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If surface is the condition

If surface is still the material condition of painting – both its poverty and its gift – then how can we plausibly activate that condition for today, without it being either the royal road to aesthetic autonomy (Clement Greenberg) or the highway to a hell of ontological banality and critical redundancy (Peter Osborne)? Now as ever, painting is a ritualized display of surfaces. Yet we hesitate to forge an ideological link between surface and value today. And for good historical reasons. But by thinking speculatively, historically and disjunctively, we can discern two or three major sites of possibility in painting today, each of which approaches surface strategically. The paper sketches these approaches through close readings of works by Lucy McKenzie, Glenn Brown, Claude Rutault and others. In responding to these, the argument moves to broader questions of spatial invention, dialectics of skilling/deskilling, and immanence. Successive moments of art-critical resonance – like Greenberg in the late 1950s, minimalism modelled by Morris and Judd in the 60s, relational aesthetics in the 90s according to the gospel of Bourriaud – all these can be grasped as shifting claims for immanence. And immanence itself equates to an insistence on a surface level; as opposed to transcendence with its implication of heights, depths and levels of hierarchy. The paper then lingers on some of the complex implications of immanence for painting in its relation to the range of postconceptual practices. That complexity will have a lot to do with thinking surface both spatially and temporally.

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