Representation* (1994): 'photography introduced a new way of seeing that had to be learned before it was rendered invisible' (Chaplin, 1994: 179).

52. 'In order to move from its reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate; there is no necessity to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image' (Barthes, in his *Image Music Text*, 1977: 17).

This indexical relationship means it is not difficult to suspend disbelief and cognitively replace the sign with the referent when looking at photographs; and a photograph's sheer surface completes the sense that reproduction and materiality are hardly felt. Painting, on the other hand, is far from transparent in these terms; its objectness, its uniqueness, its warm and textured surface, its artificiality, its chromatic effects, inventions, and discrepancies, and its giving over to evidence of the artist's touch and cultural age/style/technologies all betray material intervention [53]. As the experience of viewing photography's installation shot is not the experience of viewing the painting represented within, painting's material irreproducibility [54] means that Struth's photographs separate the viewer from the materiality of the represented painting.

Putting aside Fried's absorption/theatricality agenda, what we can draw from Fried is that by asserting representation as such (by screening off representation and pictorialising viewing), Struth orchestrates a way to disrupt the transparency of photography. We can no longer suspend disbelief and compare the photographed world with our own. Fried states:

> [It] is as if the non-'transparent' character of the paintings' surfaces is inevitably registered in Struth's photographs at the same time as the viewer's sense of removal from all possibility of direct contact with those surfaces allows the 'world-likeness' or say 'world-apartness' of paintings as representations to be apprehended with particular force. (Fried, 2008: 124)

To put it another way, painting's materiality is declared (as ontologically different

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53. Of course, indexical relationships aside, photography is also susceptible to cultural age, style, and technologies.
54. See Thierry de Duve's *Irreproducible Ryman* (2009). Through his argument regarding Robert Ryman's resistance to photographic reproducibility, de Duve writes of painting's specific form as irreproducible.

from photography's), though the viewer's inability to see and understand it in any meaningful way means that the material - as a casualty of re-presentation - no longer influences representation; and yet the image (as another 'world' as dissimilar to the world of re-presentation and display) remains intact. Let us break this down further: If we look at an old master painting, suspension of disbelief is cognitively achievable on some level, yet separation is evident because painting's materiality accompanies the image. While the frame of an old master painting separates inside (art) from outside (non-art), with photography's installation shot, only the image quality of painting survives [55], and materiality is instead transferred to the architectural surroundings because the place of display becomes the work of art.

Fried also speculates that Struth's museum photographs depend upon representational painting, as abstract painting 'falls short of picturing a world' (Fried, 2008: 127). Separation necessitates that the re-presented image mediated by photography's installation shot is that of three-dimensionality, of a space comparable to the space outside of it, and familiar to the viewer. This is a compelling thought. And perhaps it has to do with the fact that perspective and the mimetic qualities of the image are superficially reproducible, while the pictorial space of abstraction is bound to the structure of images (as flat and opaque) and is therefore inseparable from their material form. White has written: 'One of the most significant characteristics of artificial perspective is that it assumes an observer with his eye in one particular position at a fixed distance and direction from the scene before him' (White, 1987: 192). It is not that if perspective presupposes a viewer then abstraction does not, but rather that since photography's installation shot makes the 'space of display' the 'work of art', then perhaps a traditional abstract image - as flat, opaque,

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55. Although, while objectness is abolished, the painting is still identifiable as an object.

and not a 'world' - cannot pictorialise separation. [56]

Let us consider this point through a arguably similar archival practice, as Andrew Grassie's expertly-painted realistic miniatures re-presenting installation shots of gallery hangs conform to a reading of a correlation between the 'world' inside and outside of the represented art object.

[Fig. 25] shows an installation shot taken by Grassie of a Daniel Buren striped work installed at the Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh in 2008 (at Grassie's behest). Grassie then spent several months transcribing the photograph in paint. The resulting painting - *Ingleby Gallery with Daniel Buren* (2008) [Fig. 26] - was then hung in the gallery (in the same position from where the installation shot was taken, see [Fig. 26a]), and Buren's piece was then re-installed to complete the dialogue (for a weeklong exhibition).

The concept behind the work centres on a trick whereby the laborious process of photorealistic reinterpretation is presented to the viewer as if it has been realised as

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56. In a related issue, we can state that while Struth's re-presented paintings are not abstract, neither do they hang in modernist settings. Struth's installation shots are in prominent museums and other grand spaces, far from the modernist white cube gallery. In his *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1999), Brian O'Doherty pinpoints the formal construction of the modernist gallery and how it differs from the 19th century gallery place with its Salon hang. O'Doherty likens the modernist gallery to the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, and the mystique of the experimental laboratory; whereas salon pictures were hung 'as wallpaper', each a self-contained entity 'totally isolated from its slum-close neighbour by a heavy frame around and a complete perspective system within' (O'Doherty, 1999: 16). O'Doherty has explained the epistemological difference of the modernist space: 'the space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space occupying bodies are not' (O'Doherty, 1999: 15; see also O'Doherty, 1999: 35-64). The viewer is eliminated through the installation shot; the photograph - without figures - becomes an ideal, a metaphor for the gallery space. Photographically capturing the modernist ideal, then, relies upon 1) the inclusion of modernist works, and 2) a lack of representative viewers. Apart from the confirmation and blurring of scale intimated by the installation shot, O'Doherty claims, almost as an aside, that installation shots of modernist spaces are generally for abstractionists: 'realists don't go in for them much' (O'Doherty, 1999: 42). If this observation is to be believed (and it would seem a reasonable deduction), then the central point is the conflict between the miniaturised, internal perspective system of a picture and the photographed actuality of the gallery space external to it.

[Fig. 25] Installation shot of a Daniel Buren at Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, 2008; paint and vinyl on wall, 75 x 75 cm.

[Fig. 26] Andrew Grassie, *Ingleby Gallery with Daniel Buren* (2008) tempera on paper, 13 x 19 cm.

[Fig. 26a] Installation shot of Grassie's painting installed in the position from where the installation shot of Buren's striped work was originally taken. The exhibition *Andrew Grassie and Daniel Buren* took place from 5th - 12th April, 2008.

instantaneously as a photograph. Yet beyond the material surface, Grassie's time and skill as a draughtsman, and the atmospheric lighting effects he brings to the remade image [57], the painting copy with its limited size reveals little more than the original installation shot. If anything, we see less, as Grassie's rendition replaces the 'view' outside of the window with 'light'. Indeed, it was Buren's decision to wedge his 'painting' into the corner of the room, which then governed the composure of the installation shot. Grassie's painting makes no such impositions on the space around it. It is a polite record of a critique, where the viewer is completely closed off to the act of viewing by an undersized painting that serves only to correlate Buren's prop with the space of display through painting in its form as documentation. Ultimately, although we can say that a practice that makes 'context' the 'work of art' is syntactical, Grassie's reliance upon only mimetic illusion's ability to encourage a suspension of disbelief, along with the proposal that some alchemical operation is at work [58], perform neither interrogative, nor meta-reflexive, routes to signify syntax.

While Struth and Grassie serve as models for reconsidering the image through the pictorialisation of the space of display, their faithfulness to the real-world re-presentation of space does not inspire analytical consideration. From my discussions on Duccio's abstracted box space, Stella's favouring of depicted over literal shape, and my idea that it is productive to rethink modernism through transparency, I propose instead that a syntactical conception of space provides painting with an anti-immersive concept that affirms and complicates modernist flatness, and yet is without precedent.

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57. Lighting effects that are certainly achievable in photography.

58. The viewer experiences Grassie's painting as if it were the original installation shot, as a painting of the Buren could not possibly exist in the space/time of the exhibition.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that a meta-syntactical interrogation of painting separates art that uses as its starting point pictorial invention's facility for reflexive syntax from that which exploits syntax *outside of the frame*. In support of my belief that a renewed investigation into internalised syntax can distinguish contemporary painting from modernist formalism and postmodern quotation, I have nominated two avenues for investigation: syntactical painting and depicting space. Through these enquiries, I have looked to the syntactical painting of Stella, Lasker, and Abts in opposition to art that works under the syntactical jurisdiction of painting's material relationship to the real space of display (Buren and Zobernig). And in reference to art that pictorialises context, I have made a case for the diagrammatic representation of space (Duccio) over more faithful reproductions (Struth and Grassie).

In approaching research on painting, my motive for adopting syntax as a critical lens stems from the fact that examples of paintings that look to meta-syntax as a rationale for painting are locatable throughout pre-modernist, modernist, and postmodernist modes, and yet the currency of syntactical painting is much neglected. One of the strengths of syntactical painting is that an attention to it can mobilise materiality without restricting painting to twentieth-century mindsets surrounding the dominance of objectness; instead, conventions are open to reiteration, transformation, and pictorial re-presentation to new effect. Unlike hypotheses on painting that maintain and promote a theoretical divide between materiality and immateriality (such as Greenbergian flatness), in syntactical painting we find the means to analyse both structure and depiction. Moreover, in the examples I have discussed here, I have found paintings with the capacity to pictorialise, and erode such a divide.

As a consequence of relating syntax to both the form and inventions of painting, my

concept of syntax has not been entirely beholden to linguistic models. The structural parallels to spoken or written language have only been partially useful because visual signs presuppose a different social activity (i.e. they are made for observation). As art has its own conventions, and as art history provides its own diachronic systems, my determination of syntax is better described as relating to art's ability to re-present its own limits. Whilst being attentive to past criticisms that have sought to explain the medium of painting by scrutinising elements immanent to images, such as Schapiro's semiotic study of what he has termed as 'image-signs' (i.e. ground, frame, divisions of the field, size, and physical sign-bearing matter), I have identified the meta-pictorial elements discernable in specific artworks. A framework of syntactical painting has facilitated the discussion of otherwise unconnected practices, and looking beyond period aesthetics and ideology I have examined the work of Duccio, Holbein, Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, Matisse, Picasso, Polke, Stella, Buren, Ryman, Lasker, Struth, Buren, Zobernig, Guyton, and Abts, without the burden of cataloguing similarities or documenting an overview of syntax over time. This is because my interest in syntax is not as some vessel for formalist interpretation, and neither have I been concerned with discerning traits applicable to painting in general; instead, particular works have been chosen as visual sites for syntactical analysis because they demonstrate a reflexive, meta-syntactical approach as the source of the artwork.

The paintings of Lasker and Abts have been paramount in my assertion of pictorial syntax as a fertile ground for contemporary painting; and Lasker's idea of painting as an image-kit has been instrumental in the forming of my position. Moreover, Lasker's sensitivity to syntax - through his isolated and transposable 'paint' and 'drawing' units - enables him to simultaneously modify two historical myths: 1) he converts the expressive mark of modernist painting into a practised and repeatable trope; and 2) he transforms minimalism's itemisation of raw materials (Ryman) into an invented

vocabulary primed for picture-making. Abts is my exemplar for this approach to the conventions of the medium, and in my discussion on her work I have reasoned that her mode of invention goes one step further than Lasker's by way of her insistence upon those pictorial effects extraneous to formalist abstract painting. With this in mind, I have allied Greenberg's pejorative term 'homeless representation' [1] with Abts' use of shadow in order to rework the concept and amend an attitude that erroneously closed painting to illusion. In this new and positive conception of homeless representation, the term explains how Abts does not exploit trompe l'oeil in the usual way (as with mimetic painting's encouragement of the viewer's suspension of disbelief), for while a shadow might still explain the direction of light or describe a contour, within the context of syntactical painting its functioning is also ambiguous. In this way, Abts scrutinises the syntax of depiction, and even more effectively, alternates between depicted signs and literal material. This is new ground, and in this thesis I have contended that shadows, spatial supervision, figure/ground exchange, opaque and transparent paint, and the combined use of depicted and literal relief, are all syntactical measures utilised by Abts to unparalleled effect.

My account has stressed that an attention to internalised syntax has the potential to renew painting's prospects, which is not to say, however, that syntactical painting is a route to declare a single or final language [2]. Neither is it a programme that can be somehow applied to painting to ensure interesting or relevant art. Aside from the fact that not all of Lasker's and Abts' works are infallible, my inclusion of Moholy-Nagy's oil sketch *Konstruktion Z 1* (1922-1923) - notable for its characteristics and not for its design - demonstrates that while syntactical painting can shed light upon pictorial

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1. See Greenberg's *After Abstract Expressionism* (1962).
2. As I stated in my introduction to this thesis, the high modernist painters believed in a final language; however, in Richard Rorty's terms, postmodern 'ironists' recognise the contingency of language. See Rorty, R., 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

possibilities, its consideration in no way guarantees a painting free from untenable decisions [3].

Conversely, using painting to critique painting is a meta-concept utilised effectively by Polke in his *Die drei Lügen der Malerei* (1994), and I have argued that Polke's overt and playful categorisation of the functioning of signs indeed engenders a thought-provoking work that celebrates the medium alongside the enacted derision. In my analysis of *Die drei Lügen der Malerei*, I noted Polke's clever use of a literally transparent surface to convert a structural component into a pictorial one. Because the stretcher's horizontal crossbar appears to segment part of an image, it disrupts the viewer's suspension of disbelief, and recasts the functioning of an object into that of a sign. Within this dialogue on Polke, I have also discussed how his compelling visual critique employs 'mountain' and 'tree' as meta-reflexive illustrations; however, as we saw in Chapter 1, the referentiality of the sign as such adds no weight to my argument. A more crucial issue being that signs can foster alternate signification [4].

For an historical basis to the problem of referentiality, I have looked to Kandinsky and Picasso. While Kandinsky failed to recognise the sign as adaptable (instead replacing the ostensible fixity of mimesis with an imagined, fixed code that attached abstract shape to colour), Picasso, in his collages like *Violin* (1912), interfered with resemblance by using context to instigate what Krauss astutely refers to in her essay of the same name as *The Circulation of the Sign* (1998). However, if Kandinsky's fabricated code limited the prospects for abstraction at the same time as making it

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3. While through the hindsight of my applied critique, Moholy-Nagy's oil sketch is a useful model for 'syntactical painting', within the context of its own time it exemplifies a failure to understand Mondrian's prohibition on diagonals.

4. Aside from Polke, I have considered this in relation to Picasso and David Salle. Additionally, the role of mimesis is revisited in Chapter 3 through Moholy-Nagy's image of an image in *Konstruktion Z 1*, which relies on mimesis born from internal repetition as opposed to external referentiality. Moholy-Nagy's simulacrum is worked from (and resides within) what is identifiable as an original image, abstraction here facilitating representation of and for itself.

seem a somewhat fruitless enterprise, Picasso's indeterminable sign was also largely inconspicuous from subsequent art practices. This was primarily because a different principle came to prominence (one also attributable to Picasso): that of objectness (i.e. painting conceptualised for its materiality over and above its facility for imagery), this idea later mutating into the literal objectness of minimalist art.

Rather than looking to Picasso's experiments with objectness through collage, I have located within this research compatible ideologies to explain how materiality dominated as the presiding belief of twentieth-century painting. These include Mondrian's abandonment of the frame, the Bauhaus' codification of transparency, and Greenberg's identification of flatness (the two-dimensionality of the support) as the essential quality that differentiates painting from other arts.

I have posited that the reconciliation of flatness with the frame was Stella's project; however, we have also seen that, for the most part, the decline of the frame's impetus was synonymous with the prevalence of painting-as-object. Indeed, Greenberg's influence was such that reactions to his theory of flatness led to the sway of minimalism, which expelled illusionism altogether. And I have stated that while Judd zealously reasoned that painting's two-dimensional pretence of three-dimensionality should be traded for genuine three-dimensionality, Ryman stayed with painting, finding another way to banish illusion through his astonishing commitment to the rawness of materials. I have also noted how Ryman challenges what the viewer is supposed to look at, blurring the divide between art and non-art. My discussion on Ryman's approach explains how it differs from the pictorial syntax of Lasker and Abts, with my term 'material syntax' referring to art that learns from painting-as-object to collapse the boundary between what is inside and outside of the frame. With this in mind, I have also looked to other artists for their use of material syntax: Buren, Guyton, Bradley, and Zobernig; and I have concluded that

using real space to critique painting fails to replace the possibilities of pictorial invention, and that a continued resistance towards illusion has lost its critical force. [5]

Aside from my investigation into how syntax relates to the development of abstraction and the prominent debates of the latter half of the last century, I have also conducted an examination of three anomalous artworks notable for their constructions and disruptions of depicted space, with each work providing this thesis with differing meta-syntactical operations for consideration: Duccio's *Maestà Altarpiece* (1308-1311), Moholy-Nagy's *Konstruktion Z 1* (1922-1923), and Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533). Moholy-Nagy's *Konstruktion Z 1* has supplied this thesis with a host of discernable effects attuned to syntactical analysis (such as: literal transparency; perceptual transparency; frontality versus an oblique angle; space-as-a-support; size; discontinuity; the original and the simulacrum; re-presentation and an image in and of an image; and so on); while Holbein, in his *The Ambassadors*, upsets his own mimesis of things to implicate the viewer by pictorialising painting/viewer reciprocation and disassociation. Yet, it is in Duccio's depiction of a box space that I have found the most strenuous example of meta-syntax, even though this has involved a consideration of Duccio's work that sits outside of its own terms and historical context.

While it is difficult for us to deduce the level to which Duccio's new depictive theatre appeared as though spatially realistic during his lifetime, today, for its symmetry and lack of single-point perspective, it looks unreal and diagrammatic. As I have stated

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5. In Chapter 2, I noted Zobernig's recent shift to pictorial concerns; however, it is also worth pointing out that the last decade or so has seen a marked difference in Buren's practice. Buren's use of transparency and mirrors points to a more playful consideration of art's relationship to its environment that is vastly more productive than his critique through painting as a prop.

within this research, Duccio's depicted box space and tiered compositional scenes (that climb the opaque surface of the prepared field) comply with the limitations of his medium as a contained and flattened-out cavity. The viewer sees a map of spatial depth as opposed to encountering 'depth', meaning that the depicted space is open to analyses rather than being intuitively experienced. Due to its unfamiliarity, a visual fluency from the viewer's world to an abstracted spatial depiction is obviously unachievable, and when looking at the individual panels of the *Maestà* we are reminded that when viewing depicted spaces, we either consider syntax or imagine continuity between the space of our empirical world and painting's figurative 'world'.

This idea is explored further through my discussion on art that pictorialises the contextual space of artworks. According to Fried, Struth's large-scale photographs of paintings hung in museums, such as *Art Institute of Chicago 2* (1990), demonstrate the *separateness* between the world of display and that of the painted image. This separateness detaches the materiality of painting from the viewer by way of an image without material code (i.e. the photograph), which represents a mediating space of represented viewers (i.e. the installation shot with figures). As Fried tells us, Struth's image of an image relies upon the space of painting being conceivable as a 'world'. And therefore, as the space of abstraction - with its lack of sensible order (i.e. gravity and single-point perspective) - is not conceivable as a 'world', abstraction is not a subject used by Struth with any real momentum. The implication here is that the abstract image cannot be detached from its materiality by way of the re-presentation of its place of display. Following this logic, to make 'context' the explicit subject we need representations of works that have an identifiable context *within the frame*.

With photography's installation shot, 'context' becomes the 'work of art', and in this thesis I have also considered Grassie's carefully-painted realistic representations of

art's architectural surroundings. However, while Struth and Grassie both re-present the space of display, theirs is not a model for this research. Instead, I maintain that Duccio's diagrammatic space provides contemporary painting with a way to rethink space through syntax.

Inside/outside of the frame, and art's relation to the viewer, are themes that run through this research, and therefore I have repeatedly turned to Fried. Making their first appearance in his *Art and Objecthood* (1967), and running through Fried's oeuvre are his differential concepts: the negatively framed 'theatricality' (i.e. art that includes the viewer as a performer), and the positively affirmed 'absorption' (i.e. art that excludes the viewer). Initially, the critical constructs of theatricality or absorption separated Judd's boxes from Anthony Caro's sculptures; however, Fried has more recently applied these labels in his defence of photography as art (Struth's work, for example, being absorptive). If we compare Fried's terminology with my own, then superficially, absorption is analogous with pictorial syntax (Lasker, Abts) and theatricality is comparable with the material syntax of display (Buren, Zobernig). However, I would say that in terms of this thesis, syntax is theatrically charged and is not open to characterisation away from viewer/object reciprocation.

A case in point is Stella's shaped canvases. Stella's tremendous *Wolfeboro II* (1966) sets up the theatricality of material syntax (in a figure/ground relationship that involves the wall of the gallery space) in order to prioritise the pictorial syntax of depicted shapes. The combined use of literal form and pictorial syntax in this painting goes beyond Fried's distinct either/or of absorptive or theatrical modes. In a similar operation, Stella's schema of repeated banding, observable in his illusion/anti-illusion painting *Hyena Stomp* (1962), looks to the syntax of depiction to misrepresent literal structure. If Stella's multifarious practice has failed to be categorised in this way until now, it is perhaps because syntax in Stella has been

overlooked, and because Fried neglected to recognise the significance of his own observation: that depicted shape interferes with literal shape in Stella's shaped canvases.

In his essay, *Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings*, Fried wrote of Stella's 'disassociation of literalness from the support' (Fried, 1966: 24). This occurs because the shaped canvas prevents the eye from seeing the support as a single entity (i.e. in *Wolfeboro II* we see depicted shapes and not a seven-sided polygon). This appraisal - written the year before he first staked out his aforementioned divergent terms - has two highly emotive connotations: 1) it is incompatible with Fried's conflicting claims of absorption and theatricality [6]; and 2) it contradicts late modernist claims of the assertion of the objectness of a work of art over its pictorial possibilities.

A concern for syntax was prevalent in early modernist painting, and within this, one of its most notable operations was a theatrical implication of the viewer (locatable in Seurat's viewer-mixed dots of colour, Cézanne's simultaneous views, and Manet's reciprocated gaze). Over time, these syntactical investigations lost out to the overarching need to reveal the technical/material means within painting. However, it is conceivable that Abstract Expressionism's acknowledgement of the literal qualities of materials (e.g. Pollock's enamel drips) were just the kind of meta-syntactical activities that were not fully interrogated as such at the time [7]. When Greenberg

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6. Hochdörfer, in his *A Hidden Reserve: Painting from 1958 to 1965* (2009), outlines the shift in Fried's position between his *Shape as Form* (1966), and his *Art and Objecthood* (1967). Hochdörfer writes: 'Fried irrevocably gave up the idea of a *dialectic* between literalness and transcendence: Instead, painting now had to decide whether it wanted to be perceived as sheer object or as transcendent form. The sublation advocated in 'Shape as Form' was disclaimed, and Fried decided unilaterally in favour of 'optical illusionism'' (Hochdörfer, 2009: 154) [Hochdörfer's italics].

7. That being said, syntax is not an obvious consideration for Abstract Expressionism. If we consider symmetry, for example, symmetry in Peter Halley is analytical and coercive, whereas in Rothko it is arrived at through his colour washes; it is an improvised effect that is felt, but the viewer barely registers its structure as such.

secured modernist painting through his theory of flatness, pictorial syntax was forgotten, as networks of homogenous effects replaced figure/ground relationships with opaque surfaces. The mural-sized also meant that the frame expanded to the viewer's peripheral vision (i.e. imagery was no longer *behind* the frame) [8].

Essentially, with flatness, a meta-syntactical rationale for painting was rendered moot, as imagery became second to painting-as-object. In choosing formalism's 'truth' over the sign as a lie, Greenberg confined abstraction to objectness. If, the model Greenberg had pursued had been one of syntactical painting, then flatness, depiction, illusion, and the frame could have been interrogated simultaneously, and syntax would not have been subsequently pushed *outside of the frame*.

Such a revision, however, would have failed to accommodate 'opticality', upon which both Greenbergian and Friedian modernism hinged, and within this thesis I have analysed the work of Stella and Al Held in relation to this particular issue. However, what is at stake has also been made clear by Krauss, and as a coda for this aspect of my research, what follows looks to an illuminating disagreement between Krauss and Fried concerning the time it takes to respond to a work of art.

Using Language to do Business as Usual (1991) is an essay by Krauss in which she takes Fried to task for confusing, or rather attempting to reconcile, syntax with the

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8. This is not to suggest that the frame was not of importance to the Abstract Expressionists. In his essay, *Abstract Expressionism* (originally published in 1974, and in Stangos, 1981: 169-211), Charles Harrison explains that in works like Barnett Newman's *Abraham* and *Concord* (both from 1949): 'The vertical stripes echo the framing edges and thus establish a relationship in which the literal, material limit of the painting - its actual edge - is given identity as a compositional function rather than merely as a condition of composition' (Harrison in Stangos, 1981: 193). However, Harrison also writes of Rothko's and Newman's ''man-sized' paintings' [*sic*] (painted from 1949) as 'embodying to the viewer', and how that the large size implied ''absorption' of the spectator by the painting' (Harrison in Stangos, 1981: 196-197).

instantaneousness of getting 'the point of the work' [9], or what Fried has called 'presentness' [10]. When compared with the 'presence' (i.e. literal objectness) of minimalism, Fried had spoken of the '*syntactic* nature' of Caro's sculpture [11], because, for Fried, opticality and syntax come under the same heading. This presentness (or instantaneousness) is a state of being:

> […] as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it. (Fried, 1967: 22)

Krauss, however, learns from Derrida [12], through whose eyes the linguistic model relies on language's iterative nature, whereby a code exists by virtue of its repeatability (in the absence of its referent and intention/context), so that every mark is in effect: 'the non-present remainder of a differential mark cut off from its putative 'production' or origin' [13]. Once 'cut off' from the speaker's meaning, the sign is consequently open to 'citational graft' (i.e. being put between quotation marks), thus engendering 'an infinity of new contexts' [14]. Therefore there is no immediacy or transparency of meaning in language, and no 'presentness' that can be equated with syntax. While Fried clings to the notion that there is no contradiction, writing: 'Saussure's model doesn't deny that we experientially grasp the meaning of a word or sentence in a flash […]' [15], Krauss succinctly sums up the issue:

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9. Krauss explains Fried's idea of pure cognition, the moment of 'getting it'; see Krauss, 1991: 90-91.

10. Alongside his absorption/theatricality models, Fried used counter terms of 'presentness' (i.e. the instantaneousness of the sign in art) as verses 'presence' (i.e. minimalist objects); see Fried's *Art and Objecthood* (1967).

11. Fried quoted in Krauss, 1991: 90 (Source: Foster, ed. *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, 1987: 72).

12. Actually, to be specific, Krauss uses Derrida to criticise Kirk Varnedoe, and Barthes to critique Fried.

13. Jacques Derrida quoted in Krauss, 1991: 85. (Source: Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', *Glyph*, 1, 1977: 183.)

14. Ibid., 86 (Derrida, 1977: 185-6).

15. Fried quoted in Krauss, 1991: 91 (see note 8 for source, Foster, 1987: 87).

> We cannot analyse the production of illusion at the same time as we are
> having it. (Krauss, 1991: 93)

Although Fried is correct to intimate that syntax is not fully compatible with
objectness, sensory experiences - e.g. mirage-like optical illusion, trompe l'oeil, and
suspension of disbelief - are not in themselves syntactical.

I include this dialogue as it demonstrates how easy it is to misunderstand syntax,
and by the same token, how necessary it is to clarify its tactical merits. The
complicated nature of syntax (as both analogous and incongruent with literalness) is
what makes it such a valuable critical tool in the separating of contemporary
tendencies towards invention from the objectness that presided over antecedent art.
This thesis has gone some way to explain how the relations of discrete parts may
well include those that are literal and those that are invented, parts that speak to the
architecture of art's surroundings and parts that look to internal systems. And
although opticality cannot be 'felt' through syntax, it can be analysed, and I have
referred to specific paintings to ascertain some of the ways in which sensory
experiences have been re-presented through meta-syntactical code. For his
interrogative use of a diagrammatic spatial depiction, Stella is my proto-painter for
syntactical painting; whilst in Abts' simultaneous use of literal and depicted relief
(combining objectness with immateriality, and deferring literalness through trompe
l'oeil), I have identified another approach that also falls outside of Fried's terms.

In recomposing syntax, I have submitted that abstraction provides logical and fertile
possibilities for the iterative sign. And my position is that - when taken as the genesis
of a work - this idea has the power to rescue (abstract) painting from its current
status as an uncritical modernist leftover that can only be engaged with through
reductive attitudes. When artists like Bradley and Zobernig propose a citational graft
that complies with modernist logic to work solely from outside of the frame, painting

joins other furniture to colour the viewer's experience of the place of display. In such a context, painting is merely a prop to facilitate the critique. However, what the paintings of Stella, Lasker, and Abts demonstrate is that pictorial invention and abstract 'world'-building open painting to analyses applicable to both materiality and immateriality, and can even be utilised to confuse the boundary between the two.

Appendix:

Notes on Practice

The elements of painting that facilitate this thesis - units, coding, transparency, the flattened-out cavity, and depicting space - are central to my own art practice. In my paintings, I explore a meta-analysis of painting to ascertain the potential of in/extrinsic conventions previously discarded by modernist and (so-called) post-modernist discourse. Looking beyond the ideology of modernist opacity or objectness, and apocalyptic myths (purity/quotation), I scrutinise the constructs that mark painting's theoretical and material isolation, namely, flatness and the frame. An abstract model is followed so that: 1) syntax can be clearly expressed and considered; 2) the viewer cannot suspend disbelief and cognitively convert any illusion; and 3) colour and shape can be explored away from referentiality. Likewise, I use isolated imagery to separate out elements, frontality to mirror the viewer, and homeless representation to pictorialise illusion; and the depiction of three-dimensional space and the texture of the support are both codified here to impede or alter their effects. By way of a spatial construct that is derived from the frame (as opposed to single-point perspective), the paintings test the referentiality of the sign in relation to image-signs, transparency, and the re-presentation of art and context.

The paintings themselves are made in oil on linen. Using colour and surface to interrogate the technical problems of the medium, the method of colour application involves the extraction of the oil binder and the desiccation of thin washes of transparent colour so that colour/texture is parched like chalk pastel, and appears at times as though abraded or polished smooth. The effect is a warm, tactile surface where paint is not an applied skin but reveals the weave of the ground, and where staining is not a gestural technique but a controlled procedure. There are no ridges of paint or brushstrokes (i.e. there are no marks or visible traces of technique);

instead soft films of oil coat the linen so that material flatness is preserved and figure and ground are inseparably paired. The transparent films bond the figure to the ground to produce a flatness that is so flat that even shading (the painter's means of describing volumes) cannot escape referencing two-dimensionality. Yet while the transparent films mean that the weave of the linen is exposed as a component, its treatment is one of depiction rather than material truth.

The mechanics of this last point will feature over the coming pages, but first to its ontological significance: The prepared field here (the primed linen surface), although literally flat and paper-smooth, has the potential to be highly textured by way of the method of colour application. What is significant is that this flattened texture is a material aspect that is confined to the visual. If objectness through the loss of figure/ground relationships is a prime indicator of the modernist rubric (from the equivalency of the grid to the unity of all-over painting), then the colour films in these works enable the pictorialisation of two-dimensionality through literally flat imagery that is amenable to perceptual figure/ground separation, i.e. to the proscribed pictorial space (invented distance, hierarchies and focal points, etc.). The paintings re-present abstract flatness through discrete and comparable units (flattened minimal shapes of colour) in order to prioritise the literal planarity of painting as a place for the virtual transparency of the image; yet the depicted texture is a sign - not for objectness - but for the image, as the literal grain of the linen mimics depicted flecks as if to state: 'atmosphere'. Naturally, painting provides the means to test this hypothesis, and what follows considers my position through the characteristics discernable in specific works.

If we observe an angled detail shot of a painting [Fig. 1] [1], we can better ascertain

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1. An angled detail shot of *Frame of Reference* (2012) (76 x 61 cm) [Fig. 19].

[Fig. 1] An angled detail shot of *Frame of Reference* (2012) (76 x 61 cm) [Fig. 19], showing literal flatness, hard-line/shading, colour transparency, and the flat, 'colour-exposed', surface texture. [Please note: the area outside of the bands is also painted surface.]
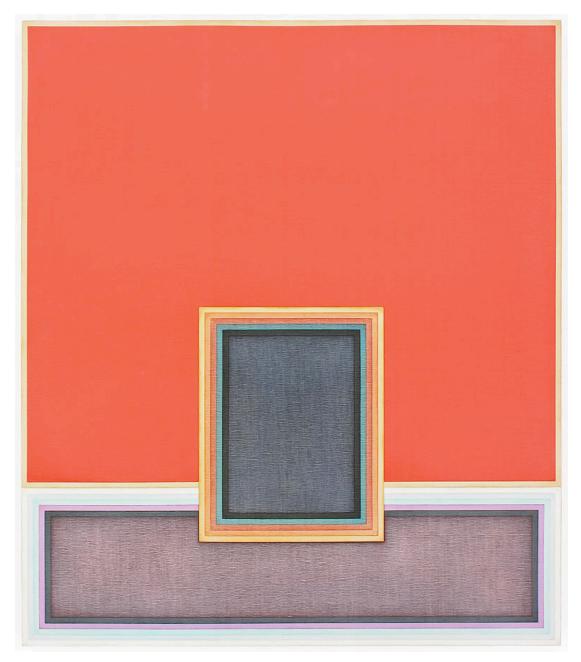
how the texture of the linen surface is exposed within colour, meaning that through colour addition the prepared field is made visible. Rather than materiality, the narrative this conjures is one of counterfeit substitution, where a colour-surface performs as if un-primed canvas, or as if dyed, drawn, or printed. Material simulation is evoked to advocate the idea of painting as something other than truth, an approach that lends itself to the restoring of painting's mimetic quality not through depicting objects but through alternative processes for pictorial depiction, e.g. oil paint used to look like a pastel smudge or a pencil line. For its re-tradition, this pretence is a reassuring lie, yet the trickery only goes so far; the restatement of the prepared field is the operation of note, for it makes an image of painting's own structure, and deconstructs painting for imagery's sake (i.e. not for objectness). Coupled with the fact that the imagery's principal function here is to explicitly contrive flatness as a faux-depth placeholder, the idea of painting is claimed as a truth/lie composite, and simultaneously as an object, a sign, and a sign for object-signs and their material and illusionistic possibilities.

Although the matt colour-surface seems to absorb light, the literal transparency of colour in these works is comparable to that typically seen in watercolour painting, for it borrows from the white primer beneath as if lit from behind. However, if watercolours suggest a view (the contained and prepared field as an open window), then the evenly-flat, backlit property of these paintings is reminiscent of a stained glass window, or a monitor. The concept of a flat, glazed screen is attended by the use of imagery that is controlled, as if primitively computer-rendered, i.e. separately and uniformly coloured, clearly transcribed, straight-lined, hard-edged, regular, impersonally executed, and rigidly mathematical. As the painting's abstract imagery is also flat and frontal to the viewer's viewing point, is graphically mapped out (as a layout or template), and because it can seem formative in its apparent simplicity, the paintings are effectively diagrams. As such they are concerned not with authenticity

(original/material), or with the representational modelling of the three-dimensional, but with the deconstruction of shapes and space to two-dimensionality and the singularly-framed and fixed view. In the paintings, rectangles and other regular shapes are adapted to the limitations of the medium - as a flattened-out cavity - through their organisation to the frame (straight lines running parallel) or to the convention of a delineated box space (oblique lines fixed into the corners). Shapes do not overlap; instead, imagery is visualised as isolated, and is arranged to face the viewer head-on, as minimal scenery flats. This creates a kind of theatrical stage space that sets each element along the same surface plane, and curtails fictive distance as it represents it.

The sense that shapes are inlaid as if through a process of marquetry is evident in *Keystone* (2012) (71 x 61 cm) [Fig. 2], where a two-dimensional cut-out - that is placed *in* rather than *on* a 'floor' - is fixed to bridge a two-part background. A figure/ground illusion of depth is impeded as the figure is materially bonded into its abstract setting. *Keystone* also illustrates for us how only some areas of these works are textured, confirming that materiality here serves the pictorial (i.e. texture is not solely a natural condition of the prepared field).

In these paintings, meticulous and pencil-thin (but oil-made) lines demarcate shapes of colour, acknowledge the frame, and invite scrutiny. The lines are frequently accompanied by a contrasting short border of softly-smudged shading, the combination suggesting both a hard edge with a drop shadow, and the pretence of shallow relief. The effect adorns colour with subtle spatial illusion, infiltrating abstraction with properties alien to its historic development. Yet aside from its decorative quality, and the intrusion it makes upon modernist values, the particular use of the shading in these works restates the frontal quality of the prepared field. This is because shading restricted to frontality signifies that the light source that

[Fig. 2] *Keystone* (2012) oil on linen, 71 x 61 cm.

creates it belongs to the viewer's world (rather than from within the picture or its orientation). Shading, then, in place of its traditional role in contouring objects or representing cast shadows, emphasises a line, reaffirms flatness, and references the viewer's viewing point. The strength of the effect is apparent in *Apparition* (2012) (76 x 61 cm) [Fig. 3], a tonal monochrome where the edge of the painting is defined by three shaded lines that situate the monochrome itself (as *the* opaque statement) into a flattened spatial dramatisation of the limits and spatial politics of painting. *Apparition* is an atypical piece, for its lines imitate the limit-frame in its entirety, making its whole colour-self about the frame.

As is evident in *Keystone,* shapes are of one colour and are framed by narrow, consistent bands (usually between two and six) of one or several colours. The bands place colour inside itself, utilising colour relations to underscore the edge of an area of colour. The intent is that the viewer will allow the bands to work upon their visual experience of the area encased, so that perceptually, colour is slightly recessed or set forward towards the viewer.

For Domestic Devotion (2013) (76 x 61 cm) [Fig. 4] is a recent piece that borrows from pre-renaissance triptych panel painting. The single-coloured banding used here creates a trompe l'oeil frame that is at odds with the flat surface of the painting.

Aside from the illusion such banding generates, a depicted frame - or what I will call a 'colour-frame' - signifies an area of colour as isolated. The significance of this is twofold: 1) isolation establishes that an area of colour is perceivable as a unit (if not a unit proper then a visual sign analogous to a unit), the importance of which being that an isolated unit is repeatable; and 2) isolation by way of a painted frame denotes the separation of a contained colour from the space around it. This is important, for if a picture frame is an architectural prop that implies an inside/outside yet belongs to

[Fig. 3] *Apparition* (2012) oil on linen, 76 x 61 cm.

[Fig. 4] *For Domestic Devotion* (2013) oil on linen, 76 x 61 cm.

the latter (the viewer's space), an internalised colour-frame fabricates an inside/outside and belongs to the former. Such a move infers the viewer's space within the limited space of painting, so that when the space external to a colour-frame is white (primed surface), it simulates the emptiness or blankness that surrounds a painting displayed on a wall in a modernist gallery space; and therefore, with space-as-a-support, an area of colour inside a re-presented blankness is identifiable as a painting within a painting. [2]

Several of my works are plays upon this notion. In *Meme* (2011) (91 x 76 cm) [Fig. 5], six rectangles of colour with individual colour-frames in both landscape and portrait formats are arranged to the limit-frame of the painting and are equally spaced by a white margin. While the colours vary in their opacity, the texture of the linen ground behaves slightly differently with each colour choice. The painting shows the comparability of units, where an isolated rectangle of colour amongst others can be seen as part of a grid and also as a representation of a painting in a salon hang. Viewed in such a way, the modernist grid becomes a format for the re-presentation of a favoured pre-modernist system of display. This re-conceptualisation of the grid relies upon the colour-frames, for the individualism and the perceptual illusion they create interfere with historic ideology. An abstract painting re-presenting a salon hang of paintings is an idea continued in *Traffic* (2011) (60 x 50 cm) [Fig. 6], except

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2. If a surrounding whiteness helps identify an area of colour as a painting in these works, it is because the viewer has learned the convention that white signifies invisibility or neutrality, i.e. the modernist gallery is white so as not to visually intrude upon the viewer's experience of the art objects it holds. While the backlit property of the colour application here necessitates white as the means to illuminate transparent colour, white itself is not reproducible through the technique, situating it as 'the other' to all coloured imagery. 'Art', then, is always coloured, and colour itself instigates the hierarchy between what we notice and what we ignore. I have made works that re-present primed linen as raw (un-primed), for example, *Aporia* (2011) (130 x 147 cm), in which the pseudo-trompe l'oeil effect pictorialises not only the hidden fabric support of the easel painting tradition, but the hessian-tiled wall surface favoured by pre-1970s displays. However, as white is the accepted sign for architectural blindness, its re-presentation - signifying architecture as a component of painting - has the greatest impact upon how we theorise the ontology of the frame.

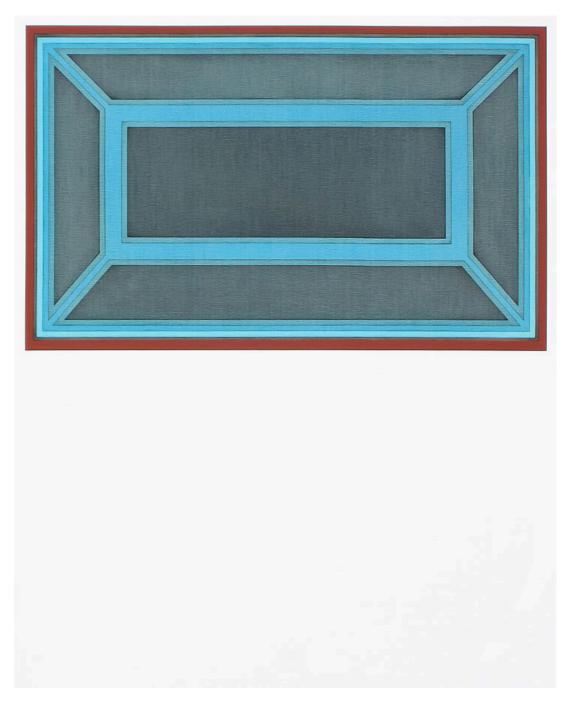[Fig. 5] *Meme* (2011) oil on linen, 91 x 76 cm.

[Fig. 6] *Traffic* (2011) oil on linen, 60 x 50 cm.

that the wall-space here, if seen referentially, is the muted grey of the museum.

As I have already implied, the re-presentation of a wall suspends 'an abstract painting' in an abstract manner, i.e. in 'space' (with space-as-a-support), but an interior wall is also a flat, painted surface, a concrete sign for two-dimensionality, opacity, support, and containment, and a metaphor for a virtual screen. These conditions are replicated by painting, so that if a flat rectangle of colour (image) housed within a flat rectangle of a painting (object) speaks to the characteristic elements of painting, the primary of these must be that it hangs on another flat rectangle. Other characteristics - for example, that a painting showcases pictorial information because it can be seen as a flattened-out cavity, or that information is arranged to fit because paintings are isolated and enclosed - follow the parameters of this external form.

Unlike the paintings of 'paintings' hung on a wall, *Alcove* (2012) (76 x 61 cm) [Fig. 7] shows an abstracted and flattened niche space *in* a white wall (the white, primed surface). The picture only occupies the top half of the painting, asking the viewer to accept the representation of a blank wall as the means to prop up the image. This prioritises the wall as an element (in contrast to its traditional role as a factor not meant to be seen).

From paintings hung on or *in* walls we naturally move to paintings in rooms. In *Gallery 1* (2012) (76 x 61 cm) [Fig. 8], the viewer is confronted with two rectangles of colour. The upper one is relatively small and is suspended centrally within an area of white space, while the lower one fills the space to the confines of the limit-frame. *Gallery 1* is both an abstract painting of two rectangles of colour, and an abstract representation of rectangles positioned to imply a mural-sized painting in a gallery space, the lower rectangle representing the 'floor'.

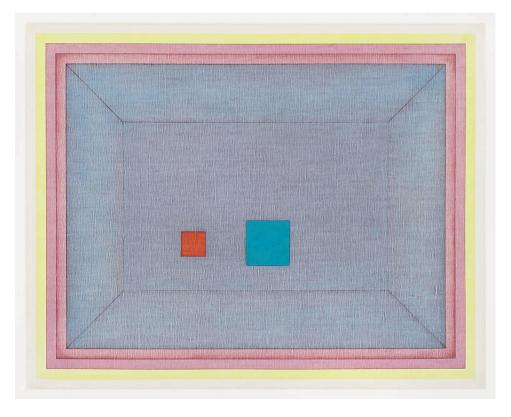[Fig. 7] *Alcove* (2012) oil on linen, 76 x 61 cm.

[Fig. 8] *Gallery 1* (2012) oil on linen, 76 x 61 cm.

Immaculate Suspension (2012) (40 x 50 cm) [Fig. 9] is an abstract painting of two abstract paintings in an abstract representation of a room that can be seen as schematically aping the flattened-out cavity of painting. 'Space' is signified and compressed to flatness, and likewise the texture of the prepared field is pictorialised. The 'paintings' - if that is what they are - suggest a push/pull illusion that throws the back 'wall' into question, while the colour-frame in this painting is a frame surrounding the entire 'gallery' and can be seen as pretending at electric lighting, the hum of colour offsetting the internal purple-flecked blue 'space', as if the gallery is being seen at night.

Stasis (2012) (36 x 46 cm) [Fig.10] repeats the flattened box space but here, a pattern of two shapes, repeated three times with shifting axes, floats both in and in front of the framing structure. If *Stasis* can be seen as a representation of the sign as unfixed, then *Magnificent Isolation* (170 x 150 cm) [Fig.11] transforms the idea of space-as-a-support into objects. The plinths in this gallery are made of 'space', i.e. they are not painted but are defined by the areas painted around them. Each 'space'-object supports an arbitrary object, using a gallery signifier (a plinth) to transform an abstract shape that would otherwise be floating into a sculpture.
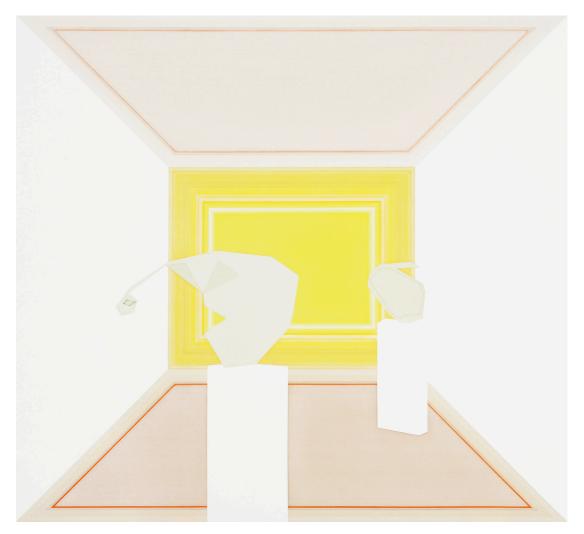
As both distinct and repeatable, an area of colour isolated by a colour-frame is able to form part of a greater construction, and in *Reticle* (2012) (150 x 160 cm) [Fig. 12], four dark trapeziums join together about the four sides of the limit-frame of the painting to make a picture frame of sorts (surrounding a white central 'space'). Any perception of the frame as a flat container is abrogated by an additional shape that sticks out of the base of the frame, casting the frame as a box space with sufficient interior depth to house a shape (albeit a two-dimensional one). The proud shape is a centrally-placed vertical rectangle that looks like a portal (for its blackness and the recessional qualities of the banding), but it is positioned as a plinth or podium *in* the

[Fig. 9] *Immaculate Suspension* (2012) oil on linen, 40 x 50 cm.
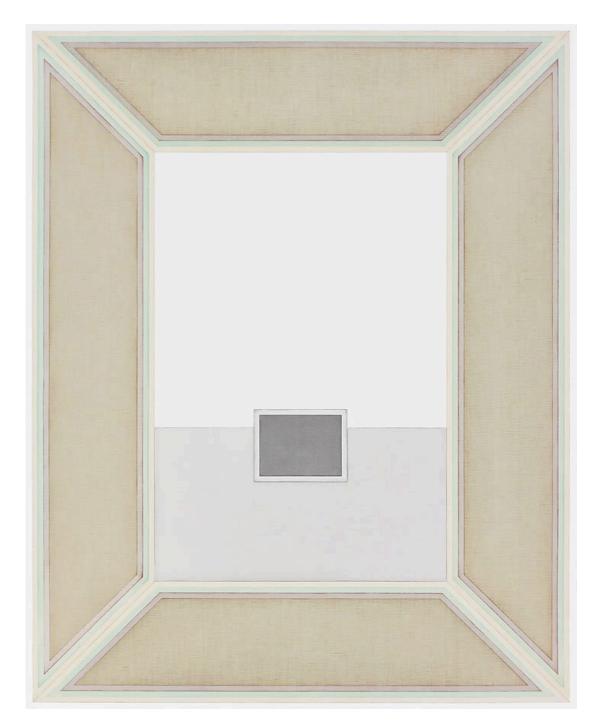

[Fig.10] *Stasis* (2012) oil on linen, 36 x 46 cm.

[Fig. 11] *Magnificent Isolation* (2011) oil on linen, 150 x 163 cm.

[Fig. 12] *Reticle* (2012) oil on linen, 150 x 160 cm.

floor rather than at the edge of it. The light/dark contrast between the predominately black shapes and the bright, white rectangle enclosed by them suggests a cinema. The rainbow of thin banding of the colour-frames in *Reticle* is the most optically charged of all of the paintings listed here; hard lines blur and resonate, and set the edge of an area of colour out of focus depending upon the distance the viewer observes from and how their eye is drawn. The pulsing of the banding has led one viewer to read *Reticle* as an abstracted speaker in a shop window.

In contrast to the plinth's intrusion upon the logic of the picture frame in *Reticle*, in *Foregone Conclusion* (2012) (76 x 61 cm) [Fig. 13], the 'picture frame' idea is unobstructed and therefore is perceptually limited to its role as a flat frame. Comprised of four 'identical' trapeziums, with colour-frames locked into one another and the edge of the painting's rectangular limit-frame, the image mimics a picture frame (except that it resides within the painting and is made from the same elements). The sameness and fixed quality of the trapeziums means they are hard to determine as units, and therefore their individual colour-frames only decorate and accentuate the structure of the picture frame as a whole. The picture frame surrounds and contains a picture of an object on a 'floor'. There is a quiet austerity and remoteness to the interior drawing, and a palpable impasse between its graphite-like straightforwardness and the lightly textured warmth of the depicted frame that encases it. Divided by a horizon line separating 'white-washed wall' from 'concrete floor', the object is a small, grey, centrally placed rectangle with a single band, and, although it is ambiguous, it is perceivable as a flat diagrammatic representation of Donald Judd's 'specific object' theory. The viewer who recognises the quotation might be entertained by an abstract painting's two-dimensional re-presentation of the literal art that conceptually replaced historic abstract painting with three-dimensional objects.

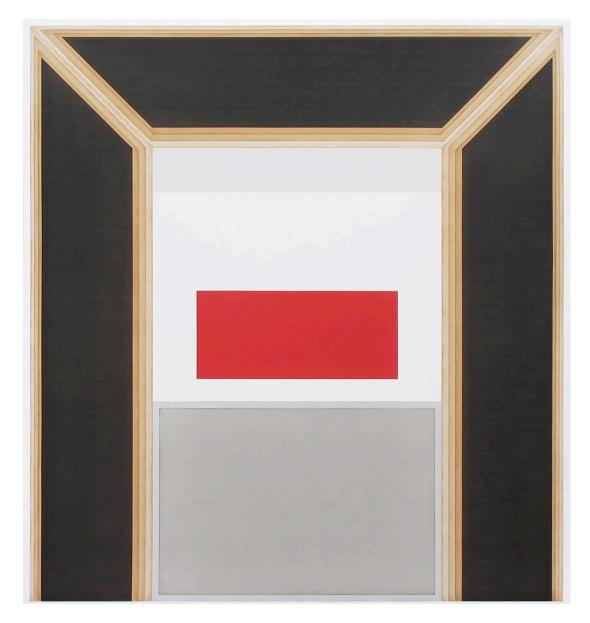[Fig. 13] *Foregone Conclusion* (2012) oil on linen, 76 x 61 cm.

In these works, it is not so much that painting as such is re-presented but that depicted space is shown as a place where spatial transformations occur. An image in/of an image and an image of the space of images both interrogate the structure of painting's appearance, its artificiality, and the presumption that painting is made in relation to the viewer for observation. Attendant to this, these paintings are devised through a codification of photography's installation shot of abstract painting, so that a re-presented painting is not an open window or framed distance (a sign for another place) because the interior perspectival box space reflects the gallery room as a place contingent upon impenetrable rectangular planes (walls). In considering the particulars of painting, the re-presentation of wall-ness identifies painting's capacity to pictorialise its conditions and reach beyond interiority, and the emphasis is instead upon painting's integral reflexivity. It is not that these paintings propose fantasy exhibition hangs but that they disclose and unite the conventions that make painting autonomous in order to ask what it is painting can do. Allied with abstraction, the gallery space by way of photography's installation shot further flattens and distances the painting from the viewer.

In the majority of these works, frontality and a regimented single axis of symmetry confront the viewer in the act of observation, i.e. the anthropocentrism signifies the object for viewing. The effect also makes an image of the symbolic value we grant paintings, and is suggestive of the aggressive, the monumental, and the ceremonial. While symmetry directs the viewer's attention to a painting's reciprocal nature (reflecting the body) and to the relational dialogue between paintings and architecture (other symmetrical rectangles: walls, partitions, mirrors, windows, doorways), it also facilitates the sense of unimpeded illusionistic depth. In *The Mutability of the Sign* (2012) (160 x 150 cm) [Fig. 14], however, the image's vanishing point is conspicuously traded for a flatbed or re-presented rectangle that replaces formally-constructed pre-modernist distance with the re-presentation of

flatness in 'space'. The red rectangle in *The Mutability of the Sign* is unlike my other motifs, for it is opaque and unframed, aligning it with modernist ideals. Hovering on/in the white 'wall/space', it uses a socially recognisable pictorial standard of miniaturisation to stage the pictorialisation of a mural-sized abstract painting. The operation is not about undermining the gravitas of historic abstraction but rather drawing the viewer's attention to the act of viewing, and also receiving text as the subject of art. Nonetheless, the abstract sign can be interpreted in multiple ways, for example as a rectangle of colour in 'space', or as a painting of a Barnett Newman painting on a wall in a gallery, or as a painting of a Newman as a jpeg image floating in an abstract representation of cyberspace, and so on. The scene conveys both an image of heroic abstraction (as an historical marker and cultural artefact), and a spatial signifier that signifies the impossibility of the modernist directive against figure/ground relationships (i.e. a Newman in the context of the gallery).

A View of Modernism (2012) (91 x 76 cm) [Fig. 15] does something similar, only here a diagrammatised Frank Stella painting is the object of the quotation, restoring the focal point blocked by the opacity of the Newman-like rectangle. While the framing structure in this painting has been likened to the legs of a table or chair, I conceive of it as an archway, signifying that the viewer is not in the space of the Stella reproduction. Perhaps the 'chair legs' reading invites a further analysis of looking, for it implies that we are small, equating a sense of 'peering through' with the re-worked monumentality of abstraction.

The influence of Stella is also apparent to two other works: *Aquarium* (2013) (50.5 x 61 cm) [Fig. 16], and *Apparatus* (2013) (50 x 60.5 cm) [Fig. 17]. The former shows a flattened box space with two shaped canvases hung (with space-as-a-support) on a back 'wall', while in the latter, the space is crowded by four flattened objects, two suspended in abstract space and two floor-bound. With a horizon line of grey floor,
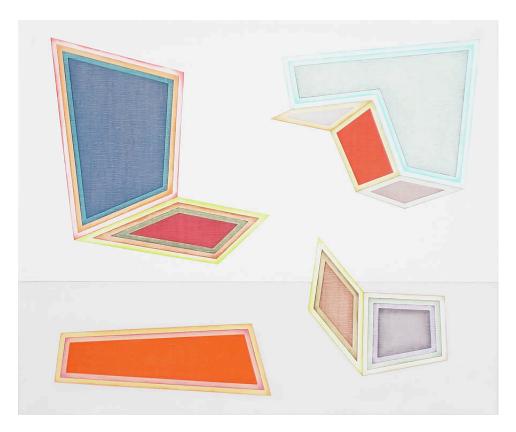
[Fig. 14] *The Mutability of the Sign* (2012) oil on linen, 160 x 150 cm.

[Fig. 15] *A View of Modernism* (2012) oil on linen, 91 x 76 cm.

[Fig. 16] *Aquarium* (2013) oil on linen, 50.5 x 61 cm.

[Fig. 17] *Apparatus* (2013) oil on linen, 50 x 60.5 cm.

the viewer reads the shapes in 'space' as flat paintings, and the shapes that are grounded as flat objects (or scenery flats). The shape on the left can be seen as a propped-up cut-out or as flat on the floor.

Although, as I have said, the denotation of a colour-frame echoes the frame's mode of separation, as figure and ground are inseparably paired along the surface plane in these paintings, something else takes place. Far from the frame's image-sign function (indicating the material limit and the viewer's peripheral vision), a depicted colour-frame is not a partition device, separating inside (art) from outside (non-art), but rather it is the means to propose an alliance. This is made explicit in the paintings where the colour gradation of the banding grows paler towards the outer reaches of a colour-frame so that colour diagrammatically blurs the stages between depicted white 'space' and a darker interior. The significance of this rests on the fact that the representation of non-art material makes possible the convincing re-presentation of art, yet a colour-frame, a re-presented wall, and the reduction of architecture to elementary two-dimensional shapes also invent a mediatory space, neither gallery space nor abstract painting. If an abstract painting is a screen awaiting a projection (of text), then the paintings do not re-present context so much as they conceptualise the place of projection.

As the duplication (where a painting re-presents itself) takes place within a mode of painting that can be described as abstract, two operations occur that interfere with previous models for abstraction: 1) An image re-presenting painting-as-object. The often-claimed built-in ideology of abstraction as opposed to representation is adapted to assert painting's self-referentiality *as imagery*. The mimicry returns the image and perceptual transparency to a particular idea for painting previously determined as materially faithful and therefore devoid of illusion. 2) The artwork with accompanying text. Assimilated within an act of reductive re-presentation,

abstraction (historically theorised as pure) is contaminated by the quotation of art within itself and alongside that of non-art, i.e. the representation of text in the form of a constructed spatial context familiar to painting, explicitly the architecture of display. However, in keeping with the ambiguity of the sign, the text is deconstructed and remodelled as abstract, and therefore can be seen as both text and art, and as amenable to supplementary influences (e.g. history, seriality, etc.).
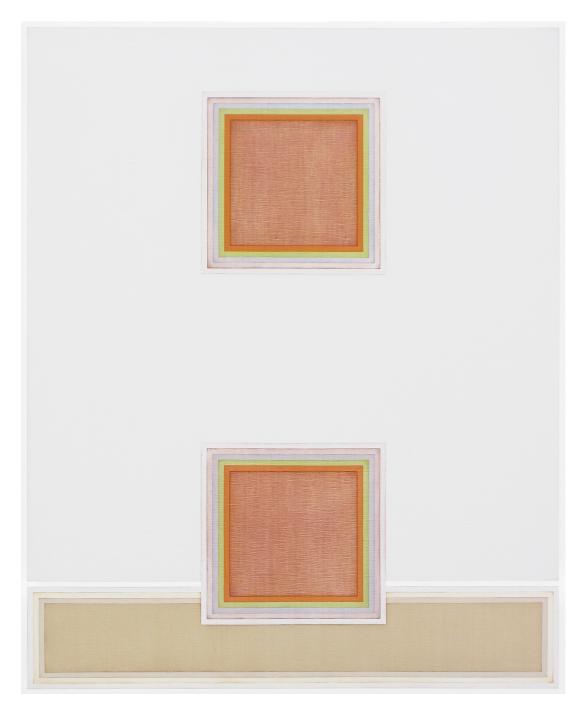
In these works, the mediatory space (neither gallery space nor abstract painting) is brought to the viewer's attention through the perceptual shape-shifting and signification-shifting potential of flat-based abstract imagery; for example, the fact that a trapezium of colour is also perceivable as a rectangle with illusionistic depth. This is observable in a painting like *Room* (2010) (150 x 163 cm) [Fig. 18], where a white 'space' is dominated by two trapeziums that mirror one another across a central rectangle with an elaborate colour-frame. The arrangement can be seen as flat (three drawn or wall-hung shapes), as a slice of a pyramid, and as a box space with white walls. A trapezium then, as both a flat shape against a flat space, and as a flat shape canting into virtual space, can be read as a representation of a shaped canvas on a wall, or as a coded representation of part of a simulated gallery (as one side of the box space). The viewer activates the binary, where a painting as an object (or rather its re-presentation) is set in opposition to an image of the context for image-objects. However, the experience of the latter is compromised by: 1) the use of a stilted perspective as measured to the corners of the frame; 2) the pictorialisation of the surface ground (colour-textured linen); 3) the regularity of the width of the banding (as a lack of foreshortening negates perspective); 4) an unvarying flat colour; and 5) colour choices unsympathetic to a reading of architecture (i.e. a green ceiling and floor). Despite the label '*Room*', which cues the viewer to receive the representation of an interior space, these abstract safeguards ensure that even as a perceptual alternation occurs, illusion is constrained to the

[Fig. 18] *Room* (2010) oil on linen, 150 x 163 cm.

limited representational quality of painting (as artificial and two-dimensional). Imagery, then, not only adopts discordant signification, but the disruption of recognition is strengthened as invented space reveals itself as just that: invented.

To facilitate such a schema, imagery is approached in terms of syntax, where an area of framed colour with space-as-a-support not only determines itself as a scenery flat, or as an image of an image, but can also be seen as a distinct, adaptable, and repeatable unit. Accordingly, a unit is able to relate to other such units. This uncomplicated move has a striking implication, as an abstract painting originates and houses its own referent (allegorising mimesis). The transferability of shapes relies upon their simplicity and recognisability, and the condition or environment that governs the identity of the sign. For example, in *Frame of Reference* (2012) (76 x 61 cm) [Fig. 19] we see two identical squares with colour-frames situated differently, one hung with space-as-a-support, and the other grounded by a rectangle signifying a 'floor'. The context of the 'same' shape denotes either: two paintings (the upper as wall-hung, the lower square as if leaned); a painting and a sculpture, with the latter observable like a painting (from one fixed view); the same painting simultaneously depicted before/after it was hung for viewing at an approximated eye level; or an illustration of the two divergent spatial organisations accredited to painting: abstract space (freely floating) and figurative space (beholden to gravity). The repetition asks which is the referent and which the art, while the narrative considers painting's form as inclusive of, and reliant upon, the architecture of its surroundings.

[Fig. 19] *Frame of Reference* (2012) oil on linen, 76 x 61 cm.

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