A DEBATE ON ABSTRACTION

SYSTEMS AND ABSTRACTION	THE PERSISTENCE OF PAINTING	ANTI-SIMULATION: MATERIALISM AND ABSTRACTION	PHOTOGRAPHY AND ABSTRACTION
Curated by Susan Edwards	Curated by Vincent Longo	Curated by Maurice Berger	Curated by Rosalind Krauss
November 15– December 22, 1988	February 1– March 10, 1989	March 16– April 21, 1989	May 1– June 2, 1989

The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery · Hunter College

The Persistence of Painting

An image is strictly an emanation, simple, formal, a pouring forth of the whole of an essence, pure and naked. It is an emanation from the depths, in silence, excluding everything exterior. It has a kind of life. A thing's image grows out of itself and upon itself.

Meister Eckhart

Modern abstraction's grounding in formalist aesthetics is only one small stage in a development that had its beginnings in the earliest forms of creative expression. Art found in paleolithic caves and in megalithic mounds and barrows is essentially abstract. Early peoples expressed themselves and communicated visually through patterns of marking, scoring, painting, and carving. Paintings, powerful graphic images of clearly identifiable but economically transformed animals, sometimes began as engraved outlines found prefigured in the rock wall. Before the hand axe acquired a wooden handle flint burins were made for the sole purpose of engraving images: tectiforms, dots, zig-zags, sun wheels. Their meanings cannot be known but their placement in the deepest recesses of the caves, in areas of extremely difficult access, indicates their importance.

The cave paintings show a distinct disregard for boundary, and only an urgent concentration on images, overlapping and transparent, repeated one over another for thousands of years. An obvious purposefulness intensifies this art made to prolong the hunt and enhance chances of survival in the face of awesome natural forces. Images were primary and must have been concordant with the first utterings of language, thought by Rousseau to be mainly figurative and poetic. Some signs left bodily traces—for example, wavy line patterns finger-painted in soft clay and stenciled hand prints made by dusting black or red ocher pigment over an open hand held

against the wall, leaving a compelling imprint of its creator, an index of human involvement in ritual necessity.[1]

Tendencies toward geometric order and rigorous adherence to format characterize most neolithic abstraction, which reflected agrarian requirements for more permanent settlement as it gradually replaced the more organic cave art. Rectangularity in domiciles began around 10,000 B.C., but most megalithic structures were cave-like and covered in man-made mounds of rubble and earth. Neolithic art shows a profound interest in regularity, uniformity, measure, and number and is strictly oriented to an externally delimiting shape whether it be a belt buckle, pot, basket, or megalithic slab. Though more abstract and ordered, it is no less magical and urgent than paleolithic art and still reflects an "undifferentiated vision in which the boundaries of the inside and outside world have become uncertain," where abstraction and reality are the same, suggests Anton Eherenzweig in *The Hidden Order of Art*. Counting abstraction as a high achievement, Eherenzweig connects it with creative sublimation which "implies that the highest human achievements should be linked with what is lowest and most primitive in ourselves,"contents emanating from "deep roots in the unconscious."[2] In other contexts he writes of unconscious scanning as a valuable resource of the abstract artist.

Differences in the motivations behind abstraction and realism were explored by Wilhelm Worringer early in the century, before such a thing as nonobjective painting existed. In *Abstraction and Empathy* he contended that primitive abstraction could not be a deficient view of the external world but was instead a meaningful withdrawal from it that allowed the artist to satisfy impulses toward psychic wholeness. He posited a dichotomy of volitions regarding art making: abstraction was the result of an agoraphobic, self-alienating tendency, while arts of imitation grew out of an empathetic, feeling-into condition of the artist towards nature. Empathy, Lipp's concept of projected self-enjoyment, was the basis of realism and idealized concepts of classical and natural beauty. Worringer's

interest in abstraction was grounded in studies of archaic and tribal arts with a particular eye to traditions of ornament. Signaling the beginning of modernist abstraction before it actually got under way in 1906, he called attention to a creative urge that he felt originated in the feelings and attitudes early peoples had about natural vastness and uncertainty, an "immense dread of space"; fear and unrest were at the root of an activity that could provide internally generated models of clarity and order.[3]

Is it by accident, then, that Malevich withdrew (figuratively) from the "real" world (as he later recalled it) by taking "*refuge* in the square form" in order to free art from "the ballast of objectivity" and retreat to a place "where nothing is real except feeling"? The square signified release and a calming fullness; "This was no empty square I had painted but rather the feeling of nonobjectivity." Deep space is rejected, and is replaced by flat, frontal Suprematism, by which he meant "the supremacy of pure feeling in art."[4] Malevich's metaphors of withdrawal indicate a view not unlike Worringer's, that abstraction satisfies needs for immanence in art, a particular kind of "absolute" in which the psyche "may rest from the agony of the relative."[5] Worringer saw in the symmetrical regularity of abstracted plant ornament intrinsic truths that could reflect the laws and beauty of nature without resorting to imitations or detailed copies of her forms. This kind of redefining formal invention is still critical to abstract art.

For many centuries abstraction was a source of delight as long as it was confined to its ornamental status. The Book of Kells, the Alhambra, never lose their appeal. But beginning with Cubism, as abstraction encroached on the domain of figuration, painting and sculpture, it has been the visual problematic of the century. Impacting visual language in new and disturbing ways, it is not only still difficult for its audience at large but it proves unnerving at times to other artists as well. At its best, abstraction is characterized by highly conscious willful acts, symbolic acts taken by solitary individuals around whose work arise movements redefining limits, practices and

uses of art. Seen in this light, abstraction has consisted in a litany of declared essences reduced to singular elements: the square (Malevich, Albers), line (Mondrian, Newman), gesture (Pollock, Kline), and so on, each seeing painting in terms of what it is not. The Subjects of the Artists School (latterly the Club) was predicated on what the artists would not do rather than on what they would do; painting had a synecdochical function: a singular aspect of form, a part of painting, stood for the whole of what painting was about. Radical acts made in the isolation of the studio engendered uncertainty and doubt. In the early Fifties Anton Eherenzweig referred to the anxiety-producing effect of the blank canvas as a malady peculiar to the painters of the new abstraction. Separation from European taste and easel painting itself left them in a state of dissociated alienation.

Meyer Schapiro called it an absolutizing state of mind:

> . . . If the impressionists reduced things to the artist's sensations, their successors reduced them further to projections or constructions of his feelings and "essences" grasped in a tense intuition.[6]

In strategic terms Clement Greenberg once remarked that the vanguard artist excluded from painting what a respected and admired predecessor felt obliged to retain. Thus, reductive tendencies can be seen as leading eventually to minimalist cul-de-sacs, as was indicated in latter-day Club humor: "Pollock opened the door, Newman closed it, Rothko pulled down the shades, and Reinhardt turned out the lights," leaving New York abstraction in the dark, in a milieu at closure. Once an aesthetic takes hold, however, detractors do little to deflect its course of action. When Joyce was at work on *Finnegans Wake* advance portions under the title *Work in Progress* were treated harshly by critics and associates for not being written in English. Beckett defended the work:

> You cannot complain that this is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something. It is that something.[7]

Running counter to illustration and description, abstraction operates in the language of equivalents and constants which

become the sub*stance* of the observed, the experienced, the felt, the reasoned. When new it fosters estrangement and communication failure. Meyer Schapiro (1957):

> But if painting and sculpture do not communicate they induce an attitude of communion and contemplation. They offer to many an equivalent of what is regarded as part of religious life: a sincere and humble submission to a spiritual object, an experience which is not given automatically, but requires preparation and purity of spirit. It is primarily in modern painting and sculpture that such contemplativeness and communion with the work of another's perfected feeling and imagination becomes possible.[8]

Extreme reduction is often translated as emptiness (Eherenzweig called certain aspects of abstraction "full emptiness") not to be taken seriously as art. Rosalind Krauss has put the problem in terms of a strategy of oppositions:

> . . . a work in which nothing is pictured cannot be a work that is about something. Nor, by the same token, can there be a serious work about nothing . . .
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> . . . But the twentieth century's first wave of pure abstraction was based on the goal . . . to make a work about Nothing. The upper case n in Nothing is the marker of this absolute seriousness . . . to paint Nothing, which is to say, all Being once it has been stripped of every quality that would materialize or limit in any way. So purified, this Being is identical with Nothing.[9]

This essentializing is not unlike the "subtle essence" of the Upanishads or the first Chinese Chan (Zen) Buddhist Hui Neng's statement: "From the first Not a thing is." All reduction metaphors make strict demands on viewer and listener, demands approaching conviction and belief.

Malevich's square/feeling equation: "The square = feeling, the white square = the void beyond this feeling" is suggestive of nonverbal thought processes, a form of thinking. To Jung feeling is a rational function of ego adaptation in that the subject is aware of the feeling condition and not swayed by it to a debilitating point of involuntary affect and is therefore capable of making judgments and decisions based upon it.

Despite the fact that abstraction in its multiple forms and guises has been subsumed in the random image production of post-modern culture, there is a tendency among some impor-

tant artists to resist this externalizing, over-objectification of art. Their work is made with a conviction that painting is not subordinate to its literalness and is centered in the act of painting. As Robert Swain said recently, ''Painting is what I do. I don't do anything else.'' Operating within a codified system of over a thousand mixed tones he pursues disciplined investigations of color that are reminiscent of experiments in sound by Cage and Glass. Gridded harmonies and soft progressions have in recent paintings given way to asymmetrical assignations of weight and balance; relations are startling and unmetaphorical, referring only to their own painting/color condition.

The right-angled insistence of square and rectangle gives this new work an added frontality and straightforwardness that is akin to the less chromatic paintings of Merrill Wagner and, on a smaller scale, Nancy Haynes and Jody Manasevit. Their similarly existential presentations bordering on nonacts are resolved as uniquely fabricated and particularized expressions of form and purity found in a critical choice of material and how it supports a painting's identity and quality. Wagner's slabs of slate in rather anthropomorphic stance seem animated as if in neolithic finality. An image autonomy pervades these works, modifying the strict conscious ordering of visual means.

Bill Jensen's recent paintings are even more occupied by contents drawn from half-conscious hypnogogic states depicted in unreal but concretized internal landscapes. Jung says artists and poets are particularly responsive to these states and to what he calls the autonomous creative complex which temporarily lowers conscious restraints, allowing the artist to ''go with'' intruding imaginary contents—not dissimilar to stream-of-consciousness monologues of early modernist writing. Acknowledged fictive illusion is thus made very real and gives Jensen's forms the look of things evolving to their own ends. This is true also, with less internal drama perhaps, of Jake Berthot's slowly metamorphosing images: his signal acts of becoming. Gradually changing from rectilinear to

ovate, from abstract landscape to an inner iconic portraiture (in space and scale if not in function) his calligraphically brushed layerings of encrusted paint offer extremely felt considerations of painting and its situation today.

Slowly paced deliberate spontaneity is apparent, too, in the recent works of Louise Fishman, Rochelle Feinstein, and Susanna Tanger, all of whom are concerned with softened, lyrical geometric episodes in close interiorized spaces. Abstraction of this kind edges toward brushing and flirts with illusory space, qualities usually avoided by typically geometric orders. Eherenzweig's oxymoron ''full emptiness'' characterizes all of this work, which is centered in confident, reticent quiescence. Haynes's dark reflections and Manasevit's quiet dichotomies signify their private observances and experiences in art and in life abstractly transformed in terms of pure painting and its special asset: how it tends to deny its physicality; these walls of paint, encrusted slabs, stained fields, perceptual patterns, blocks of color, coded emblematic signifiers of private contents translate into totally affective visions.

In support of Worringer's ideas Jung said that abstraction is a method of deanimating the external object, removing its magical hold on the subject by permitting differentiated attention to the self:

> Abstraction . . . presupposes a certain living and operating force on the part of the object; hence it [the subject] seeks to remove itself from the object's influence. Thus the abstracting attitude is centripetal, e.g. introverted. Worringer's concept of abstraction, therefore, corresponds with the introverted attitude.[10].

This is to say that abstracting is ideational. In art, however, ideas arise from images, according to Remy de Gourmont, who structured for creative writing a cyclic progression from sensation to image to idea. He insisted that ideas come last and ''visual memory'' consisting of images taken from direct personal experience must not be made subordinate to overriding restrictions of affected style or manner:

> An idea is only a stale sensation, an effaced image; to reason with ideas is to assemble and combine, into a labored mosaic, faded cubes which have become almost indistinguishable.[11]

The artist's first task is to crystallize a phantasy-image (Jung) which is not to be confused with hallucinatory effects in that it does not become a substitute for reality, but is rather an imaged model of a more complete kind, a ''concentrated expression of the total psychic situation'' in which the work of art is produced. Abstraction represents the outside in terms of the inside.

Much abstraction relies, still, on systematic serialization, typically modern givens of form reflecting aesthetic concerns that, however, go back to Middle Ages Scholasticism: uniformity, evenness, smoothness (*aequalitas*); belonging to a category, being of a certain type (*quidditas*—whatness, essence); having individual particularity (*haecceitas*—thisness).[12] Fundamental considerations of formal essence like these still typify modernist abstraction and are tellingly put to practice in these disparately styled paintings. Doug Ohlson, Swain, and Sanford Wurmfeld have been categorized as colorists but each particularizes that study in very different ways. Wurmfeld's uniquely structured check and line systems add up to perceptual fields of interacting and ''spreading'' tones resolving into pure film which at times attains rhapsodic and transcendent airiness, an effect that goes beyond what seem like careful objective investigations. Color breaks through its limited capacity as paint reflecting light and instead is made to behave as if it is light. Uniformity of unit and measure has been replaced recently by progressively changing intervals that open up the center. Color sensation is maximized by Wurmfeld and Swain as it is by Berthot and Ohlson but it is somehow more interiorized in the latter two despite their interest in chromatic intensity. Ohlson is involved with reconciling oppositions and differences. Hard/soft, bright/dim, brushy transparency/opaque flatness separate and combine in poetic, brooding questioning. Harvey Quaytman's uses of color are approached from a background of literalist objectivity that once called for a rule which gave each color its own shaped support in eccentric constructions. That literalness is now turned to defining color in terms of its material source; rust red

is attained by using actual rust. His mixing table is an alchemical array of ground glass and metals and little-known imported pigments.

Quaytman's quaternized cruciform configurings began with rectangles placed in quarter turns around a central pivot, and most of his paintings develop situations involving edge-to-center equilibrium. The unerring balance and absolute stasis the new work has gained shows perfection of proportion in a seeing-making ratio that most of the artists here have found in varying ways. This is further substantiated in their material choices, which represent moments of discovery matching artistic intents and expectations, moments after which their art becomes recognized as uniquely individuated. This characteristic is especially true of Haynes, and has been for a few years. Her work has an unalterable finality about it, as though it should not and cannot be made another way. No longer requiring the external shaping her work had so beautifully exemplified, perfectly crafted panels contain markedly interiorized, deeply felt concerns for painting.

The more painterly, touch-oriented worlds of Berthot, Fishman, Tanger, and Manasevit, which leave more activated autographic hand/brush traces, suggest an inwardness that can only be best expressed in painting; Feinstein's interior picturing is no less than a visual poetics of feeling. This is painting qua painting, without apology or cynicism.

Abstraction such as this, reflective in differing ways of unified concern with the very nature of forming, is at so fundamentally a human level of direct visual experience that it repeats ageless image patterns, recurring and self-renewing, begun long ago by drawing in the sand, molding clay, carving stone, imprinting walls with insistent conviction and archetypal consistency over a 40,000-year continuum that . . . goes on.

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1. See Rosalind Krauss, ''Notes on the Index: Parts 1 and 2,'' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 196–219.

2. Anton Eherenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 128.

3. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy* (New York: International Universities Press, 1953), p. 15.

4. Kasimir Malevich, ''Suprematism,'' in Robert Herbert, ed., *Modern Artists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 92–102. My italics.

5. Worringer, p. 133.

6. Meyer Schapiro, ''Abstract Act,'' in *Modern Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1979), p. 191.

7. Samuel Beckett, as quoted in Brenda Maddox, *Nora: The Real Life of Molly Bloom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. 253.

8. Schapiro, p. 224.

9. Krauss, p. 237.

10. Carl Jung, *Psychological Types* (London: Routland & Kegan Paul, 1923), p. 362.

11. Glen Burne, *Remy de Gourmont* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1963), p. 97.

12. See Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 86.