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National College of Art and Design

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**Contemporary critical responses to certain
historical claims centred on Abstract Painting.**

By

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this discussion is not to identify any single form of painting as more valid than another. Neither is it intended to suggest that the writers cited in the text desire a complete resurrection of any previous practices. It is intended to suggest however that, in general the authors cited share a common suspicion of any generalised historicist notions of the redundancy or even the inevitability of any one form. It is also an aim of this present text to suggest that to speak of a resurrection of dead forms becomes irrelevant as soon as one begins to critique traditional historicist readings. It is for their allowance of a greater complexity to abstraction as a project, than can be provided by the historicist reading, that makes the authors cited relevant to a common discourse.

Abstract art, specifically painted abstraction has been one of the most problematized manifestations of Twentieth Century Art. One reason for this condition may be said to be abstractions alleged "refusal to depict" (*Osborne, 1991 , P.76.*) This problematic refusal would therefore be a condition stemming from the work itself and as such could be said to

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be an intrinsic part of the work of any abstract painting. Abstraction would thereby be committed to absolute non-depiction. In the most obvious sense, this commitment would be an impossible one. Painted abstraction by producing optical stimuli, just like any work of painting, necessarily runs the risk of looking like something for somebody. In such a case it is pointless to argue that the work was intended to elicit any other response in the spectator.

Whilst this is a simplistic example of the problematic nature of the intentions of a work and the response to work, it indicates a much more complex condition within the project of abstraction. It allows for a consideration of certain claims that have been mobilised within the project. One of those claims which is being referred to is that of optical purity, or pure form. The question is, how can there be any form which is not mediated through the spectators experience or emotional response? An awareness of historical precedents, which inevitably occur, even in the most simple markmaking, dictates the terms of any interpretation. It will be argued here that too much emphasis is laid on the supposition that an abstract form must have no referents, that it must in some way be pure form, or essential form.

An important point to note, is that the project of abstraction as it has been documented in linear historical terms, now has a history, or histories. The claims

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that abstraction is either a negation of representation, that it is the expression of an essential spirituality or that it transcends the real through non-representation, all limit the possibility for abstraction to be regiven to successive interpretations. Yet these claims are part of that history which has been documented. The example of optical purity as pertaining to abstract forms, has its origins within early abstract projects such as that of Kandinsky and especially Mondrian.

The writers cited in this text are largely representative of an attempt to provide new critical strategies for the discussion of abstraction. Yve - Alain Bois suggests a framework for discourse which allows for the appropriation of any strategic or theoretical modes perceived as appropriate or necessary to the interpretation of a given form. He argues against a linear historicism and the inevitability of any single form or interpretative strategy. At no point do the writers cited suggest the inevitability of any form of abstraction.

Abstraction and the discussion of its various claims, whether originated within the project or acquired, are seen as part of a continuum.

Andrew Benjamin speaks of the possibility for a work to be regiven. He also discusses the notion of the work's work. Within a situation whereby a work is 'regiven' to interpretation, its condition as existing with its

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own forms as its historical referents will be the works work. If it is the work's work which defines its activity as an art work, then abstraction's reworking of its forms becomes the defining work of abstraction. Benjamin does not identify this condition in order to set out a new objective for abstraction. What he is identifying is a juncture at which the work of abstract art may distance itself from its many limiting associations. These authors attempt to provide a theoretical and philosophical by-pass, around the perceived decline or irrelevance of abstraction as an artistic project.

To a certain degree, the project of abstraction has become bound-up with the perception of difficulty or problematics which are associated with its forms. Peter Osborne writes: "...it would seem ...semantic instability and critical ambivalence are constitutive features of the form(abstract painting)". (*Osborne, P. 1991, p.76*) . Both the production and the interpretation of painted abstraction, it would seem, have become immanent to a discussion of confusion between the work's intention and its reception. It would also appear that these concerns impact directly on several contemporary abstract painting projects (I have in mind work by artists such as Helmut Dorner, Fandra Chang, Fabian Marcaccio David Urban and A.D.S. Donaldson.) The result is a reworking or more correctly, a reinvestment in certain recognisable forms of historical abstraction. The impetus in this case, would not be a reaction to figuration or to narrative as it has been

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suggested that certain of these forms were originally intended to be. The impetus instead comes from within abstraction. This facilitates a critical reinvestment in terms such as purity and essence. It also implies a possible alternative to notions of the end of painting and its forms.

CHAPTER ONE CONTENTS

Peter Osborne's identification of three pivotal accounts of abstraction, with regard to notions of a return to painting and how this impacts upon abstraction.

W.J.T. Mitchell's "*Abstract painting and language*" the consequences of the perceived exclusion of language from the work of or interpretation of abstract painting and its appropriation of theory. That the claim that language can be excluded from art making or interpretation is a false one.

Robert Schubert's perspective on the work of abstraction in contemporary practice, that it can only be that of parody, and of revealing its own inadequacies as a legitimate practice.

Mikel Dufenne's account of the 'pre-real' as equating to the space of abstraction and the work of painting in general. The "pre-real" corresponding to certain notions of the work of abstraction as bound-up with essence spirituality and expression.

Peter Osborne, in *"Modernism, Abstraction and the return to painting"* 1991, proposes that the problems which relate to the work of painting, historically positioned, as it is in the present, in a "post-conceptual space..." are "especially acute" in the case of abstract or non-figurative painting. (*Osborne, 1991, p. 71*).

This conclusion is posited within an awareness that the return to specific forms of figurative or expressive painting (typified by artists who gained solid reputations in the 1980's such as , Eric Fischl and Georg Baselitz), was enacted with the specific intent of continuing the project painting as it had existed previous to historical Modernist groupings such as Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, but very much mediated through the lessons assumed to have been learned from these avant garde movements.

This assumption limits the possibility for any complexity within both figuration and abstraction which might allow for them to be evaluated simultaneously. What is meant by this is that the return to painting witnessed in the 1980's was somehow mediated through the lessons of non -figurative projects. This implies that the project of abstraction had at its core, a reinvestment in the notion of the historical immanence of one form of painting; figuration. This claim is no different

essentially to one which would posit figuration as the historical prelude to the non-illusory space of abstraction.

Abstraction, as it relates to the notion of a "return to painting", cannot be assumed to be either the prelude to or the postscript to any other form. This is not to deny its historicity. It warns of the inadequacy of any totalising or linear historical overview which would take a single form as depending solely on another form for its validity. It also warns against the perception which limits the possibility for the movement and continuation of any form to the specific results of its activity within a fixed historical timeframe. It can be seen that the notion of a return to painting can have very different implications for an abstract painting project than it does for figuration. Neither abstraction nor figuration should necessarily be expected to operate solely within the historical dialectic of their perceived opposition. This opposition is enforced by the view that would define abstraction as the negation of representation.

Osborne points to three historical perspectives on the issues which have become synonymous with abstraction; notions of spirituality, the medium and autonomy, and social implications of abstraction and notions of aesthetic autonomy. All have had a great deal of currency at various times with specific regard to the project of abstraction, but in very different ways. The three historical moments are ; the spiritual account of abstraction represented by Kandinsky, Malevich and

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Mondrian, the Greenbergian account of the importance of the medium using Abstract Expressionism to mediate his argument and the socio-political account.

Osborne identifies Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian as representative of a movement within abstraction which can be termed "spiritual abstraction". (*Osborne. 1991, p.63.*) The author understands this movement as supposedly expressive of spiritual values. The medium of paint within the new pictorial space of abstraction is employed to convey the spirit and its workings. Osborne identifies a "quasi-naturalistic spiritualism " in the work of Kandinsky in particular. (*Osborne. 1991, p.63.*) The tendency to interpret Mondrian in these terms of quasi-naturalistic intent, hinders a more productive reading of the work and is far from what Mondrian intended.

What is important in relation to the "spiritual abstraction" of Kandinsky or Mondrian is the fact that their work has become all but utterly reliant upon this exclusive and historicist reading. This is not to suggest that the specific circumstances of Mondrian's project be ignored entirely. It is known that Mondrian invested time and energy into consideration of theosophical texts. Yve-Alain Bois disregards this aspect of Mondrian's practice as irrelevant to his interpretation of Mondrian's true intentions for his work. The critical dependence upon the spiritual reading is exclusive because it posits one specific moment as the defining moment of a series of works which

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2. In the second part, we shall consider the case of a single particle.

3. The third part is devoted to the case of a system of particles.

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exist within the changing dialectic of abstract painting. There is no allowance for the work to be other than a hollow series of outmoded rhetorical statements. It is overly historicist for the same reason that it is exclusive. It allows for one moment of historical retrospection but does not allow for the possibility of it being reinvested in, in any successive interpretive framework.

Abstract Expressionism has as one of its spokespeople the critic Clement Greenberg. Greenberg saw the development of Kandinskys work as a failure to understand fully the significance of the abstraction which he had helped bring about. This judgement is based on the opinion that Kandinsky did not fully realise the implications of abstraction for the medium of paint itself. Kandinsky used paint as a medium, as an already given through which to mediate notions of the spirit using abstracted forms. Greenbergs thesis foregrounded essential qualities, in this case the medium of paint on a two dimensional surface.

In Osbornes opinion, Clement Greenberg perceived that project which became known as Abstract Expressionism as having "... exploited the possibilities of post-cubist pictorial space for the exploration of the emotional content of the pure physicality of pictorial means." (*Osborne. 1991, p.66.*) This a concession to two different principles. In the first place it allows for the discussion of either intuition or expression, emotional content in the production of a work and secondly it

1. The first part of the report is a general introduction to the subject.

2. The second part is a detailed description of the methods used in the study.

3. The third part is a discussion of the results of the study.

4. The fourth part is a conclusion and a summary of the findings.

5. The fifth part is a list of references.

6. The sixth part is a list of figures and tables.

7. The seventh part is a list of appendices.

8. The eighth part is a list of footnotes.

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22. The twenty-second part is a list of the author's other dreams.

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privileges the notion of attention to the medium, pure physicality.

Thierry de Duve has written of Greenberg:
Greenberg thought Modernism would lie in the attempt of the various kinds of art to seek out and show the constituent elements, or the languages, intrinsic to them. In this process, painting - in particular, abstract painting - would occupy an exemplary place. For if in Modernism all the arts try to purify themselves, "pure painting" (i.e. abstraction) would most purely express that process.

(de Duve, 1991, p.vii.)

It was not enough for Greenberg to say that ".... the arts lie safe now". (*Frascina, 1985, p.41.*) This may be a weakness in Greenbergs argument. Peter Osborne identifies a failure in Greenbergs work on Abstract Expressionism, to confront the issue of expression in painting. He sees the virtue of Greenbergs attentiveness to the importance and significance of the medium, but simultaneously identifies a lazy disposal of concerns of expression loosely defined as "emotional content". Osborne notes that, "His (Greenbergs) humanism dictates the recognition of the necessity of the submerged residue of expressive content, but he is unable to integrate this recognition into his account of the meaning of the work." (*Osborne, 1991, p.66.*) The consequences of Greenbergs perceived failure to integrate the expressive dimension into his reading of the importance of the medium to the meaning of the work is that " there is no conceptual space

within his account that would allow for anything but a regressive return to figuration". (*Osborne, 1991, p.66.*)

The third historical instance of which Osborne writes is represented by the theoretician Theodor Adorno. Osborne identifies the importance of Adorno's project as lying in his emphasis on social and political contextuality. Osborne cites Expressionism and Constructivism as being important "...in terms of the artistic (and extra-artistic) contexts into which they intervene,..." (*Osborne, 1991, p.68*)

Abstraction is politicized within Adorno's reading. It is not seen as a definitive form of spiritual expression. Neither is it perceived as the pure activity of the medium, supplying content by virtue of an existential 'being in the world'. Instead, the move towards abstraction is seen as product, (never an entirely conclusive or final product) of a continuing dialectic, "...an historically evolving dialectic of expression and construction (mimesis and rationality)..." (*Osborne, 1991, p.68*)

Osborne perceives the return to painting as being as important in its implications for abstraction as it is for figuration. He selects three historical perspectives on abstraction in order to demonstrate, with the first two, the complexity of that history and with the third perspective, to demonstrate the way in which the documented histories operate in a non-linear manner when placed within a broader social and contextual theoretical framework as

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of the experimental errors and the conclusions.

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opposed to a strictly historicist framework of definitive claims and limiting categories.

“*Ut Pictura Theoria*” by W.J.T. Mitchell is specifically concerned with the connection between the project of abstract painting and the perceived claim made on behalf of that project that it had no use for language. Previous to this by a generation Clement Greenberg had marked an abandonment of ‘literature’ as a defining moment in the development of abstraction. “The avant-garde saw the necessity of an escape from ideas which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society. Ideas came to mean subject matter in general (subject matter as distinguished from content...)” (*Frascina, 1985, p.39.*)

W.J.T. Mitchell noted that “... the wall erected against language and literature by the grid of abstraction only kept out a certain kind of verbal contamination, but it absolutely depended, at the same time, on the collaboration of painting with another kind of discourse, what we may call, for the lack of a better term, the discourse of theory.” (*Mitchell. 1994, p.220.*)

Theory, according to the author, is the very process which has ensured the survival of any legitimate discourse on abstraction. The reason for this is perceived as being the absence of, or deliberate refusal of any narrative provided by the work itself. Mitchell sees "...a necessary connection between the meaning of abstract painting and the theoretical discourse around it", but he also notes that this theoretical discourse can be perceived as applied to the work after it has been completed or even in order to make it complete. (*Mitchell. 1994, p.221.*) Mitchell cites the opinion of the sculptor and painter Robert Morris who holds that the theoretical basis of work from the early stages of abstraction by Kandinsky and Malevich, came from a reading of nineteenth century idealist philosophy. The Abstract Expressionists took their cues from their spokesman Clement Greenberg, and Morris believes that in contemporary practice the theoretical work is once more coming directly from the artists themselves. (Mitchell notes that there have been numerous examples of a "picture theory" in the past, that it is not a phenomenon particular to the present century or to abstraction.)

It becomes apparent from reading Mitchell's text that there is a critical tendency towards the opinion that abstract art, to ensure its survival under the accusation of being contentless, has "erected a wall" between itself and language and therefore interpretation and has painted this wall with theory that is conveniently impenetrable. However, the author dismisses this claim

against abstraction stating that "...we have to understand the way abstract art sees itself as having changed the rules of the game..." and that "It is one of the principle doctrines of abstract art that although iconography and represented objects may disappear, content and subject matter do not." (Mitchell. 1994, p.223.) Clement Greenberg pointed to the distinction between subject matter and content in relation to Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg based his critique on the exclusion of narrative from painting to allow for a foregrounding of the medium, However, it is never denied at any point in his critique that the notion of expression or even intuitive aesthetic judgement may be implicit in the production of work regardless of its level of dependance of narrative.

The claim for abstraction that it came to be, in large part due to the rejection of language is broken down by Mitchell. He uses the example of Malevich's "*Suprematist Composition: Red Square and Black Square*" of 1915 to demonstrate how dialogue and language cannot be excluded from the reception of artworks. That is "...the relation of beholder and image ... includes an ethical-political relation, an intersubjective, dialogical encounter with an object that is itself dialectically constructed." The denial of language under the derogatory name of "kitsch" was "...never entirely successful...". (Mitchell. 1994, p.226.)

Mitchell identifies the fundamental question as still remaining, "...why was it so crucial to

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4. The fourth part is a conclusion and a list of references.

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6. The sixth part is a list of appendices.

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29. The twenty-ninth part is a list of figures and tables.

30. The thirtieth part is a list of appendices.

pretend that language was being kept out of the picture?" (Mitchell. 1994, p.226.) Earlier in the text he identified a "... paradox in the ideology of Modernism". (Mitchell.1994, p.220.) This paradox could be said to lie in the alleged intentions of any abstract work of art in relation to its refusal of the linguistic medium, where so many linguistic interpretations can be supplied and quite often can serve the artwork well. By refusing language (Mitchell sees this as a fruitless refusal), the work of abstract painting is in effect refusing many possible interpretations. Quite often, interpretation can rest on the inability of work to stay within the framework of silent opticality which it sets out for itself. The fact of the spectators' recourse to language for the purpose of interpretation is highlighted in Mitchells text. By allegedly refusing to admit language, abstract painting as a project has achieved the opposite effect of foregrounding the issue of language. W.J.T. Mitchell is saying that this overt refusal is no more than a hollow claim amongst others which has only succeeded in crippling the reception of abstract works. It has come to define the activity of painted abstraction as impenetrable, elitist and exclusive, and it does not allow for any complexity within the project of abstraction.

Mitchell, after Greenberg, perceives the exclusion of language as related to a specific moment in paintings history, whereby an ambition existed to promote painting to a cultural status, equivalent to that of literature and poetry whilst being simultaneously autonomous. He

1. The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the United States. It is argued that a knowledge of the past is essential for a full understanding of the present and for the development of a sense of national identity. The author points out that the study of history is not merely a collection of facts and dates, but a process of interpretation and analysis. It is through the study of history that we can learn about the values and beliefs of our ancestors and how they have shaped the course of our nation's development. The author also notes that the study of history can help us to understand the challenges we face in the present and to develop strategies for addressing them. In this way, the study of history is not only a means of understanding the past, but also a tool for shaping the future.

2. The second part of the paper discusses the role of the federal government in the development of the United States. It is argued that the federal government has played a central role in the process of nation-building, from the establishment of the Constitution to the development of the federal bureaucracy. The author points out that the federal government has been responsible for the creation of the national infrastructure, the establishment of the national defense, and the development of the national economy. It is also responsible for the protection of the rights of citizens and the promotion of the general welfare. The author notes that the federal government has often been criticized for its size and its power, but it is argued that the federal government is essential for the functioning of the United States as a nation. Without a strong federal government, the United States would be a collection of warring states, and the progress that has been made in the past would be lost.

3. The third part of the paper discusses the role of the states in the development of the United States. It is argued that the states have played a central role in the process of nation-building, from the establishment of the Constitution to the development of the state governments. The author points out that the states have been responsible for the creation of the local infrastructure, the establishment of the local defense, and the development of the local economy. It is also responsible for the protection of the rights of citizens and the promotion of the general welfare. The author notes that the states have often been criticized for their size and their power, but it is argued that the states are essential for the functioning of the United States as a nation. Without strong state governments, the United States would be a collection of warring states, and the progress that has been made in the past would be lost.

4. The fourth part of the paper discusses the role of the people in the development of the United States. It is argued that the people have played a central role in the process of nation-building, from the establishment of the Constitution to the development of the national identity. The author points out that the people have been responsible for the creation of the national culture, the establishment of the national values, and the development of the national character. It is also responsible for the protection of the rights of citizens and the promotion of the general welfare. The author notes that the people have often been criticized for their ignorance and their selfishness, but it is argued that the people are essential for the functioning of the United States as a nation. Without a strong and virtuous people, the United States would be a collection of warring states, and the progress that has been made in the past would be lost.

notes that, "The notions of self-reflexive art and art for arts sake collaborated with a heightened sense of professional self-regard that was fuelled by the philosophical and scientific theories of 'pure vision' and 'intuition'". (Mitchell. 1994, p.227.) Mitchell describes a new order whereby "...painting would not only 'come into its own', it would become the model for literature". (Mitchell. 1994, p.227.)

Referring to this documented history of the avant-garde, Mitchell states that "...contradictions come to abstraction as external forces". (Mitchell. 1994, p.228.) The essentialist and purity claims for abstract art were contradicted continuously by evidence of the "...concrete world of historical circumstance". (Mitchell. 1994, p.228.) Abstractions alleged purity according to the author, "...from either a political or religious point of view, is continually in danger of being compromised by the vulgarity and materilism around it". (Mitchell. 1994, p.229.)

Clement Greenberg legitimised the perception of historical inevitability associated with the rhetoric of abstraction. However, Mitchell does not see Greenbergs argument as being strong enough to encourage anything more substantial than an interesting debate. This debate was not self sufficient enough to develop into a stable critical position, in spite ironically of its polemic of self-criticism and self-sufficiency within the work. Mitchell warns against a generalised critical approach.

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to a general

discussion of the problem and the methods used.

2. The second part is devoted to the study of the

properties of the solutions of the problem.

3. The third part is devoted to the study of the

asymptotic behavior of the solutions of the problem.

4. The fourth part is devoted to the study of the

stability of the solutions of the problem.

5. The fifth part is devoted to the study of the

convergence of the solutions of the problem.

6. The sixth part is devoted to the study of the

regularity of the solutions of the problem.

7. The seventh part is devoted to the study of the

smoothness of the solutions of the problem.

8. The eighth part is devoted to the study of the

boundedness of the solutions of the problem.

9. The ninth part is devoted to the study of the

continuity of the solutions of the problem.

10. The tenth part is devoted to the study of the

compactness of the solutions of the problem.

11. The eleventh part is devoted to the study of the

weak convergence of the solutions of the problem.

12. The twelfth part is devoted to the study of the

strong convergence of the solutions of the problem.

13. The thirteenth part is devoted to the study of the

uniform convergence of the solutions of the problem.

14. The fourteenth part is devoted to the study of the

pointwise convergence of the solutions of the problem.

Our problem, I would suggest, is to work through the visual-verbal matrix that is abstract art, focusing on those places where this matrix seems to fracture its gridlike network of binary oppositions and admit the presence of something beyond the screen.

(Mitchell. 1994, p.235.)

Mitchell cites Jasper Johns' "Flags" and 'Targets' works as seminal paintings in the historical decline of Modernism and the emergence of what has been termed the 'Post Modern'. "The 'Flags' and 'Targets' compositions have by now become as transparently emblematic of an artistic revolution as the abstractions of Malevich were to Alfred Barr". *(Mitchell. 1994, P239)* The nominalism which would reduce abstract arts potential for reinvestment would also limit all other successive forms and position each in 'binary opposition'. This is not to suggest that the historical aspect of a work, or works, be disregarded. It instead suggests that, to claim that a work is either entirely dependant on its historical positioning or its specific poltic or alternatively to suggest that it is entirely divorced from this and exists in a void, kept and maintained by its own regenerating polemic of purity are fantastic statements which do not allow for the complexity of any work.

In an article from *Art + Text* on the work of two contemporary Australian artists, Mikala Dwyer and Kathy Temin, the critic Robert Schubert writes that “ To make abstract art now is to do so without the assurances and confidence with which non objective art claimed a transcendent realm above the world of mere things.” (Schubert. 1994, p.35.) It could be argued that the cause of such assured and confident proclamation of ‘transcendent’ claims for an ‘abstract art’ arose from the absence of any overwhelming of convincing manifestation of this ‘transcendence’ within the work itself.

The ‘narratives’ which Robert Schubert identifies within abstraction are those of “pageantry and decor, comic and tragic drama, tableaux vivants, frivolity and pretense”, they are viewed as a “...necessary historical condition for purely abstract art today”. (Schubert. 1994, p.35.) It is argued in the text in ruthlessly anti-modernist terms that any claims which have been made for an ‘abstract art’ can no longer be seen as legitimate; that a ‘purely abstract art’ necessarily relies on a specific narrative structure. (Robert Schubert identifies this narrative as the theatricalisation of modernism. This is in opposition to the concept of ‘theater’ in Michael Fried’s seminal essay of 1967 “*Art & Objecthood*” where the term first appeared in relation to ‘literalist’ (minimalist) art). By identifying a dependence on pastiche Robert Schubert is negating the possibility of a ‘purely abstract art’ in contemporary practice, also implying that one never existed in the past.

January 1st, 1905

Dear Sir,
I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 28th inst. in relation to the matter of the purchase of the land for the proposed road. I am sorry that I cannot give you a more definite answer at this time, but the matter is being considered by the proper authorities and I will be glad to advise you as soon as a decision has been reached.

I am, Sir, very respectfully,
Yours truly,
[Signature]
[Title]
[Address]

This is to say that certain abstract forms were mobilised simultaneous to certain claims for these forms such as spirituality, transcendence and essence. These claims were attributed to a specific work at a specific time and in reaction to specific historical forms. Clement Greenberg's identification of certain key works of nineteenth Century realism as the prelude to the abstracted space of early Modernism would be an example of such a history. It must be noted that Clement Greenberg provides only one critical perspective. However, the project which Robert Schubert identifies for abstraction in contemporary practice is simply to "...act out the hopelessness of sustaining such beliefs"; beliefs that is in the transcendent properties of an abstract art. (Schubert. 1994, p.35.)

Robert Schubert launches a full scale attack on the claims which have been made for an abstract art. He does not indicate any difference between that which is claimed to qualify a work at a given time and the work itself as it is given to reception over and over at different times. Andrew Benjamin, in *"What is Abstraction"* speaks of the ability for a work to be 'regiven' to interpretation. Robert Schubert is attacking the essentialist notions which have clung to the project of abstract painting and which have possibly contributed to the myth of its redundancy within contemporary practice. The author does not however, see the possibility of there being any alternative for abstraction than self parody.

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OFFICE OF THE DEAN

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1954

TO THE FACULTY

FROM THE DEAN

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However, there are greater complexities which apply to the work of abstraction, specifically abstract painting, than those for Robert Schubert allows. It is intended to suggest here that the project of abstraction is being critiqued on the basis of various historical claims which were historically specific moments in an ongoing discourse in which the inevitability of any form was never assumed as given.

In a very dramatic tone Robert Schubert plots his version of the task of the project of abstraction within contemporary practice ".....while abstraction might be metaphysically inclined its real charm now lies in costume drama, playacting and decor". (*Schubert. 1994, p.37.*)

1. The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the United States. It is argued that a knowledge of the past is essential for a full understanding of the present and for the development of a sound policy for the future.

2. The second part of the paper is devoted to a study of the early history of the United States. It begins with the discovery of the continent by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and continues to the establishment of the first colonies in the early 17th century.

3. The third part of the paper deals with the period of the American Revolution. It discusses the causes of the Revolution, the course of the war, and the establishment of the new government.

4. The fourth part of the paper is devoted to a study of the history of the United States from the end of the Revolution to the present. It discusses the growth of the country, the development of the economy, and the changes in the political system.

5. The fifth part of the paper is a conclusion. It summarizes the main points of the paper and emphasizes the importance of the study of the history of the United States.

It is important to remember that Dufrennes argument regards both 'non objective' and 'abstract' painting as operating on the same level. "Abstraction has been a necessary moment in the history of painting: it teaches by a retroactive effect to realise that even figurative painting also expresses rather than represents". (*Dufrenne, 1997, p.142.*)

Using the example of Cezannes painted variations of a view of Mt. Ste.-Victoire, Dufrenne critiques not the figurative / non objective opposition but the nature of painting in general as an activity through which nature itself appears. (Merleau Ponty previously wrote a phenomenological account of Cezannes activity in an essay entitled "*Cezannes Doubt*")

By identifying the different models of mountain that exist, for example, the difference between the one the geographer studies and "...the one we discover when we climb it", Dufrenne is pointing to the possible existence of "...a mountain that exists nowhere outside of the painting." (*Dufrenne, 1987, p.142*) Dufrenne goes further to attempt to name the particular experience which defines this space which exists only within painting. Dufrenne calls this experience or virtual state, the 'pre-real'.

The concept of the pre-real is an important one in terms of painted abstraction even though it does not apply exclusively to abstraction in Dufrenne's text. The

pre-real as a theory is more complex than any superficial notions of transcendentalism alleged to be inherent in painted abstraction. Dufrenne arrives at the pre-real via a discussion of the 'possible real' supplied by the work of painting. This is posited in relation to both actual reality, including that which comprises the subject of painting, whether non-objective or figurative and the painting itself as object in the world.

"What painting realises is the truth of seeing rather than the truth of the visible." Dufrenne identifies the nature of this 'seeing' as a 'genesis' which no amount of 'imagination' can complete. (*Dufrenne. 1987, P.143*)

In other words, regardless of the paintings specificity as an object in the world and as an object in an economy- "...a controllable object delivered to commerce and ideology"- it is only that which Dufrenne calls 'vision' which can complete / recognise the work of the painting. (*Dufrenne. 1987, P.144*) Dufrenne states that "The visible gives us to feel beyond seeing". True vision involves a phenomenological feeling and that which we feel through painting is the 'pre real'. (*Dufrenne. 1987, P.144*)

Dufrenne is attempting to convince us that the work of painting 'calls upon us' to grasp it as pre-real. It is the emergence of a pre-real into the real , through the efforts of the viewer to substitute the superficial activity of looking for 'vision' which distinguishes the work of painting from that of simply providing visual information to look

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to a general

discussion of the problem and the methods used.

2. The second part is devoted to the

description of the experimental results.

3. The third part is devoted to the

discussion of the results and the conclusions.

4. The fourth part is devoted to the

conclusion of the paper.

5. The fifth part is devoted to the

acknowledgment of the help of the

authorities of the institution.

6. The sixth part is devoted to the

list of references.

7. The seventh part is devoted to the

appendix.

8. The eighth part is devoted to the

summary.

9. The ninth part is devoted to the

conclusion.

10. The tenth part is devoted to the

acknowledgment of the help of the

authorities of the institution.

11. The eleventh part is devoted to the

list of references.

12. The twelfth part is devoted to the

appendix.

13. The thirteenth part is devoted to the

summary.

at. The figurative does not call upon us to perceive it as other than the represented. Figurative here refers to work which does not entice us to feel.

Returning to the claims which have been made and which are associated with the alleged properties of painted abstraction, it can be seen how easily a confusion could arise between a concept such as the pre-real and essentialist rhetoric. An essentialist view would claim that certain forms were definitive expressions of their referents. Dufrenne states, "All the sensuous brings itself together in such a way that appearing makes sense, and that means that a Logos inhabits the sensuous and is known to our body prior to any cognitive operation. Painting shows us how". (*Dufrenne, 1987, p.139-140*)

This 'Logos' which painting helps us to recognize, of which our bodies are aware before our conscious minds could dream of grasping it, is in Dufrennes terms, existant in nature as the 'pre-pre-real'. It is in fact nature itself. (*Dufrenne, 1987, p.139-140*) This 'pre-pre-real' becomes manifest to us, in painting, through vision in the form of the pre-real. Therefore, for Dufrenne painting posits a space between nature in terms of the pre-pre-real and the real in the form of the world we experience as existing of necessity. Painting, which does not exist of necessity is necessarily "...in the world without belonging to the world". (*Dufrenne, 1987, p.147*)

Despite Dufrennes specifically philosophical accent, a vagueness of argument is exhibited, of which the

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OF THE NORTH AMERICAN

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following is an example: "We take part in this gestation (vision) by a type of carnal familiarity with the painters gesture". (*Dufrenne. 1987, P.149*) What is being hinted at here is that the viewer or visionary (if one is to remain true to the form of the text) is intimate with the work of painting and thus with the painters work from some pre-human awareness, ' carnal familiarity' Painting therefore reinvests in this awareness.

This theory could be read as necessarily opening up the scope for interpreting painted abstractions of any kind. Equally could it be seen as closing off the debate of an 'abstract' art practice, risking the possibility of a situation which may already have happened. The belief that abstract art essentially expresses nothing and has been, to use the rhetoric of Clement Greenberg, "..... legislate(d) into permanency" via unsubstantiated claims for the essence, transcendence, spirituality and purity of abstract form. Any critique of abstraction which refuses to recognise these claims as inherent in painted abstraction is perceived as being necessarily opposed to abstraction in principle, creating a theoretical gridlock.

CHAPTER ONE

SUMMARY

There exists an enormous range of readings of the history of Abstract painting, which would each posit a unique set of historically significant moments, as essential to the continuity of that reading. In one sense, the writers cited in the present text, for the most part, have taken the liberty of disregarding the historicism which would conclude that Abstraction has been exhausted and finally/ultimately disposed of by the logic of a linear progression.

Peter Osbornes positioning of three significant moments in the history of abstraction thus far, is relevant within the present discussion, less for its selective historical account, than for the fact that it addresses the continuance of an abstract painting project within a largescale return to painting, (historically placed in the 1980's) and the issues raised by this 'return'. By positioning issues of abstraction within the self-conscious and self-questioning framework of a return to painting, Osborne is allowing for the continuance of an abstract painting practice, albeit in an unstable and confused state. Osborne says of abstraction that, "...semantic instability and critical ambivalence are constitutive features of the form." (*Osborne, 1991. P.76*)

1870
The first of the year was a very dry one
and the crops were much injured
by the drought. The wheat was
very poor and the corn was
also much injured. The
cattle and sheep were
also much injured by the
drought. The farmers
were very much distressed
and the government
gave them some help.
The year was a very
difficult one for the
farmers. The crops were
very poor and the
cattle and sheep were
also much injured.
The farmers were
very much distressed
and the government
gave them some help.
The year was a very
difficult one for the
farmers. The crops were
very poor and the
cattle and sheep were
also much injured.
The farmers were
very much distressed
and the government
gave them some help.

W.J.T. Mitchell has been cited here, for the significance of his identification of a connection between theory and Abstract painting. His is also a historically informed argument. Again, it is a selective history which Mitchell uses. Drawing on the documented perception that Abstract painting has in some way negated the use of language, Mitchell suggests that this necessitated a substitution by theory. Mitchell's argument is that language cannot be excluded from either the production of work or from the interpretation of that work.

Robert Schubert's article serves to illustrate a negative consequence of holding to certain claims for abstraction which are historically grounded in Modernism. He sees no way for abstract painting to shake these associations and cannot perceive a complexity within the project beyond that of a postmodern style parody.

The concept of the 'pre-real' as proposed by Mikel Dufrenne, is not specific to the work of abstract painting. However, as Dufrenne sees no difference essentially, between the work of abstract painting and that of figurative painting, (it is painting itself which is important), the concept of the 'pre-real' can apply equally to abstraction.

CHAPTER TWO CONTENTS

Yve-Alain Bois liberal appropriation of theory for the purpose of interpretation / reinterpretation of work(s) in opposition to linear and enclosed histories.

Andrew Benjamins concept of the 'works work'.

That the work of abstraction today is a 'staged encounter' with previous forms, (abstraction perceived as having its own history/histories) allowing work to be 'regiven' to interpretation.

In his book *'Painting as Model'* Yve-Alain Bois writes of the conception of the death of painting with specific regard to abstract painting. Abstraction (painted abstraction) as a phenomenon associated with Modernism is seen as that manifestation of painting which has been most concerned with the idea of an end or point of arrival and completion. Yve-Alain Bois makes specific use of Piet Mondrian's belief in the inevitability of abstraction not just to painting but also to other aspects of life. "Painstaking formal analysis was for him (Mondrian) the only way painting could reach its own end" (Bois, 1995, p.240) Yve-Alain Bois perceives this conception of the death of painting as something to be worked through if not even fought against as opposed to ignored.

In the final chapter of *'Painting as Model'* which is devoted to a reading of *'Fenetre Jaune Cadmium'* by Hubert Damisch (1984) Yve-Alain Bois outlines with the example of Damisch's text close at hand four specific theoretical models which encapsulate his argument. They form a staged encounter with the claims laid against the continuation of painting. They constitute an attempt to provide a theoretical space within which abstraction (painted abstraction) can be seen to continue to operate. Yve-Alain Bois recognizes that abstraction in particular has become synonymous with that end point at which the work of painting is perceived as having arrived.

The first of these models is identified as the “perceptive model”.

The ‘perceptive model’ could be said to be the antithesis of the crude notion of ‘the imaging consciousness’. (Bois, 1995, p.246-247) This notion proposed by Jean Paul Sartre in his text *‘L’Imaginaire’* suggests that the subject of a painting, ‘a portrait, a landscape, a form’ becomes visible to us only once we cease to perceive the painting for what it actually is ; that is as soon as it’s objectivity is no longer part of our interpretive apparatus.

Yve-Alain Bois suggests that it is the promotion of this notion of an ‘imaging consciousness’ which has disrupted the formation of a proper interpretive model(s) for an abstract art. “...dissertations abound that would make Malevich’s black square a solar eclipse, Rothko’s late works stylised versions of the pieta and the deposition, or Mondrian’s Broadway Boogie - Woogie an interpretation of the New York subway map.” (Bois, 1995, p.247) Mondrian’s real objective for painting according to Bois was to “...postpone it’s own dissolution into the real until the symbolic order on which it is grounded has been neutralised.” (Bois, 1995, p.240-241) He tried to achieve this by working through the stock of associations supplied traditionally by the work of painting such as the figure/ground opposition. For this reason Mondrian is seen as the “...opposite of the ‘geometric abstraction’ genre of which he is supposed to be the herald.” (Bois, 1995, p.247)

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Hubert Damisch quoted in Yve-Alain Bois' text states that "Mondrian's paintings are made to counter such impulses (imaging impulses) and to hinder the movement whereby an unreal object is constituted from the tangible reality of the painting."(*Bois, 1995, p.248*) How successful Mondrian's project ultimately was is a matter of debate. However, it is not the purpose either of this text or of the concept of the 'perceptive model' to assess the degree of Mondrian's success. In any case it is the impulse to act out his paintings in a practical and interpretive space other than that supplied by the 'imaging consciousness' which makes Mondrian relevant to the discussion of any new 'perceptive model'.

Using the 'perceptive model' Hubert Damisch according to Bois necessarily disrupts the reading of Modernism which has become so much a part of history in the present century.

That reading ascribes to abstraction the disturbing finality of which both the 'imaging consciousness' reading and conversely any lazy essentialist readings are unsatisfactory. The 'perceptive model' for Yve-Alain Bois opens up the space of interpretation of, in particular abstract painting, and allows for the possibility of the continuance of that project abstract painting and the reinvestment in earlier work from the same project. Yve-Alain Bois sees Modernism's assignment as having been "...the preliminary task of confusing the figure/ground opposition, without the assurance of which no perception

could establish itself in imaging synthesis.”(Bois, 1995, p.249) It is this “perceptive model” that allows Damisch not only to compare Pollock and Mondrian but also to establish the ambiguity of the figure/ground relationship as the very theme of the American painter’s interlacings.”(Bois, 1995, p.249)

‘The Technical Model’

Within Hubert Damisch’s text ‘*Fenetre Jaune Cadmium*’ a reading is formed whereby the building up of successive layers of gestural paint slashes in the work of Jackson Pollock “...each of which has no meaning except in relation to the one that preceeds it” is made equivalent to the figure/ground opposition thought to be intrinsic to the work of painting.(Bois, 1995, p.250) The progression of this is that the ‘work’of painting manifest in the work of modern painters such as Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian all “...become theoretical models that demonstrate the painting of this century just as perspective demonstrated that of the Renaissance.” (Bois, 1995, p.251)

The ‘thickness of the plane’ as it relates to the work of Jackson Pollock is a good example of the ‘technical model’. This is specifically so for Yve-Alain Bois insofar as the figure/ground opposition will always remain integral to the work of paint where paint allows itself to be seen at work. Even when an attempt is made to destroy this thickness it will be just as apparrent - the work of paint is “...inaccessible as such to pure vision.”(Bois, 1995, p.252) This is why it can be argued that Clement Greenberg’s

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to a general

discussion of the problem and the main results.

2. In the second part we consider the case of a

finite number of variables and prove the

main theorem. In the third part we consider the

case of an infinite number of variables and

prove the main theorem. In the fourth part we

consider the case of a finite number of

variables and prove the main theorem. In the

fifth part we consider the case of an infinite

number of variables and prove the main theorem.

6. In the sixth part we consider the case of a

finite number of variables and prove the main

theorem. In the seventh part we consider the

case of an infinite number of variables and

prove the main theorem. In the eighth part we

consider the case of a finite number of

variables and prove the main theorem. In the

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number of variables and prove the main theorem.

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finite number of variables and prove the main

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case of an infinite number of variables and

prove the main theorem. In the twelfth part we

consider the case of a finite number of

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thirteenth part we consider the case of an

infinite number of variables and prove the main

concept of 'at-onceness' as applied to abstract expressionism is necessarily dependent on the traditional tools of perception to validate its own position in opposition to that tradition. Piet Mondrian's project based upon working through the established 'work' of painting to arrive at an end point of painting approximating to 'pure vision' also becomes undone from this position.

The 'technical model' may not provide any alternative to the traditional reading just as the production of Modernist painting does not provide any alternative to the production of traditional painting. It does however make redundant the expectation of newness from the work of painting and affords it an understanding of itself. The 'technical model' is about technique. Within Modernist painting and specifically abstract painting the objectivity of the work of art is highlighted; it becomes the work. In this situation the discussion of technique is not made redundant, it is still the medium of paint at work. This is what allows Hubert Damisch to speak of Renaissance perspective and 'thickness' in the work of Jackson Pollock within the same theoretical model, that model being the 'technical model'.

'The Symbolic Model'

Yve-Alain Bois argues that painting is a key to the "...interpretation of the world, a key neither mimetic nor analogical, but, as for science or language, symbolic..." (*Bois, 1995, p.253*) Bois cites Hubert Damisch's identification of a relation between mathematics and painting of the order of symbolism; "...having successfully

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to a general

discussion of the problem and the main results.

2. In the second part we consider the case of a

finite number of variables and prove the

main theorem in this case.

3. In the third part we consider the case of an

infinite number of variables and prove the

main theorem in this case.

4. In the fourth part we consider the case of a

finite number of variables and prove the

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main theorem in this case.

9. In the ninth part we consider the case of an

infinite number of variables and prove the

main theorem in this case.

10. In the tenth part we consider the case of a

finite number of variables and prove the

main theorem in this case.

shown how the invention of pictorial perspective in the Renaissance anticipated by two centuries the work of mathematicians on the notion of infinity...(Damisch)...was tempted to pursue the transserial inquiry into modern times."(*Bois, 1995,p.253*)

This inquiry yields many instances of the shifting nature of painting's work which could be said to have projected it , as an activity, onto the symbolic level which Bois associates with science and language. The fact that the modern artist is perceived as carrying out a form of research is indicative of this new role.

The move to a 'symbolic model' is exemplified by a new approach to perception. It is not strictly scheduled as such at any point in history. The emergence of an avant garde as it has been documented by a multitude of sources does not qualify. Yve-Alain Bois discussion is of theoretical readings and as such is afforded the appropriation of various material at once, be it philosophical or historical. This allows Bois to speak of avant-garde or an avant-garde both with and without employing the specificity of it's documented emergence. It is only when the work of painting, specifically abstraction under Modernism identifies it's work as acting within a consistent mode of inquiry, that it begins to act symbolically. The avant-garde shakes off it's newness-the shock of the new is seen to have never been the work of painting in the first place.

1. The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year. It is divided into two main sections: the first section deals with the general situation of the country and the progress of the work during the year, and the second section deals with the specific results of the work.

2. The second part of the report deals with the specific results of the work. It is divided into three main sections: the first section deals with the results of the work in the field of agriculture, the second section deals with the results of the work in the field of industry, and the third section deals with the results of the work in the field of commerce.

3. The third part of the report deals with the financial results of the work. It is divided into two main sections: the first section deals with the income of the work, and the second section deals with the expenditure of the work.

4. The fourth part of the report deals with the conclusions of the work. It is divided into two main sections: the first section deals with the conclusions of the work in the field of agriculture, and the second section deals with the conclusions of the work in the field of industry and commerce.

5. The fifth part of the report deals with the recommendations of the work. It is divided into two main sections: the first section deals with the recommendations of the work in the field of agriculture, and the second section deals with the recommendations of the work in the field of industry and commerce.

Bois returns to specific examples of Modernist abstraction's inquiry into the nature of perception. He cites the 'flat-bed' method of Robert Rauschenberg wherein the traditional mode of the picture-plane in its position against the wall is disrupted. The plane which is the surface of painting is seen instead as a ground viewed from above and the surface of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings necessarily raised the ground of the spectator (transformed by the painter's action/gesture) into the field of vision and reception. "...the confusion of the vertical and horizontal proposed by one side of modern painting was taken for an essential mutation, participating, if you like, in a critique of optics, whose importance is yet to be measured." (Bois, 1995, p.254) Yve-Alain Bois is attempting to demonstrate the relevance of the 'critique of optics' to the promotion of painting to the symbolic or rather to the application of a theoretical model which perceives the work of painting as symbolic in its implications as opposed to just mimetic or analogical.

'The Strategic Model'

According to Yve-Alain Bois a work "Like chess pieces...has significance, first by what it is not and what it opposes..." (Bois, 1995, p.254-255) The 'strategic model' promotes the use of the terms of opposition. The 'strategic model' is a term which encompasses all the other models which deal with specific concerns within the work of painting. The 'perceptive model' dealing with that which is specific to the painted surface, the 'technical model' dealing

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with the mode of production of that surface and the 'symbolic model' dealing with the perception of the way the work of painting functions in relation to other activities; this perception being assumed to have changed with the emergence of Modernism.

The 'strategic model' allows for the mobilization of any theoretical model in any given location for the interpretation of art works. Bois writes that "...the strategic reading is strictly antihistoricist : it does not believe in the exhaustion of things, in the linear genealogy offered to us by art criticism...neither does it believe in the order of a homogenous time without breaks, such as art history likes to imagine."(*Bois, 1995, p.256*)

and elsewhere Bois states that the 'strategic model'

"...has the advantage of deciphering the pictorial field as an antagonistic field where nothing is ever terminated..."(*Bois, 1995, p.256*)

Yve-Alain Bois applauds Hubert Damisch's "supremely ironic attitude" toward the notion of the death of painting or the end of painting of which abstraction was perceived and sometimes promoted as being herald to. (*Bois, 1995, p.257*) Damisch uses the metaphor of chess to articulate the importance of holding to a position. The strength of this position then necessarily derives from theoretical models. The 'strategic model' allows precisely for the strategic placement of painting beyond the blockade of the perceived end of painting. It is not simply an evasion.

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to a general

discussion of the problem and the main results.

2. In the second part we consider the case of a

finite number of variables and prove the main

theorem of the paper.

3. In the third part we consider the case of an

infinite number of variables and prove the main

theorem of the paper.

4. In the fourth part we consider the case of a

finite number of variables and prove the main

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finite number of variables and prove the main

theorem of the paper.

Clement Greenberg has written in 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' first published in 1940 ; "Abstract art cannot be disposed of by simple-minded evasion. Or by negation. We can only dispose of abstract art by assimilating it, by fighting our way through it."(*Frascina, 1985, p.45*)

In the text '*What is Abstraction*', Andrew Benjamin begins by identifying the nature of abstraction as necessarily equivalent to that of Modernism. If abstraction is one of the trademarks of Modernism then "...writing about abstraction will already be to write about the nature of Modernity".(*Benjamin, 1995, p,7*) It is not written however that abstraction exists exclusively for the purpose of validating the project of Modernism. In fact the identification of a connection, no matter how strong between Modernism and abstraction serves to elaborate a position regarding an abstract art, (specifically in this text painted abstraction) freed from Modernism and its associated historical fate (culminating in a perceived irrelevance within art practice since the 1960's) .

Andrew Benjamin posits his argument in relation to different concepts of time employed both by the art work and towards the art work. The first of these conceptions of time to come into play is historical time. By virtue of abstraction's role within Modernity "Time in this

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case of an infinite number of variables and

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sense will already be present.”(*Benjamin, 1995, p.7*) That time which is referred to is historical time.

Clement Greenberg was also aware of the importance of historical time to the complexity of art works; “When the purist insists upon excluding ‘literature’ and subject matter from plastic art , now and in the future, the most we can charge him with off-hand is an unhistorical attitude.”(*Frascina, 1985, p.35*) for the purposes of this argument however the conception of historical time will serve to emphasize the connection between Modernism and abstraction.

Benjamin states that “Modernism is not just a style but a specific way of construing art’s work”.(*Benjamin, 1995, p.8*) Given the already stated connection between abstraction and Modernism, Benjamin sees this operation of Modernism as accounting for “...why abstraction is linked to a conception of autonomy that does not pertain to the artist but to the operation of art’s work.”(*Benjamin, 1995, p.10*) (Interiority for instance would not be seen as the ‘work’ of Romanticism. That would be an emotion or interiority projected onto the work.) Andrew Benjamin , having established the importance of a conception of historical time as pertaining to the art work, then pursues an investigation of one of the most important conceptions of time elaborated within the framework of Modernism. That conception is Clement Greenberg’s one of the temporality of abstraction operating within Modernism : “at-onceness”.

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2. The second part is devoted to a detailed analysis of the case of a single particle.

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Benjamin agrees with Greenberg when he writes that "Part of what hindered painting is its reduction to the literary and thus an effacing of any engagement with the medium."(*Benjamin, 1995, p.11*) Painting that operates within Modernism therefore , and more specifically abstract painting, foregoes any mediation through the 'Literary'. The work denies any narrative or anecdotal tendencies and gives nothing more than that which is the pure operation of paint. Submitting to the work of the medium (paint) the art work refers back only upon itself and is therefore self-contained in "a single temporality". Benjamin states that "The time of viewing is linked to the object maintaining and thus containing a single temporality, a temporality that would be united in the act of sheer presentation".(*Benjamin, 1995, p.12*)

The move to abstraction is perceived as arising "...once the field of representation no longer pertains".(*Benjamin, 1995, p.16*) "It is rather the identification of another source of signification. This source will be the objects own work."(*Benjamin,*

1995, p.13) What Benjamin is suggesting is that abstraction, once it is freed from the burden of being simply the negation of representation, must identify that which is left as falling under the operation of its work. Benjamin is agreeing with Clement Greenberg's conception of abstraction historically but is also providing for an abstraction which is not dependant on Modernism.

According to Benjamin "...what defines the work is the already identified simultaneity of giving and receiving."(*Benjamin, 1995, p.18*) This refers specifically to Clement Greenbergs Modernist conception wherein the self critical work gives itself to be recieved as being immediately recognisable as nothing more than itself. This is its work, the 'work's work'. Of painting's self-definition Benjamin has written "Rather than this being understood as the attribution of an intention to the work itself, it needs to be seen as an expression of the work's work."(*Benjamin, 1995, p. 18*)

Benjamin has written that "The interarticulation of ontology and time will underwrite the already present nature of a complex temporality."(*Benjamin, 1995, p.17*) With regard to Modernism it could be said that the ontological status of the painting is qualified in relation to the negation of representation; the non-objective as diametrically opposed to the figurative. Add to this however the statement :

"...abstraction could be understood as the movement in figuration in which there is no longer any reference to the literal,"(*Benjamin, 1995, p.29*) and it becomes apparrent that historically grounded claims that abstraction is opposed to figuration and other Modernist proclamations do not allow for the complexity of interpretation available to works of art. (*Benjamin, 1995, p.29*)

Greenberg's analysis is useful in identifying the articulation of ontology in painting's work and also in identifying the changing nature of this ontology. "Modernism is not just a style but a specific way of construing arts work." (*Benjamin, 1995, p.8*) Clement Greenberg recognized the fact that the foregrounding of the medium in painting necessarily changed the ontological status of the work, thereby changing the 'work's work'.

The work of abstraction through Modernism would appear to have been the promotion of a 'self critical' work of art. This does not necessarily equate to notions of purity or 'optical purity' but it would be forgivable to suggest some connection. For what the emergence of an ontology of painting as object allows for is the possibility to reinvest in painted abstraction via an examination of the claims (such as essentialist claims) which have been made for it.

Andrew Benjamin has warned of the possible redundancy of such an approach:

What has to be taken as the initial point of departure for this other economy (an economy of abstraction) is tracing the consequences of the relationship between in the first place, abstraction having been freed from the work of negation (then negation of representation), and in the second, the necessity to hold to the presence of a complex ontology as providing a description of the art work. The temptation here is to respond by arguing that such a formulation robs art of its insistence by introducing levels of difficulty that are simply inappropriate to the study of painting. The problem with such a claim, however, is that it fails to take painting seriously. It reduces it either to an object of

contemplation-a modern-day l'art pour l'art-or an icon, be it cultural or philosophical, in which the concentration on content and meaning robs the work of its specificity as painting" (*Benjamin, 1995, p.28*)

What Andrew Benjamin is pointing to is the possibility of a continuing project of abstraction which utilizes the Modernist 'self critical' element identified by Clement Greenberg; but one which does not answer solely to the call of Modernism. In other words, rather than writing abstraction off as an aberration of modernity, or intellectualizing it out of relevance or the scope of reasonable interest, Benjamin is proposing that the concept of the work of abstraction be validated by an engagement with the different temporal levels employed by the work and brought to bear on the work.

Of artworks in historical time, Benjamin writes:

"They are repeated within a movement of interpretation in which a later position allows them to be reincorporated and thus given again as part of the process that is taken to lead inexorably to this later position. Once this position is analyzed it reveals that what the work of art-by its very nature-allows for is the claim that artworks enjoy a reiterative reworking. (*Benjamin, 1995, p.25*)

and later;

"When he (Clement Greenberg) allowed for a reinvestment in particular works such that they come to be read as moving towards abstraction,-moving towards the space of abstraction-there was the already present concession that artworks have a greater complexity than that which is given in the simultaneity of giving and receiving. (*Benjamin, 1995, p.27*)

There are two questions which can be raised by the above paragraphs with regard to a continuing practice of abstract art. Firstly, is Andrew Benjamin contradicting his earlier analysis by pointing to an impulse to reiterate within abstraction and ruling out the possibility for it to maintain relevance and urgency? Secondly, is the 'space of abstraction', towards which it is said works move and ultimately arrive, measured out?

In response to the first of these questions it can be noted that Benjamin points to what he perceives as being the 'crisis' within painting. It is not the threat of painting succumbing to mere

'objectivity or the decorative' as Greenberg saw it. "...the crisis is produced by the retention of that conception of opticality that depends upon what has been identified thus far as 'at-onceness'." (*Benjamin, 1995, p.23*) Benjamin is refuting the claim that 'at-onceness' is given by the work for the purpose of interpretive completion.

This is a response to both the above questions in one. Andrew Benjamin sees value in abstraction as much as Clement Greenberg does; and he makes particular use of the concept of historical time which allows a work to be 'regiven' within an interpretive framework which succeeds the actual work. Benjamin uses the example of the interpretation of works by Courbet and Manet in the formation of an abstract art operative within Modernism. However Benjamin sees the crisis as extending not from the

work's operation within historical time but instead from the conflation of the perceived arrival of painting at the space of abstraction with the identification of an 'at-onceness' within that abstraction. "Greenberg's linking of the optical with 'at-onceness' comes undone because there cannot be a totalising view of the work".(Benjamin, 1995, p.36-37) In Benjamin's view Clement Greenberg's assumption would not allow for abstraction itself to be 'regiven' (as this would negate its holding to an 'at-onceness') as

other works were 'regiven' (Courbet, Manet) to form abstraction. In Benjamin's own words "This is not an argument against holding to the importance of the medium's self-address. Rather, it is meant on the one hand to extend that possibility to the range of painting, while on the other it allows for the particularity of abstraction to be taken up again."(Benjamin, 1995, p.36)

W.J.T.Mitchell writes of abstraction in '*Ut Pictura Theoria*', "The abstract probably has more institutional and cultural power as a rearguard tradition than it ever did as an avant-garde overturning of tradition."(Mitchell, 1994, p.214)

Andrew Benjamin argues against the acceptance of abstraction as an end point. He marks "...a need to reject the complacency that accepts as absolute the pre given, divisions that mark out the site of interpretation and to rework what is taken by the tradition to have already been given and therefore to be complete." (Benjamin, 1995, p.39-40)

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CHAPTER TWO

SUMMARY

Yve-Alain Bois warns against historicist interpretations of abstraction more vigorously than any of the other commentators cited. Instead of holding to the limiting historicism of abstractions documented theoretical decline, Bois suggests that the focus be shifted to the different frameworks within which a work operates. For the sake of argument he cites three main theoretical models, all operative within a fourth, which he names the 'strategic model'. These three models are, the 'perceptive model', the 'technical model' and the 'symbolic model'.

Bois does not suggest that these models constitute the entire project of abstraction. They exist exclusively to articulate Bois' argument. Indeed, the point which Bois is illustrating is simply that, within a single interpretation, any theoretical model which serves to illustrate a given aspect of the complexity inherent within an artwork, may be applied. What is most valuable in Bois' text is the notion that artworks operate on many levels and promote many meanings.

Andrew Benjamin points to the ways in which a work relates to time. Firstly, he identifies the concept of historical time as being integral to the interpretive process. Abstraction will necessarily equate to Modernism within a historical framework. The second

conception of time to come into play is that which is held by the worked surface of the painting. He looks at some contemporary manifestations of what may be termed historical forms of abstraction. Employing a concept of complexity involving an awareness of the different levels on which a work operates, Benjamin demonstrates how a work can be 'regiven' to interpretation. It is a similar argument to Yve-Alain Bois in its emphasis on the conception of historical time taken from a linear framework and employed within a theoretical dialectic. Both Benjamin and Bois use the articulation of theory to demonstrate that, whilst works of art or forms of art may be seen as having lost any relevance, it is possible to reinvest in those forms at successive periods in the continuing dialectic of interpretation.

CONCLUSION

Given the range and depth of writing which is in circulation on the project of abstraction, and given the validity of a continuing practice of abstract painting at all, it has to be noted that the aims of the present text are modest. Primarily, its purpose has been to identify, through the selective citation of recent and contemporary texts, the existence of a concerted critical effort to investigate historically grounded notions surrounding abstraction.

These writers have been chosen for the fact that they attempt to address the issues of abstract painting with renewed vigour. This is not to suggest that there is an attempt to revive past forms, such as Constructivism or Abstract Expressionism. Neither is there an attempt to reinvest in or reinstate the original motivational forces behind certain modes of abstract painting.

Robert Schuberts article in *Art + Text* No.49. 1994., is the only text cited which actively articulates a negative position. Titled "*Restaging Abstraction*", Schuberts article suggests that there cannot be any active progression of abstract painting within contemporary practice or in the future. For Schubert, any continuing abstract practice is destined to exist as a parody of itself, of its own history. Only by conceding to this self-mimicry,

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Schubert believes, can abstraction, once again, participate in what may be called avant-garde practice. [The concept of the avant-garde is also commonly perceived as part of the dead historical rhetoric of Modernism, based on complexity and exclusivity] Schuberts diagnosis is that abstraction can no longer deny its own inadequacies as a self-sufficient practice.

One question which can be asked is, to what extent is the present condition of abstraction, and the problematic nature of its forms, as demonstrated by the problematic nature of the debate surrounding it, an inherent defect in abstraction itself? And if Abstraction fails to convince, is there any purpose in attempting to provide a critical or theoretical defence for it ?

It is being argued here that the problems in abstraction are not inherent to the forms. They arise once those forms are assumed to be synonymous with certain claims for such qualities as purity, essence or transcendence. This is not to deny that an abstract form can be spoken of as relating to notions of pure form. It is simply an argument against the limiting critical practice which privileges those historical claims at the expense of all other interpretations.

W.J.T. Mitchell, in "*Ut Pictura Theoria*" (1994) has suggested that the proliferation of theory and philosophical debate with which abstraction has become almost synonymous (It is true to say that abstraction has become synonymous with a certain level of difficulty and impenetrability), was required due to the exclusion of

language and narrative by the project of abstraction itself. Mitchell reminds the reader that language is an integral part of the interpretative process, and can never be entirely excluded, regardless of what the work claims.

The use of theory, of course, is not denied either. In the bulk of Yve-Alain Bois, *"Painting as Model"*, the chapters devoted to specific artists, such as Barnett Newman, Piet Mondrian and Robert Ryman serve to articulate the author's position well. For the purposes of the present text, what is of particular interest is Bois' liberal application and appropriation, for the purposes of interpretation, of any theoretical model necessary, regardless of its status as 'outmoded'. Bois' thesis is perhaps the most comprehensive in its awareness of a work/works' dual capacity to act within a single history, the history of its production, and its ability to act within successive histories.

Both the notion of historical time and the awareness of the worked surface of paint are central to Andrew Benjamin's reading. Benjamin's aim is to examine certain contemporary manifestations of abstraction, as they relate to certain historical precedents. His argument is elaborated via a reading of Clement Greenberg's *"Towards a newer laocoon"* of 1940. Fundamentally it examines the validity of a continuing abstract painting practice where that practice is seen to have its own history. Any continuing practice will necessarily refer to the history of painting, but

also, it will refer now to the history of abstraction for its justification.

If anything can be stated conclusively within this continuing discourse, it is that, a work or works do not exist exclusively for the articulation of a single historical perspective. To speak of any form as essentially redundant is to deny the complexity inherent in that form and also its ability to acquire complexity through successive histories.

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