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**Monochrome and Trace in Contemporary Painting**

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## **Abstract**

This project explicitly addresses the persistent question of the monochrome. I want to develop several figures of thought such as inscription, erasure and trace in order to examine new ways in which this question might find fresh trajectories of formulation. Historically, the monochrome has attracted discussions related to the autonomy of painting, the circularity of process, chromatic purity, repetition, limits, transcendence, the beyond of representation. The project does not aim to formulate the question of the identity of contemporary abstraction but instead explore the questions related to abstraction's temporality.

The monochrome appears to resist a pure art historical discourse because of the way that it has always been close to a speculative drive within philosophical aesthetics. In this regard I wish to test this relationship between ways of mediating the visual in terms of language and the schemas assumed by the modulation of the 'seeable' into the 'sayable'. Jacques Derrida is an important figure for my research in terms of his thinking about the trace and the play of absence and presence. These concepts will be engaged with alongside accounts of the monochrome in contemporary art history.

This intellectual project is anchored by the relationship to my own studio practice, which involves an overlapping of elements that are added and dismantled until a definitive form is achieved. The physical nature of the materials is, thus, central to the activity. Materials are added and removed; the latter process is frequently the more important. The surface is worked through a restrained process of making, trading one factor against another until a resolution becomes possible. By working with increased physicality, plus highly

calibrated or austere means, the ambition is then to engage the viewer as a total sentient being as opposed to a receiver of images. The work thus resists the conventions that govern the presentation of image-based paintings and this implies the possibility that the work creates other schemas of both place and temporality.

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## Introduction

In the present study, I approach the question of the monochrome from the position of an artist and painter in order to question certain art historical accounts. Certain key texts that I have been reading alongside my studio practice, certain contemporary manifestations of the monochrome seem historically problematic and insufficient for engaging with the complexities of the form, which has been even considered by some critics as the “cemetery of painting”. The aim thus is to offer a reanimation of the recent history of the monochrome and therefore to reject given terms that approach the question. In order to do so, I will engage in the discussion of various critical texts and explore my own studio practice.

In my MPhil project, I attempted to establish a logic between the theory and practice of monochrome, i.e. between the contemporary relation of the monochrome and a critical art historical account of its manifestation. After completing this project, I felt that something was still missing: the critical works on the monochrome seemed insufficient to account for the form. I started to think that the intellectual exposition itself is inevitably the barrage of a lack in relation to monochrome itself - and more is loaded in turn with painting – thus my inquiry shifted from the certainty of a secure method of historical account to the investigation into figures of thought which might explain or account for the persistence of this form in contemporary abstraction. I engage with the analysis of other traditions within the history of the monochrome. It was also necessary to investigate what is at stake in painting, something which can only be achieved through the optic of painting itself, what claims I might make within the

place of my own practice. What is at stake is not the comparative relation between philosophical and art history and painting narrative but rather how figures and discourse both coexists and that part of the research process is how to give adequate testimony to the conflicts and tensions of different fields.

In my experience, painting monochromes can be thought of as the passage between a state of being nothing but a pure impulse to paint, and the appearance of a painting. The “impulse to paint” is first channelled through movement. I walk around and around the surface creating a rhythmical pattern of closeness and distance to it. As I walk I add the materials and in doing this, a schematic image emerges in my mind. Then, as I continue to walk around the surface, I start to remove the materials and to give shape to the work. Thus, the work is constructed through the overlapping of elements that are added and dismantled until a definitive form is achieved. The physical nature of the materials and of the entire process is, thus, central to the activity. But just as important is the mental image that builds up in my mind. At that point it is this mental image what leads the creative process and what I aim at reproducing on the surface. Thus, I go from impulse to movement, to mental image, to the work. Different materials are added and subtracted, the latter process frequently being the more important. The process of making has to be worked for, by negotiation, trading off one factor against another until a settlement becomes possible, not an end or a conclusion, more a balance of events, only partially realized, yet sufficiently detailed to withstand continual examination. This passage from pure impulse to paint to the appearance of a painting could be thought of as an “in-between”. This in-between is an area that needs to be accounted for both on the level of experience and on the level of understanding.

This project addresses issues that consider the gesture towards, not through, identity or designation or historical completeness but considered as an event, which touches the fold of interiority and exteriority rather than solving them. I wish to focus on that passage in which there is nothing and then something figures.

Two gestures dominate the history of modernist art and both appear as gestures of negation. Both are based on the presentation of a pure idea: the idea that all objects under certain conditions might qualify as works of art but with this destroy the aesthetic privileging that art's designation was based on, and the idea that representation can be rendered void through monochromatic effacement. A gesture might be described as something that goes out of itself in order to touch on the otherness of the condition out of which it arose. In the aesthetic realm gesture implies a process of rupturing habit. As radical modes of negation both the introduction of the found object and the monochrome proposed or occupied the possibility of the death or end of art, but this is also the site of a paradox because they also served as ciphers for the renewal of the speculative dimension for aesthetic enquiry. We also have to equally confront the problem that both gestures become the site of the opposite manifestation, namely the consecration of these forms as habitual encounter with the rhetoric of the new with modernist development. Are we then faced with two genres in which everything that might be said is now complete? Within this project my investigation proposes that in the context of the monochrome renewal is a possibility both on the level of practice and on the level of theoretical exposition.

If we return to this notion that both the monochrome and the found object contain gestures then we might begin by attempting to discern this on the level of difference. Western Modernity was founded on the eclipse of transcendental figures namely in the form of the 'death of God' so Malevich re-inscribed the otherness of material reality through the negation of figural representation. Thus the black square served as an erasure of three-dimensional reality in order to introduce a not yet figured other dimension that might stand for a spiritual dimension. Paradoxically this served to link pre-Modernist alchemical structures and methods with the becoming of the new scientific thresholds of post mechanical discovery. Yet we can also trace how the monochrome is not simply a reconfiguration of a transcendental figure or going outside boundary of art to touch the pure manifestation of the becoming of art but also a case that appears in opposition to this, namely the emergence of a practice of difference that derives out of internal differentiation. This might be understood as immanence or dynamic process of becoming. Both figures imply a different version of infinity but equally a confrontation between idea and materiality. So we cannot simply contrast the gesture of the monochrome as being one that is based on what is above (the pure idea, becoming one or absolute) and the found object containing a gesture of what is below art, namely the found objects of material production, but rather see both figures as dealing with the new realities; through which the very figure of art is organised with the templates of time and space that in turn determines boundary experience of matter and mind.

In the context of late modernity (exhausted modernity?) it is possible to understand both the condition of the monochrome and the found object as operating both in tandem and in opposition. On a simple level the monochrome



represents a cipher of purification and in turn produces a figure of singularity whereas the found object introduces multiplication of figures. If late Modernity is simply an exhausted mode, it might be that the questions that inhabit it are not put deep enough down. If this is the case then what are the blind spots that govern the reiteration of these forms. My project is based upon the idea of latency within these two modes. Within my research the idea that the monochrome is not just a modernist idea but has manifestation within cultures outside Western Modernity i.e. the extended history of Chinese monochrome porcelain. On the level of painting practice a blind spot corresponding to the relationship of material inscription and the cognition of temporality. This is based on the insight that the monochrome is not simply a stable form but the manifestation of an unstable relationship between form and trace. Formalist painting was affirmative of the idea that painting might be true to its formal requirement and manifest a beautiful appearance in accord with this condition. In this the unity of the sensible and ethical was realised within the evolution of the immanent unfoldings of the formal requirements of painting. There is within this a closure between identity and appearance with nothing left over. The monochrome is not the presentation of either appearance or idea but it is the impossibility of being able to figure the relationship between both. This derives from the fact that there is no indexical root or no substantial reality that can be said, to be subsumed back into it. In this instance it can be claimed that it is based on the reality of non-identity. Whereas formalist painting expunged the 'sayable' in order to present the actuality of the visible or the 'seeable', the late monochrome is a negation of the operation by which the two orders are brought into a relationship that might find resolution. In the simplest terms, it is possible

that the monochrome finds its condition in what cannot be seen and likewise what cannot be said but without resorting to single figures such as a negative theology. Formalist painting might have appeared as a stable project for a distinct period but its collapse appears to be equally dramatic, but the monochrome appears to persist because it evades itself within its own becoming as it cannot answer itself.

The monochrome can be partly read as one of the main iconoclastic impulses that weave its way throughout the course of aesthetic modernity. The monochrome, the found object, minimalism and conceptualism are all linked in this regard. Each of these movements or tendencies exhibit several distinct traits or figures, the most striking being a schematic reducing device that lays bare the speculative question of art (and non-art). Each in their own designated manner, solicit questions related to the least condition in which art might assume condition of designation thus giving rise in turn to an intensive theorisation process about the ontological status of art. If a series or set of concepts might be assembled in common across these registers they would be as follows: negation, reduction, speculation, tautology, purification and distillation. It should also be noted that all these traits share a form of art historical persistence especially within late modernity and this is specially the case with the monochrome. Perhaps this persistence relates to the fact that each manifest, at their root a relationship to aporia. In the case of the monochrome aporía is related to trace and connected to this is a manifestation of temporal restlessness. This implies that there is something that never quite settles or is resolved, that something is always left over, a blind spot perhaps that evades both seeing and knowing.

What is often evoked in relationship to the monochrome is various notions of pure painting or painting about painting. This is clearly a case of predication based upon notions related to matter and form. Not only is the matter-form distinction resolved alongside the figure-ground relationship but also identification is disturbed. This implies that pigment can be affirmed as pigment rather than being made subservient to form or that the substance of paint is not dependant upon exterior principles such as representation. This might serve to be an account of the monochrome deriving from an account of immanence and with it an account of internal differentiation. I might in another context be drawn into examining the relationship of philosophy and aesthetic practice because it appears to be open to such enquiry. But I am swayed against such a trajectory. I am a monochrome painter and this has drawn me into its history but I can only present my findings in ways that make sense within the activity of painting. Culturally my task is not simply to clear the air around the monochrome as a practice or to render it within a space of clarity in order to expunge amnesia or other modes of opacity. Neither is my task to advocate for a version of modernity that might still retain earlier utopian traits. To research is to invent a new space by which one can exist within and without of the working process and what I write, and what I exhibit, is simply that process being actualized. Within painting itself I make small steps at a time. On the surface there is little by way of drama. Writing is also a case of being with one's object of attention. It is a case of letting the monochrome work on you as much as working on the monochrome so that an event may occur<sup>1</sup>. I say 'event' because although the

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<sup>1</sup> An event in Badiou ('Being and Event') is "purely haphazard". The event comes from either the beyond or an unexpected place and thus assumes an unrepresentable form. Artistic events

ideal of research is that it is systematic, insight occurs in more haphazard ways assuming a force rather than form. In the 'Shortest Shadow' Alenka Zupancic claims that the event is the tension that propels or drives the subject and that the subject exists, so to speak, along the two edges of the event. So I am in part reporting upon a subject that might think that it knows whilst be open to the surprise of being stripped of such a posture and be taken by surprise by quite other arrangements.

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occur on the border of the formless or monstruous and thus demonstrates that it is posible to conceive of the beyond.

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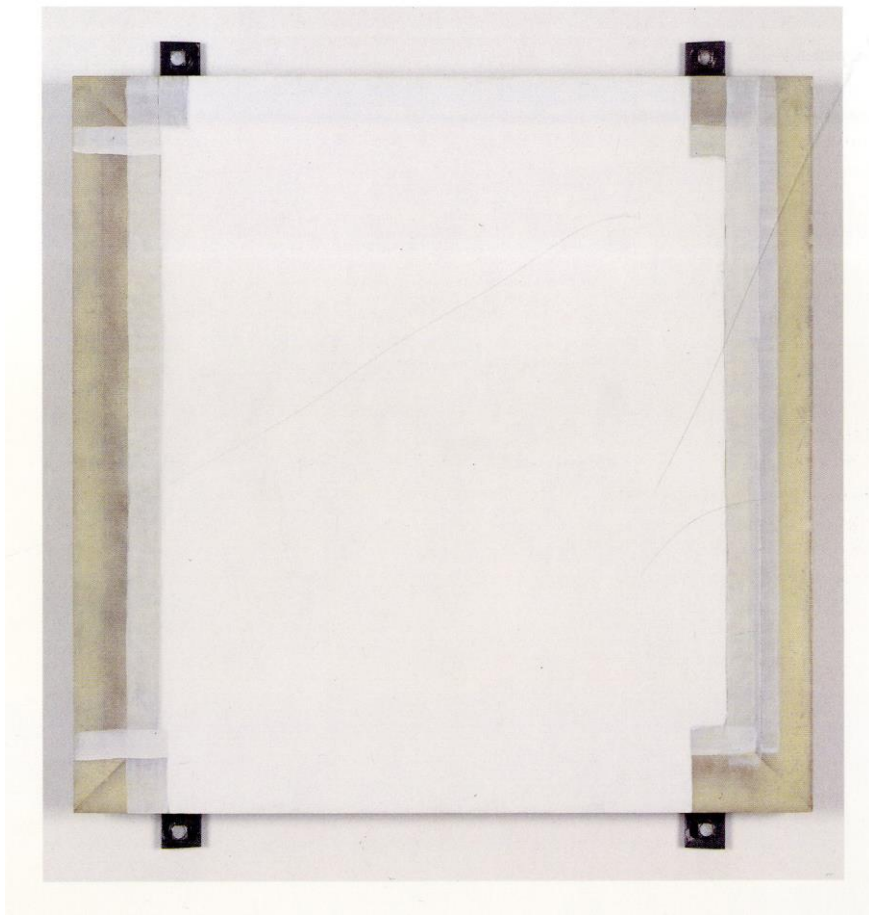
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**Fig.1**



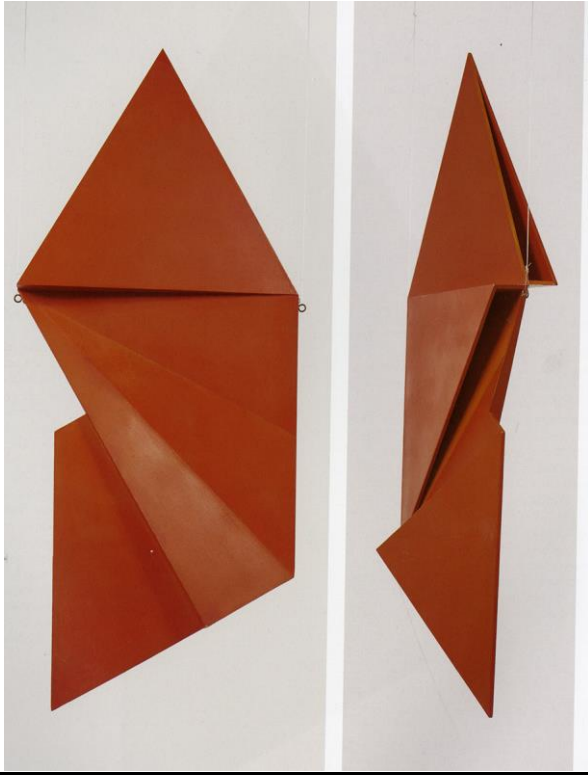
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**Fig.2**





**Fig.3**



**Fig.4**



**Fig.5**



**Fig.6**



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**Fig.7**



**Fig.8**



**Fig.9**



**Fig.10**





**Fig.11**

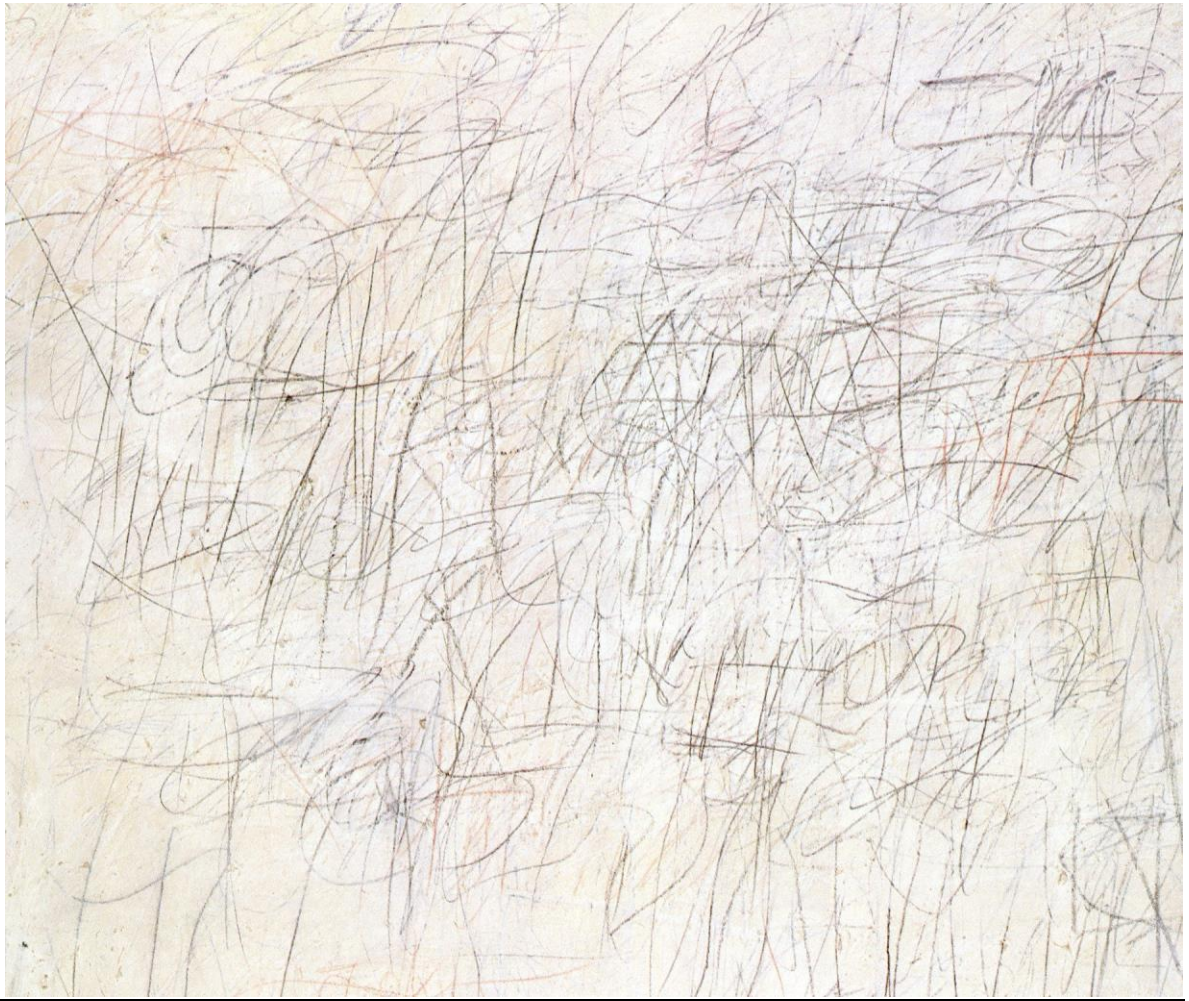


**Fig.12**

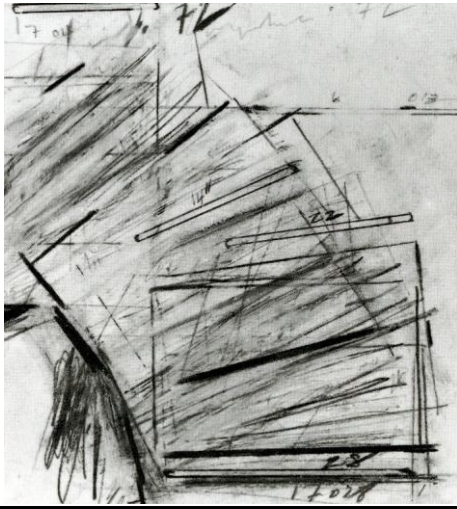


**Fig.13**

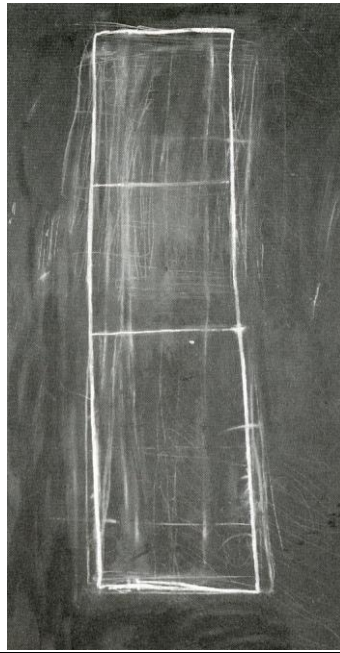




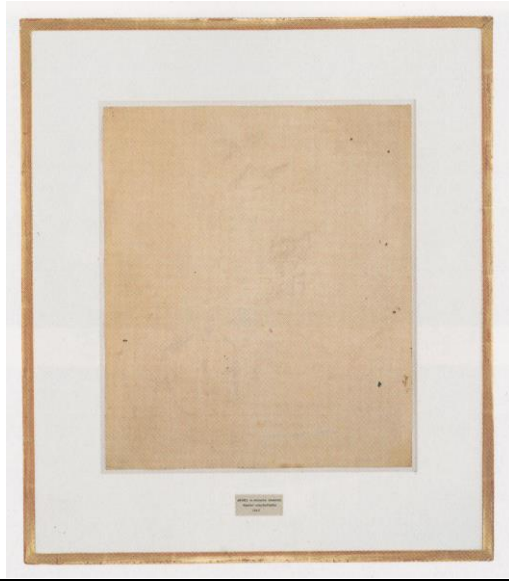
**Fig.14**



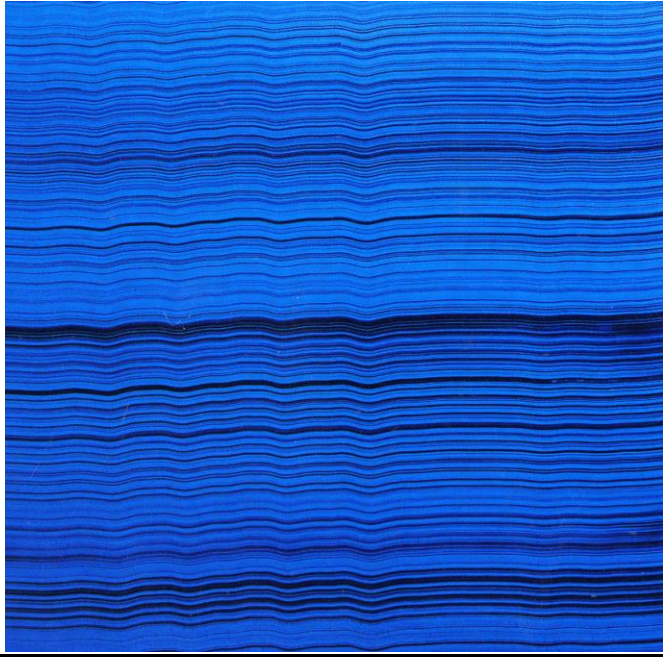
**Fig.15**



**Fig.16**



**Fig.17**



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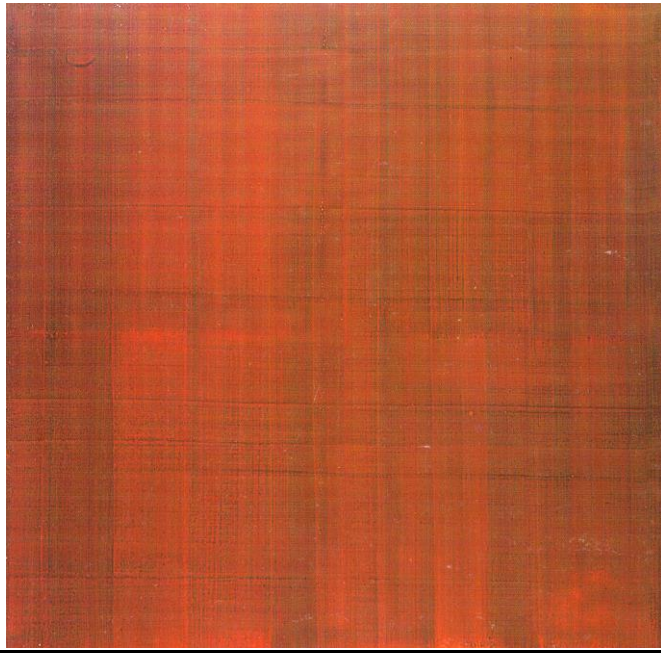
**Fig.18**





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**Fig.19**



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**Fig.20**

## **Chapter 1**

### **Temporality of Monochrome**

Content: Late Modern and Contemporary Abstraction vis-a-vis the monochrome. The circularity of discourses in painting. Chinese ceramics vis-à-vis the monochrome.

#### **1.1 Temporality of Monochrome**

The text that follows considers in first instance the question of the temporality of monochrome, the re-occurrence of the monochrome and therefore the insistence of monochrome. This re-occurrence is examined as a series of fragments, as a research goal, aiming to build a series of images that reveal the transition of time through aesthetic form.

Within the re-occurrence of the monochrome there is a process of re-investment, the re-investment of a device that has been central to abstraction. The re-appearance of the monochrome throughout the history of abstraction is well known. This process of re-investment indicates a desire for the exhaustion of the possibilities of monochrome, thus a question that arises is how to reconfigure something that cannot be reconstituted –such as the monochrome– even though one is compelled to do so. Such a question points towards a subject in search of a process of reconfiguring, and brings up the question regarding the kind of temporality that might be possible in contemporary abstraction. Ideas of re-occurrence and re-inscription also lead to the question of what kind of temporality might be possible to establish between historical and contemporary time.

I am stressing the relevance of the monochrome because, as Paulo Herkenhoff contends, the monochrome, especially after the 1950s, creates a remarkable pattern<sup>2</sup>. Nigel Cooke addresses Herkenhoff's point of view when he states: "The monochrome's importance for a discussion about painting is in its being

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<sup>2</sup> Paulo Herkenhoff, "Monochromes, the Autonomy of Color, and the Centerless World," in *Painting at the Edge of the World*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2001).

emblematic, in several cultures, of the end-game logic of modernism, and by extension, the end – or death – of painting”.<sup>3</sup> It can be argued then that the relevance of the monochrome for the discussion of contemporary abstraction is related to its status of being emblematic as well as to the manner in which the monochrome addresses –like the grid-- the question of repetition.<sup>4</sup> In turn Daniel Birnbaum addresses these questions in his essay *Late Arrivals*.<sup>5</sup> In this text Birnbaum mentions Freud’s notion of deferred action, the idea of belatedness.<sup>6</sup> It is well known that the notion of deferred action can be used to describe the return of historical forms later in time and this Freudian perspective is also offered by Birnbaum as a suggestion to explain how the temporality of artworks might operate: “Transplanted to the stage of cultural history, this logic of psychic temporality could be taken to imply the following: the traumas of the ‘original’ avant-garde –the monochrome and the readymade, say– are acted out only in works of art by later generations”.<sup>7</sup> Birnbaum notes also the use of the notion of deferred action by critics such as Hal Foster,<sup>8</sup> specifically in Foster’s appraisal of the neo avant-garde.

Foster notes: "...to pose the question of repetition is to pose the question of the neo-avant-garde, a loose group of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and 1920s as collage and assemblage, the readymade and monochrome."<sup>9</sup> Foster argues that the re-inscription of such avant-garde devices is not a meaningless repetition, rather it makes the legacy of the pre-war avant-garde relevant for subsequent works so that the backward look is not exhibited as or from a position of inferiority –the present as a bad replica of the past-- but from a position that confers original status on the thing replicated. From this perspective the origin becomes more relevant through its repetitions.

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<sup>3</sup> Nigel Cooke, "The Ambivalence of the Undead - Entropy, Duality and the Sublime as Perspectives on Contemporary Painting" (Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Birnbaum, "Late Arrivals," in *Painting at the Edge of the World*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.p.79.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.p.79.

<sup>8</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.p.1.

Following from this question of the function of repetition Birnbaum then links this question of repetition to the issue of the temporality of the work of art: "An artwork continues to *be* because it is continuously viewed and read anew. It is read, re-read, misread, and thus given birth to retroactively over and over again. This retroactive rewriting is sometimes so powerful that the original meaning –if such a concept still has any validity-- disappears in favor of the new rendering."<sup>10</sup> Thus a work of art exists as a series of deferments and the concept of an original presence needs to be replaced by something more primary: an original delay and thereby locating the historical relay between past and present in the artworks themselves. For both Birnbaum and Foster this notion might lead to the assertion that such repetitions occur as part of the contemporary matrix of art. Through that notion of temporality, Birnbaum suggests a model for the temporality of both history and artworks based upon deferral and repetition.<sup>11</sup>

At this point it is necessary to consider Benjamin Buchloh's essay, *The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant Garde*. This essay is relevant in terms of understanding the notion of deferral and delay mentioned above by Birnbaum and Foster. Buchloh begins his essay by analyzing Peter Burger's *Theory of the Avant Garde*. It is well known that Burger's argument emphasizes that the historical avant-garde attempted to criticize the modernist notion of autonomy; in other words, this was an attempt to eliminate the detachment of the aesthetic from the real.<sup>12</sup> Burger contends that, by contrast, the neo-avant- garde had a deficiency of repetition. As Buchloh explains that for Burger, "...the 'historical' avant-garde artists were original, while their postwar followers are imitators, recapitulators. The neo-avant-garde has copied and therefore falsified the original moment or rupture with the discursive practice and institutional system of modernism".<sup>13</sup> It is also clear, Buchloh adds, that for Burger the so-called 'duplicitous' copy is marked by the "...binary opposition ultimately derived from the cult of the auratic

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<sup>10</sup> Birnbaum, "Late Arrivals.", p.79.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.p.80.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: a Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde " *October* 37 (1986).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.p.42.

original".<sup>14</sup> But Buchloh distinguishes – alongside Rosalind E. Krauss – that Burger's understanding is embedded with the fictitious moment of an 'origin'. The claim that Buchloh makes is basically that within the neo-avant garde – and we could say within contemporary abstraction - we face artistic practices, which cannot be possibly discussed just in terms of authenticity alone. By claiming this, Buchloh picks up the notion of *Nachtraglichkeit* mentioned by Birnbaum and Foster, explaining that Rodchenko's *Pure Colors: Red, Yellow, Blue*, (1921) abolished the conventional attributions of the 'meaning' of colour in favour of the materiality of colour.<sup>15</sup> He contrasts Rodchenko's work with Yves Klein's, arguing that the latter had no contact with any examples of post-cubist monochromes until the late 1950s. He states that: "This is corroborated by the fact that Klein was literally surrounded at the time by other artists of his generation who (re-) discovered the strategy with equal enthusiasm and naiveté – for example, Fontana, Rauschenberg and Kelly".<sup>16</sup> What Buchloh is arguing is that this repetitive structure of the neo-avant-garde does not allow the perception of an immanent meaning for the work of art. Therefore it moves meaning to the margins, which Buchloh calls the *outside*, and this outside is defined by the conditions of reception of any artwork within a specific period of time.<sup>17</sup> If we focus our attention in both Klein's work and Rodchenko's triptych, we could say that according to Buchloh there is a movement that goes backwards: "While for Rodchenko it was the *tactility* of his monochrome panels, their relief character, so to speak, that suggested the abolition of the bourgeois contemplative mode of perception, it is precisely *contemplation* that Klein prescribes as the proper perceptual approach to his works. While Rodchenko wished to purge chromatic qualities of their mythical and transcendental meaning, Klein conjures up the essence and the atmosphere of the poetic moment of each individual painting."<sup>18</sup>

Having noted that Buchloh mentions Robert Rauschenberg as one of the artists who explored monochromatic painting in the late 1950s, this idea – a practice

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.p.42.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.p.44.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.p.45.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.p.48.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.p.51.

as deferral - is taken also by Achim Hochdorfer in considering precisely the period roughly between 1958-65, in which artists such as Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly explored possibilities that were subsequently largely suppressed until recent practices appropriated them. Hochdorfer names the strand of abstraction previously mentioned "the hidden reserve,"<sup>19</sup> adding that the potentiality of the works made during the aforementioned period appears to be reformulated – rather than rejected – by contemporary painters.<sup>20</sup> The repetition of abstractions that is a characteristic of the 1960's (the period mentioned by Hochdorfer) is regarded also by Jonathan Harris as reinforcing a kind of impossibility to ignore past practices in contemporary abstract painting: "Although painting now in one sense uses the abstract art of the 1960s as a kind of radically distanced (safe?) historical resource, it cannot, 'rid itself entirely from this past'. This is because 'the 1960s' represents not only a set of artistic practices but a whole world that still influences our present."<sup>21</sup> Harris' contention in regard to the 1960s involves – as in Foster – the monochrome as a device used by artists both during the 1960s and in contemporary abstraction. Thomas McEvelley considers that precisely the monochrome had already been established during the 1960s as one of the dominant modes of Modernist abstraction.<sup>22</sup> McEvelley states: "The monochrome painting is the most mysterious icon of modern art. What is happening? The painting does not impress the viewer through a display of skill. In it skill is negated. Compositional sense is negated. Colour manipulation and relationship are negated. Subject matter, drama, narrative, painterly presence, touch are absent. Yet there in this ritual-pictorial moment the deepest meaning of Western Modernist art are embedded."<sup>23</sup> By diminishing the pictorial qualities of the monochrome McEvelley does not pay adequate attention to the wide range of artists who achieved precisely the opposite of what McEvelley stresses as characteristics that make the monochrome "not impressive". Could it be possible to assert that Tapiés' scarred monochromes, Richter's grey paintings,

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<sup>19</sup> Achim Hochdorfer, "A hidden Reserve - Painting from 1958 to 1965," *Artforum* (February 2009).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p.157.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Harris, "Introduction: Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism," in *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting - Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism* ed. Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas McEvelley, *The Exile'S Return - toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (Cambridge, Mas.: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p.9.

Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman's endlessly elaborated works do not have subject matter, narrative or painterly presence? I am inclined to think not, remembering Thierry de Duve's painstaking essay on Robert Ryman's work – *Irreproducible Ryman* (1984) - in which de Duve remarks the strong sense of narrative involved in Ryman's paintings: "Narrativity linked to the motility of the artist's body, depending on the duration of the session and rhymed by the potential of the instrument, as in the *Windsor* series".<sup>24</sup> McEvilley though recognizes Reinhardt as an artist "...whose work most uncompromisingly and persistently embodies the monochrome idea".<sup>25</sup> But the main point McEvilley expresses is not the pictorial qualities of the monochrome – he does not seem to be interested in that aspect – but rather ontological meaning of the monochrome. By linking the monochrome with the sublime, McEvilley traces a historical account of the monochrome understood as a vehicle used by artists in order to stress the identification between the monochrome and the sublime. McEvilley mentions then Mallarmé's regard of blue as special analogue of the sublime: "... blue of course is associated with sea and sky, the most illimitable external objects which humans experience. We can say that for Monet, Turner and Van Gogh the monochrome tendency became overwhelmingly strong as the end of life approached. In the late water-garden paintings Monet was intuitively attuned to the philosophical and mythological implications of monochromaticism."<sup>26</sup> What is more relevant to me is the account McEvilley makes in regard to the monochrome and its persistence. He tracks the monochrome through the works of a wide range of artists, from Malevich to Ben Nicholson, from Tobey's "White Writing" – linked to the Chinese 'grass-style' calligraphy – to artists such as Sam Francis and Robert Motherwell amongst others. McEvilley contends that by the 1960s the monochrome tendency "...had spread into all types of painting and become a pervasive element of the mainstream vocabulary".<sup>27</sup> His regard about the possibilities of the monochrome today sounds extremely pessimistic, but it is a pessimism misdirected by sentimentality: "...as a major conquest in the adventure of art it lies in the past,

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<sup>24</sup> Thierry de Duve, "Irreproducible Ryman," in *Robert Ryman - Critical Texts since 1967*, ed. Vittorio Colaizzi and Karsten Schubert (London: Ridinghouse, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> McEvilley, *The Exile's Return - toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p.16.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p.24.



exhausted and wrung dry of meaning. It is the banner on the grave of the mad ambition of Modernist abstraction".<sup>28</sup>

I have mentioned previously, Birnbaum and Buchloh's contentions about the circularity of processes in painting, the idea of belatedness, and also Birnbaum's model of the temporality of artworks based upon deferral and repetition. I stressed as well that Birnbaum locates the historical relay between past and present in the artworks themselves, suggesting an interconnection. This interconnection is addressed by McEvelley in regard to the monochrome and also by critics such as Hal Foster in his analysis of artistic strands such as Minimalism: "...the Minimalists looked to the transgressive avant-garde for alternative models of practice. Thus Carl Andre turned to Alexander Rodchenko and Constantin Brancusi, Dan Flavin to Vladimir Tatlin, many others to Duchamp and Malevich, and so on. In this way Minimalism became one site of a general return of this avant-garde."<sup>29</sup> But let us focus on the monochrome. We have analyzed the monochrome and different threads that attempt to understand its re-occurrence in the history of painting. I have referred to the idea of belatedness, McEvelley's gloominess about the ontological status of the monochrome, and to notions of the circularity within the processes in painting in order to address these concepts through the analysis of late modern and contemporary paintings.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.p.56.

<sup>29</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century.*

## 1.2 Anti-Illusion: Monochrome as Object

In his essay *Monochromes, the Autonomy of Color, and the Centerless World*, Paulo Herkenhoff argues: "White monochromes created in just more than a decade by artists from all over the world point to the dispersion of the idea of center in art history. This occurs when there is an artist who questions the gaze, whether in Brazil, Italy, France, the US, or Japan".<sup>30</sup> Robert Ryman's work is relevant within the discussion of the monochrome, not only for the obvious reasons, but also because of the manner in which he addresses the relation between painting and the readymade, alongside the question of medium specificity. It is well known that according to Clement Greenberg pictorial specificity had to prevail over illusion and narrativity, thus setting apart any narrative content that might be involved in regard to the perception of the work. In reviewing Greenberg's position, Thierry de Duve clarifies these issues as follows: "The ideal modernist painting would present itself in the single instant of an epiphany. The aesthetic experience of pure pictoriality is the immediate experience of a coloured surface escaping practical space and suspended in the time of action".<sup>31</sup> Obviously, it is not possible to apply that kind of epiphany to Ryman's paintings, as Yve-Alain Bois stresses: "Aren't [Ryman] paintings themselves – preeminently anti-illusionistic, flatly literal – all the explanation the viewer or critic needs to penetrate their ineffable silence? Don't they reveal what they are made of, proudly, with a kind of routine generosity, thereby cutting short any attempt at associative readings? Simply don't they seem to suggest their own commentary, to define their own discursive terrain?"<sup>32</sup> What Bois mentions as Ryman's 'discursive terrain' is related in Ryman's work to his process of making, all the step-by step decisions that Ryman makes through the construction process of his work. The outcome of Ryman's procedure becomes relevant at this point: a reproduction of Ryman's **Access, (1983)** [Fig.1] might convey the notion of a readymade, whereas the work perceived directly by the viewer indicates the subjective investment made by Ryman through the process of making. Despite the almost mechanical look of the work

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<sup>30</sup> Herkenhoff, "Monochromes, the Autonomy of Color, and the Centerless World."

<sup>31</sup> de Duve, "Irreproducible Ryman."

<sup>32</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1990).

when the viewer stands in front of the work the surface opens out the trace of the materials, which produce this appearance. Within this process, irreproducibility is one of the ideas at stake as de Duve rightly remarks.<sup>33</sup> Ryman belongs to a generation of American painters that includes, among others, Stella, Johns, and Noland, a generation whose work already seemed difficult to incorporate in Greenberg's vision of 'American-Type Painting' and what is more, Ryman's work has been associated, by critics, firstly with Minimalism and conceptual art, and then, when the pressing need arose to designate a specifically pictorial branch of minimalism, with *reductive painting*, *systemic painting*, *analytic painting*, *fundamental painting* and other brands of *peinture-peinture*. John Chilver, in his essay *If Display Becomes Materiality*, addresses this issue: "Ryman's work puzzles me. Whatever one's feeling about it, it is hard to write about. Ryman devised an unprecedented vocabulary for a mode of painting whose five key terms were: surfaces, signatures, markings, fastenings, and the—non—colour white. Consequently one obvious way of writing about it is simply to describe the facticity of these variables as encountered in individual works, which is more or less how commentators like Naomi Spector approached and is exactly how Ryman himself talks about it."<sup>34</sup> For Chilver, Ryman's work stands as a high tide of the painting as object, Chilver then links Ryman's work with artists like "...Palermo, Oiticica, Buren --who sought even more forthrightly to integrate painting with its architectural container-- 'as part of the room'".<sup>35</sup> If we follow Chilver's contention, we might claim that painting as object attempts to prescribe the relation between painting and the architectural space of display within the boundaries of painting.<sup>36</sup> Chilver's contention is accurate in regard to Ryman's work, as he clarifies: "Ryman's paintings were perhaps the last ones that could happily draw attention to their dependence upon the surrounding structure of the room, while all along looking resolutely undistracted by the room and whatever else it might contain. [...] We thereby approach the painting-as-object in terms of a contest of limits and of framing, where the painting attempts both to contain and crucially to *pictorialise* its own

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<sup>33</sup> de Duve, "Irreproducible Ryman."

<sup>34</sup> John Chilver, "If Display Becomes Materiality," in *Painting with Architecture in Mind*, ed. Alex - Whittaker Landrum, Edward (Sion Hill - Bath: Wunderkammer Press and Bath Spa University, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.p.116.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.p.117.

limit markers.<sup>37</sup> Helio Oiticica is also mentioned by Chilver as an example of an artist that attempted to integrate painting with the architectural space. Oiticica's *Box Bolides* and *Spatial Reliefs* are clear examples of such a relationship. But before embarking on an analysis of these works by Oiticica, I wish to mention his ***Invention No 15, (1959-62) (Oil and resin mixtures on wood fiberboard)*** [Fig.2]. *Invention N15* poses several issues relevant to this study. Firstly, it is connected to Herkenhoff's contention, mentioned above, regarding the dispersion of the idea of an art center within the structure of art history. Secondly, it creates a pressure to return to the analysis or question of the monochrome's temporality. It thus becomes clear that there is a similarity between Oiticica's *Invention N15, 1959-62*, and the white monochromes Robert Rauschenberg of a similar time interval. The question that Oiticica's work addresses is again the question of the neo-avant garde, because Oiticica's work is a clear example of what Foster calls the art that: "...invokes different, even incommensurable models, but less to act them out in a hysterical pastiche – as much as the 1980s – than to work them through to a reflexive practice – to turn the very imitations of these models into a critical consciousness of history".<sup>38</sup> I have mentioned above Buchloh's critique of Burger's account of the neo-avant garde and also mentioned that Burger presents the development of the historical avant-garde as punctual and final. Thus for Burger, a work of art, a shift in aesthetics, happens all at once and for all, so that any elaboration can only be a rehearsal.<sup>39</sup> By using the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, Foster makes an analogy in order to make another account of the neo-avant garde: "...historical and neo-avant garde are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of pretension and retention, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts – in short, in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition. On this analogy the avant-garde is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments."<sup>40</sup> For Foster this understanding is not possible at that initial moment because, he contends, the shift is "traumatic," therefore the reception of this change can only be fully comprehended afterwards. Within this

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.p.117.

<sup>38</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.p.10.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.p.29.

situation the readymade and the monochrome are precisely key figures to be considered. Thus we have two operations in relation to the historical and the neo avant-garde: the first one, “traumatic”, and the second one being restorative.<sup>41</sup> Thus for Foster – following the notion of deferred action – the historical avant-garde returns, “...and it continues to return, *but it returns from the future*: such is its paradoxical temporality”.<sup>42</sup> Yet it is precisely in regard to Oiticica that we need to address Henkerhoff’s contention in regard to the dispersion of a center in late modern painting. In his study of Oiticica’s work, Lucio Figueredo follows Herkenhoff’s remarks. For Figueredo, the *Spatial Reliefs*, the *Bolides*, or the *Parangoles* are not a consequence, or a stream of Constructivism, or for that matter any other modernist vanguards. Thus, Figueredo locates Oiticica’s work outside these traditions: “There is no category in the history of modern art into which these works may be lumped or to which they even can be specifically related”.<sup>43</sup> For Figueredo the relevant question regarding Oiticica’s work is the following: “How can we understand the artist [Oiticica] who decreed ‘the end of painting as a picture’, who’s *Spatial Reliefs*, *Bolides*, created environmental and sensory possibilities for painting?”<sup>44</sup> I have noted Chilver’s contention in regard to painting-as-object attempting to prescribe the relation between painting vis-à-vis architectural space of display.<sup>45</sup> Chilver points out that this is an unsure enterprise: “At any point painting could be swept up into an embrace of display in which it would become indistinguishable from its surroundings”.<sup>46</sup> For Oiticica this constitutes the “salvation” of painting: “I no longer have any doubt that the age of the end of painting had definitively been inaugurated. To me the dialectic surrounding the problem of painting has advanced along with my experience in the sense of transforming the painting into something else- to me the nao-objeto – so that it is no longer possible to accept development ‘within the picture’ because painting has already become depleted. Far from being the ‘death of painting’

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.p.29.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.p.29.

<sup>43</sup> Luciano Figueredo, ""The World Is the Museum" - Appropriation and Transformation in the Work of Helio Oiticica," in *Helio Oiticica -the Body of Colour*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramirez (London: Tate Publishing in association with The museum of Fine Arts Houston, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.p.109.

<sup>45</sup> Chilver, "If Display Becomes Materiality."

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.p.117.

this is its salvation, for true death would be a continuation of painting as such, as a 'support' for 'pictures'. How clear is all that now: that painting must move out into space in order to be complete, in its deepest integrity, not remaining on the surface, in appearance."<sup>47</sup> It is necessary then to further analyze Oiticica's *Spatial Reliefs* and *Box Bolides* in order to fully understand his contention. We also need to be aware that Oiticica was, as Wynne Phelan states, a master of materials<sup>48</sup> and that he considered colour as a completely independent order or register that has been regarded secondary to the pictorial support. Phelan stresses that for Oiticica colour [as such] "...has its own spatial and temporal dimension that could only be appreciated when released from the plane".<sup>49</sup> The ***Red Spatial Relief (Red), (1960) [Fig.3]*** explored Oiticica's favourite colour: "In the *Red Spatial Reliefs* the vibrant hues on the slim edges of the panels have the greatest colour intensity. The dark open voids at the ends of the works accentuate the bright yellow and orange edges, transforming them into piercing bands of colour".<sup>50</sup> More importantly, Oiticica controlled depth appreciation by applying gloss paint to highlight the different planes of the structure and in so doing, he complicates for the viewer the perception of planar relationships.<sup>51</sup> ***Box Bolide Ideal 05, (1963) [Fig.4]*** addresses even further Oiticica's concern in regard to the relation between colour, time and structure. As in the *Red Spatial Reliefs* the three-dimensional assembly of the *Box Bolides* is crucial as it offers the chance to experiment colour/light in tandem with time/motion. Constructed with low-ranking materials such as plywood and strips of wood, the *Box Bolides* have similarities with the *Spatial Reliefs*, as in both works Oiticica uses the narrow interstices to stress colour modulation. As Phelan explains, "In *Box Bolide 05 Ideal* the radial saw marks engraved into the thick wood play a significant role in surface texture, as do the different brush-stroke patterns and the peaks of impasto".<sup>52</sup> *Box Bolides* are important in Oiticica's work because they marked the end of Oiticica's experiments with painting. Moreover, as

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<sup>47</sup> Oiticica Helio, *Ho I Aspire to the Great Laberynth*, ed. Luciano - Pape Figueredo, Lygia - Salomao, Wally (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Rocco - Hereafter AAGL, 1986).

<sup>48</sup> Wynne Phelan, "To Bestow a Sense of Light: Helio Oiticica's Experimental Process In *helio Oiticica: The Body of Colour*," (London: Tate Publishing in association with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston 2007).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p.84.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p.84.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p.85.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p.89.

Figueredo contends, the most important value of the *Box Bolides* "...is the power of the ironic transformative act that Oiticica offers us, one that is practically devoid of formal mediation. He presents us with boxes that have been rejected by the world and yet contain essential parts of the world that 'is the museum'".<sup>53</sup>

Having discussed the works of Robert Ryman and Helio Oiticica as examples of monochromes as objects, a space opens to address two monochromes by Karla Black: ***Demands Are for Fixing, (2011) [Fig.5]*** and ***Forgetting Isn't Trying, (2011) [Fig.6]***. Black uses a wide range of materials for the construction of her work, such as petroleum jelly, marble dust, paint, cellophane, wood, plaster powder and powder paint and the outcome is a sort of wavering or fluctuation. For the critic and historian Briony Fer this wavering can be understood as an oscillation between sculpture and painting and on a more abstract plane materiality and immateriality<sup>54</sup> thus, "...the formal gesture has returned but only under certain transformed conditions. The first and most obvious one being that it always exists in the context of a *mise-en-scene*, which is theatrical. The second is that there is always a degree of illusionism by which I mean not a depiction of objects in the world but the fact that she often uses materials illusionistically rather than literally. A mountain of powder is falling; a drape of cellophane soars upward."<sup>55</sup> Fer mentions that Black's formal gesture is somehow an incursion into theatricality so at this point it is not possible to evade considering the dispute against Michael Fried's notion of absorptive pictorial virtues and theatricality. The debate about theatricality vis-à-vis painting started within the historical context in which artists like Ryman began to develop their work. This historical context reflected the conflict between Clement Greenberg and those critics following him, such as Michael Fried and the group of artists, in particular the minimalists who due to Greenberg's predominance, had to place themselves explicitly in connection to him, even though in counter

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<sup>53</sup> Figueredo, ""The World Is the Museum" - Appropriation and Transformation in the Work of Helio Oiticica."

<sup>54</sup> Briony Fer, "Karla Black - Scotland + Venice 2011," ed. Palazzo Pisani - The Fruitmarket Gallery (London: The Fruitmarket Gallery and The Henry Moore Foundation 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

distinction.<sup>56</sup> As de Duve rightly points out, it is peculiar that the main debates in regard to the art of that period (the 1960s) were determined "...around a critical doctrine that sets itself as retrospective and descriptive, yet becomes prospective and prescriptive in the very works of those artists who took it for granted and who therefore had to reject it in order to create".<sup>57</sup> Michael Fried's argument against theatricality is based on the distinction that he makes between two different modes of experience. In the minimalist experience the spectator perceives an object as what it literally is, something existing in space and time. According to Fried: "The literalist case against painting rests mainly on two counts: the relational character of almost all painting, and the virtual inescapability of pictorial illusion".<sup>58</sup> Fried elaborates that for the minimalists, painting is regarded as an art: "...on the verge of exhaustion, one in which the range of acceptable solutions to a basic problem –how to organize the surface of the picture- is severely restricted. The use of shaped rather than rectangular supports can, from the literalist point of view, merely prolong the agony: The obvious response is to give up working on a single plane in favor of three dimensions."<sup>59</sup> Fried describes the minimalist experience as one in which the relationship between spectator and object can be invested with drama; that is to say that the relationship can be made theatrical. In the other mode of experience such as in modernist painting and sculpture, the spectator is engaged by a formal configuration that appears as instantaneously present, thus the sense of time and place is suspended. For Fried, it is this second mode of experience that is introduced by authentic modernist art because what matters are the internal relationships which give the work of art its own identity in the perception of the viewer. Fried stresses the fact that what "...is at stake in this conflict is whether the paintings or objects in question are experienced as paintings or as objects, and what decides their identity as *painting* is their confronting of the demand that they hold as shapes. Otherwise they are experienced as nothing more than objects." <sup>60</sup> In fact, the question Fried

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<sup>56</sup> de Duve, "Irreproducible Ryman."

<sup>57</sup> Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>58</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood. essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p.149.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p.151.



attempts to answer is why the kind of 'objecthood' projected by minimalists would be antithetical to art, as understood from the formalist viewpoint of modernist painting. The answer for Fried is that: "...the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater, and theater is now the negation of art".<sup>61</sup> Fried argues that it is not possible to see works of art as mere objects. Modernist painting, according to Fried, can only suspend its own objecthood and preserve its essence, its pictorial specificity, through the medium of shape.<sup>62</sup>

The emphasis on the qualities of modernist painting and sculpture is developed by Fried by contrasting these with the aims claimed by artists such as Judd for whom what really matters is whether or not a given work is able to sustain interest: "The interest of a given work resides, in Judd's view, both in its character as a whole and in the sheer *specificity* of the materials of which it is made".<sup>63</sup> Fried mentions also another distinction between literalist work and modernist painting, that is the question of time. Fried regards the literalist experience as persisting in time. Thus, he concludes that the literalist preoccupation with time (with the duration of the experience) is paradigmatically theatrical. Theater then addresses the idea of temporality, of time both passing and to come. The question of time marks for Fried a key difference between literalist work and modernist painting. In the latter, the viewer's experience has no duration, or as Fried expresses it: "...at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest".<sup>64</sup> Precisely for that conception of temporality Fried condemned Minimalism. Foster considers that Fried's contention is accurate in that Minimalism did inaugurate a concern with time as well as the kind of perception that the viewer would have of this kind of work.<sup>65</sup> Minimalism settled the work of art among objects and redefined it in terms of place. In this rearrangement the spectator, rather than scan the surface of a work for an observation of the properties of the medium, is induced to explore the perceptual consequences of a particular object – *specific object* in Judd's terms – in a given site. This is

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.p.154.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.p.160.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.p.165.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.p.167.

<sup>65</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century.*

according to Foster the key reorientation that Minimalism proposes.<sup>66</sup> I consider that addressing the question of the monochrome as object, or painting as object it would be required to follow Thierry de Duve in order to follow a different approach in regard to the controversy between theatricality and anti-theatricality. As mentioned, the two aspects of the contest between Greenberg, Fried and the minimalists were specificity (the conflict between painting and objects) and literalism, which follows from specificity. As previously mentioned, de Duve argues that the problem of literalism during the mid-1960s was not a real issue, the real issue for de Duve was the understanding of the epistemological significance of the readymade at that historical time.<sup>67</sup>

Like Foster, de Duve maintains that Minimalism should be interpreted in relation to the reception of the readymade in the 1960s; and that in fact, the question to answer is not if there is any threshold between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, or painting and objects. Rather, the question should focus on "...the symbolic threshold which separated and articulated two kinds of naming: the specific name of painting and the generic name of art".<sup>68</sup> De Duve argues that Ryman's work demonstrates that it is feasible to choose painting instead of art if the painter achieves two conditions: 1- invests in his own name each of the gestures of the traditional craft of painting and 2- accounts for this investment: "...that he makes it happen at the nominal threshold, from which, in return, his gestures will name him a painter: though, unlike Flavin's neons".<sup>69</sup>

Returning to the previous commentary, Fer points out that regarding the materials Black uses we can refer back to the historical avant-garde processes with materials. She mentions Vladimir Tatlin and his reliefs and counter reliefs that burst the logic of the wall. It is well known the concept of "faktura" that refers both to the process of making and to the materials used. Fer contends that the narrative of modernist painting disregarded this idea of "faktura".<sup>70</sup> But more importantly what Fer maintains is that: "...Black's work combines and

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.p.38.

<sup>67</sup> de Duve, "Irreproducible Ryman.", p.123.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.p.123.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.p.124.

<sup>70</sup> Fer, "Karla Black - Scotland + Venice 2011."

confounds these narratives of abstraction. Her work is powerfully abstract in the sense that it resists symbols even as it seems to court certain kind of metaphorical association. This can be seen most clearly in her deployment of a pictorial language of pure gesture, which is made possible not by the way she applies materials, but the way she physically handles them. The movements that have gone into making the work include hoisting, pulling, dragging, lifting and knotting."<sup>71</sup> Fer's contention in regard to the connection between the work of Karla Black and Tatlin, and the concept of "faktura" gets us back to the circularity of processes in art previously mentioned by Birnbaum, and also to the assertion made by Foster about the interconnection between the historical avant-garde and the neo avant-garde. With Black's work we have in contemporary context the same scene of pretension and retention mentioned by Foster in regard to the historical and neo avant-gardes, "...the complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts".<sup>72</sup> Fer stresses in Black's work: "...materials are very far from being merely literal. Cellophane seems to soar, as if it is immaterial, as it defies all structure, and most of all gravity. Through this and other materials she creates a different kind of metaphore but one that is potentially as complex as that traditionally associated with modernist painting".<sup>73</sup> In *Demands Are for Fixing*, 2011 **[Fig.5]** the cellophane implies display. In contrast, in *Forgetting Isn't Trying*, 2011**[Fig.6]**, it addresses a series of objects situated directly on the floor. Thus, Black's work suggests the possibility of an aesthetic that can be pictorial as well as sculptural. Fer contends that: "...the pieces of Black's work stand in melancholic isolation".<sup>74</sup> This reading of Black's work can be further advanced through the analysis of Angela de la Cruz's monochromes.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*.

<sup>73</sup> Fer, "Karla Black - Scotland + Venice 2011."

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

### **1.3 Angela de la Cruz: The Melancholic Monochrome**

Melancholy and contemporary painting seems to be a matter of great concern for some art historians such as Yve-Alain Bois in his essay, *Painting: The task of Mourning* <sup>75</sup> in his analysis of the death of painting, specifically the death of abstract painting.<sup>76</sup> Bois considers that through the linear conception of history in painting and especially with Greenberg's essentialism: "...its idea that something like the essence of painting existed, veiled somehow, and waiting to be unmasked, the enterprise of abstract painting could not but understand its birth as calling for its end".<sup>77</sup> It is well known that Bois interprets this "end" not only as a function of abstract painting's essentialism; he considers this essentialism as the outcome of a bigger historical crisis: industrialization and mass-production.<sup>78</sup> "Mass production seemed to bode the end of painting through its most elaborate mise-en-scene, the invention of the readymade. Photography and mass production were also the base of the essentialist urge of modernist painting. Challenged by the mechanical apparatus of photography, and by the mass-produced, painting had to redefine its status [...] The beginnings of this agonistic struggle have been well described by Meyer Shapiro: the emphasis on the touch, on texture, and on the gesture in modern painting is a consequence of the division of labor inherent in industrial production. Artists were compelled to demonstrate the exceptional nature of their model of production. From Courbet to Pollock one witnesses a practice of one-upmanship. In many ways the various "returns to painting" we are witnessing today seem like the farcical repetition of this historical progression."<sup>79</sup> Bois considers Robert Ryman as the ultimate example of a [abstract] painter whose exceptional domain of manual mastery sets him apart: "By his dissection of the gesture, or of the pictorial raw material, and by his (non-stylistic) analysis of the stroke, Ryman produces a kind of dissolution of the relationship between the trace and its organic referent. The body of the

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<sup>75</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning " in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.p.230

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.p.230.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.p.231.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.p.231.

artist moves toward the condition of photography: the division of labor is interiorized".<sup>80</sup> For Bois the key fact is that Ryman's work gets close to the readymade but at the same time marks the threshold of readymade's negation. Alongside Bois' account, Thierry de Duve's essay *Irreproducible Ryman* <sup>81</sup> **should be noted.** Here de Duve considers Ryman's paintings as unphotographable. We get then, according to Bois, to the 'heroic' status of Ryman: "...is more accurately the guardian of the tomb of modernist painting, at once knowing of the end and also knowing the impossibility of arriving at it without working it through".<sup>82</sup> Ryman would then be the exemplary painter because he is the one who avoids mania and melancholy. Bois states: "Painting might not be dead, its vitality will only be tested once we are cured of our mania and our melancholy and settling our historical task: the difficult task of mourning".<sup>83</sup> Nigel Cooke's contention in regard to Bois' assertion is relevant at this point: "Does *this* not sound like the work of a 'manic mourner'? The knowledge of loss, the grieving for the mode so cherished yet the awareness of absence? There seems to be a contradiction here. Critical of Peter Halley's conduit paintings and Ross Bleckner's 'failed op art paintings,' Bois calls *these* artists manic mourners. Yet in their appropriation of the 'look' of various strains of modernism, whilst maintaining an industrialized mode of production (stenciling, masking) and pictorialising abstraction (picturing things that look like abstract paintings), could they not be said to satisfy Bois' agenda?" <sup>84</sup>

Yet the works of Peter Halley and Ross Bleckner do not satisfy Bois' agenda, or Foster's. In his essay *Signs Taken for Wonders* <sup>85</sup> Foster contends that these painters, alongside Jack Goldstein, do not assume or reconsider abstract painting: "...so much as they *simulate* it. [Their] paintings are simulacra rather than copies, and as such they function in a strategically different way. Whereas the copy produces the model as original, the simulacrum calls into question the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.p.231.

<sup>81</sup> de Duve, "Irreproducible Ryman."

<sup>82</sup> Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning".

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.p.243.

<sup>84</sup> Cooke, "The Ambivalence of the Undead - Entropy, Duality and the Sublime as Perspectives on Contemporary Painting".

<sup>85</sup> Hal Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," in *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. Frances Colpitt (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

very notions of the copy and of the model".<sup>86</sup> Foster calls this perspective "conventionalism", this means that painting is made "as a *sign* of painting"<sup>87</sup> as opposed to the works of Ryman or Brice Marden in which according to Foster there is a historical collusion with material practices.<sup>88</sup> Thus for Foster within "conventionalism" there is not any act of recuperation nor any act of retrieval through memory, this conventionalist logic leads to an obligatory demise: "...painting must die as a practice so that it might be reborn as a sign".<sup>89</sup> Foster asserts that this post-historical point of view leads artists into various forms of pastiche, and in case of the abstractionists mentioned previously into a "passive pessimism" stating in turn that: "Thus the melancholy of Bleckner, for whom Op is an appropriate metaphor of a history which reduces out experience, memory, judgment, thus too, the defeatism of Philip Taaffe".<sup>90</sup> There is a sense of pessimism overarching in Foster's remarks and this pessimism in some sense follows de Duve's *Kant After Duchamp*: "...the history of modern painting is melancholically looked at in hindsight as if it still had its future, while its achievements already belong to the past".<sup>91</sup> Although de Duve maintains that modernism in some sense keeps a possible time ahead through the process of re-reading. At this stage it is necessary to pay special attention to the following contention by de Duve in regard to the program of modernism: "Inasmuch as hindsight forces us to recognize that the 'program' of modernism was accomplished in the very brief time span that separates Seurat from Malevich's *Black Square*, does not Duchamp's note invite us to reinterpret this 'program' not through the grid of its own regulative ideas – pure visibility, pure colour, pure painting – but through Duchamp's idea of *pictorial nominalism*, as it takes the modernist regulative idea as its referent? Does not it compel us to take a second look at the feeling of impossibility that has propelled the history of modernism and to relocate that feeling in the objective conditions that have made painting useless?"<sup>92</sup> Yet a disagreement with de Duve's contention must be raised, firstly because of his idea regarding *nominalism*. His idea of naming

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.p.110.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.p.111.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.p.111.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.p.111.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.p.112.

<sup>91</sup> de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.p.174.

as replacement to making, naming as a disembodied act of judgment seems to be of little value to understand painting. Secondly it should be claimed that the project of Modernism couldn't be considered accomplished or finished with Malevich's *Black Square*.

In examining the various discourses of Bois, Foster and de Duve's and especially in regard for their concerns with melancholy in regard to contemporary painting, what is striking is that the term melancholy is continuously mentioned almost without any explanation or analysis in regard to its broader and especially psychoanalytic understanding so it becomes necessary to address this question in order to fully understand its implication in regard to modernist painting and contemporary painting. The basic modern studies about melancholy are constituted in early modernity by Sigmund Freud<sup>93</sup> and Karl Abraham's<sup>94</sup> essays. In reading these essays the similar features between the two conditions, mourning and melancholia can be understood and both associated to a loss: "...the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one. Such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition."<sup>95</sup> The pathological aspects of melancholia according to Freud are a painful dejection, the loss of interest in the outside world and more importantly: "...a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment".<sup>96</sup> This last symptom is crucial because it is basically the one that differentiates the two conditions, as the disturbance of the self-esteem is absent in mourning.<sup>97</sup> As George Didi-Huberman contends, we are confronted to the symptom as a form of constraint to unreason, where facts can no longer be distinguished from fictions, where facts are essentially fictive and fictions

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<sup>93</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Complete Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XIV*, ed. James Strachey (London: THE HOGARTH PRESS AND THE INSTITUTE OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS, 1917).

<sup>94</sup> Karl Abraham, *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham* (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1973).

<sup>95</sup> Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia."

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p.244.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p.244.

become as a consequence efficacious.<sup>98</sup> Apart from the lowering of the self-regard, the other aspect that differentiates both conditions is that in melancholia the loss is that of a more ideal kind, i.e., the object of desire has not perhaps disappeared but has been lost as an object of love. "This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious. In mourning we found that the inhibition and loss of interest are fully accounted for by the work of mourning in which then ego is absorbed. In melancholia, the unknown loss will result in a similar internal work and will therefore be responsible for the melancholic inhibition. The difference is that the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely."<sup>99</sup> This articulates clearly the crucial difference between mourning and melancholia, because in mourning it is the present world that has become poorer, whereas in melancholia, it is the ego itself that endures this condition.<sup>100</sup> Therefore for Freud what the melancholic is telling us points out to a loss in regard to his ego. The point here is that the desire of self-punishment and self-accusations in the melancholic very often apply to someone or something else: "Every time one examines the facts this conjecture is confirmed. So we find the key to the clinical picture: *we perceive that the reproaches against a loved object which has been shifted it on to the patient's own ego* [...] the object-cathexis proved to have little power of resistance and was brought to an end. But the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss."<sup>101</sup> Thus for Freud the erotic cathexis of the melancholic in regard to the lost object has a double alteration. On the one hand, it regresses through identification; on the other hand, it is pulled back to the field of sadism:

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<sup>98</sup> George Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images - Questioning the Ends Of a Certain history of Art* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 2005).

<sup>99</sup> Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia."

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.p.246.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.p.248.



“It is sadism alone that solves the riddle of the tendency to suicide which makes melancholia so interesting –and so dangerous”.<sup>102</sup> The other side of the condition is the tendency to swap into mania. In melancholia the ego has given in to the complex, in manic conditions somehow the ego accomplishes a dominion on the complex and leaves it aside.”<sup>103</sup> The maniac thus shows liberation from the object of grievance, but by seeking voraciously for a new object-cathexis.<sup>104</sup> For Freud the main conflict between the melancholic and the lost object comes as a consequence of “ambivalence”: “The ambivalence is either constitutional, i.e. it is an element of every love-relation formed by this particular ego, or else it proceeds precisely from those experiences that involved the threat of losing the object. [...] In melancholia, accordingly, countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other; the one seeks to detach the libido from the object, the other to maintain this position of the libido against the assault.”<sup>105</sup> Therefore consciousness does not play a significant part in the process of melancholia: it is an unconscious process, whereas in the process of mourning, the ego accepts the loss of the object of desire and lets go of it, the melancholic faces a much more complex condition: it is not only the loss of the object but also his own state of ambivalence towards the object mentioned before, and the retrogression of libido into the ego.<sup>106</sup> Analyzing Freud’s essay on mourning and melancholia, Karl Abraham agrees with Freud in regard to the similarities between the two conditions, but also points out the connection between melancholia and obsessional neuroses. What connects these conditions, Abraham contends, is the disengagement of the libido from the external world.<sup>107</sup> For Abraham what Freud demonstrated is that the melancholic, by introjecting the lost object, tries to get it back. This condition is regarded by Abraham as an, “...archaic form of mourning”<sup>108</sup> and this condition is regarded as “archaic” by Abraham because there is in the melancholic an essential distress on the libidinal relation to the lost object: “It rests on a severe conflict of

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.p.252.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.p.254.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.p.255.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.p.256.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.p.258.

<sup>107</sup> Abraham, *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham*.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.p.437.

ambivalent feelings, from which he can only escape by turning against himself the hostility he originally felt towards his object".<sup>109</sup> There are two stages then for both Freud and Abraham, the loss of the object of desire and the re-absorption of it. Abraham gives further clarification in regard to these two stages. He coincides with Freud in relation to the libidinal-cathexis withdrawn from the object, which is at the same time introjected into the ego, exposing the latter to the "ambivalence" aforementioned by Freud. Therefore melancholia would imply that that event: "...had a pathogenic effect because the patient was able to regard it in his unconscious as a repetition of an original infantile traumatic experience and to treat it as such. In no other form of neurosis, it seems to me, does the compulsive tendency to repeat an experience operate so strongly as in manic-depressive illnesses."<sup>110</sup> In addressing the etiological elements of the condition, Abraham points out especially to a severe wound to infantile narcissism. The melancholic as a child got the impression of being abandoned so to speak. The reiteration of this primary wound in later stages in life would be then the outbreak of a melancholic depression.<sup>111</sup> After this outbreak the melancholic's desire of revenge against the lost object obtains pleasure in distressing the ego.<sup>112</sup> Within this condition of "archaic" mourning there are two sides clearly differentiated: while in melancholia the super-ego distresses the ego, in maniac state, this fact is reversed through the belief of self-importance that characterizes the maniac condition: "The 'shadow of the object' which had fallen on his ego has passed away. He is able to breathe freely once more, and he gives himself up to his sense of regained freedom with a kind of frenzy".<sup>113</sup> Julia Kristeva states in regard to melancholy that to write about this condition would only make sense if this action, writing, takes as its starting point the sorrow of melancholia. The starting point suggested by Kristeva is relevant in regard to the work of Angela de la Cruz. Writing about de la Cruz's work, Gilda Williams mentions a statement made by the artist: "One day I just broke the painting. Not in anger but in sadness".<sup>114</sup> This is a vital

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.p.438.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.p.456.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.p.460.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.p.464.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.p.471.

<sup>114</sup> Gilda Williams, "Angela De La Cruz," in *New Perspectives in Painting - Vitamin P*, ed. Valerie Breuvert (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002).

starting point in order to understand de la Cruz's work and her process of making, yet before that it is necessary to analyze further Kristeva's own position about melancholia. What Kristeva adds in relation to the writings of Freud, Abraham and Klein is the following notion: "...an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound so precious that no outside agent –subject or agent– can be used as a referent. For such narcissistic depressed persons, sadness is really the sole object, more precisely it is a substitute object they become attached to, an object they tame and cherish for lack of another."<sup>115</sup> Kristeva contends that the melancholic does not mourn an object such as the object of love which is mentioned by Freud and Abraham but rather a "Thing" and this is regarded by Kristeva as the real: "...that does not lend itself to lead to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated".<sup>116</sup> Consequently, while Freud sees melancholia as a particular kind of object relation, Kristeva argues that the problem is located in the failure of the relation as such to materialize. There is no object for the melancholic, only sadness as an ersatz of an object; or as Kristeva goes on to say, there is only a 'Thing'. Hence, melancholia tends towards a loss of words, of taste for life that propels towards despair. No object can replace the loss, no sign can express the loss, and desire fails to emerge or materialise. In other words, melancholia is the reverse of love with its synthesis of idealization of affect. Melancholia holds the two elements apart.<sup>117</sup> Therefore this condition makes it impossible for any object to replace the irreplaceable. Kristeva then tries to find a way to approach this "Thing" (sublimation is for her an attempt to do so) within the poetic form and it is this particular form, the poetic, because Kristeva maintains that although "...unbelieving in language, the depressive persons are affectionate, wounded to be sure, but prisoners of affect. The affect is their Thing".<sup>118</sup> For Kristeva sadness guides us into the realm of affects. She contends that although irreducible to its verbal expression, sadness, like all affects: "...is the *psychic representation of energy displacements* caused by

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<sup>115</sup> Abraham, *Selected Papers of Karl Abraham*.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.p.13.

<sup>117</sup> John Lechte, "Art, Love and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva," in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love - the Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. Andrew and Fletcher Benjamin, John (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.p.14.

external or internal traumas".<sup>119</sup> The melancholic, stranded in the past, has a notion of memory that precludes any possibility of moving forward. Thus, the psychic object of the melancholic would be a memory event that belongs to a lost time.<sup>120</sup> Kristeva develops the notion of a primary abandonment mentioned by Freud and its consequent narcissistic wound, thus the sadness of the melancholic would be "the negative impotence": the other is moving away but the self nonetheless does not accept this desertion. At this point Kristeva considers the outbreak of imaginary creation in art in relationship to melancholia; and it is precisely, she contends, that the narrative of the creation processes are governed by the aforementioned primary processes. She thus points out to "symbolic processes", the logic of discourse, and "semiotic processes", that are related to displacement and condensation. In regard to the symbolic, the melancholic confronts this stage but only to close it through denial and maintaining the "*unnameable jouissance*" of an omnipotent affect.<sup>121</sup> Here it becomes important to refer to Freud's essay *On Transience*,<sup>122</sup> in which Freud links the themes of mourning, beauty and transience: "Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. [...] I declare, that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it. As regards the beauty of Nature, each time it is destroyed by winter it comes again next year, so that in relation to the length of our lives it can in fact be regarded as eternal."<sup>123</sup> Thus, sublimation could be the counterbalance to loss, that loss to which the libido remains strongly attached. For Kristeva the question is then the following: "Enigma of mourning or enigma of the beautiful? And what is their relationship?" The beautiful might then appear as the: "...absolute and indestructible restorer of the deserting object".<sup>124</sup> The dynamics of sublimation, by summoning up primary processes and idealization, weaves a hyper sign around and with the depressive void. This is allegory, as lavishness of that which no longer is, but

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.p.21.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.p.61.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.p.66.

<sup>122</sup> Sigmund Freud, "On Transience," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume Xiv*, ed. James Strachey (London: THE HOGARTH PRESS AND THE INSTITUTE OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS, 1916).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.p.305.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.p.305.

which regains for myself a higher meaning because I am able to remake nothingness, better than it was and within an unchanging harmony, here and now and forever, for the sake of someone else.<sup>125</sup> For Kristeva, sublimation resists death but she adds that the adoption of the sublime is no longer libidinal, rather it is disengaged and therefore it is then an artifice. Kristeva mentions Walter Benjamin's notion of allegory, and in particular the *Trauerspiel* (mourning play) as *the* one that best achieves the melancholic tension. "By shifting back and forth from the disowned meaning, still present just the same, it endows the lost signifier with a signifying pleasure, a resurrectional jubilation even to the stone and corpse, by asserting itself as coextensive with the subjective experience of a named melancholia –of melancholy *jouissance*".<sup>126</sup> In regard to painting it is well known the analysis made by Kristeva of Holbein's *Dead Christ*, (1520-22), a corpse strangely alone, an isolated corpse that invests the image with a melancholic weight. "...A new morality resides in this painting. [...] Christ's dereliction is here at its worst; forsaken by the father, he is apart from all of us".<sup>127</sup> In short, there is no coded rhetoric in Holbein to alleviate the anguish induced by the intimation of death. Holbein's minimalism places the spectator in touch with death and its synonyms: the unnamable, the real, the void. Holbein evokes the sadness of separation, enables us to relive it in signs (albeit minimal) and to come as close as possible to experiencing death.<sup>128</sup> For Kristeva Holbein's *Dead Christ* is the image of man holding death, taking death into his very existence "as the endmost ethos of his non-sacred reality". For Kristeva it is, therefore, the foundation of a new dignity: "... [Holbein's] melancholy moment (an actual or imaginary loss of meaning, an actual or imaginary despair) summoned up his aesthetic activity, which overcame the melancholy latency while keeping its trace. [...] The economy of depression is supported by an omnipotent object, a monopolizing Thing rather than the focus of metonymical desire, which "might account for" the tendency to protect oneself from it through, among other means, a splurge of sensations, satisfactions, passions, one as elated as it is aggressive, as intoxicating as it is indifferent."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.p.99.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.p.102.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.p.113.

<sup>128</sup> Lechte, "Art, Love and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva."

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.p.137.

Holbein's *Dead Christ* demonstrates that it is still possible to paint, to make an artwork when the artist is confronted not with desire but with distress represented by death, a distress that melancholia translates as a symptom. "Between classicism and mannerism [Holbein's] minimalism is the metaphor of severance: between life and death, meaning and non-meaning, it is an intimate, slender response of our melancholia".<sup>130</sup> In arguing that what Kristeva adds in relation to the writings of Freud and Abraham, is the notion of an "unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound so precious that no outside agent can be used as a referent". This assertion by Kristeva, alongside with her account of melancholia as a "collapse of language," could be related to Didi-Huberman's distinction between "...to know without seeing or to see without knowing. There is a loss in either case".<sup>131</sup> For Didi-Huberman the very distinction of the empirical vis-à-vis the rational, fails to "apply" to artistic images.<sup>132</sup> We would need then another kind of knowledge to replace the couple thesis – antithesis, we would need to proceed dialectically: "...of thinking the thesis with *its* antithesis, the architecture with its flaws, the rule with its transgression, the discourse with its slips of the tongue".<sup>133</sup> This would be a kind of non-specular knowledge, a knowledge that would be able to think the work of not-knowledge; in the case of melancholia, the "collapse of language" as evoked by Kristeva. Didi-Huberman asserts that it was Freud that inaugurated this way of thinking and for Didi Huberman, Freud's understanding of the notion of symptom is "...a decisive and new way of *seeing*: which is why we must come to halt here when the image catches us in play of not-knowledge".<sup>134</sup> Following this he further states that: "It is with the dream and the symptom that Freud smashed the box of representation. And with them that he opened, which is to say rent and liberated, the notion of the image. Far from comparing the dream with a painting or a figurative drawing, he insisted on its value as distortion *Enstellung* and on the play of logical ruptures by which the "spectacle" of the dream is often breached, as by a perforated rain."<sup>135</sup> Within

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.p.137.

<sup>131</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images - Questioning the Ends Of a Certain history of Art*.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.p.142.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.p.144.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.p.144.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.p.144.

this distortion we thus have an “outside-subject image”: “...a kind of image that will project a retrenchment: the sole survival, simultaneously a sovereign reminder and the trace of an erasure. A visual agent of disappearance. [...] So the ground of certainty crumbles. Anything becomes possible: co-presentation can mean agreement *and* disagreement; simple presentation can itself be an effect of co-presentation – through the process of identification.”<sup>136</sup> Here we are confronted with Freud’s notion of *figurability* and what *figurability* shows is how the representation “is opened” and shows us more what we often see in the representation of painting.<sup>137</sup> It is well known that art historians, in analyzing art images have paid attention to signs, symbols or the manifestation of stylistic phenomena, but very rarely to symptoms. Didi-Huberman maintains that this is so, because to look at the symptom “...would be to risk their eyes in the central rend of images, in its quite troubled efficacy. That would have to accept the constraint of a not knowledge and thus to dislodge themselves from the position of the subject *who knows*”.<sup>138</sup> The symptom speaks to us of the infernal scansion, the *anadyomene* movement of the visual in the visible and of presence in representation.<sup>139</sup> We have an example of Didi-Huberman’s contention in Erwin Panofsky’s analysis of Durer’s *Melancholia* (1520-22). This analysis belongs to what Didi-Huberman names “pre-Freudian reason”. It is well known that in his interpretation of Durer’s *Melancholia*, Panofsky mentions the physiological tradition in regard to the theory of the four humors and also the distinction between the mechanical and liberal arts. For Panofsky the outcome of Durer’s engraving is “...an intellectualization of melancholy on the one hand, and a humanization of geometry on the other. [...] A melancholy gifted with all that is implied in the word geometry- in short, a ‘Melancholia artificialis’ or artist’s melancholy”.<sup>140</sup> For Didi-Huberman, in Panofsky’s analysis the system of interpretation – theoretical and historical – is closed, because in Panofsky’s view, Durer would be the ‘artist-scientist-genius of the Renaissance.’<sup>141</sup> A powerful system where one perceives that desire to synthesis, the desire of

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.p.148.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.p.155.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.p.162.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.p.162.

<sup>140</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Durer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

<sup>141</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images - Questioning the Ends Of a Certain history of Art*.

leaving no reminder, precisely because it would entail leaving a number of things in the lurch, or the shadow of a paradoxical will to not know anything about the work.<sup>142</sup> For Didi-Huberman Panofsky's analysis of Durer: "...leaves out the fact that Durer's art also articulates a religious paradigm, the imitation of Christ paradigm, in which melancholy found a field of application as paradoxical as it was sovereign. Durer's self-portrait as a melancholy artist referenced, I think, a figurative practice of *imitation Christi* – which basically presupposes that Christ could also have provided the ultimate example of melancholy in whose image men modeled theirs."<sup>143</sup> Such is Panofsky's position in regard to melancholia that he keeps the synthesis but denies the symptoms.<sup>144</sup> On the contrary to this, it is well known that it is the symptom in psychoanalysis that must be taken into account because the temporality of the symptom is modulated within the play of advance and regression. The symptom symbolizes events that have taken place and within this play of advance and regression, a degree of repetition is involved. Foster maintains that here repetition is both a draining of significance and a defending from affect: "Clearly this is one function of repetition, at least as understood by Freud: to repeat a traumatic event (in actions, in dreams, in images) in order to integrate it into a psychic economy, a symbolic order".<sup>145</sup>

By analyzing Warhol's *White Burning Car III* (1963) and *Ambulance Disaster* (1963), Foster claims that Warhol's repetitions in regard to these works, suggest an obsessive fixation on the object in melancholy. Furthermore, Warhol repetitions "...not only reproduce traumatic effects: they also *produce* them. Somehow in these repetitions, then, several contradictory things occur at the same time: a warding away of traumatic significance *and* an opening out to it, a defending against traumatic affect *and* a producing of it".<sup>146</sup> Here Foster follows Lacan's definition of the traumatic as a missed-encounter with the real and as missed, the real cannot be represented, only repeated: indeed it must be

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.p.172.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.p.173.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.p.175.

<sup>145</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.p.132.



repeated. Thus repetition is not reproduction, and Foster picks this up for his argument in regard to Warhol, repetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation: "Rather, repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic".<sup>147</sup> Foster's attention to these works by Warhol becomes relevant in relation to the analysis of Angela de la Cruz's ***Shrunk (2000) [Fig. 7]***. As Gilda Williams points out, *Shrunk (2000)* "...resembles a smashed automobile hood, like if Warhol's car-crashes come to life 30 years later".<sup>148</sup> De la Cruz's work addresses, as Octavio Paz would say, both sides of melancholy spirit: the brooding and the furious. Repetition as destruction is essential in her work, in ***Homeless II (1996) [Fig. 8]***, the painting has been broken in two and abandoned into the corner of the room, and it is precisely the variety of battering that de la Cruz inflicts to her paintings the main issue that Williams remarks.<sup>149</sup> Damage is also inflicted in ***Ready to Wear (Red), (1999) [Fig. 9]*** where the canvas has been smashed from right to left. Although de la Cruz's work, has evolved into something that is nuanced in different ways more recently. Commenting on the works on aluminum showed in de la Cruz's exhibition *Transfer* at Lisson Gallery in 2011, Phyllida Barlow observes that there is now in de la Cruz's works a kind of calming effect as consequence of the layering of coated paint applied to the crushed aluminum. In ***Compressed (Violet), (2011) [Fig. 10]***, "The monotonous, repetitive, lined strokes of the brush are slow in tempo, anaesthetizing the potential energy of the crushed form beneath. More sealed than painted, more encased than coated; the paint holds, freezes and tightens. It is paralyzing what lies beneath or protecting it?"<sup>150</sup> For Barlow, de la Cruz's previous works were "forensic", as they pointed to their existence in their own syntax: "In-between, caught off-guard, these paintings seemed to be salvaged remains. [...] Precision finds a different methodology with these current works in *Transfer*, the clinically manufactured aluminum boxes are achieved under strict instructions. The crushing process is executed by two forklift truck-operators who have been instructed to squash an

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.p.132.

<sup>148</sup> Williams, "Angela De La Cruz."

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.p.64.

<sup>150</sup> Phyllida Barlow, "Keeping a Distance," in *Transfer - Angela de la Cruz*, ed. Lisson Gallery (London: Lisson Gallery publication N 53, 2011).

aluminum oblong.<sup>151</sup> De la Cruz's paintings compel a twofold reading for the viewer as there are both sculptural and pictorial languages at play, thus the viewer needs to circulate *around* them. As in the previous works there is a strong sense of touch in *Compressed (Violet)*, (2011) but now as Barlow argues that: "...touch in an uncanny sense. [...] The evidence that the hand has been used is eradicated without a trace".<sup>152</sup> The surfaces of the works in *Transfer* are immaculate; there is a massive amount of work involved in the application of the paint that is in a kind of perfect continuity with the overall grain of the surfaces. That the object has undergone a kind of catastrophe remains completely evident, and yet it is equally evident that this damaged object has been treated with as much care as if it had been a pristine one, or indeed more – that through the processes of painting, it has been redeemed.<sup>153</sup>

Having addressed the different notions of melancholia in this section in order to clarify the concept in its relation to painting and also Thierry de Duve's appraisal in regard to Ryman's work and the connection that Ryman stresses with photography on his paintings, paintings which de Duve named "irreproducible," de Duve surpasses the contention between photography and painting through Duchamp's readymade: "Duchamp's 'invention' of the readymade in so far as it repeats within the field of painting, the invention of photography, of which it is, quite literally, the after affect through which pictorial practice took cognizance of the initial traumatism that produced those 'entirely new functions' of which Benjamin spoke: since Niépce, the possibility of producing ready-made painting has traumatized painting, which is only slowly beginning to recover."<sup>154</sup> For de Duve what Ryman's work teaches the viewer is the fact that painting "must work through" this trauma by explicitly overinvesting the wide range of elements of the pictorial process – hyper-cathexis Freud would say.<sup>155</sup> Angela de la Cruz proceeds, as has been mentioned, through an almost paradoxical restrained process of making: destruction as creation, in

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.p.9.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.p.10.

<sup>153</sup> Barry Schwabsky, "Angela De La Cruz and Crazy Jane," in *Transfer - Angela de la Cruz*, ed. Lisson Gallery (London: Lisson Gallery publication N 53 2011).

<sup>154</sup> de Duve, "Irreproducible Ryman."

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.p.122.

order to produce isolated, compelling paintings. An isolation that leads us back to the remarks made by Kristeva on Holbein's work: "Holbein created heroes of modern times; they stand strait-laced, sober, and upright. Secretive, too: as real as can be and yet indecipherable. They simply remain upright around a void that makes them strangely lonesome. Self-confident. And close."<sup>156</sup>

#### **1.4 The Blind Spot: Chinese Ceramics**

Michael Newman argues that: "The blind spot marks that point in the field of vision [we could refer also to the field of discourse] that we cannot see".<sup>157</sup> Could there be a claim that Chinese ceramics have remained unseen within the history and discourses that relate to the monochrome or at least within the discourse that refers to the monochrome going back from the monochromes of the historical avant-garde until the present. Although the focus is on painting, the discussion being assembled is also about the nature of visibility and the way in which visibility and discourse cohere. Thus it is necessary to step out of the formal frame established in order that other cultural passages and practices might also be considered because they can be understood as remaining outside the *historical a priori* mentioned by Michael Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.<sup>158</sup> Foucault's concept of the *historical a priori* requires clarification and as he explains in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: "Different *oeuvres*, dispersed books, that whole mass of texts that belong to a single discursive formation –and so many authors who know or do not know one another, criticize one another, invalidate one another, pillage one another, meet without knowing it and obstinately intersect their unique discourses in a web of which they are not the masters- all these various figures and individuals do not communicate solely by the logical succession of propositions that they advance, nor by the

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.p.122.

<sup>157</sup> Michael Newman, "The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing " in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act - Selected from the Tate Collection* ed. The Drawing Center and Tate (New York and London: Tate Publishing and The Drawing Center, New York 2003).

<sup>158</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

recurrence of themes, nor by the obstinacy of a meaning transmitted, and rediscovered; they communicated by the form of positivity of their discourse, or more exactly, this form of positivity - and the conditions of operation of the enunciative function - defines a field in which formal identities, thematic continuities, translations of concepts, and polemical interchanges may be deployed. Thus positivity plays the role of what might be called a *historical a priori*.<sup>159</sup> Thus discourse according to Foucault has a quite specific meaning, it refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking. Thus a discursive formation is the way meanings are connected together in a particular discourse. Foucault describes discursive formations as “systems of dispersion”<sup>160</sup> in that they consist of the relationship between parts of the discourse. Our sense of our self is made through the operation of discourse, and our relationship to objects, relations and places. If we use discourse to designate the forms of representation, conventions and habits of language that produce specific fields of culturally and historically located meanings we may also conclude that painting can be also understood as a discourse, a specialized field of knowledge with its own rules and conventions. Within this, discourse is produced and circulated. It becomes then not certain kinds of visual images but the knowledge, institutions, subjects and practices, which work to define their own field. Referring again here to Buchloh’s *The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant Garde*<sup>161</sup> this text refers primarily to the historical and neo avant-gardes, but his notion of discourse is helpful here. Buchloh stresses: “...the discursive formation of modernism generated its own historical and evolutionary dynamic. If we assume that visual paradigms operate analogously to linguistic paradigms, then the “*langue*” of modernism would constitute the neo-avant-garde “speakers” and continuously replicate and modify their “*paroles*”.”<sup>162</sup> Buchloh following Foucault considers aesthetic objects as emerging from discursive formations. Chinese monochromes have remained unseen within the history and discourses in regard to the monochrome but it is possible to consider them as compelling object-images

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.p.126.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.p.127.

<sup>161</sup> Buchloh, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: a Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde ".

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.p.45.

and this allows for the possibility of thinking about the monochrome from a completely different viewpoint. In choosing as preliminary options for this study, three images that belong to different periods in this long tradition of Chinese glazes it is possible to assemble a case for this detour. Firstly the blue glazes of the Ch'ing Dynasty demonstrate a wide variation of tones and within blue tones Laurence Tam distinguishes especially the grayish-blue, the powder blue and the lavender blue. Also produced in the K'ang Hsi period was the blue glaze, which faded down to a very pale moonlight shade, known to the Chinese as "moon-white" but better known in the Western world as "chair-de-blue".<sup>163</sup> A major Kangxi innovation at Jingdezhen was the 'apple-red' or 'peach-bloom' glaze – also known as the 'beauty's blush' glaze. **[Fig. 11]** Nigel Wood stresses that this cooper-based glaze shows blushes of red, occasionally dotted with fine green spots, on a pinkish-red ground. "The glaze sometimes gives the impression of delicate blushing skin, sometimes of ripening fruit. The peach-bloom glaze was used on small porcelain wares of exceptional quality made in a limited range of forms 'for the scholar's table'.<sup>164</sup> Wood remarks that there is a tendency to treat the peach-bloom glaze as a single glaze, but it is possible that the peach-bloom effect was achieved by using a cooper-line pigment sandwiched between clear glazes, with the pigment itself probably applied by spraying. The logic behind these unusual cooper-line under-glazed-red mixtures seems to be that cooper-red painting develops more effectively beneath more fluid glazes, but more fluid glazes also cause the cooper brushwork to diffuse during firing, thereby losing definition.<sup>165</sup> By adding a flux to the cooper pigment, a stiff porcelain glaze can be rendered more fluid in the narrowly defined area of the painting itself thereby improving its colour. Differences in pigment thickness, resulting from spraying, may well have produced copper-and flux-rich areas that soaked through the over glazes.<sup>166</sup> The first Han lead glaze studied from the V & A's collection came from a small Eastern Ham covered jar with a bluish-green, slightly iridescent glaze. **[Fig. 12]** Wood adds that this glaze

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<sup>163</sup> Laurence C.S. Tam, "Monochrome Ceramics of Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties," ed. Hong Kong Museum of Art (Hong Kong: The Urban Council Hong Kong, 1976).

<sup>164</sup> Nigel Wood, *Chinese Glazes - Their Origins, Chemistry, and Re-Creation* (London: A & C Black - University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.p.182.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.p.183.

proved to be a fairly advanced lead-aluminum-silicate composition containing calcium.<sup>167</sup> The more weathered areas of the same glaze proved to be much lower in lead and copper oxides, and higher in silica, alumina, and chlorine compounds, probably from contact with burial earth, organic materials and ground salts.<sup>168</sup> Chinese glazes have an almost endlessly scope of study, such is the richness and complexity of those astonishing works of art. The aim here is just to offer a glimpse of the surprise as a painter by uncovering those intense and complex monochromes. As painters attempt to borrow images or technical procedures from the outside world that might be of interest for developing different modes of practice. Rather than being a practice at the outer limits of what might be considered the practice of painting, this tradition could produce a surprise within the passage of the painterly tradition of the monochrome.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.p.183.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.p.193.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Monochrome and Trace**

Contents: Cy Twombly and the trace. The difference between the mark and the trace. Late modern and contemporary abstraction vis-à-vis the trace. Robert Rauschenberg's *Erasing de Kooning Drawing*. The works of Jason Martin, Zebedee Jones and Torie Begg.

#### **2.1 Cy Twombly and the Trace: between Presence and Absence**

In this analysis, the trace is considered in relationship to Cy Twombly's paintings and the question of absence and presence within Derrida's writings. It is known that Rosalind E. Krauss has introduced the relation between the indexical mark and the Derridean discourse of the trace but before analysing Krauss' remarks about this relation, it is necessary to clarify the context in which Twombly developed his early works, and the link between these works and the work of Jackson Pollock. Krauss maintains that for both Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, the vertical was a form of "...momentum, a narrative. To stand upright is to attain to a peculiar form of vision: the optical, and to gain that vision is to sublimate".<sup>169</sup> Thus the subject can become a "beholder" and therefore retain the possibility of contemplation and domination. It can be proposed that by reversing the verticality to the ground through his process of making, Pollock reversed the verticality not of the beholder but of the maker: the painter. Krauss mentions Twombly and Andy Warhol as examples that followed Pollock's process towards gravity and horizontality. According to Krauss, Twombly started this process around 1955: "[Twombly] had begun down the attack route which is that of the graffitist, the marauder, the maimer of the black wall. And he had made it clear that the maimer he had taken as his model was Pollock. It is not just the circularity of Twombly's marks and the

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<sup>169</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1993).

loopy aimlessness of their tracks repeating over the canvas field that is addressed to the drip pictures. Rather it is the experience of the trace itself – the trace that composes the tracery of the drip paintings – as violent. [...] The violence that Twombly read in the traces left to mark the path of so many sprays of liquid thrown by Pollock from the end of stick or brush, the violence that he therefore ‘completed’ - to invoke Bloom’s notion of the strong misreading – as graffiti, invested Pollock’s traces with a form."<sup>170</sup>

For Krauss the form of those marks has a singularity: "...as this form belongs to the realm of the clue, the trace, and the index. This is to say the operations of form are those of making an event – by forming it in terms of its remains to its precipitate – and in so marking it of cutting the event off from the temporality of its making. When Derrida would come to analyze this condition – the pure form of the imprint – to which he would give the name of arche-trace, he would invent the name *differance* to account for the temporal disjunction internally fissuring this event."<sup>171</sup>

Krauss mentions sign, trace and index, alongside Derrida’s notions of *differance* and arche-trace. All these terms require clarification. It is necessary then to further analyze them in order to understand what the implications are within the relation between the mark and the trace. Following from this issue of the relationship of mark and trace, C.S. Pierce asserts in regard to the sign: "A *Sign or Representamen*, is a First which stands in such genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its *Object*, [as smoke to fire] as to capable of determining a Third, called its *Interpretant*, to assume the same triadic relation to its object in which it stands itself to the same Object. The triadic relation is *genuine*, that is its three members are bound together by it in a way that does not consist in any complexus of dyadic relations. That is the reason the Interpretant, or Third, cannot stand in a mere dyadic relation to the Object, but must stand in such relation to it as the Representamen itself does."<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.p.259.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.p.260.

<sup>172</sup> C. S. Pierce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Pierce - Volume I* ed. Charles - Weiss Hartshorne, Paul (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1932).



Thus anything that determines something else – its *interpretant* – refers to an object to which itself refers – its *object* – in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign. For Peirce the fundamental division of signs is into *Icons, Indexes and Symbols*.<sup>173</sup> An *icon* is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak representing a geometrical line. An *index* is a sign that would, at once, lose the character that makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for instance, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as sign of a shot.<sup>174</sup> And a sign can be *iconic*, that is, it may represent its object mainly by its similarity, no matter what its mode of being: “If a substantive be wanted, an iconic representamen may be termed a *Hypoicon*. Any material image, as a *painting*, is largely conventional in its mode of representation; but in itself, without legend or label may be called a *Hypoicon*”.<sup>175</sup> We have now a clearer notion of the differences between icon and index. Krauss adds that as distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relation to their referents: “They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the objects they signify. Into the category of the index, we would place physical traces – like footprints”.<sup>176</sup>

In regard to the mark, the double code of depiction plus indexicality has been central to painting. In the tradition of oil painting, the mark that both depicts and refers to its own making is basal. We can observe also that modernist painting asks the question about the necessity of depiction and then tries to respond it by locating the whole operativity of painting in an indexical mark. The indexical mark as the mark that draws attention to its own contingency and so to the wider contingency of the picture it helps to paint and of which it is a component. The indexical mark rethorizes the mark as an event in the sense that the mark has a past – it was previously absent – and the space it occupies was unmarked space and becomes marked space. So the indexical mark emphasizes its invasive force as an incursion into an unmarked space. The

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.p.157.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.p.170.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.p.157.

<sup>176</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*.

central point here is that the indexical mark offers a critical intensity. The task of redeveloping that intensity is massive. We know as well that the modernist idea of painting as defined by the “essence of the medium” has lost relevance. Addressing this question Isabelle Graw argues: “I want to propose that we conceive of painting not as a medium but as a production of signs that is experienced as highly personalized. By focusing on painting’s specific indexicality we will be able to grasp one of its main characteristics. It is able to suggest a strong bond between the product and the – absent – person of its maker. This is due to the way indexical signs actually operate. [...] Someone has left his marks.”<sup>177</sup> When an artist like Frank Stella maintains that his practice, “It’s like handwriting”.<sup>178</sup>, he is addressing this question. And this is also true for paintings that avoid “handwriting” as technical device, for example, other practices like Gerhard Richter’s abstract paintings made with a squeegee: “By moving the squeegee up and down the painting in a particular way Richter inscribes his own body movement into the painting. In other words attempts to eliminate the subjectivity of the artist from the painting usually lead to reentering of subjectivity into painting. And the more negation there is of handwriting, the more this negation will be considered to be the handwriting of the artist. [...] Yet linking indexicality to painting does not imply that we ignore the split that occurs between the artwork and the authentic self. What we encounter in painting is not much the authenticity revealed self of the painter but rather signs that insinuate that this absent self is somewhat present in it. As a highly mediated idiom painting provides a number of techniques, methods and artifices that allow for the fabrication of the impression of the author’s quasi-presence as *an affect*.”<sup>179</sup>

Graw adds that there is one aspect in regard to the indexical mark-sign that has to be considered. According to Pierce the indexical sign is able to capture our attention because it is affected by the power of its object, but for Graw, in

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<sup>177</sup> Isabelle Graw, "The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons," in *Thinking through Painting - Reflexivity and Agency Beyond the Canvas*, ed. Isabelle - Birnbaum Graw, Daniel - Hirsch, Nikolaus (Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2012).

<sup>178</sup> Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," in *Minimal Art a Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>179</sup> Graw, "The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons."

painting's indexicality, this object is the artist. "This is why painting can be potentially experienced as being intriguing in a way that only an intriguing person could be".<sup>180</sup> The question in regard to the trace understood in indexical terms is that its unity is preceded by multiplicity, or as Krauss maintains, by the conditions of division and deferral which underlie the sign as the very ground of possibility: "And this prior condition intervening like a knife to cut into the indivisibility of presence – the presence of the subject to himself – is understood to be a form of violence. For it to make a mark is already to leave one's mark, it is already to allow the outside of an event to invade its inside, it cannot be conceived without the no presence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present."<sup>181</sup>

The index's violence is not then just a consequence of its being just a residue, but a condition of the structure of the marker's having been cut away. Thus the present of the mark is thus far invaded by the future. For Krauss, Cy Twombly acknowledges "...the structure of Pollock's mark, his drip, his clue, as the residue of an event".<sup>182</sup> Krauss' remarks are a useful point of departure and introduce the relation and delimit it to the question of temporality, or more precisely to the notion of a long fold of fluctuation between the present moment of mark-making and the futurity of the address that the mark will accomplish qua sign, which will in return cast it as past event, as an absence. The value of temporality in this discussion is clear and Krauss is right to stress it, but at this stage it is necessary to clarify Derrida's notion of writing and of the trace. For Derrida: "We tend to say writing [...] to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face the signified itself. And thus "writing" for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematographic, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural, "writing"."<sup>183</sup> Catherine Malabou notes that Derrida describes here the semantic enlargement of the

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.p.52.

<sup>181</sup> Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.p.260.

<sup>183</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

concept of writing not as an arbitrary philosophical decision but as an event, the appearance of a new order.<sup>184</sup> For Derrida the exteriority of the signifier is the exteriority of writing in general. He contends that there is no linguistic sign before writing and without that exteriority, according to Derrida, the very idea of the sign falls into decay.<sup>185</sup> It is well known that Derrida begins his argument by analyzing Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course of General Linguistics*.<sup>186</sup> De Saussure maintains that within the relationship between speech and writing, the latter has a narrow and derivative function: "Narrow because it is nothing but one modality among others, a modality of the events which can befall a language whose essence, as the facts seem to show, can remain forever uncontaminated by writing".<sup>187</sup> Writing, sensible matter, would then be an artificial exteriority: a "clothing".<sup>188</sup> Derrida traces an overall continuity in Western thought that devalues writing in favor of speech. Writing in this context is a supplement to the presence of the speaker as speech itself is a supplement to thought. De Saussure confirms the point: "Language is necessary in order for speech to be intelligible and to produce all of its effects, but the latter is necessary in order for language to be established; historically the fact of speech always comes first".<sup>189</sup> *Of Grammatology* works at undoing this received conception. "Writing," in Derrida's terms, comes to stand in for signifying in general. It is correct that the institution of writing in its historical growth, reconfigures and frames speech and the habits of speakers. Derrida re-affirms the point: "Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than a shadow or reflection of the representer. A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected, which lets itself, seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable."<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing - Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>185</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>186</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana, 1974).

<sup>187</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.p.35.

<sup>189</sup> de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*.

<sup>190</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

For Derrida there is no simple origin and this question begins with “the violence of forgetting”. Writing, a mnemotechnic means, supplanting spontaneous memory, thus signifies forgetfulness. It is what Plato said in the *Phaedrus*, comparing writing to speech: the auxiliary aide-memoire to the living memory. For Derrida, instead “If “writing” signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign, “...writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs”.<sup>191</sup> In that field a certain sort of instituted signifiers may then appear, “graphic” in the narrow and derivative sense of the word, ordered by a certain relationship with other instituted – hence “written” even if they are “phonic” signifiers. Derrida goes further as he claims that in the structure of alphabetic writing – and phonetic writing in general – no relationship of “natural” representation, nor resemblance, no “symbolic” relationship in the Saussurian sense, and no “iconographic” relationship in the Peircian sense, is implied.<sup>192</sup> Derrida concludes: “We must think that writing is at the same time more exterior to speech, not being its “image” or its “symbol” and more interior to speech, which is already in itself writing. Even before it is linked to incision, engraving, drawing, or the letter, to a signifier referring in general to a signifier signified by it, the concept of the *graphie* – unit of possible graphic system – implies the framework of the *instituted trace*, as the possibility common to all systems of signification.”<sup>193</sup>

Derrida contends that in both Saussure and Pierce the genetic root system refers from sign to sign. “No ground of non-signification – understood as insignificance or an institution of a present truth – stretches out to give it foundation under the play and the coming into being of signs”.<sup>194</sup> Indeed Pierce goes far in the direction that Derrida calls the “de-construction of the transcendental signified”, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign. Derrida identifies logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful and irrepressible desire for such a signified. For Derrida since writing no longer

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.p.44.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.p.45.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.p.46.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.p.48.

relates to language as an extension or frontier, the question to be addressed would be: "**how language is a possibility founded of the general possibility of writing.** [...] Demonstrating this, one would give at the same time as account of that alleged "usurpation" which could not be an unhappy accident".<sup>195</sup> Derrida starts his argument by asserting that the "original", "natural" language has never existed, has never been intact and untouched by writing, that it had itself always been a writing: "An **arche-writing** whose necessity and new concept I wish to indicate and outline here, and which I continue to call writing only because it essentially communicates with the vulgar concept of writing. The latter could not have imposed itself historically except by the dissimulation of the arche-writing, by the desire for a speech displacing its other and its double and working to reduce its difference. If I persist in calling that difference writing, it is because, within the work of historical repression, writing was, by its situation, destined to signify the most formidable difference. It threatened the desire for the living speech from the closest proximity; it **breached** living speech from within and from the very beginning. And as we shall begin to see, difference cannot be thought without the *trace*."<sup>196</sup>

Arche-writing, although its concept is invoked by the themes of "the arbitrariness of the sign" and of *differance*, cannot be recognized as the object of a science because it is that very thing which cannot let itself be reduced to the form of presence. It is the original breach without which speech would be impossible. It is clear then that the phonic substance lost its privilege. And this arche-writing would be at work not only in the form of graphic expression: "It is because arche-writing, movement of *differance*, irreducible arche-synthesis, opens in one hand the same possibility, temporalization, as well as relationship with the other and language, cannot, as the condition of all linguistic systems, form a part of the linguistic system itself and be situated as an object in itself."<sup>197</sup> Thus the trace is not only the disappearance of origin, it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin.<sup>198</sup> As Malabou explains, "The trace does not derive from presence, it comes before

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.p.52.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.p.60.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.p.56.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.p.61.

presence, it is always ahead of that which it traces, always more originary than the form that is supposed to leave a trace. It cannot be seen and is not expected to present itself".<sup>199</sup> For Derrida the concept of the trace implies a passage through *form*, this passage through form is a passage through the *imprint*. "And the meaning of *differance* in general would be more accessible to us if the unity of that double passage appeared more clearly. [...] Here the appearing and functioning of difference presupposes an originary synthesis not preceded by any absolute simplicity. Such would be the originary trace"<sup>200</sup> and from there: "It is not a question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the pure movement which produces difference. *The – pure - trace is differance*. It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such plenitude."<sup>201</sup> Therefore it permits the articulation of speech and writing – in the colloquial sense. *Differance* is therefore the formation of form. But it is on the other hand the being-imprinted of the imprint.<sup>202</sup> We have then Derrida's definition of the trace: "The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general, origin of all repetition, origin of ideality, the trace is not more ideal than real, not more intelligible than sensible, not more a transparent signification than an opaque energy. [...] And is a fortiori anterior to the distinction between regions of sensibility, anterior to sound as much as to light."<sup>203</sup>

The idea of the "psychic imprint" thus relates essentially to the idea of articulation. Without the difference between the sensory appearing and its lived appearing, "mental Imprint," the temporalizing synthesis, which permits differences to appear in a chain of significations, could not operate. That the "imprint" is irreducible means also that speech is originally passive. This passivity is also the relationship to a past, to an always already there that no

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<sup>199</sup> Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing - Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*.

<sup>200</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.p.62.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.p.63.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.p.65.

reactivation of the origin could fully master. That is what allows us to call *trace* that which does not let itself be summed up in the simplicity of a present.<sup>204</sup> The concepts of *present, past and future*, everything in the concepts of time and history, which implies evidence of them, cannot adequately describe the structure of the trace. For Derrida it is similar to the problem of the deferred effect – *Nachträglichkeit* – of which Freud speaks: “The temporality to which Freud refers cannot be that which lends itself to a phenomenology of consciousness or of presence. It is in a certain “unheard” sense then that speech is in the world, rooted in that passivity, which metaphysics calls sensitivity”.<sup>205</sup> Arche-writing as spacing cannot occur *as such* within the phenomenological experience of a presence. It marks the *dead time* within the presence of the living present. “Constituting and dislocating it at the same time, writing is other than the subject in whatever sense the latter is understood”.<sup>206</sup> This deconstruction of presence accomplishes itself through the deconstruction of consciousness, and therefore through the irreducible notion of the trace – *spur* – as it appears in Freud’s discourse. “If the trace, arche-phenomenon of “memory” which must be thought before the opposition of nature and culture belongs to the very movement of signification, then signification is a priori written, whether inscribed or not, in one form or another, in a sensible and spatial element that is called exterior. Arche-writing at first the possibility of the spoken word, of the “*graphie*” in the narrow sense the birthplace of “usurpation”, denounced from Plato to Saussure this trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing.”<sup>207</sup> The trace then affects the totality of the sign in both its faces. The signified is originally trace, therefore *it is always already in the position of the signifier*.<sup>208</sup> Thus discourse for Derrida is the present living, conscious *representation* of a text within the experience of the person who writes or reads it. “We know that the metaphor that would describe the genealogy of a text *is still forbidden*. It is neither causality by contagion nor the simple accumulation of layers. Nor even the pure juxtaposition of borrowed

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.p.66.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.p.67.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.p.68.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.p.70.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.p.73.



pieces. And if the text always gives itself a certain representation of its own roots those roots live only by that representation, by never touching the soil so to speak."<sup>209</sup>

A text has then several eras and reading must resign itself to that fact and in this light, Derrida talks about the text; but what is then the relation between the text and writing? For Derrida the work of writing and the economy of *differance* will not be dominated by the epistemology that goes from *Phaedrus* to the *Course of General Linguistics*. *Differance* does not resist appropriation; it does not impose an exterior limit upon it. "Death is the movement of *differance* to the extent that that movement is necessarily finite. [...] This means that *differance* makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of *differance* the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing space".<sup>210</sup> Then what about the relation between writing and painting? Derrida claims that: "...the first writing is a painted image. Not that painting had served as writing, as miniature. The two were at first intermingled; a closed and mute system within which speech had yet no right of entry and which was shielded from all other symbolic investment. [...] This natural writing is thus the only universal writing. The diversity of scripts appears from the moment the threshold of pure pictography is crossed. That would be a simply origin."<sup>211</sup> We could say that - like the first word - the first pictogram is thus an image. The first sign is then determined as an image. The idea has an essential relationship to the sign, the representative substitute of sensation: "The history of writing, like the history of science would circulate between the two epochs of universal writing, between two simplicities, between two forms of transference and univocity: an absolute pictography doubling the totality of the natural entity in an unrestrained consumption of signifiers and an absolutely formal *graphie* reducing the signifying expense to almost nothing. There would be no history of writing and of knowledge - one might simply say no history at all – except between these two poles."<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid.p.101.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.p.143.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.p.283.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.p.285.

For Derrida and this is startling in its implication: "...all begins with painting".<sup>213</sup> Then pure representation, the purely reflecting kind of painting, is the first figure. In it the thing most faithfully represented is already no longer properly present. Thus if we presume that writing had a primitive and pictorial stage, it would emphasize this absence: "Writing as painting is thus at once the evil and the remedy within the *phainesthai* or the *eidos*. Plato already said that the art or technique – *techne* – of writing was a *pharmakon* – a drug. And the disquieting part of writing had already been experienced in its resemblance to painting."<sup>214</sup> Alphabetic writing concerns itself only with pure representers. The circulation of signs is facilitated but for Derrida there was a natural universality of a sort in the most archaic degree of writing: painting, as much as the alphabet, is not tied to any determined language. It is then a sort of universal writing. But its liberty with reference to languages *is due not* to the distance that separates painting from its model, but rather to the imitative proximity that binds them.<sup>215</sup>

Derrida discusses the "...supplement of origin: which supplements the failing origin and which is yet not derived; this supplement is, as one says of a spare part [*une piece*], of the original make [*d'origine*] or a document, establishing the origin. Thus one takes into account that the absolute alterity of writing might nevertheless affect living speech, from the outside, within its inside. Alter it – for the worse".<sup>216</sup> To return to received understanding: a supplement is by definition posterior, an afterword, an auxiliary aide-memoire to the living memory, an exteriority to the presence, a structure established in the absence of the event, an effect in an aftermath. Thus one takes into account that the absolute *alterity* of writing might nevertheless affect living speech, from the outside, within its inside: *alter it.*"<sup>217</sup> However the issue here is more precisely that the originarity of the gesture, of the event, is inaugurated belatedly through the retroactive supplement which nonetheless casts itself as initiation and semination. In this sense the origin is characterized as such posthumously. We have seen that

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.p.292.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.p.292.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.p.301.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.p.314.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.p.313.

*Derrida regards difference itself as framed in a strand of refusals: "Differance is neither a word nor a concept. In it however we shall see the juncture – rather than the summation – of what has been most decisively inscribed in the thought of what is conveniently called our "epoch": the difference of forces in Nietzsche, [...] impression and delayed effect in Freud, difference as irreducibility of the trace of the other in Levinas."*<sup>218</sup> Thus it is not a method, nor an absence or a presence, therefore not a force, especially if force entails presence thus it is a movement that is in no need of an external origin of its movement. This argument appears in differing contexts in ***Of Grammatology*** and ***Differance***. *Differance* with an `a` is what permits signification to emerge. It is what makes articulation possible. Signification is always articulation. So it becomes clearer why Derrida might propose writing to stand for signification in general. Derrida states: "The space of writing is not an originary *intelligible* space. It begins however to *become* so from the origin, that is to say from the moment when writing, like all the work of signs, produces repetition and therefore ideality in that space. If one calls reading that moment which comes directly to double the originary writing, one may say that the space of pure reading is always already *intelligible*, that of pure writing always still *sensible*."<sup>219</sup>

We have then a number of related concepts: spacing, articulation, and repetition. These concepts require something by way of commentary. The sign in general must be exchangeable therefore, being iterable means that it is necessarily repeatable, capable of re-iteration in differing exchanges and contexts. As the `first` inscription / mark / sign, so to speak, attracts the series that will constitute its repetition, so the future marks cast their shadow onto the moment of the inscription of the `first` mark. "Signs represent the present in its absence; they take the place of the present. When we cannot take hold of or show the thing, let us say the present, the being-present, when go through the detour of signs. [...] The sign would thus be a deferred presence. What I am describing here is the structure of signs as classically determined, in order to define – though a commonplace characterization of its traits – signification as

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<sup>218</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Differance," in *Speech and Phenomena - and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (London: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

<sup>219</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

the *differance of temporalizing*".<sup>220</sup> With this there is a return to the inscription of Krauss' graffitiist. The sign qua sign cannot occur only once. Iteration and repetition steer in a temporal sequence. It can be claimed that the two concepts, *originary supplement and differance* stand as versions of the complex origin of the entity. The point is that the originary moment or condition needed *to be marked as originary* and that this marking as originary was necessarily retrospective. Derrida argues: "It is historically significant that the two apparently different meanings of difference are tied together in Freud's theory: differing as discernibility, distinction, deviation, diastem, spacing, and deferring, as detour, delay, reserve, temporalizing."<sup>221</sup> It is useful to compare the above with Derrida's essay *Freud and the Scene of Writing*<sup>222</sup> in which we find another rendition of the critique of presence read from and through Freud. In Derrida's reading the condition of the Freudian psyche as both virginal and always already marked by memory is equivalent to the arche-trace, or the originary supplement. Derrida explains that Freud has to find an enunciation of a structure in which the psychic apparatus can contain at once, "an unlimited receptive capacity and retention of permanent traces".<sup>223</sup> Following from this: "Now, a main characteristic of nervous tissue is memory, that is, quite generally, a capacity for being permanently altered by single occurrences. And a 'psychological theory deserving any consideration must furnish an explanation of 'memory'. The crux of such an explanation what makes such an apparatus almost unimaginable, is the necessity of accounting simultaneously [...] for the permanence of the trace and the virginity of the receiving substance, for the engraving of furrows and for the perennially intact bareness of the perceptive surface; in this case of the neurones."<sup>224</sup> Derrida adds: "That the present in general is not primal but, rather reconstituted that it is not the absolute, wholly living form which constitutes the experience, that there is no purity of the living present – such is the theme, formidable for metaphysics which Freud in a conceptual scheme unequal to the thing itself, would have to pursue."<sup>225</sup> On this

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<sup>220</sup> "Differance."

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.p.149.

<sup>222</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.p.256.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.p.251.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.p.266.

reading, the Freudian account is one: the presence of the immediate impression on the psychic apparatus both because the impression is always already structured through memory and as affect, and because it is not available – not capable of being assimilated - until filtered through meaning in its most elementary sense. In Freudian terms every experience or excitation reaches us only having suffered the transfiguration of secondary elaboration. Derrida remarks: "The metaphor of path breaking, so frequently used in Freud's descriptions, is always in communication with the theme of the supplementary delay and with the reconstitution of meaning through deferral, after a mole-like progression, after a subterranean toil of an impression. This impression has left behind a laborious trace which has never been perceived, whose meaning has never been lived in the present, i.e., has never been lived consciously. The postscript that constitutes the past as such is not satisfied, as Plato, Hegel, and Proust perhaps thought, with reawakening or revealing the present past in its truth. It produces the present past."<sup>226</sup>

Having addressed Derrida's notion of repression in regard to writing, this repression constitutes for Derrida the origin of philosophy as **episteme**. "Repression as Freud says, neither repels, nor flees, nor excludes an exterior force; it contains an interior representation, laying out within itself a space of repression. Here what represents a force in the form of the writing interior to speech and essential to it has been contained outside speech".<sup>227</sup> In regard to the mark, it can be considered – as Isabelle Graw argues - as a production of signs; it is also an invasive force or an incursion into an unmarked space. Following from this it is known also that the mark has been endlessly elaborated. Graw adds as well the idea of the mark as an impression of the author's presence as an affect. But having analyzed Derrida's notion of the trace, what about the relationship between the mark and the trace? What is implied in distinguishing these two concepts? Michael Newman considers these questions in his essay *The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing*.<sup>228</sup> "Is the mark a trace? Or the trace of a trace? Or a mark from which the trace

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid.p.269.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.p.270.

<sup>228</sup> Newman, "The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing ".

withdraws? Or the effacement of the trace? At stake in these questions is the relation of the drawn mark to the one who leaves it, and the one who receives it. Does the mark mediate; create an in-between that both divides and joins, or is it the trace of an alterity outside all possibility of mediation? Could it be argued that while the index draws attention to the space and time of its occurrence, the trace disturbs the sphere of manifestation in which it occurs: it has come from elsewhere from a wholly other dimension, even an absolute exteriority? Insofar as it involves the question of the trace and its relation to immanence, drawing marks the crossing point of ethics and aesthetics and as the site of a departure, it is also a place of mourning."<sup>229</sup> In the history of Pliny the Elder, it all began with the lines round a human shadow. Butades tracing the face's profile of his daughter's lover. For Newman the shadow is an indexical sign insofar as it has a relation of effect to cause. It is a sign of the daughter's lover insofar as the lover causes the shadows to be cast on the wall. The shadow is the trace of another person. Thus Newman asks: "Can we understand the trace as distinct from the mark, on the basis of presence, with absence determined as lacking or defective presence?"<sup>230</sup> For Newman the process of drawing and painting, stroke by stroke, re-enacts desire and loss. Its peculiar mode of being lies between the withdrawal of the trace in the mark and the presence of the idea it prefigures. Newman suggests – and this is central - that in drawing the question of the status of the trace is articulated through the relation of the trace to the mark: "Could we say that is the trace which withdraws from the mark? [...] This is implicit in Pliny's story in the relation of the *trait* to the shadow. It follows from this that there is blindness implicit in the act of drawing, and a blinding in its inception. That blindness would be the proper comportment toward the trace as not visible."<sup>231</sup> If we follow Graw's contention we could say that in painting, expressive gesture refers back to an origin that is a unity and that is identified with the subject: the author's presence as affect. Gesture that is compulsive or automatic – like Twombly's gestures - refers back to something other in the one who apparently produces the gesture. For Newman "...this 'other' could be understood as an "outside on the inside" something alien and exterior that

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.p.94.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.p.94.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.p.95.

inhabits the subject".<sup>232</sup> Following this he develops further: "If drawing [and painting] has to be taken as just such a gesture, how are we to respond to it? If it is not directed to a meaning or interpretation what does it demand of us? [...] Instead of considering *what* its meaning is we could place the emphasis on the fact that a gesture has been made, the fact *that* something has been left for us – a mark inscribed on a piece of paper, perhaps –by someone. We could thus receive the gestural mark as the trace of the other, without any need for that mark to be meaningful. We need say nothing more than that the other has left this mark."<sup>233</sup>

We know that in painting the mark can take many forms: Frank Stella's "handwriting", stains, traces of erasure, or ideographic signs like in Twombly's work; and in turn there is a sense that in our digital epoch drawing and painting become "archaic" and this issue is further developed by Newman: "...yet this archaism makes contact with the tactility of the most up to date mediums. And if writing with light began by imitating drawing, as analog photography itself becomes an archaic medium, drawing [and painting] will aspire to the condition of the photograph, not as a projective representation, but rather as a resemblance produced by contact, like a life cast or death mask, an image not made by human hands, a relic like a stain on a shroud."<sup>234</sup> Cy Twombly's paintings rehearse one kind of response to this question by developing the mark beyond the terms of presence/absence or past/present, by fashioning his own kind of mark that is, at the same time, inscrutable and spontaneous. Twombly's paintings are linked in several ways with the Derridean motifs considered. In this discussion the interest is in how Twombly's paintings complicate the distinction between presence and absence: "The form of the mark-as-graffito [in Twombly's work] is, in its attack on presence, an attack on organicity, good form".<sup>235</sup> To originate for Twombly is to appear, and it is the mark what appears. As Krauss remarks, Twombly manifests the performativity of artistic creation.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid.p.103.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.p.104.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.p.105.

<sup>235</sup> Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.p.266.

And of course Twombly cannot originate painting only once and quit: he has to originate it over and over, signaling here the Derridean notion of repetition as iterability. For Krauss, Twombly's paintings acknowledge the structure of Pollock's mark, his drip, as the residue of an event. Krauss declares that: "...Twombly does not buy into this idea of an escape from through the presence of the mark to its marker, as through in a mirror. If Pollock's pictures can be said to have the structure of an 'event' it is because they inhabit the condition of the trace and are formed by its violence against the very possibility of presence."<sup>237</sup> Krauss then contends that Pollock's marks strike "...at the figure in the mirror, they smashed it".<sup>238</sup> Twombly has the sense that this striking at the figure is systematic within Pollock's operation of the trace, which is to say that is in operation even where there are manifestly no 'figures' in the under layers of the painting.<sup>239</sup> Although in ***Panorama (1955)* [Fig. 13]** Twombly stayed within the formula of the all-over web and maintained his graffitist as a dispersal of abstract marks, white arcs and switchbacks here scratched into gray, he had by the early 1960s felt the need to acknowledge the role of the body.<sup>240</sup> The viewer is compelled to acknowledge a very particular conjunction: that the gesture eschews technical control at a certain point, dramatizing its own contingencies and chaotic momentum. The gesture is chaotic and contingent but at the same time it is also controlled: it follows its own chaotic order. Kirk Varnedoe maintains that Twombly's paintings are about "...offhand impulsiveness and obsessive systems, the defiling urge toward what is base and the complementary love for lyric poetry and the grand legacy of high Western culture".<sup>241</sup> These remarks are not very helpful in understanding the singularity of Twombly's paintings. We could add that Twombly's work involves written words, counting systems, geometry, ideographic signs and abstract finger work with paint – all ask to be understood in concert. It is through that complexity his paintings have to be seen. But I think that we need to refer again to the historical framework in which Twombly started to develop his work.

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.p.265.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.p.265.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.p.265.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.p.266.

<sup>241</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly - a Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York - Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1994).



Varnedoe points out that we need to consider Robert Rauschenberg's *The Lily White* (ca.1951) as an anticipation of Twombly's work. For Krauss, *The Lily White* contains a confusing scrawl of lines and numbers, thus cannot be regarded as a space of figure-ground differential: "...the picture ends up as a verification of its own opaque surface".<sup>242</sup> But more importantly, Krauss argues, what Rauschenberg proposes to the viewer is another kind of reading of the work. According to her, Rauschenberg conceives the perception of the work by the viewer as an experience shared with language and discourse, thus involving a temporal development when the viewer perceives the work.<sup>243</sup> In Krauss' view Rauschenberg's temporality differs from the single-image painting and instead is related to "...the *durée* – to the kind of extended temporality that is involved in experiences like memory, reflection, narration, proposition".<sup>244</sup> This conception of temporality is linked to the idea of treating images as material and the way he materialized images was made by Rauschenberg through making colour corporeal. In Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Red Painting)*, ca.1953, a surface of different types of paper is impregnated with colour and the chromatic differences of colour, which are conveyed through the qualities of the materials, are converted into a function of these materials. For Krauss, Johns and Stella had been involved in that idea of colour as an explicit function of material, but Rauschenberg orientated his work to the "...materialization of images. In the course of this, the paint itself – both, in terms of its color and its density, applied in smears, drips, squeezes - came to function within the works as its own kind of specialized 'image'".<sup>245</sup>

Through this brief consideration of Rauschenberg's early work it is possible to get closer to the relation involved between Twombly's paintings in relationship to writing within the consideration of temporality. Tacita Dean wrote a beautiful text on Twombly for the catalogue of the Twombly exhibition at Tate Modern in 2008. In this text Dean refers to the movement of erasure – and through erasure - to the temporality that is at display in Twombly's work: "Twombly

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<sup>242</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden W. Joseph (Cambridge, Mass. and London The MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.p.41.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.p.48.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.p.49.

crosses out as a way of making the surface work his rubbing out is a process of adding as well as subtracting: a buildup of cancellation when the connection has broken, marking to say and then not to say: retraction that leaves a trace".<sup>246</sup> Dean imagines Twombly in a "trance-like concentration", a movement of advancing, retreating, and continuously working towards the instant of contact. Dean refers also to the connection between creation and destruction: "The essence of an object has some relation with its destruction: not necessarily what remains after it has been used up, but what is *thrown away* as being of no use. Twombly's handwriting is the familiar integrant to his images: it is homely and *hausgemacht*, like the note left on the table, telling us of the actual presence beyond the nib or beyond the lead, his human presence encountering the larger world and out universal anguish."<sup>247</sup> Through the grey-ground of **Panorama (1955) [Fig. 13]** Twombly made not only a reversal of light / dark relations but also created a radical shift in the composition and space. The loose mesh of overlaid lines confuses the figure / ground distinction making the separateness of individual forms far less important than the overall field of linear marking.<sup>248</sup> As Krauss, Varnedoe links Twombly's work with Pollock's, stressing that "...no painter could have made pictures of the scale of *Panorama* in New York in the mid-1950s without thinking of their relation to the poured paintings of Pollock's and certainly, not Twombly".<sup>249</sup> Varnedoe stresses: "The evidence of process here tells of insistently discontinuous, programmatically repeated passages with the chalk stick yielding none of the liquid, variegated, organic webbing of the poured paintings. There is also, more than in Pollock, a sense of overrunning extension out of every side of the canvas. The wholeness of Pollock's dense, explosive clouds of energy is replaced by dispersed, jumpily nervous electricity, at the local structures of both drawing and writing seen continually to pull and tug at the cumulative abstract palimpsest."<sup>250</sup> In **Criticism (1955) [Fig. 14]** Twombly constructs a dense surface with multiple layers of paint, pencil and crayon lines that work into and against the viscosity of the

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<sup>246</sup> Tacita Dean, "A Panegyric," in *Cy Twombly - Cycles and Seasons*, ed. Tate Modern (London: Tate Publishing, 2008).

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.p.36.

<sup>248</sup> Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly - a Retrospective*.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.p.19.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.p.22.

cream field. These marks have a congested hot frenzy in comparison to the relatively airy work on the grey canvases. The dialogue of inscription and erasure is essential not only to this level of 'reading' the works but also to their overall energy.<sup>251</sup> ***Problem II (1966) [Fig. 16]*** isolates geometrical and gestural elements from his previous images. The *Problem* pictures are a three-part chronicle of a variation and transformation of a basic shape. This temporal aspect was then extended throughout the grey-ground works of the next few years in the frequent imagery of analytically segmented movement.<sup>252</sup> Twombly's previous attraction to the evidence of deep, slow, 'vertical' time in scarred surfaces is translated in ***Untitled (1972) [Fig.15]*** into an attention for the forms of 'lateral' speed, forms and forces rushing by with their proliferation of marks more rationally divided. Twombly's paintings deploy a series of technical procedures to produce brush marks and swirling knife smears, 'first order' gestures yet which appear also to be images of gestures. All of which makes it really difficult for the viewer to ascertain the technical sequence for making the painting.

Having mentioned that Michael Fried in his text *Art and Objecthood*<sup>253</sup> outlines two decisive aspects of the ontology of painting - in Fried's word "primordial" - conditions of painting which he argues, have critical consequences for the practice of painting. These two aspects are: firstly that the painting seen is grasped in its entirety by the eye and secondly in a flash or as an instant. These are for Fried ontological constants for painting and in turn Fried argues that painting has evolved in unconscious ways, modes and registers that state and exploit these ontological features. It is clear that certain registers of painting - like Pollock or Twombly - are very much directed at usurping the encounter in which the gaze feels itself in its duration to have occurred long after the explosive instantaneousness of the glimpse, where the gaze feels like the afterglow of the glimpse. My description of Fried's analysis of the limit conditions of the temporality of painting does not assume that those two limit conditions constitute values. Nevertheless, limit conditions inevitably come to

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.p.23.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.p.40.

<sup>253</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood. essays and Reviews.*

have evaluative consequences in particular circumstances and as always with painting, one is making assertions from the encounter with the particularity of individual paintings. Yet to impose extrinsically determined principles of historicity on painting would prevent an understanding of the complex oscillations between histories and languages that have defined painting's character as a practice. To define a particular set of limits of painting is about taking painting away from its complexity. As Andre Blauvelt remarks: "...the drive to reduce the definition of painting to a set of characteristics with which to limit and thus differentiate it as specific would foreclose an understanding of painting as intrinsically plural. To expand notions of painting beyond these delimited essences would be to acknowledge the aggregative and complex conditions that constitute painting's heterogeneity."<sup>254</sup> Twombly's paintings, with their expanses of gestural folds display a distinct version of a painting register. His use of the often horizontally elongated format disrupts the flash; rather, the eye has to roll laterally and his marks disrupt the sense of the instantaneous glimpse for they suggest a mediation of this temporality of the glimpse. We can therefore conclude that it is not possible to legislate for the gesture: to say in advance what kind of pictorial work it can or cannot, should or should not do.

## **2.2 The Trace of Erasure: Robert Rauschenberg's *Erasing de Kooning Drawing***

The story of Rauschenberg persuading Willem de Kooning to give him a drawing that Rauschenberg then rubbed out is well documented. The resulting work, ***Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953)***, [Fig.17], centers on the interrelatedness of destruction and creation. In deleting the older artist's marks, Rauschenberg created a new icon, but one that was completely dependent on what was formally there – as indicated by its title, which is embedded inside the frame. Sarah Roberts points out that, in the early 1970s, Rauschenberg firmly

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<sup>254</sup> Andrew Blauvelt, "No Visible Means of Support," in *Painting at the Edge of the World* ed. Douglas Fogle (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2001).

linked *Erased de Kooning* with the *White Paintings* stressing that he had been working on ‘the monochrome-no image’.<sup>255</sup> According to Roberts, Rauschenberg was clearly intrigued by Duchamp’s challenge to prevailing notions of authenticity, and originality, and developed his own interest in interrogating and breaching the boundaries of painting. On another level, *Erased de Kooning* can also be read as evidence of an action or a recording of an event, and as such is aligned with the precepts of action painting or gestural abstraction that dominated the New York art scene in the early 1950s. *Erased de Kooning* reverses the physical, additive process of action painting, but it hinges entirely on the concept of an artwork as a performative act.<sup>256</sup> And of course *Erased de Kooning* plays on the power of the original – through the representation of its loss – and draws strength from the act of transgression: the destruction of the original. It would be too simplistic to characterize the gesture of erasing de Kooning’s work as an act of Oedipal insurrection, or an attempt to erase the past to create a new present. It would be also an oversimplification to place the work in a straight lineage from Duchamp and Conceptualism. Sarah Roberts states that: “The act of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* embodies was far more complex, and the artwork is far more subtle and far-reaching. Yes, the erasure was an act of destruction, but as creative gesture it was also an act of reverence to de Kooning and to drawing”.<sup>257</sup> *Erased de Kooning* is appropriate for the discussion of the last issue I want to address in regard to painting vis-à-vis Derrida’s notion of the trace, and it is the question of erasure. I have mentioned that Derrida gives the name “trace” to the part played by the radically other within the structure of difference that is the sign. I have mentioned also that de Saussure recognizes the structure of the sign to be a trace-structure. And Freud, to some extent, recognizes the structure of experience itself to be a trace, not a presence-structure. Gayatri Spivak – Derrida’s translator of *Of Grammatology*’s English version – points out that Derrida, following an argument analogical to the sign, puts the word “experience” under erasure. Derrida affirms: “As for the concept of experience [...] like all the notions I am using, it belongs to the history of metaphysics and we can only use it under

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<sup>255</sup> Sarah Roberts, "Erased De Kooning Drawing," *Rauschenberg Research Project* (2013).

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

erasure".<sup>258</sup> Experience is put under erasure, because Derrida's trace is the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience.<sup>259</sup> Derrida reaffirms the point: "The value of the transcendental arche – origin – must make it necessary felt before letting itself be erased. The concept of the arche-trace must comply with both that necessity and that erasure".<sup>260</sup>

Derrida is then asking us to change certain habits of mind: the authority of the text is provisional, the origin is a trace.<sup>261</sup> I have noted above by analyzing Derrida's *Freud and the Scene of Writing*, that Freud implies that the psyche is a sign-structure, for, like the sign, it is inhabited by a radical alterity, what is totally other, we know that Freud calls this alterity "the unconscious". To this structure Derrida gives the name "writing". The sign cannot be taken as a homogeneous unit bridging an origin – referent – and an end – meaning –, as "semiology," the study of signs, would have it. The sign must be studied "under erasure", always already inhabited by the trace of another sign which never appears as such.<sup>262</sup> In Derrida's essay, *Difference*, it is emphasized Freud's presence in the articulation of what comes close to becoming Derrida's master-concept "*Difference*" spelled with an "a". We have then three movements: "differing", "deferring", and "detour". Difference and deferment are present in the French verb "differer" and both "properties" of the sign under erasure. This *differance* – being the structure (a structure never quite there, never by us perceived, itself deferred and different) or our psyche – is also the structure of "presence", a term itself under erasure. For *differance*, producing the differential structure of our hold on "presence" never produces presence as such.<sup>263</sup> We can then describe the structure of writing as the sign under erasure.

Trace-structure, everything always already inhabited by the track of something that is not itself, questions presence-structure. We already know that *Of*

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<sup>258</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>259</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

<sup>260</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>261</sup> Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface."

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.* p. XXXIX.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.* p. XLIII.

*Grammatology* is not a simply valorization of writing over speech. Derrida's choice of the word "writing" or "arche-writing" is not fortuitous. Spivak maintains: "Indeed as Derrida repeatedly points out in the section on Levi-Strauss, no rigorous distinction between writing in the narrow and the general sense can be made. One slips into the other, putting the distinction under erasure. Writing has had the negative privilege of being the scapegoat whose exclusion represents the definition of the metaphysical enclosure".<sup>264</sup> Deconstruction is a perpetually self-deconstructing movement that is inhabited by *differance*. These then are the lineaments of the Derridean double bind, deconstruction under erasure, the abyss placed in the abyss, active forgetfulness. Here it may be pointed out that one of the traditional charges against writing is that it breeds passive forgetfulness and passim. In this respect also, deconstruction reinscribes the value of writing.<sup>265</sup>

Since Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), other artists have made works by rubbing out preexisting images. In *Another Misspent Portrait of Etienne de Silhouette*, (1999-2004) Christian Capurro enlisted more than two hundred people to erase every image from a *Vogue* magazine between the years 1999 and 2004. Keeping track of the amount of time each person spent erasing, Capurro calculated roughly that a total of 267 hours went into the final product, a truly vacuous publication. This was valued at AUD\$11,349.18, though nobody was actually paid. Wiping out all the high-end commodification from the pages of *Vogue*, labor was then equated with time in order to be equated with money, the facilitator of all commodification. But beyond the Marxist critique, this is a work about the base unity of matter. With all signification removed, the pages became pure substance, and the artist went on to exhibit other erased magazines alongside piles of the resulting rubber erasings, indicating a simple but tedious transferral of the same thing from one physical state to another. There is in Capurro's work a critique in regard to the notion of labour, and there is also a critique to the artwork as commodity.

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid.p.LXIX.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.p.LXXVIII.

### 2.3 Contemporary 'Traces': Jason Martin, Zebedee Jones, Torie Begg

Having analyzed the work of Cy Twombly and its relation to Derrida's notion of the trace, it is necessary now to refer to the question of the trace in contemporary abstraction. It is necessary to analyze the works of contemporary painters and evaluate how the discussion of the trace can be addressed in contemporary context. Jason Martin refers to these questions in regard to his work: "I have reduced my interest in painting to a finite act. This act is simple. In its simplicity, dragging a brush from right to left, there is instability. This instability is based upon my control over moving one large brush from A to B. There is a lack of control that allows something to occur that I could not have pre-conceived. What occurs is a trace. This trace is a record of my body moving through an indeterminate continuous event. It is a record of my body moving over a surface without ceasing. It is a record of a trace of time in which the viewer can attempt to allegorically re-structure the event."<sup>266</sup> For Martin what is at stake in his process of making is a precise method in order to allow "painting to present itself through its own image".<sup>267</sup> Martin's method is quite clear to the viewer. In ***Untitled (1995)*** [Fig.18], the electric blue flows through the surface of the aluminum in a movement that might be considered as compressed in a brief period of time.

This method is stressed by Brian Muller in his analysis of Martin's paintings: "Martin's work is best described through its method of production: partly expressive and partly minimal, he uses his bodily movements to implement deep set fissures from one side of the canvas to the other in a continuous trial, letting unpredictable events unfold in the spatial and rhythmical regularity of the painting". Martin uses layers of oil or acrylic gel on hard reflective stainless steel, aluminum or Perspex, in order to display the paint across the surface in one movement, often repeating it again and again until a balance of paint and striation is achieved. By working in monochrome, Martin is able to stress his focus on light and space. The surface of Martin's paintings is then a trial of the

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<sup>266</sup> Jason Martin, "Artist Statement in Real Art - a New Modernism - British Reflexive Painters in the 1990' ", ed. Southampton City Art Gallery - Stedelijk Museum - Leeds City Gallery (Southampton: Southampton Art Gallery with Leeds Museums 1995).

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.p.52.



movement of the brush across the surface; through this process the oil paint registers the different degrees of pressure and velocity inscribed by the artist. There is as well a dialogue between illusion and literalism in his paintings, a dialogue that seems to me more central to his work than the performative component. But there is also a problem. A problem that is shared with the other two artists I have included in this section: Zebedee Jones and Torie Begg. And it is related to the production of the new. It is not random that Brian Muller, analyzing the works of these three artists, places them in the strand he calls "New-Modernism": "New Modernism would be more pertinent to describe the work of Zebedee Jones. His links to modernism remain obvious in terms of the technical devices that he felt free to appropriate. The device of repetition – a device he shares with Minimalism – is used without encumbrance and Twombly's syntax of marks are dropped in favor of Ryman's self-referential foreground materiality."<sup>268</sup>

For Zebedee Jones the question is then to make self-referential objects. These objects-paintings are concerned with an analytic and structured approach in regard to the application and manipulation of paint. In his works the viewer's reading of the physical process of painting and the materiality of the paint dominates and disrupts his automatic external associational references. Of course there is a strong commitment to the material of paint. The surface of his work is – like in ***Horizon Grey (1995) [Fig.19]*** - rigorously and systematically obliterated. This mechanistic procedure is found as well in Torie Begg's paintings. In ***Brush Structure (1995) [Fig.20]***, the three primary colours – red, yellow and blue – are alternated with layers of white and grey. The paint is then applied repetitively, layer upon layer, either with a horizontal or a vertical brush stroke of the same width, leaving a residue along the edge of the paintings to reveal a record of the painting's own layered construction. But the central issue within this process is disarrangement, as Muller notes: "This controlled process is then disrupted and frustrated by the instability of the artist's control of the hand-held brush, the viscosity and degree of transparency of the paint in each layer that allows the layer to show through one another to varying degrees,

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<sup>268</sup> Brian Muller, "Real Art - a New Modernism - british Reflexive Painters in the 1990'," ed. Southampton City Art Gallery - Stedelijk Museum - Leeds City Art Gallery (Southampton: Southampton Art Gallery in association with Leeds Museum, 1995).

along with the denser residues of paint that build up around unpredictable bubbles and specks of dust trapped between layers all serving to interrupt and suspend the reading of the ultimate layer and engage the viewer.”<sup>269</sup>

I have noted the common pattern between Martin, Jones and Begg, a pattern that regards painting as a performative act; and also, within this performative act, the strong commitment to the materiality of the medium. I have noted as well the problem I find in the works of these artists, not in relation to the idea of the trace. It is clear that for them, especially for Martin, the notion of the trace does not have the epistemological meaning we find in Derrida’s texts. The notion of the trace here is considered as part of the performative action. But as I have said before, the issue regarding the works of Martin, Jones and Begg is the question of the production of the new. I have quoted Brian Muller’s text in referring to the works of Martin, Jones and Begg. For Muller these works are examples of what he calls “New Modernism”. And at this stage we run into the problem of the very possibility of a new Modernism in painting. I have quoted in the first chapter of this study Thiery de Duve’s contention in regard to this very possibility: “...the history of modern painting is melancholically looked at in hindsight as if it still had its future, while its achievements already belong to the past”.<sup>270</sup> I have addressed de Duve’s remarks through the analysis of Angela de la Cruz’s paintings, which I have stressed bring a radical new approach to contemporary abstraction. The problem I find in the works of Martin, Jones and Begg is the lack of this radical approach. We cannot deny that the three of them are accomplished painters, that the three of them are able to master the materiality of the medium, especially of oil paint, which presents a special challenge for the maker. But there are still very present references to the past, to past movements of rupture in the history of modern painting that remain present in the works of these artists. It is not random chance that Muller refers in analyzing them to – late-modern - painters like Ryman or Twombly. We would have then in this case a “New Modernism” that is not new. David Geers considers this question in his essay *Neo-Modern*.<sup>271</sup> The term, Neo-Modern

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid.p.6.

<sup>270</sup> de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*.

<sup>271</sup> David Geers, "Neo-Modern," *October*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 139, Winter (2012).

that Geers combines with the term Neo-Formalism is used by Geers to refer to practices "... that draw on a range of influences spanning Constructivism to Arte Povera, but it most closely resembles Action Painting in its emphasis on performative production – process – and abstract form. [...] Neo-formalism traffics in hybridized materials that afford it a referential base and so insulate it against charges of pure abstraction. Its décor too often carries a payload of gritty materialism that deflects any accusation of strictly aesthetic claims."<sup>272</sup> For Geers, by incorporating received values of materialism, neo-formalism pursues an art of aesthetic arrangement that satisfies the need for formal continuities. But at the same time in fact, nullifies the specificity and discursive potential of its own materials and subsumes them in a familiar modernist idiom. Thus, less simulation than emulation, this is in fact for Geers a restorative project: "Such a model represents a cynical model for a contemporary practice that now searches for loopholes and blind spots in a constant hedging of bets. In fact, it allows the artist and the collector to have it both ways – the luxury of aesthetic pleasure and its simultaneous terrain too acting as unwitting champion in today's version of the 'return to the craft'. A process-based resin painting by Alex Hubbard for instance can echo de Kooning or Tapiés all of whom are aggrandized in a youthful update."<sup>273</sup>

There is a connection here between Peter Burger's complaints about the Neo avant-garde and Geers' own complaints in regard to Neo-Formalism/New-Modernism. For Geers neo-formalism, by recombining former original models like Minimalism, Arte Povera or Abstract Expressionism is just attempting to connect to an economy of luxury goods: "To obviate such impasses and vulgar concerns, neo-formalism retreats to the aura of the objects and to its hallowed resting place in modernist abstraction".<sup>274</sup> For Geers the emphasis on "process" is just another consequence of the lack of critical discourse, a critical discourse that was present in late modern painting. Let's just remember as example of this critical discourse Barbara Reise remarks about Ryman's process of making.<sup>275</sup> For Geers this is a moment of retreat, what he calls a collage of art

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.p.10.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.p.12.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.p.12.

<sup>275</sup> Barbara Reise, "Robert Ryman: Unfinished li (Procedures)," *Studio International* 187, no. March - 964 (1974).

objects that reveals a discourse of art as consisting of nothing but the market.<sup>276</sup> “The Neo-formalism crowding today’s MFA programs, galleries and museums are both the ostensible antagonist of this development and its reaction formation. It may appear to deny a perfected spectacle but it is tethered to it as by an umbilical cord”.<sup>277</sup> We can consider this “umbilical cord” as a symptom of nostalgia of a lost age, or as just another strategy of the market. But with either these two answers we do not address the most important question: How the ideas of process and of labour can channel the way for the production of the new in aesthetics.

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<sup>276</sup> Geers, "Neo-Modern."

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.p.14.

## Conclusions

This study started out with the following question: How can we account for the insistence of monochrome? It has been announced as a “cemetery of painting” and yet, it persists. Although considering it the “cemetery” or death of painting seems excessive, one could accept that it is a form of art that is related to the limits of representation. One might argue that monochrome, perhaps, reiterates the original achievement of the origin of representation. That moment in which there is nothing, and then something figures.

As it has been remarked about the neo avant-garde, the insistence of monochrome does not imply an empty repetition or a mere imitation. Rather, it entails a reflexive repetition. This reflexive repetition can be understood with the aid of the Freudian concept of “nachträglichkeit”, of deferred temporality. Freud develops this concept in relation to the trauma, which has two moments. An event that occurs at some point in time is resignified as “traumatic” later on. The Freudian concept of Nachträglichkeit allowed us to consider this repetition as a recreation of the historical avant-garde.

This allows us to think of the monochrome as an event, as the origin of the representation of time. An event establishes a present and a past. It implies a temporal disruption after which one will need to resort to the representation of time to account for something that was not there and then has been originated.

Another concept related to time is that of “gesture”, gesture as the movement by which the artist produces the work. The artist makes a mark, and this mark, which points to the artist, constitutes him as a past presence. This mark, which implies an origin, has a past: it was previously absent. Thus, the gesture constitutes the artist into a temporal being. Also, as a spatial being, since the space that the mark occupies was unmarked and becomes marked space. The space occupied by the mark is a space that is different from the space occupied by the artist’s presence.

The ideas of “event” and “gesture” that constitute the artist as a temporal and spatial being, detached from the time and space of the mark, are related to the Derridean concept of “trace”. The concept of trace is, as we have seen, related

to the idea of movement, of the absent maker of a mark. It is connected, as well, to the concepts of “writing” and “differance” (differing, deferring and detour). They are all concepts that share the idea of a temporal disjunction, of displacement, of deferred time. They all point to the existence of “the other” within the structure of the sign. The term “writing” encompasses all forms of possible inscription that then make possible for signification to take place. All human possible forms of representation, then, are limited, since when a mark or inscription (writing) is created, there seems to be a paradoxical effect which renders the maker of the mark absent in time and space (trace) from his or her own creation.

This paradoxical effect –the fact that the mark, for it has an indexical character, will bear a causal relation to its maker as absence, the fact that the origin of the mark comes to be as a loss that cannot be recovered– is what makes us wonder whether the creation of works of art (or any other form of symbolic inscription or representation –thought, writing, painting) constitutes the possibility of mediation, or rather the impossibility of it, just as expressed by Michael Newman in his essay *The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing*: “Is the mark a trace? Or the trace of a trace? Or a mark from which the trace withdraws? Or the effacement of the trace? At stake in these questions is the relation of the drawn mark to the one who leaves it, and the one who receives it. Does the mark mediate; create an in-between that both divides and joins, or is it the trace of an alterity outside all possibility of mediation? Could it be argued that while the index draws attention to the space and time of its occurrence, the trace disturbs the sphere of manifestation in which it occurs: it has come from elsewhere from a wholly other dimension, even an absolute exteriority? Insofar as it involves the question of the trace and its relation to immanence, drawing marks the crossing point of ethics and aesthetics. And as the site of a departure, it is also a place of mourning”.<sup>278</sup>

It is worth to return to this quotation to gain some additional insight and to be able to connect the concepts of “trace”, “mark”, and “gesture”, to other ideas developed in the present paper such as melancholy, desire, loss and creativity.

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<sup>278</sup> Newman, "The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing "

The idea of “trace” (and all the related concepts) points out to the idea of loss and absence. At the same time, however, it is connected to the creative drive that is involved in the making of a mark. From this viewpoint, it is related to creative desire.

I started out this study speaking of monochrome and melancholy. Melancholy bears an aspect of repetition and obsessive fixation with a lost object. Freud explains the mechanism involved in melancholy as the impossibility to overcome the loss of an object. The ego becomes identified with the lost object. Monochrome has been seen as a melancholic type of painting. Angela de la Cruz’s broken paintings express the work of an artist invaded by sadness. But also in the repetitive character of monochrome and in the fact that it is a form of painting that seems obsessively non-figurative, as a form of painting that seems obsessed with not saying anything over and over again.

Kristeva adds an interesting turn to Freud’s notion of melancholy. Freud considers melancholy as a sort of insistence with a lost object. Kristeva, in turn, argues that it is not a lost object, but rather a no object that she calls the “Thing”. The Thing is a concept that we can relate to that of “trace”, or to “the other” within the structure of the sign. The Thing can never be represented (thus, it is not an object that was lost and could be found), but it functions as the engine of creativity, by being at the core of the process of sublimation.

I can now go back to the initial questions. Is monochrome the cemetery of painting? And, how can we account for the insistence of monochrome as a genre? Monochrome is a form of painting related to the “trace”, in that it aims at recreating that original moment of inscription of a mark. It is a form of painting that does not represent any object, but aims at “representing” the very trace, if such a thing is possible. It aims at representing the Thing, the “other” within the structure of a sign. The insistence, the reflexive repetition of monochrome as a genre, expresses its obsessive desire to achieve that impossible goal. It expresses, at the same time, not a melancholic attachment to a lost object, but rather the human creative drive to make marks. This is a persistent drive, although the entrance into the realm of representation and symbolization

("writing" in Derridean terms) entails a loss and leaves the artist absent as presence.



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