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Tactility and Opticality in Contemporary Abstract Painting

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Abstract

The thesis analyses the construction of surface in contemporary abstract painting and its broader implications, mainly in regard to Clement Greenberg's understanding of modernist painting. It considers how this issue was contended between art critics such as Greenberg and Michael Fried and artists that challenged the formalist account of painting's medium specificity through a wide range of procedures and techniques. I review Thierry de Duve's analysis of Robert Ryman's work in regard to Greenberg's understanding of modernist painting and discuss the ways in which the contest between painting and photography (since photography made painting reproducible) is central.

The analysis of Ryman's work leads to a consideration of Duchamp's readymade and its significance to painting. Painting's resistance to being annexed by photography follows de Duve's contention in regard to painting-photography competitiveness where he argues that opposition to photographic reproducibility has been critical for painting since the invention of photography. At this point the historical significance of Duchamp's readymade is regarded as a repetition of the invention of photography within the domain of painting.

The assertion is then that the key to contemporary abstract painting – what supports its attraction – is the manner in which the construction of surface is made through the reformulation of pictorial practices that were developed from the 1960s – such as *Informel* – and continue to be elaborated in a contemporary context in the works of artists like Katharina Grosse or Sergej Jensen. By considering *Informel* as a manifestation of a painting-photography contest I argue for its value in contemporary abstract painting as a means to further develop abstract painting's potentiality, as Katharina Grosse and Sergej Jensen do through their engagement with architectural space.

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Chapter 1 Abstraction without opticality

1- Introduction

The text that follows considers in the first instance Clement Greenberg's rejection of tactility developed in his essays *Modernist Painting* (1961) and *After Abstract Expressionism* (1962) as well as Thierry de Duve's critique of Greenberg's view of literalism, a critique developed by de Duve in his meticulous essay on Robert Ryman's work, *Irreproducible Ryman* (1980). Further review of Ryman's work is undertaken on the basis of Yve-Alain Bois' *Ryman's Tact* (1981) and *Painting: The Task of Mourning* (1990). In surveying de Duve's text on Ryman's work, I consider painting in its relationship to Marcel Duchamp's readymade as well as the threat faced by painting since photography made painting reproducible. The appraisal of Ryman's work based on the aforementioned text by de Duve leads to the account of Michael Fried's viewpoint of literalism and the contest between the artists who stressed tactility and anti-illusion in their works - such as Ryman and Robert Rauschenberg - and formalist art critics such as Greenberg and Fried. The strand of abstraction developed by Ryman and Rauschenberg based on tactility and anti-illusion is related as well to the contest between photography and painting.

I examine also Rauschenberg's early work through analysis made by Leo Steinberg, Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois. The relevance of Rauschenberg's early paintings is considered on the basis of Rauschenberg's treatment of the pictorial plane, an innovation that spread across high modernism and influenced artists who did not belong to the North-American thread of high modernism such as Antoni Tàpies.¹ As mentioned, the examination of the strand of abstraction developed by Ryman and Rauschenberg based on tactility and anti-illusion is complicated by the clash between photography and painting. My aim is to engage with and reconsider pictorial practices based on tactility and anti-illusion as well as evaluate the significance of revisiting this strand of abstraction in a contemporary context.

Finally, it is through the interpretation made by Rosalind E. Krauss on Donald Judd's work *Untitled, (1966)* [Fig. 8] - *Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd* (1966) – that I appraise the meaning of tactility and anti-illusion beyond painting and the consequences of this particular work by Judd in regard to the perception of the viewer,

a topic that is further analyzed in Chapter 2 through the works of Katharina Grosse, Jules Olitski and Sergej Jensen.

As aforementioned, the starting point of this research considers Greenberg's regard of flatness and opticality as essential conventions of modernist painting. Greenberg's rejection of tactile values in modernist painting is well known. De Duve notes Greenberg's preference for "...the exclusion of tactile values quick to evoke sculpture or bas-relief, but also the exclusion of an excessive literalism that would restore to the frontal surface of painting the three-dimensionality of an ordinary object".² According to Charles Harrison and Paul Wood the main argument of Greenberg's *Modernist Painting* is an attempt to represent the development of modernist painting retrospectively, in a way which justifies and explains the work of artists which Greenberg had been reviewing over a period of time.³ For example, in Greenberg's view, the works of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland were resolved through a particular manner to which Greenberg gave the label *Post-Painterly Abstraction*, post-painterly because according to Greenberg it succeeded the painterly style previously related to the works of Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning. Harrison and Wood maintain that Greenberg regarded Louis and Noland's works as emblematic modernist paintings.⁴ Thus the works of Louis and Noland appear to confirm Greenberg's thesis that painting has had to concentrate upon what it shares with no other art form: its flatness, its address to eyesight alone.

Harrison and Wood argue:

His *Modernist Painting* (1961) presented an ambitious body of ideas about art in a form which rendered those ideas both graspable and available for critical scrutiny. On the one hand, as the work of the Abstract Expressionists achieved public acclaim and market success, artists and critics looked to Greenberg as a source of judgements about art *After Abstract Expressionism* (the title of an essay of 1962). On the other hand, his status as the Modernist critic *par excellence* made him a natural target for those looking to counter what they saw as the regulatory effects of Modernist priorities in both the practice and the criticism of art.⁵

For Greenberg flatness was fundamental because it is linked to the particularity of painting, As Andrew Benjamin remarks: "...the project of *Modernist Painting* was to hold painting apart from sculpture".⁶

De Duve considers that what was fundamental in Greenberg's view was the idea of opticality that sets apart any perception of narrative in the work. As a consequence of the necessity for optical illusion only colour is used and thus tactility and narrative are excluded.⁷ Greenberg then undervalued the works of artists such as Jasper Johns or Antoni Tàpies:

In Europe, too, painterly abstraction presses towards the three dimensional. Painterly abstraction in Europe has likewise degenerated into an affair largely of mannerisms, whether those of 'furtive bas-relief' or those of 'homeless representation'. And there, too, a vast quantity of abstract art that is bad because mannered is relieved, within the orbit of the mannerisms, only by felicitous minor art. For our Johns and Diebenkorn, Europe has its Tàpies and Sugai to show.⁸

According to Greenberg, it is painting and specifically its opticality that maintains a residual illusionism. Thus Greenberg's stress on opticality and his emphasis on eyesight alone as a mode of perception of the work of art was maintained at the expense of other artists and tendencies that were marginalized or simply ignored in modernist criticism.⁹ What de Duve adds - and rightly so - is that what is distinguishable about Greenberg is that he did not support a work such as Rauschenberg's seven white panels, ***White Painting, (1951) [Fig.1]***, a work that long before his *Modernist Painting* essay, delineated the notions of flatness and the delimitation of flatness as specific pictorial conventions:

Having declared them: 'familiar-looking and even slick', he probably reckoned that they were no better than a 'stretched or tacked-up canvas [which] already exists as a picture - though not necessarily as a successful one'.¹⁰

2-Unphotographable Ryman

The Greenbergian account of painting's medium specificity was challenged by the advent of new experimental movements in the 1950s and 1960s. The established assumptions governing modernist painting were questioned and alternative techniques and materials offered a wide range of new approaches in painting.

The stress on anti-illusion was one of the strands that defined these approaches; anti-illusion as an attempt to develop an alternative path to Greenberg's view of painting's medium specificity. I have mentioned that according to Greenberg pictorial specificity prevailed over anti-illusion and narrative, therefore setting apart any narrative content that might be involved in regard to the perception of the work. Reviewing Greenberg's position, de Duve clarifies:

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 colored surface escaping practical space and suspended in the time of action.¹¹

Obviously 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-illusionist, 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?¹²

I suggest that what Bois names 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. According to Bois, Ryman's stress on this process can be considered as one of the consequences of the fact that painting became the obvious target for the narratives of modernity with its new forms, such as photography. Bois contends that if abstract painting is regarded as the emblem of modernism, it is then required to understand its essentialism as the effect of a critical historical period, which he argues can be named industrialization:

Mass production seemed to bode the end of painting through its most elaborate *mise-en-scene*, the invention of the ready-made. Photography and mass production were at 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, to reclaim a specific domain. Artists were compelled to demonstrate the exceptional nature of their model of

production. Then the painter's gesture had to re-evaluate this position as modernity progressed.¹³

Once painting had to deal with the threat of industrialization, the features that made painting different from other modes of production had to be defined precisely. In modernist terms, painting's value arose from painting's autonomy from other forms of production rather than from its similarity to them. At this point we have to go back to Greenberg's contention that painting does not share the specific features of its makeup with other art forms. Bois argues that the emphasis on the touch, on texture as well as on the gesture in modern painting "...is a consequence of the division of labor inherent in industrial production".¹⁴ Bois contends also that it is precisely in Ryman's paintings that the theoretical evidence of painting's historical location as a singular domain of manual expertise is developed in full scope:

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 artist moves toward the condition of photography: the division of labor is interiorized.¹⁵

In regard to the issue of photography considered as a threat to painting - as a threat to painting's value as an art form - de Duve maintains that it is precisely the confrontation to photographic reproducibility the constant strand which Robert Ryman's work emphasizes.¹⁶ Therefore de Duve enquires then if in attempting a definition of painting in "...its specific form as painting"¹⁷ one should have to take into consideration whether opposition to photographic reproducibility has not been crucial for painting since photography was able to make painting reproducible. That in turn - in de Duve's view - "...would make Ryman's work an exemplary model in this respect".¹⁸ De Duve notes at this point that Greenberg never paid attention to the historical process of the contest between painting and photography:

...which is, so to speak, industrialized, aura-less painting. But [Greenberg] never concerned himself with that specific competition, smothering it beneath the general antagonism between avant-garde and kitsch. And he preferred to believe that pictorial specificity had won over sculpture and literature, in other words over tactility and narrativity. Ryman is a good model when it comes to refuting Greenberg on this point.¹⁹

According to de Duve, tactility and narrative are main features in Ryman's paintings.²⁰ These features are made visible through the thickness of the surface, the different materials used by Ryman, and the way in which Ryman presents the work in relationship to the wall. Tactility and narrative - or narrativity in de Duve's terms - are clearly expressed through the process:

A tactility visible on the surface or stratified in thickness, a tactility of adhesion in the works made on the wall, or indeed of detachment in the canvases mounted at some distance from the wall on little metal braces, the tactility of sharpness in the unframed / reframed works (...) 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.²¹

Thus all the step-by-step decisions that Ryman makes during this process convey the sense of Ryman's place as painter, whose commitment to the procedure through the work's construction process is plainly indicated to the viewer. De Duve argues that the crucial point of Ryman's paintings is that they are irreproducible: "...they are made not to be photographable because their only subject matter consists of the painter's commitment to all the operations and decisions that have always constituted his *métier*".²² The printed image of Ryman's ***Untitled (1962)*** [Fig.2] can inform the viewer about the strokes of white oil paint, the blue particles and that the painted area stops short of the edges, revealing the thin gesso and the raw linen. It also documents that the left and right sides of the linen have been cut and are ragged. But as mentioned by de Duve, the photograph is not able to reproduce the subjective investment made by Ryman through the work's construction process. Thus de Duve concludes: "...procedures are present in a good photograph of a Ryman as documentation, while they are totally absent from the photo as reproducing an object of subjective investment".²³ For de Duve the subject matter of Ryman's paintings "...is not the process, but the subjective investment in the process".²⁴ An investment that, de Duve clarifies, "...is not reproducible in Ryman's painting any more than it is in any other painting".²⁵ What for de Duve makes Ryman's irreproducibility crucial is that

...nothing is so invested but the 'process' which I prefer to call, with Barbara Reise, *procedure*: those technical operations and sensitive decisions specific to the painter's *métier*, that the totality of what constitutes the 'procedures' is invested, from the choice of a brand of pigment to the way of hanging the picture when it is shown to the public, and that each to the phases and

operations of those 'procedures' is rendered explicit, emphatic and self-referential.²⁶

As previously mentioned, Ryman's work characteristic of being self referential is noticed by Bois as he contends that Ryman's paintings do not allow "associative readings", setting their own "discursive terrain".²⁷ The "discursive terrain" is then linked to Ryman's process of making. Thus – in de Duve's view - the irreproducibility of Ryman's work is not connected to some kind of technical restriction of photography, or to the printing process that reproduces Ryman's paintings in catalogues or books; rather it relates to the fact that a reproduction printed in a catalogue or in a book, is not able to communicate what de Duve calls Ryman's subjective investment within his process of making. At this stage it is necessary to situate Ryman in the historical context in which he began to develop his work. Ryman was situated within a generation of North-American painters that included artists such as Stella or Johns among others, artists – as de Duve rightly points out – whose works appear hard to include in Greenberg's view of *American-Type Painting*.²⁸ De Duve distinguishes that Ryman's work was linked firstly with Minimalism and afterwards, with the necessity to identify a pictorial section of Minimalism, "...with *reductive painting, systemic painting, analytic painting, fundamental painting* and other brands of *peinture-peinture*".²⁹ For de Duve these labels indicate a twofold problem: on the one hand, related to the complicatedness of an incorrect reading of Ryman's work (de Duve mentions as well the works of Robert Mangold and Brice Marden) in relationship with Minimalism and on the other hand, to the inadequacy of relating Ryman's work with *Post-Painterly Abstraction* (as mentioned before concerning Louis, Noland and Olitski) fostered at that time by Greenberg to confront Minimalism. In regard to this historical context de Duve maintains:

It is as if Greenberg found essential, for there to be art, to have the tendency towards literalism stop somewhere and retain the possibility of what we might call a residual illusionism, so as to safeguard the autonomy of an aesthetic experience distinct from a phenomenology of the ordinary object. For him, it is specifically painting, that has the historic task of maintaining that residual illusionism.³⁰

Thus from Greenberg's notion of pictorial specificity, it is then required - as Greenberg does - to undervalue the works of art that, such as Judd's, cut across the threshold of literalism. De Duve recognizes that a surplus of literalism might constitute a danger to

an understanding of an object as an art object and that due to historical reasons it is within the visual field

...the painter's *métier*, more than the sculptor's or architect's, that has, since the late 19th century, become the trustee of a safeguarding function: to ensure that the particular phenomenological experience that we call aesthetic is still possible within a culture which, because of industrialization, functionalises, 'literalises', and reifies all the objects that it produces.³¹

But in de Duve's view, by foreseeing a terminal literalisation modernist painting "vaccinates" its tradition against a surplus of literalism:

...it is by itself initiating the 'functionalising', 'literalising', and 'reifying' of more and more extensive areas of what 'tradition' once claimed to idealise, that the avant-garde anticipates a functionalisation, literalisation and reification which will, at any rate, sooner or later reach the culture as a whole. A strategy of vaccination, in short. (...) Once this contradiction is acknowledged – that by anticipating a fatal literalisation avant-garde painting 'vaccinates' its tradition against an excess of literalism – it is futile to make the question of literalism a matter of thresholds.³²

This is central for de Duve because he argues that this point was not comprehended by Greenberg.³³ That is precisely according to de Duve the reason why Greenberg undervalued Minimalism, because Greenberg considered that Minimalism had cut across the threshold of unrestricted literalism. De Duve enquires then how [Greenberg] "...could have blinded himself to the phoney problem of a threshold of excessive literalism?"³⁴ De Duve contends that the answer is placed in Greenberg's blindness to Duchamp - to the magnitude of the readymade - and to the historic competition between photography and painting:

Greenberg has been unable to spot that, in inventing the ready-made, Duchamp had not been attempting to broaden aesthetic judgement and artistic appropriation to its furthest point and outside pictorial conventions, but had duly noted that the invention of photography had brutally modified all conditions of artistic utterance within pictorial conventions. Therefore, he came to believe that Minimalism was nothing but the compulsive repetition of the readymade, somewhere between painting and sculpture.³⁵

Hal Foster maintains also that Greenberg considered literalism as a reiteration of Duchamp's ideas. According to Foster, literalism - in Greenberg's view - "...pursued extraneous effects rather than the essential qualities of art".³⁶ The issue to address – according to de Duve - is the attempt of a different approach to the conflict between Greenberg and Minimalism. This approach should disagree with Judd's conception in regard to the quality of the work of art, specifically, to Judd's claim that the only quality of a work of art needs is to have to be interesting.

De Duve argues that Judd's position is a reductionist one:

...[because Judd] claims to resolve the historical contradiction between the tendency towards literalism and the resistance of illusionism by purely and simply eliminating one of the terms of the contradiction.³⁷

Ryman's work precisely indicates – in de Duve's view – that the specificity of painting "...works towards a disjunction".³⁸ This disjunction is regarded, on the one hand, as aesthetic experience and on the other hand, as painting understood as process; the specific procedures that set their own conventions and locate themselves within their own historical context.³⁹ Ryman locates that disjunction over the counteraction that links the work and its reproduction. De Duve stresses then that a task of painting is to achieve the evidence that the reproduction is not able to replace the work. That is according to de Duve one of painting's duties since the moment "...aesthetic consciousness became accustomed to admitting that photography could be an art equivalent to painting".⁴⁰

De Duve marks the peak of the painting-photography contest in the late 1950s when a focus on the tactile qualities in abstract painting emerged in some of the postwar art tendencies. One of them was *Informel*.⁴¹ As an aesthetic *Informel* suggested that the viewer's attention was directed in the first instance to the physical properties of the materials used in the work as well as to the production of non-photographable effects of matter.⁴² According to Jaimey Hamilton it was in the *Art Informel* "infused atmosphere" that an artist like Alberto Burri began to develop his work, more precisely his *Sacchi*.⁴³ In Burri's work the opaque and highly textured raw matter are stuck directly onto the burlap or canvas support and the paint itself is often applied in such a way that its material density predominates over the effects of translucence and luminosity associated with modernist painting. Antoni Tàpies' paintings followed a similar thread.

Manuel Borja-Villel considers that Tàpies' matter paintings are associated with the wall, a surface on which *graffiti* can be written and forms of objects can be fixed.⁴⁴ By identifying colour with matter, the colour takes on a few tones: the land of Tàpies and Burri's blacks. It might be said that the work ceases to be a representation of reality and it is presented as a fragment or example of it. In Tàpies' work, earth-like sediment is crushed and compressed and random scarifications also map the picture plane. In Burri's work matter consists of materials such as burlap sacks or aluminum powder, in addition to sand. I mention the works of artists such as Tàpies and Burri because de Duve maintains that *Informel* is precisely a manifestation of painting-photography contention, at a time when painters most strongly resisted the appropriation of painting by photography.⁴⁵ But de Duve stresses the significance of the fact that the strand of *Informel* was much more developed in Europe than in North-America. De Duve contends at this point that when artists like Pollock added sand into his pigments, he was not conceding to *Informel*, rather

...[Pollock] was crudely stating the contradiction between opticality and literalism so dear to Greenberg. And Barnett Newman, who was certainly the least reproducible painter of his generation, responded to photography's challenge not with a surplus of matter, but by inscribing upon the auratic outcome of pictorial opticality – which he called the sublime – traces of the procedure giving rise to it. It is to this tradition that Ryman belongs, which means that his teaching does not stop at indicating that, if painting wishes to survive in its specificity, it must resist being photographically annexed.⁴⁶

De Duve argues that Ryman's work not only stresses the conventions of the medium, the quality that can allow painting its resistance of being annexed by photography:

Ryman locates the painting / photography disjunction within painting. Painting assumes the documentary function of reproduction just as well, and the self-explanatory nature of the procedure is even more readable in the original work than in its reproduction.⁴⁷

For example narrativity – in de Duve's terms - is explicitly manifested through the procedure in Ryman's paintings. ***Windsor 34, (1966) [Fig.3]*** displays narrative by stressing the randomness of an initial decision and final result. The horizontal painted strips end when there is no more paint on the brush. Then the left edge of the work has the appearance of a more uniform look than the right, where the brush runs out of

paint. In this case the duration of the session is linked to the supply of paint loaded on the brush. What in de Duve's view Ryman's work demonstrates, is that if painting recognizes photography as a partner, the mastery of painting is evident, because when an original Ryman conveys all the documentary information reproduced in its documentary function, the photograph loses the original's value.⁴⁸ Thus taking into account the historical competition between painting and photography, de Duve argues that "...Ryman's strategy is anything but the only possible one, far from it. First of all, the *irreproducibility* aspect of the work is only one of the aspects of the consequences of the invention of photography".⁴⁹ De Duve remarks that in conjunction with irreproducibility it is necessary to consider the historical meaning of Duchamp's readymade:

In so far as it repeats, within the field of painting, the invention of photography, of which it is, quite literally, the after-effect through which pictorial practice took cognizance of the initial traumatism that produced those 'entirely new functions' of which [Walter] Benjamin spoke: since Niépce, the possibility of producing ready-made painting has traumatized painting, which is only beginning to recover.⁵⁰

That recovery de Duve adds, took a vast amount of work, within which irreproducibility is only one of the means by which painting attempts to survive. As previously explained it is also required to locate Ryman within the historical context in which he grew to relevance as an artist: the New York art scene 1965-70 and the conflict between Greenberg and a new generation of artists – especially the minimalists. The two aspects of that dispute were: specificity (the conflict between painting and objects or more precisely between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality) and literalism, which follows from specificity. "Otherwise put, as far as painting's conventions seemed to have been reduced to flatness and its perimeter, around a conflict between painting and 'objects'".⁵¹ De Duve declares that this contest is a false one that covers another, as he believes that it is nonsense to believe in a threshold of literalism, as Greenberg does, because three-dimensionality and literality had been indicated by Duchamp long before. The real issue for de Duve is that during the mid-1960s what was being understood was the epistemological significance of the readymade: that the readymade had uncovered "...the conditions of enunciation of any art object *in the age of its technical reproducibility*".⁵² The outcome of Ryman's procedure becomes relevant at this point: a reproduction of Ryman's **Access, (1983) [Fig.4]** 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 industrial look of the work, shown in the reproduction, if the viewer stands in front of the work she/he can perceive the trace of the materials on it. Thus according to de Duve, Ryman's work demonstrates that it is a mistake to consider that painting might withstand its reification by the way of opticality, the last shelter of illusionism. Whereas Greenberg considered the conventions of painting in exclusive terms - specifying painting through flatness and opticality and excluding all that might be tactile or narrative - Ryman's work indicates – in de Duve's view - that these conventions can be considered inclusively.⁵³ The historical context in which artists like Ryman began to develop their work reflected the conflict between Greenberg and those critics who followed him - like Michael Fried - and the group of artists – like the minimalists – who, due to Greenberg's predominance, had to place themselves explicitly in connection to him.⁵⁴ And 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".⁵⁵ Michael Fried's argument against the minimalists 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 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 ubiquitousness, indeed the virtual inescapability, of pictorial illusion".⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷

Fried describes the minimalist experience as one in which the relationship between spectator and object can be invested with drama; that is to say, to the extent that that relationship can be made theatrical. In the other mode of experience – modernist painting and sculpture - the spectator is engaged by a formal configuration which appears as instantaneously present and 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 gave 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.⁵⁸

In fact, the question Fried 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. And 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”.⁵⁹ Fried argues that the possibility of seeing works of art as mere objects is not possible. Modernist painting, according to Fried, can only suspend its own objecthood and preserve its essence, its pictorial specificity, through the medium of shape.⁶⁰ 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 is made”.⁶¹ Fried mentions also another distinction between literalist work and modernist painting: 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 addresses then the idea of temporality, of time both passing and to come. The question of time marks for Fried a key difference between what he regards 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”.⁶²

Precisely for that conception of temporality Fried condemned Minimalism. Foster considers that Fried’s contention is accurate from this point of view, because Minimalism did inaugurate a concern with time as well as the kind of perception that the viewer would have of this kind of work.⁶³ 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 according to Foster the key reorientation that Minimalism proposes.⁶⁴

As mentioned before the aim of this research is related to the consideration of past pictorial practices which emphasize the stress on tactility and anti-illusion as well as on the debates that occurred about these practices.

How do we regard that strand of abstraction in the contemporary context?

According to de Duve it would be required primarily to attempt a different approach to the contest between formalist critics such as Greenberg, Fried and the minimalists, bearing in mind the misleading sense that Minimalism has, as it involves a wide range of practices that exceed painting. 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. But 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.⁶⁵ 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".⁶⁶ 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".⁶⁷ De Duve indicates then that a painter has to be capable to endow as his own each of these gestures as well as able to inscribe these gestures that he produces at that nominal threshold. That is why Ryman's paintings – with all the gestures explicitly indicated to the viewer – are different to the ready-made.⁶⁸ Therefore de Duve contends that by being the antithesis of the readymade Ryman's work shows:

...that it is a mistake to believe that Minimalism was an *art of the real*. It is no more an *art of the real* than Duchamp's urinal. If the false problem of literalism is to have a historical meaning, it is to have brought this to our attention: the

photographic ready-made, already mimicked by the urinal when it earned the name of art, makes a comeback in the 1960s at the decisive threshold of two nominations: either art or painting.⁶⁹

Then the conflict would not be between Greenberg and Judd, between opticality and objecthood, because Ryman's paintings are "...as 'literal' as Judd's objects, as 'illusionistic' as Olitski's surfaces".⁷⁰ But as de Duve contends: "...they are not ready-mades and they are not reproducible".⁷¹ Thus Ryman's work demonstrates that it is a mistake to believe that painting might resist its reification through opticality, the last bastion of illusionism:

...'modernist painting' does not describe modernist painting as a self-critical, exclusive and purist historical movement, it states the conditions of the historical survival of the painter's *métier* in the age of technical reproducibility. Its specificity does not exclude anything out of necessity, neither sculptural tactility, nor objectual literality. But it has become necessary for its survival to explicitly include a specific adversary which, since Niépce, had lodged in it like the Trojan horse: photography.⁷²

De Duve concludes that in fact "...there are no specifically pictorial qualities, any more than the specificity of objects without any quality other than their being *interesting*".⁷³ But he clearly states that there is the art we name painting and the art we name with a wide range of other artistic categories, such as Conceptual art or Process art. Thus in regard to the contest of literalism during the 1960s it is clear that the question of specificity was developed linking two nominations.⁷⁴ These nominations referred, on the one hand, to the traditional names of painting and sculpture, and on the other hand, to other developments in art without any specific tradition and categorized with new designations. The issue to address is then related to the condition of contemporary painting after that contest. Both de Duve and Bois regard as inevitable the state of mourning for painting since photography has made painting reproducible. Bois regards Ryman as the exemplary mourner painter.⁷⁵ Exemplary in a way that Ryman's work avoids - in Bois' view - the pathological aspects of mourning: mania and melancholy. The question to further explore is then why should there have to be an exemplary model to follow in contemporary painting.

3-Robert Rauschenberg's flatbed picture plane

Robert Rauschenberg's early paintings are also a radical approach in regard to the question of painting's specificity. Harrison and Wood argue that while the works of Louis and Noland might be regarded - from Greenberg's perspective - as an extension of Pollock's improvisatory manner, Rauschenberg dealt with the legacy of Abstract Expressionism in a different way: "...as if color, texture, contrast and brushstroke were no longer conceivable as vehicles of feeling but had to be treated as the conventional components of artificial schemes".⁷⁶ Leo Steinberg maintains that the radical shift made by Rauschenberg consisted in inverting "...the conception of the picture as representing a world, some sort of world space which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture".⁷⁷ According to Steinberg that conception - which was a key tool for painting - was challenged by Rauschenberg:

We can still hang his pictures –just as we tack up maps and architectural plans or nail a horseshoe to the wall for good luck. Yet these pictures no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals. The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards – any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed – whether coherently or in confusion.⁷⁸

Thus what matters is not the mode of placement of the picture but "its mode of imaginative confrontation".⁷⁹ Therefore Steinberg regards the leaning of the picture from vertical to horizontal as a radical shift of the subject matter of art: "...the shift from nature to culture".⁸⁰ Steinberg considers Rauschenberg's work ***The Lily White, (ca. 1950) [Fig.5]*** to be the earliest work that exemplifies Rauschenberg's new pattern.⁸¹ ***The Lily White, (ca. 1950) [Fig.5]*** 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".⁸² In order to contain all the elements that Rauschenberg added to his paintings in later works his picture plane had to be converted into a kind of surface onto which almost anything could adhere. The work that Rauschenberg made during the end of the 1950s contained also a wide range of non-art supplementary elements such as the ladder in ***Winter Pool, (1959) [Fig.6]***. In Steinberg's view, Rauschenberg realized then that "...[his] imagery needed bedrock as hard and tolerant as a workbench. The picture's flatness was to be no more of a problem than the flatness of a disordered desk or an un-swept floor".⁸³

Steinberg regards Rauschenberg's deepest symbolic gesture made in 1955, when he took a mattress, covered it with paint and fixed it against the wall. Then the verticality of art continues to work in the viewer's imagination, alluding to the horizontality of the mattress and to the associations the viewer can have of it.

...Rauschenberg's picture plane is for the consciousness immersed in the brain of the city. The flatbed picture plane lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event. As a criterion of classification it cuts across the terms 'abstract' and 'representational', Pop and Modernist.⁸⁴

The radical innovation Steinberg considers in regard to Rauschenberg's work is that Rauschenberg dismisses the notion that a picture merely transcribes a three dimensional object onto a two dimensional field. Thus Rauschenberg does not only engage in transformation but also in a kind of transportation, the process he achieves through placing objects from the world – like the ladder in ***Winter Pool, (1959) [Fig.6]*** - on the picture plane. This is – in Steinberg's view - the deep change Rauschenberg's work introduces into pictorial language. Rosalind E. Krauss considers the development of Rauschenberg's work within the rise of what she calls the single-image painting in USA, a mode of conceiving the pictorial plane as a single image that identifies itself with the support. Krauss mentions also Jasper Johns and Frank Stella's works as examples of artists that adopted this conception of the pictorial plane.⁸⁵ Krauss maintains that that single-image making was adopted by Rauschenberg in a particular way, through the use of collage:

It was, as we shall see, a form of collage that was largely reinvented, such that in Rauschenberg's hands the meaning and function of the collage elements bore little relations to their earlier use in the work of Schwitters or the Cubists. But it was collage nonetheless. And in so being, it forced on the viewer of Rauschenberg's work an undeniable experience of syntax.⁸⁶

What Rauschenberg proposes to the viewer is another kind of reading of the work by conceiving the perception of the work by the viewer as an experience shared with language and its sense of discourse, thus involving a temporal development when the viewer perceives the work.⁸⁷ 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".⁸⁸

This conception of temporality linked to the idea of treating images as material and the way he materialized images was made by Rauschenberg through making colour corporeal. In ***Untitled (Red Painting), ca.1953 [Fig.7]*** a surface of different types of paper is impregnated with colour. 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'".⁸⁹ The conception of the materialized image Krauss elaborates, separates Rauschenberg from other uses of the surface-related image that occurred before him. Previously the image was a matter of mapping, of translating a three dimensional object onto the two-dimensional field of the picture plane. In Rauschenberg's work the object is not transformed but transferred:

An object is taken out of the space of the world and embedded into the surface of a painting, never at the sacrifice of its density as material. Rather it insists that images themselves are a species of material. And this is true whether the image in question is a shirt or a clock which operates as the image of a shirt or a clock while all the time remaining that thing.⁹⁰

That is precisely what Leo Steinberg stressed about the new approach made by Rauschenberg: from the traditional vertical plane to the horizontal flatbed. Yve-Alain Bois considers that Rauschenberg's combines "...conduit two essential strategies, both of which concern readability – or rather, its opposite".⁹¹ Bois names the first strategy *suspension of viewpoint*⁹²: referring to the difficulties the viewer encounters in order to find a proper distance from which to observe a combine. Bois indicates the multiplicity of elements the combines contain as cause of that impossibility of a precise approach to the work. The second strategy is called - in Bois words - *the hide-and-peek booby trap*⁹³: a strategy that operates at two levels, on the one hand it can be regarded as thematic via the reference to sculpture in the combines, but on the other hand, it can be considered as material, objects that are disguised within the work: "The collaged plane of the work suggests to us that there is something behind but denies our access to it".⁹⁴ Basically what Rauschenberg attempts is to make equal the collage element and the painted one, such as in ***Untitled (Red Painting) ca. 1953 [Fig. 7]***.

This approach began with the *Black paintings* in the early 1950s, pictorial surfaces which included pieces of newspapers embedded in black paint and that can be considered as the starting point in this approach made by Rauschenberg. Another condition that ***Untitled (Red Painting) ca. 1953 [Fig. 7]*** conveys is the particular treatment of the support, the support as part of the final image which transforms its meaning as support and converts it into another fragment of the work. In Bois terms:

For a good while, all of Rauschenberg's 'supports' were patchworks – or rather palimpsests - of excruciating complexity and varying assembly (sawing being almost as common as pasting), a practice that extended to his habit of partially obscuring his collaged photographs behind veils of translucent fabric or wash.⁹⁵

Rauschenberg's early paintings challenge the presumed conventions of modernist painting through the reformulation of the pictorial plane: the flatbed picture plane dismisses the notion of a picture that merely transcribes a three dimensional object onto a two-dimensional field. Rauschenberg does not engage in a transformation, but in a kind of transportation, achieved through the process by which he places objects from the world – such as the ladder in ***Winter Pool, (1959) [Fig.6]*** – onto the pictorial plane.

4- Judd's *Untitled* (1966)

In accordance with de Duce's contention – that it is possible to include narrativity, tactility or objectual literality within the conventions of the medium in painting - I have taken as examples of that strand of abstraction the works of painters such as Ryman and Rauschenberg. Both artists make the question of illusion and anti-illusion in abstract painting a complex field within their practices. I consider relevant as well in evaluating the topic illusion – anti-illusion, a particular work by Judd: ***Untitled, (1966) [Fig.8]***. This work questions the issues analyzed previously such as literalism and optical illusion, but in this case considered through one of Judd's *specific objects*.

Judd's position as an advocate of works of art that pursue as a major achievement their total distinctiveness as objects is well known.⁹⁶ As Rosalind E. Krauss remarks, object-art "...would seem to proscribe both allusion and illusion: any reference to experiences or ideas beyond the work's brute physical presence is excluded".⁹⁷

Krauss stresses that with this reduction of art from the domain of illusion – and by means of illusion, of sense – to the field of real objects, the art with which Judd could be linked was often “...characterized as ‘blank and empty’”.⁹⁸ Krauss maintains that coming near Judd’s work from that point of view the viewer is surprised by the attractiveness of the works themselves, an attractiveness which is not taken into account within the debates of object–art. For Krauss this is a signal of the deficiency of the theoretical strand that regards Judd’s objects as ‘blank and empty` and thus its lack of positive result in analyzing the real meaning of Judd’s **Untitled, (1966) [Fig.8]**.

⁹⁹ Krauss maintains that in order to understand Judd’s work – here I am referring specifically to **Untitled, (1966) [Fig.8]** – it is necessary to undertake

...a description of the objects themselves, but bearing in mind that that description cannot rest just in a list of characteristics: it would seem that in Judd’s case the strength of the sculptures derives from the fact that grasping the works by means of a list of their physical properties, no matter how complete, is both possible and impossible.¹⁰⁰

Krauss argues that she understands that Judd’s objects “... both insist and deny the suitability of such a definition of themselves as they are not produced from ‘contentions` about materials”.¹⁰¹ But at the same time they are clearly objects of perception, objects that need to be comprehended in the experience that the viewer has in looking at them.¹⁰² **Untitled, (1966) [Fig.8]** is a 642.6 cm long aluminum bar from which at varying distances a number of shorter bars painted in a deep - translucent violet are attached. One might presume that the main bar links with the violet bars as a support from which the violet bars rest. This according to Krauss is an architectural reading, an idea that is taken from the viewer’s previous experiences with constructed objects and applied to Judd’s work.¹⁰³ But this reading is proved to be misleading if the viewer looks at the work from the side, because in fact the aluminum bar is not solid and the violet boxes below are attached to the wall, thus functioning as props for the longer bar.

A view raking along the façade of the sculpture, then, reveals one’s initial reading as being in some way an illusion; the earlier sense of the purple bar’s impalpability and luminosity is reversed and a clear perception of the work can be obtained; but it is still one that is startlingly adumbrated and misleading.¹⁰⁴

Krauss considers that through this specific way of constructing the work Judd's achievement is twofold: on the one hand he refers to architecture: to a situation that the viewer might know before he is confronted with the work, thus putting in play a prior experience which the viewer reflects on at the time she/he perceives the work.

On the other hand, the work confuses this earlier knowledge in order to outline its own significance.¹⁰⁵ One of the challenges the work presents to the viewer is that due to its length – 642.6 cm – it needs to be perceived in perspective, but at the same time the work itself complicates its reading:

...because of the obviously unequal lengths of the violet bars and the unequal distances which separate them. The work cannot be seen rationally, in terms of a given sense of geometrical laws or theorems evolved prior to the experience of the object. Instead, the sculpture can be sensed only in terms of its present coming into being as an object given.¹⁰⁶

I previously mentioned Judd's position as an exponent of works of art that pursue their total distinctiveness as objects, Krauss considers as well that Judd's own critical standpoint accepts only the kind of works that reject both allusion and illusion. However, Krauss' analysis of ***Untitled, (1966)*** [Fig.8] reveals that the singularity of this work arises from an increasing sense of illusion.

...although not of pictorial illusion but of lived illusion. In the case described above the work plays off the illusory quality of the thing itself as it presents itself to vision alone - which it does persuasively from a front view, in seeming to be a series of flat, luminous shapes, and from a raking view, in the optical disappearance created by its orthogonal recession – as against the sensation of being able to grasp it and therefore to know it through touch.¹⁰⁷

Krauss concludes that the work becomes then an annoyance, as well as an intensifying of the understanding of the viewer as she/he comes closer towards objects in order to make sense of them.¹⁰⁸ This work demonstrates then that illusion plays a part in Judd's *specific objects*. Is this experience more illusive and instant for the viewer that the one he can get from an easel painting? This question leads us back to the contest between the formalist viewpoint of modernist painting and the minimalists. It is necessary at this point to remember – as de Duve rightly does – that many minimal artists – like Judd, Le Witt or McCracken – started their careers as painters.¹⁰⁹ De Duve mentions specifically Judd's *Light Cadmium Red Oil and Sand, Black and White Oil and Galvanized Iron on*

Wood (1961) a wooden panel covered with sand, red paint and with a piece of galvanized metal attached to it.

This work departs from the two-dimensionality of painting by adding a three-dimensional element to it. They deliberately seem to transgress the limit where, according to Greenberg 'a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object'. Moreover they claim this arbitrariness as a quality in itself.¹¹⁰

What does *Light Cadmium Red Oil and Sand, Black and White Oil and Galvanized Iron on Wood* (1961) mean in regard to abstract painting? It means that Judd - among other minimalist artists – located themselves in opposition to painting. And all the subsequent modes of art production such as Conceptual art or Process art, kept this strand alive by producing generic art (as de Duve names it).¹¹¹ This produced art that cut off its links "...with the specific crafts and tradition of either painting or sculpture."¹¹² In the case of Minimalism, the stress is linked to the perceptual experience of the 'real' or 'literal', an experience that is not resolved by the specific conventions of painting or sculpture. If in accordance to Greenberg's understanding of modernist painting, two-dimensionality is the last shelter of painting, then three-dimensionality is the main feature the new generic art Minimalism.¹¹³ De Duve agrees with Greenberg that painting has a special place within modern art – although arguing from different principles to Greenberg. De Duve maintains that the transition from "the specific to the generic"¹¹⁴ was made through painting: "...the 'spatial arts' as they have been called since Lessing became art *tout court* with the passage from painting – not sculpture or architecture - to art".¹¹⁵ In this place of liminality is located painting's potentiality, and also in its ability to be continuously reformulated while acknowledging the relevance of other art forms. It is pertinent to go back at this point to Ryman's work. As de Duve notes, Ryman's paintings "...acknowledge the readymade"¹¹⁶ by stressing the very nature of painting as a protracted process of making.

Within contemporary abstract painting's process of making I focus in Chapter 2 on the works of Katharina Grosse, Jules Olitski and Sergej Jensen as examples of strands of abstraction that attempt to confuse the perception of the viewer.

Chapter 2 Tactility plus opticality in contemporary painting

1-Introduction

In Chapter 1 I analyzed Robert Ryman's paintings, Robert Rauschenberg's early paintings as well as Donald Judd's *Untitled, (1966)* [Fig. 8]. My intention was to focus, on the one hand, in the way these artists - especially Ryman and Rauschenberg - developed the construction of surface in their works, and on the other hand on the debates that occurred mainly in New York during the 1960s between the formalist viewpoint of modernist painting - i.e., Greenberg and Fried, their formalist account of modernist painting - and the new experimental tendencies in painting that were developed at that time. As previously mentioned I choose Ryman's work and Rauschenberg's early paintings as examples of these tendencies because these works expanded the field of painting through a wide range of procedures and materials. My aim was then to contrast the different viewpoints that both critics and artists followed in regard to the issue of painting's medium specificity.

I examined Thierry de Duve's assault on Greenberg's viewpoint in regard to the relevance of opticality in abstract painting, a critique developed by de Duve in his painstaking essay *Irreproducible Ryman* (1980). I focused then on the emphasis on tactility and anti-illusion that Ryman's work and Rauschenberg's early paintings emphasize. Through the review of the antagonism between opticality and literalism – or in de Duve's terms - "...between opticality as the ultimate support of a residual illusionism and the 'specific objecthood' of an art object, with the name of painting being subtracted from 'art'".¹¹⁷, I attempted to clarify the specific meaning of both opticality and literalism and the form in which these concepts indicate an understanding of a work of art, a painting or a *specific object* such as Judd's *Untitled, (1966)* [Fig. 8]. I focused through the analysis of Judd's *Untitled, (1966)* [Fig. 8] on the particular kind of illusion that this work offers to the viewer. The issues to further examine in this chapter are related then to the questions of how the viewer is engaged with some specific works of art. In this chapter I review the works of three painters, Katharina Grosse, Jules Olitski and Sergej Jensen. I examine how the viewer perceives their works as well as what kind of illusion is put in play in that experience, especially through identifying threads of abstraction that attempt to challenge the viewer's perception by means of tactile and optical illusion.

The chapter begins by considering Katharina Grosse's 'expanded pictorial plane' as a term that best describes Grosse's work in relation to her treatment of the pictorial plane and its relationship to architecture. I argue that a central concern in Grosse's work is with its singularity by means of both tactile and optical illusion. A singularity that is also related to the contest between photography and painting previously mentioned in Chapter One. I review the means through which Grosse intervenes in architectural space and the ways in which her work challenges the reproducibility of photography or documentation as a photograph. Also relevant, is how Grosse's early paintings – such as **Untitled, (1989) [Fig. 9]** share similar features with *Informel*, further analyzed later in the chapter through Olitski's work. I argue that the continuous presence of the features of *Informel* in the work of abstract painters since the late 1950s until now proves that *Informel* has not yet exhausted its possibilities in the construction of surface in abstract painting and that its main features still play a critical role within the contest between photography and painting.

My aims in examining Olitski's work are threefold: Firstly, I discuss Olitski's development of the spray technique, which preceded that which is currently used by Grosse. Secondly, I evaluate Olitski's paintings and their relationship to *Informel* in both his early and late work – taking as examples **Brown Figure, (1957) [Fig. 12]** and **Bokota Silenced – One, (1974) [Fig. 15]**. Finally, I review Olitski's approach to the question of frontality in abstract painting. My evaluation is based upon an analysis by Rosalind E. Krauss in *On Frontality* (1968). This pro-illusionistic reading by Krauss of Olitski's work makes Olitski's position as a paradigmatic modernist painter – in Greenberg's terms – controversial to some extent. One appraisal of his work should acknowledge that Olitski can be regarded as a paradigmatic modernist painter taking into account Greenberg's view of modernist painting: for example, Greenberg's stress on opticality, flatness and the delimitation of flatness as main features in modernist painting. But this appraisal leaves aside the strand of work that Olitski developed throughout his practice, a strand based on tactile illusion - like **Brown Figure, (1957) [Fig. 12]** and **Bokota Silenced – One, (1974) [Fig. 15]** – which contradict in an absolute way the notion of opticality so esteemed by Greenberg. In accordance with Greenberg one might easily apply to this strand of Olitski's work the same disapproval that Greenberg applied to the works of Jasper Johns or Antoni Tàpies in his essay *After Abstract Expressionism* (1962).¹¹⁸ I attempt then to clarify Krauss' reading of Olitski in relation to Thierry de Duve's anti-illusionistic reading of Ryman (contra Greenberg's assault on tactility) asking if it could be possible to establish a concurrence between Krauss and de Duve.

The fact that arises at this point is that Greenberg continuously supported Olitski's work, making a particular interpretation of the role of tactility in Olitski's paintings – for example in his review of Olitski's work at the Venice Biennale in 1966. Greenberg's viewpoint is going to be analyzed later on in this chapter within the survey of Olitski's work.

I conclude by considering Sergej Jensen's work as a singular approach to tactility and anti-illusion in contemporary painting. My interest in Jensen's work centres on the subtle objecthood of his paintings and on a restrained process of making that relates to my own painting practice.

2- Katharina Grosse's expanded pictorial plane

I consider that the relevance of Grosse's work is related to the manner in which she interrogates painting's possibilities through procedures and techniques from the past but in a way that challenges the perception of the viewer by means of tactile and optical illusion. This is mainly achieved through the relationship that Grosse's work establishes with architecture. Expansion is then one of the most distinct qualities of Grosse's paintings: the spatial enlargement of the picture plane. Along with the highly differentiated layering of colours in her works, it is the increasing expansion into the three-dimensional space that leaves the easel painting far behind and allows painting to enter into a new relationship with its architectural and urban surroundings. In her early paintings Grosse brought back matter as an element of the pictorial surface. She incorporated materials such as clay, wax or paraffin onto untreated canvases working on the surface as a relief, for example in ***Untitled, (1989)*** [Fig. 9]. The outcome of this process relates to *Informel*, although Marion Ackermann suggests that Grosse takes the non-colour character of these materials as a starting point from which to develop a singular image away from the references to other artists who were influenced by *Informel*.¹¹⁹ Ackermann maintains that Grosse was able to find a more personal approach by turning her attention precisely to an extremely traditional gesture used by painters: the vertical gesture from the top of the picture plane downwards:

This formalistic, ritualistic gesture produced a stripe structure, usually in only one colour, the artist then turns the canvas on its side repeats the process and the result is a grid of verticals and horizontals. At this point a second colour generally comes into play. The ensuing layered picture draws its dynamics from

the tension between the graphic system of coordinates and the impression of spatiality that arises from the way the colours interact and develops as the viewer watches. This interwoven effect has the appearance of a monochrome surface with a scarcely definable, subtly iridescent coloration and indeterminate spatiality.¹²⁰

Ackerman adds that the execution of this gesture allowed Grosse to make her first coloured paintings on a wide range of supports such as paper, canvas or aluminum.¹²¹ From 1998 onwards Grosse started to develop another strand within her practice spraying the paint directly onto the wall. One of the particularities of the spray procedure in Grosse's practice is that she no longer needs to apply those formalistic gestures because by working directly on the wall the picture plane expands in a way that is no longer required to take into account the physical limits – such as the frame - of conventional easel painting.¹²²

The performative character of the wall pieces is palpable (in a sense they seem like 'stills' of a sequence of movements) even if they are to be regarded as self-contained pieces at the moment when the exhibition opens. The transience of the work in itself is an element in the concept of the work – ultimately they are about mirroring a gesture in time.¹²³

In ***Untitled, (1998)*** [Fig. 10] the paint applied on the wall with the spray gun produces fog-like compositions:

As one contemplates the work, analogies to certain natural phenomena intrude entirely of their own accord. Mist, clouds, smoke and dust all tend both to disperse and coalesce. And these impulses – expansion and concentration – are crucial in the use of spray paint.¹²⁴

Through the spray process in ***Untitled, (1998)*** [Fig. 10] the paint covers two corners of the space as well as part of the ceiling converting the work into a three dimensional space that unbalances the architectonic function of the room where the work is placed. The work unified with the wall generates another third dimension within the space in which it is located. In addition "...there is the less definable internal spatiality of the picture. When one steps into the room, Grosse's wall painting creates the effect of a *gesamt-picture*; the moment one crosses the threshold one is moving within the picture

itself".¹²⁵ Grosse's aim to intervene within the architectural space is clearly explained by herself describing ***Untitled, (1998)*** [Fig. 10]:

This was the first time I used a spray gun to make a painting in relationship to space and its volume.(...)The painting optically destabilized the corner of the room, letting it appear soft or even dissolved. I intended to show painting's independence of the support's coherence, i.e., the architectural structure.¹²⁶

Grosse adds that she decided to place the work in the corner of the room because that was the place where her gaze finished as she went into the room. She stresses also that the natural light proceeding through windows situated on the opposite wall was stained by the green of the trees outside the room and thus the green colour of her painting mirrored in an artificial way the context of the outside.¹²⁷ For Grosse, painting invokes an illusionistic space that follows divergent rules from those of the architectural space. That is precisely why it should change the use of the space where it is displayed and also demonstrates its independence from that space, "...by underscoring an incongruent relationship to it".¹²⁸ In conjunction to the relationship with architecture there is also in Grosse's process of making a strong reference to her body as an instrument that is engaged in this process. But paradoxically at the same time she emphasizes that the movement of the spray gun should be regarded as more linked to the movements of the eyes in such a way that in Grosse's view it dematerializes the painter at some point:"The body-size / painting-size relationship is given up. The eye movement places painted areas in out-of-body-size relationships".¹²⁹ Thus the simulated extension of the artist's body mirrors with the constant enlargement of the work. Later on, in addition to the spray paintings that Grosse started to produce in 1998, she attempted to intervene in the architectural space in a different way: through lines of colour applied with brushstrokes, a process that conveys a graphic character spreading across the walls. In ***Untitled, (2001)*** [Fig. 11] these lines delineate fragments of the room as in ***Untitled, (1998)*** [Fig. 10]. In a stronger way Grosse attempts to erase the distinction between the ceiling and the wall. In this case the surface of the wall and ceiling do not disappear completely under the paint, rather the space that is left unpainted stresses to the viewer the presence of the architectonic space in a different manner. Thus when framed with the lines of paint the white of the wall remains central to the perception of the viewer and allows him to realize that he is not looking at "...an illusionary mural, but rather a wall piece which carefully explores and sensitively feels along the space in order to allow the room and its structure to be experienced differently".¹³⁰

Here also an overlapping of different colours occurs. The green meets up with yellow, the yellow is then overlapped by gray. From the very start, the instance of movement and the engagement of the body have been essential elements of Grosse's painterly concept and the spatial effects the work produces change also in regard to the location of the viewer as she/he approaches the exhibition space, encompassing and at the same time being enclosed by the work. Beate Ermacora points out that the outcome of this experience is an active interchange between the viewer, the work and the space.¹³¹ Thus it becomes difficult for the viewer to comprehend the whole work from a single position; she/he is compelled to expand his field of view:

Distance and closeness are made possible as alternating or even reciprocally determining factors within the space itself. The fact that viewing and reflecting on the work takes place step by step or in stages fosters this particular quality of perception.¹³²

Ermacora adds that one might say that in this kind of work made by Grosse the drawings on the wall and the circles of colours do not manifest themselves as having a beginning or an end. However, Grosse carefully starts the brushstrokes above the floor of the space, thus emphasizing the pictorial character of the work. Each colour is covered by another colour, although this overlapping process in ***Untitled, (2001)*** [Fig. 11] ensures that the individual brushstrokes remain transparent revealing as well the temporal element involved in the construction process of the work:

Katharina Grosse has chosen a course which she pursues beyond the representational, pictorial, and imaginary space of the canvas into a real space. Her painting thus becomes a kind of installation painting, similar to sculpture which can only be explored and experienced through movement by walking through a space. It is also painting solely generated by the artist's own rhythm of movement.¹³³

Grosse is an artist who attempts to explore what Anne Ring Petersen has called "the spatiality of painting".¹³⁴ Ring Petersen means by this the attempt to develop painting outside the conventional pictorial plane as well as the attempt to redefine what space is, or could be, in regard to abstract painting. The idea of the "spatiality of painting" is thus related, not as an outcome of illusionism, but rather as something "physical and tangible" using Ring Petersen's words.¹³⁵

Grosse reinforces this approach through the inclusion of other materials along with her spray process, objects such as a bed, a mattress and carton boxes. In *The Poise of the Head und die anderen folgen*, (2004) Grosse introduced a new element replacing those other objects, the soil. The painted soil referred to pigment as a basic ingredient of paint; it could also be regarded as a coloured earth or thickened paint. In *The Poise of the Head und die anderen folgen*, (2004), the soil ‘connected’ the wall and floor planes establishing a new space on which the canvas sits. But above all, colour is the basic element of Grosse’s art. Her colours are luminous to the highest degree and are applied with great swinging gestures of the brush or as floating layers of paint. Grosse sounds out all its possible apparitions: transparent, opaque or garish. Her murals break all the usual bonds of an easel painting. Conceived for a specific location or exhibition room, her wall paintings become walk-through volumes of space, in which colour encircles the viewer, so to speak by means of its intense luminosity. As Roland Wäspe argues, “...her sprayed works, especially, transmit a transitoriness via the diffuse tapering off their woolly volume of paint. Grosse removes the codified from the medium of painting and lends it an unrivaled lightness and transparency”.¹³⁶ This rethinking of space in painting, or of painting as space, brings about changes in the relationship of painting to the viewer and the exhibition space. Grosse treats the exhibition space as if were a surface to be painted on, thus everything is a potential ground for Grosse’s paintings: walls, ceilings, windows, doors, and the everyday objects and materials that she sometimes brings into the room. Unlike conventional easel paintings, Grosse’s in situ works are not objects. According to Ring Petersen those “painterly installations”¹³⁷ impose the conflict between the feeling of loss of self and a heightened awareness of self on the viewer with a greater intensity than most installations art and any easel painting:

In many cases one can hardly say that the artist is painting pictures, she is rather painting or creating spaces. This rethinking of space in painting, or of painting as space, brings about changes in the relationship of painting to the viewer and the exhibition space.¹³⁸

For Grosse the surface to be worked on is in fact the exhibition space rather than the conventional pictorial plane – although she continues making work on stretched canvases – it is through the processes of making that she develops. Working with a spray gun on a wall or by adding different elements to her ‘expanded paintings’, Grosse sets up different contexts for the response to her work by the viewer. She stresses the involvement of the viewer with the work as she/he has to step into the

paintings, so to speak and thus to experience that situation from the various viewpoints that are established as she/he perceives the work. Ring Petersen contends that through the “painterly installations” Grosse’s work advances to a “third direction”, this direction – which explores the physicality - spatiality of painting – refers to the relationship that the work has to both the viewer and the surrounding space.¹³⁹ Bob Nickas argues that to be inside one of Grosse’s installations is to be confronted with a number of contradictions that all point back to questions of painting, with the understanding that the inquiry is not meant to yield a definitive answer to be brought to a final conclusion:

She makes work in situ but claims that it is anti site-specific. She invents pictorial space within three-dimensional space: illusion and reality uneasily coexist. She does not see her work as abstract, even if it cannot easily be claimed as representational.¹⁴⁰

In Grosse’s work there is no single point from which the whole environment can be grasped and it cannot be absorbed in an instant but only in a succession of moments and returns, viewers may double back from an element that has been displaced to discover its original location. The support of a painting is usually canvas, a flat surface. Grosse’s support is real space made unreal and inhabited by the work and the viewers. She paints on the walls, floors, ceilings, and windows, creating multiple ‘planes’ around, above and below the viewers and orchestrating a kind of spatial dislocation. The emphasis in Grosse’s work in both tactile and optical illusion is a singularity that relates, as previously mentioned, to the contest between photography and painting. A singularity that underlines how Grosse’s work challenges the reproducibility of photography or documentation as a photograph. Grosse stresses:

What I anticipate before making a spray painting looks very different to what I actually do. I might have all sorts of clever ideas beforehand, but when I do it it is not just executing something made up in my mind. Everything I do in my painting is based on a certain thought, followed by the next and so on – that is what makes it so different from photography.¹⁴¹

There is in Grosse’s process of making an exploration through the space she develops her work. Grosse does not move around the space systematically but “...rather [her] activity seems like an idiosyncratic way of marking out territory. The first marks she makes are like traces of an initial exploration of the space she is occupying”.¹⁴²

The directness of the spray paint points out to Grosse's particular process of making in which the act of paint occurs in a very specific space of time. Grosse stresses that within this process of making she works simultaneously within three locations: the architectural space, the space she creates for herself through previous work and the pictorial space.¹⁴³ She relies then on visual repetition and relationships, both found in the space and elaborated in paint, and also on the traces of her gestures that function as paths to lead the viewer through the three-dimensional structure. Visual and spatial connections are made then through a complex process of construction, displacement and transformation. The composition becomes a dialogue, and the dialogue gives way to a visual, nonlinear narrative about the space's scale, proportions, shapes, and textures. Within this tale, formerly isolated elements become one. In turn, unities are divided. What was up is now down, and horizontal becomes vertical. A building becomes a painting, while it also remains a building. The literally concrete appears to be atmospheric, so to speak. Through her on-site paintings Grosse suggests that painting is a language alien to architecture, it behaves differently. Her work invades and deterritorialises the architecture, setting edges fuzzy that run against any geometry. Furthermore, she addresses also the question of what contemporary abstraction is still permitted to do. Grosse's wall-paintings point out to the action that is represented in the painting's process, the painting's decisions that give structure to the creative process are themselves the central theme of the finished work. As Roman Kurzmeyer stresses:

We perceive the pace and rhythm of the application process, we are confronted at once with the artist's confidence in and doubts about the act of painting, and we attempt to follow the traces of her thoughts, corrective inventions, and discoveries of form.¹⁴⁴

3- Jules Olitski

In analyzing painters that attempt – as Grosse does – to include a wide range of the conventions of the medium, I have already mentioned Olitski as an example of an artist who explored and reconsidered the possibilities of these conventions by testing different approaches and techniques throughout his practice. Charles W. Millard mentions that more than once it has been suggested that Olitski's experience of Fautrier's work (especially Fautrier's impastoed images and restricted colour range) guided him to some of the pictorial approaches he tested in his earlier work.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless Millard maintains that it would be more accurate to link Olitski's earlier work with the visual context of Spanish informalist painting, specifically to the works that painters such as Antoni Tàpies and Luis Feito exhibited in New York during the late 1950s.¹⁴⁶ Olitski's earlier paintings, which followed on from artists like Tàpies and Feito, shared with *Informel* the thick impasto and the tendency towards monochrome. The pictures Olitski made at that time contained spackle, paint and acrylic resins which create a viscous density over the surface of the works.¹⁴⁷ A similar approach to the works that Tàpies was developing at that time and this is evident in Olitski's ***Brown Figure, (1957) [Fig. 12]*** which reflects a kind of materiality similar to Tàpies' paintings. However Olitski's procedure involved different kinds of materials than those used by Tàpies. Olitski used spackle, acrylic resin and dry pigments on canvas instead of sand and marble dust on board as were used by Tàpies. Later on – around 1961 – Olitski adopted the stain technique that was being tested by Frankenthaler, Louis and Noland: thin water-based acrylic pigment soaked into unprimed canvas. Like Louis and Noland, Olitski used areas of bare canvas to point up the identification of colour and support, thus stressing the lack of textural change between painted and unpainted areas.

The stain technique gives therefore a continuous material flatness. As Kenworth Moffett clarifies:

The illusion appears disembodied and can even seem to be slightly behind the physical nap and weave of the canvas, especially if the colour is pale and washy. The tendency of the stain painters, then, has been to find a design or layout that presses the illusion still closer to the surface.¹⁴⁸

Noland and Louis attempted a clear separation of colours one from the other and a careful delineation of the edge resulting in precise linear or geometrical forms. Millard maintains that Olitski moved in the opposite direction: "...towards integration of colour, abolition of carefully defined forms and expansion of the image beyond the confines of the canvas".¹⁴⁹ Moffett contends that due to the way in which the paint is applied to the surface - with sponges and rollers - "...the picture then no longer develops outward from an anchoring shape, but from the inside out, with the edges of the field pushing outward in all directions".¹⁵⁰ Millard adds that Olitski was not concerned with exhausting all the possibilities inherent in his 1964 field pictures, instead he moved to something different: the spray technique. Moffett remarks that in works such as *Hot Ticket, (1964)* [Fig. 13]

...[Olitski] wished to introduce sharp changes of hue, especially complementary changes from say, green to red, within the field, something that is difficult to achieve by staining without creating grayed or browed transitional areas that can look moody. So he had to stick pretty much to a monochrome field created by a single application. That is, he was limited in terms of both color variation and density.¹⁵¹

Through that process Olitski seems to be interested primarily in the treatment of colour through a subtle modulation of colour into colour across the pictorial plane. Anything that could break off the continuous movement of colour – such as sharp changes of hue value - is de-emphasized. The spraying technique was then a means for Olitski to create a kind of new surface across the pictorial plane. The emphasis on colour was an important factor for Olitski during this period and also a feature that locates Olitski as a paradigmatic modernist painter in Greenberg's terms. Olitski achieves then the kind of flatness Greenberg refers to in his *Modernist Painting* essay as he links the idea of flatness to the idea of an optical third dimension. Although Greenberg recognizes that in order to explain this logic he needs to overstate it in a way:

The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l'œil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion. (...) The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it by an artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension.¹⁵²

It is well known that in order to stress the feature of opticality painters like Louis and Noland – working with the stain technique – leave areas of bare canvas to make explicit the identity of colour and the texture of the canvas. The canvas – which is to say the support - is not only covered but saturated with paint and – as maintained by Greenberg – becomes paint in itself, colour in itself: “...the picture (...) loses its character as a discrete tactile object and thereby becomes more purely a picture, a strictly visual entity”.¹⁵³ But in regard to Olitski’s work, Greenberg contends that the sprayed colour meant to some extent a kind of tactility. As Greenberg observed commenting on Olitski’s work at the XXXIII Venice Biennale in 1966:

The grainy surface Olitski creates with his way of spraying is a new kind of paint surface. It offers tactile associations hitherto foreign, more or less to picture making, and it does new things with colour. Together with colour, it contrives an illusion of depth back to the picture’s surface, it is as if the surface in all its literalness were enlarged to contain a world of colour and light differentiations impossible to flatness but which yet manages not to violate flatness.¹⁵⁴

How is it possible to understand this paradoxical reading of Olitski’s spray technique? It is extremely difficult for the viewer because the appearance of Olitski’s spray paintings does not suggest to the viewer any kind of tactility – tactility as understood in Greenberg’s terms: “three-dimensional (...) furtive bas-relief”.¹⁵⁵ How could it be possible to read Greenberg’s appraisal of tactility in Olitski’s spray paintings? I suggest that Greenberg’s reading in this case is related to colour, to the way colour is achieved on Olitski’s pictorial plane through his expertise in using the spray technique. Thus Greenberg’s emphasis is focused on the way Olitski manages to expand the surface through colour, so to speak. Olitski’s capacity to create this singular kind of surface is analyzed by Krauss in regard to colour and in relation to the question of frontality in abstract painting. An analysis that according to Krauss situates Olitski as an innovator as Krauss considers that Olitski manages to dislocate painting’s frontality as it was being understood in modernist painting. Reviewing Olitski’s *Magic Number, (1967)* [Fig. 14] Krauss considers this particular work by Olitski extremely important due to the fact that it strives for a singular openness through colour:

It is as if the density, weight and fullness, the dimension of natural objects have permeated the surface of the painting and have been made apparent through the foreshortening of the colour slanting away from view. This obliqueness, in every part and in the whole of the colour in *Magic Number, (1967)* acts as if to

lift the picture's surface off the wall on which it hangs and turn it an angle toward the viewer.¹⁵⁶

Krauss acknowledges that that description is like an over-statement, however, Krauss continues, it indicates the manner the sprayed surface appears more "present"¹⁵⁷ than the strokes of colours of blue, orange and green that are applied on two of the painting's edges in *Magic Number, (1967)* [Fig. 14].

Although the bands of colour at the bottom and right side of *Magic Number, (1967)* are placed on top of the sprayed field, the sense of contact that the viewer has with the field itself drives the ribbons of chalky blue, white orange and acid green back into fictive space.¹⁵⁸

Krauss argues then that Olitski states "...the framing edge of the painting as illusionistic"¹⁵⁹, this is, Krauss contends, a consequence of colour's property to record the picture plane "...as palpable by and through the representation of it as oblique".¹⁶⁰ Krauss maintains that to some extent the painting's pictorial quality depends on this illusion, that it depends upon "...defeating painting's natural frontality. Olitski's art is the first to make this demand an unequivocal and absolute one for modernist painting".¹⁶¹ It is necessary at this point to analyze further Krauss' contention in regard to Olitski's work and the significance that Krauss establishes within the opposition between frontality and obliqueness in painting. The starting point of that analysis should be to consider the two properties that a blank canvas presents to the viewer. The first relates to the physical presence of the canvas which the viewer recognizes when she/he perceives its literal flatness. The second is much more a "perceptual"¹⁶² one and that is:

...the apparent opening up of an infinitely penetrable depth behind that surface. In looking at a blank canvas, one can *either* see its flatness (by identifying its flatness as the surface of an object, impenetrable and unyielding like the surface of any object), or one can see its nascent space. (...) In this situation the alternate and conflicting claims of apparent depth or literal flatness can neither be adjudicated nor unified.¹⁶³

Krauss maintains that the fact that the viewer perceives that doubleness is a role of perception and that those "...two irrevocable claims are given with eyesight itself".¹⁶⁴ For Krauss this is not to suggest an opposition between frontality and flatness, but rather an opposition between the assertion of flatness, which calls attention to the

painting (what she calls an opaque object) and the declaration of frontality, which guarantees its transparent depth: "Flatness secured and congealed colour, limiting it to a second-order property of objects rather than allowing it to exist as the primary property of *an* object, namely, the painting".¹⁶⁵ Artists like Newman, Pollock and Louis attempted to create a space in which to further develop the qualities of colour and each of them found a way to an illusion of an exclusively optical space, or as Michael Fried describes:

...the eye explores the coloured field not by entering a traditional illusionistic space full of conventional clues to the tactility of objects or their relations to one another in tactile space, but by perceiving nuances, fluctuations and properties of colour alone, which together create the different but closely related illusion of space addressed exclusively to eyesight.¹⁶⁶

In his essay *Three American Painters. Kenneth Noland - Jules Olitski - Frank Stella*¹⁶⁷ Fried analyses the strains that optical space placed on the structural organization of the work of colour painters who chose to engage with it. Fried stresses the emphasis that a painter like Stella made in regard to the task of recognizing the literal or defining qualities of painting, the acknowledgement of the picture's shape rather than of its flatness. In Stella's case he arranges bands of colour in line with the shape of the canvas, thus the picture's surface is held in the vice of frontality. Krauss maintains that

...if flatness is an aspect of painting that demands that one identify the picture in terms of a sculptural object, frontality is even more importunate in this respect. The very word 'frontal' implies a three-dimensional object, the only things we ever characterize as frontal are things which, like buildings or sculptures, necessarily have backs and sides. Frontal is then used to distinguish between one of their several aspects.¹⁶⁸

Although one might say that paintings have also backs and sides, this has no relationship with the meaning of seeing as it is used in regard to debates concerning painting. Krauss questions whether if in seeing a painting the viewer could feel that she/he is seeing only one aspect.¹⁶⁹ This is similar to the perception of frontality that we have in seeing a wall from the interior of a room:

...ironically, then, a pictorial structure which acknowledges the shape of the canvas by aligning bands of color parallel to its surface, insofar as it promotes

the painting's frontality, undercores rather than denies the painting's object quality.¹⁷⁰

Thus according to Krauss, in the frontality of Stella's stripe paintings the surface is perceived only insofar as one sees the flatness and literalness of the pictorial support.¹⁷¹ On the other hand, through the openness of colour

[Olitski's spray paintings] would make colour function as part of the grammar used to locate discrete objects. By reconceiving the role of colour, Olitski was able to change the syntax of the question 'where?' (...) By turning to the logic of colour, Olitski found himself outside the circle of the logic of place.¹⁷²

What Krauss stresses is Olitski's capacity to situate colour as the primary element the viewer encounters as she/he approaches the work. Thus whereas in Stella's work, pictorial surface is appreciated as a continuance of the flatness and literalness of the support, in Olitski's paintings colour functions as both pictorial surface and support (see **[Fig. 13]**). Due to the way in which colour is applied, *Hot Ticket's* picture plane looks like a "...colored carpet suspended"¹⁷³ so to speak, thus de-emphasizing the identification picture-support. As Moffett remarks, Olitski's paintings develop from the inside out, with the edges of the field pushing outward in all directions.¹⁷⁴ Moffett stresses that precisely for Olitski the spray technique is a tool in order to create a kind of "new surface" as well as a new kind of "colour fusion".¹⁷⁵ That kind of "new surface" is not fixed to the edges of the plane – as in Stella's stripe paintings – but follows the thickness and thinness of the paint. These different paint densities – as a result of spraying paint in a non-uniform way - evolve a particular kind of surface. If the "logic of place" is regarded as the pictorial plane following the pictorial support – such as Stella's stripe paintings – in ***Hot Ticket, (1964) [Fig.13]*** Olitski's dislocates this logic by identifying colour as both pictorial surface and support. In accordance with this Michael Fried maintains that the spray technique allowed Olitski to work "...in another dimension from that of lateral extension. Or as though he has discovered in spraying another direction for colour to take – not out but *in*".¹⁷⁶ Fried argues that through this procedure Olitski manages to atomize colour and thus to atomize and also even to break apart the picture plane:

Depending partly on the colours used and partly on facture, the spray paintings establish to different degrees an illusion of depth whose power and richness are without precedent both in Olitski's previous work and in recent modernist art.

This has to do largely with the difference between spraying and staining. The latter 'identifies' colour with its canvas ground, whereas in his spray paintings Olitski seems intent on driving colour back into its ground, both literally and illusionistically.¹⁷⁷

Fried mentions as well that that is what makes the character of Olitski's surfaces remarkable, and concurs with Greenberg's aforementioned analysis of Olitski's work at the Venice Biennial in 1966 in regard to Greenberg's contention about the paradoxical way through which Olitski achieved "tactile associations"¹⁷⁸ not through matter but through colour. Fried considers also that in Olitski's sprayed paintings, surface and depth, literalness and illusion are inseparably mixed.¹⁷⁹ The spray technique then allows colour to flow in a way that anticipates its continuity. That is why Fried regards a work like *Hot Ticket (1964)* [Fig. 13] as one in which the viewer experiences the individual colours not in isolation from the others but as each colour "...competes for presentness with every other. Moreover bearing down on each colour means bearing down on each bit of it, as though it were subtly and continuously changing from point to point".¹⁸⁰ Thus what reinforces the viewer's attention is both the layout of colours across the surface of the work as well as the distinctiveness of these colours at every point. What has to be analyzed according to Fried is the context in which Olitski developed his spray paintings, which is related – in Fried's view – to the developments made by Stella in regard to a new mode of pictorial structure, a pictorial structure grounded in a keen awareness of both the shape and size of the picture support.¹⁸¹ Fried analyzes that development firstly in regard to flatness and adds that as flatness is a feature of painting, the negation of tactility stressed in North-American painting before Stella - Fried mentions as examples Pollock's all-over drip paintings (1947-50), Newman and Louis - established a kind of depth or space:

...accessible to eyesight alone. This constitutes a new illusion one in which the integrity of the picture surface remains intact at the same time as its flatness is dissolved or anyway neutralized. More than any other factor the emergence of this purely visual or optical mode of illusionism crystallized the new and more acute awareness of the shape of the support including its exact proportions and dimensions that become the basis of the structure of Noland and Stella paintings.¹⁸²

In regard to Olitski, Fried stresses that the issue of pictorial shape against literal shape is resolved in Olitski's paintings through colour. Like in *Magic Number, (1967)* [Fig. 14], through the brushstrokes of blue, orange and green that extend along two sides of the work. These brushstrokes are then regarded by Fried as mediating between both the limits of the support and the rest of the painting.¹⁸³ That is why Fried maintains that in Olitski's work "...colour *is* paint (...) because Olitski's colour is the instrument of an overriding passion for the physical one might say the defining properties of paint".¹⁸⁴ Thus in Fried's view the issue at stake within Olitski's resolution of the pictorial surface is a contest between paint and support¹⁸⁵; a clash between what Fried calls "material substance" and "material entity":

It is a conflict in which the ultimate condition for the existence of painting in the world (that there be paint) is held against the ultimate condition for the existence of the world itself (that there be objects) (...) Philosophy asked: What is an art object? Now painting asks: Why should colour be an object at all, why can't colour escape objects altogether? But it equally asks: Why should objects 'have' a colour or set of colours at all, why can't objects escape colour altogether? ¹⁸⁶

Fried published that analysis of Olitski's work in April 1967, in his introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition *Jules Olitski: Paintings 1963 – 1967* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. But he referred to Olitski's particular approach to colour before in his essay *Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons* ¹⁸⁷ originally published in *Artforum*, November 1966, subtitled: *Frank Stella's New Paintings*. In *Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons*. Fried stressed that Olitski's aim to contend with the model of structure at work in Stella's paintings produced his particular approach to colour in the first spray paintings of 1965:

Those pictures are completely devoid of depicted shape, and in fact represent what is almost certainly the most radical and thoroughgoing attempt in the history of modernism to make major art out of nothing but colour.¹⁸⁸

What kind of illusion do Olitski's spray paintings offer? Fried argues that whereas in traditional painting the illusion of a tactile space starts inside the framing edge, in Olitski's spray paintings

...the illusion of something like depth or space accessible to eyesight alone ends at outside of that edge. And that whereas traditional illusionism begins at the surface of the canvas, the strictly visual mode of illusionism of Olitski's work ends here.¹⁸⁹

For Fried the conflict between the optical mode of illusionism and the literal nature of the support is essential in the works of Stella and Olitski. Additionally, in Olitski's spray paintings that conflict is more evident; the way in which colour is applied across the pictorial surface causes the illusion to disengage from the framing edge, an illusion that abandons the literal shape hung on the wall.¹⁹⁰ Fried emphasizes as well the difference in the contest between visual illusionism and literal shape in Stella and Olitski's paintings and the works of minimalist artists such as Judd and Larry Bell. Fried maintains that Judd and Bell consider any kind of conflict between the literal character of the support and illusion as unacceptable thus creating works that are wholly literal, going in this respect "beyond painting".¹⁹¹ In Judd's or Bell's works that literalness is not the literalness of the support.

Moreover, hypostatization is not acknowledgment. The continuing problem of *how* to acknowledge the literal character of the support – of what counts as that acknowledgement – has been at least crucial to the development of modernist painting as the fact of literalness and that problem has been eliminated not solved by the artists [Judd and Bell] in question.¹⁹²

Fried contends that the works of Judd and Bell do not acknowledge literalness, they are plainly literal.¹⁹³ As counterexample Fried maintains that Stella's stripe paintings – particularly those made in metallic paint – "...represent the most unequivocal and conflictless acknowledgment of literal shape in the history of modernism".¹⁹⁴ Stella's stripe paintings are extremely important according to Fried because of their place as an instance of a recognized development in modernist painting – the emphatic recognition of literalness – and because they make that development tenable in the first place. Stella's stripe paintings thus convey – in Fried's account – the relationship between literal and depicted shape through the disposition of shapes relative to one another and to the support.

The shape of the support is then taken into account, "...but the way in which this is accomplished does not affirm the dependence of depicted on literal shape so much as it establishes an unprecedented continuity *between them*".¹⁹⁵ The viewer is then forced to perceive the literal shape segment by segment, each of which is perceived to belong to one or another of the smaller shapes that comprise the painting as an entity. This is crucial for Fried because it indicates a decisive contrast between Stella's stripe paintings and Olitski's work; compared with Stella's stripe paintings, in Olitski's work the difference between literal and illusionistic surface became unimportant.¹⁹⁶ From the literalist point of view – such as Judd's – the conflict between pictorial illusion and literalness is resolved by stressing the literal character of the work of art as the logical attempt to overcome the illusionistic strain related to modernist painting. The elimination of any kind of illusion requires then the making of works of art that are "...nothing but literal, - works of art in which illusion, to the extent that it may be said to exist at all, is itself literal".¹⁹⁷ Fried argues that the importance of Stella's paintings is related to Stella's ability to make literalness illusive and then to sort out the antagonism between a distinct kind of pictorial illusionism – addressed to eyesight alone – and the literal nature of the support.¹⁹⁸

And by so doing they unmake at least in the event and for the moment the distinction between shape as a fundamental property of objects and shape as an entity belonging to painting alone that emerges for the first time in Noland's and Olitski's paintings.¹⁹⁹

Fried focuses on the different approach made by Stella in regard to Olitski's spray paintings: whereas Stella's stripe paintings reinforce the notion of shape in relationship to objects – in Stella's case especially the painting's support – Olitski's paintings underline the idea of shape as an exclusive property of colour. This is evident in Olitski's *Hot Ticket (1964)* [Fig. 13] where the image appears to the viewer as detached from the frame, so to speak. Fried considers that Stella linked the elements within their works to the shape of the support in a way that the composition of the works corresponds with that shape.²⁰⁰ Stella accomplished that through the 2.5 inch-wide stripes beginning at the framing edge and repeating themselves inside the painting filling the whole surface of the canvas. Therefore Olitski's spray paintings, in Fried's view, contradict Stella's conception of pictorial structure. Fried contends that in fact Olitski's understanding of the importance of the shape of the support inspired him to make works that overcome the preeminence of that support: "...paintings in which it could find no handhold in which there would be nothing that could be diagrammed, in

which colour would assume the full burden of pictorial structure”.²⁰¹ Fried regards then Olitski’s use of colour in a similar way as Krauss does, regarding Olitski’s ability to disjoint the “logic of place”²⁰² by settling colour as both pictorial surface and support. What Fried values in both artists is the kind of optical illusion that both Stella and Olitski provide to the viewer in contrasts to the literality of Judd’s *specific objects* or Bell’s work. But if optical illusion is a main value in Olitski’s work – in accordance with Greenberg, Fried and especially in line with Krauss’ reading of Olitski’s ***Magic Number, (1967) [Fig. 14]***, what kind of reading does the viewer make of Olitski’s ***Brown Figure, (1957) [Fig. 12]*** or ***Bokota Silenced - One – (1974) [Fig. 15]***? Both works plainly stress the tactile illusion so disproved of particularly by Greenberg. I suggest that Krauss’ pro-illusionistic analysis of Olitski’s spray paintings cannot be applied to ***Brown Figure, (1957) [Fig. 12]*** or ***Bokota Silenced - One – (1974) [Fig. 15]***. The essence of these matter paintings is an approach that seems to be a long term interest in Olitski’s practice as he developed it through a wide range of materials, both at the beginning and the end of his career. In the later phase, Olitski started to use a heavy gel and a squeegee with which - according to Moffett – Olitski was able to achieve a kind of visual identity between paint density and value change.²⁰³ Thus Krauss’ pro-illusionistic reading of Olitski’s work is not feasible in works such as ***Brown Figure, (1957) [Fig. 12]*** or ***Bokota Silenced, - One – (1974) [Fig. 15]*** because these paintings and this strand of Olitski’s work, refers explicitly to *Informel* and as aforementioned *Informel* compels the viewer –above all, to focus on the physical properties of the materials used: tactile illusion. Unlike the spray paintings, where a kind of disembodied pictorial plane seems caught on the surface, Olitski’s later works are covered with various layers of materials – such as gel and paint – ***Bokota Silenced, - One – (1974) [Fig. 15]***. I argue that the main value of Olitski’s work resides in its capacity to deal with two main features of modernist painting: opticality and tactility. Olitski’s paintings interrogate also these strands adding new approaches, such as Olitski’s manner of stating – in a singular way - the issue of frontality - obliqueness as analyzed by Krauss in regard to ***Magic Number, (1967) [Fig. 14]***.

Olitski’s ‘matter’ paintings brings us back also to Bois and de Duve’s anti-illusionistic reading of Robert Ryman’s work, to de Duve’s viewpoint in regard to the contest between painting and photography as well as to the way in which this contest was developed through modernist painting. I noted in Chapter 1 de Duve’s suspicion of opticality as a quality, as a quality that could allow painting to withstand its reification. I previously mentioned as well that both de Duve and Bois contend that opposition to photographic reproducibility has been essential to painting since photography made

painting reproducible. And that is precisely why de Duve highly regards Ryman's work, because – as I have pointed out before – de Duve considers that resistance to photographic reproducibility is a constant strand in Ryman's work. De Duve notes at this point an observation made by Harold Rosenberg that indicates that "...*a contrario* what the irreproducibility of Ryman's works shows".²⁰⁴ Analyzing the works of Frankenthaler, Louis and Noland that were included in the exhibition "*The 1960s*" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1969, Rosenberg maintains that the opticality of their works is so reproducible that almost nothing differentiates the real painting from its reproduction.²⁰⁵ Thus de Duve argues:

Opticality is reifiable and reproducible, it is photographable, which is tantamount to say that it is not a quality. (...) So there are no specifically pictorial qualities; there is an art that we call painting and the art that we call something else. But there is a specifically pictorial tradition, and it is not the same 'conventions of the medium' that allows us to name painting as those that name sculpture, drawing, or art in general.²⁰⁶

It is known that Greenberg highly regarded Anne Truitt's works, works that deal with the conventions of sculpture and painting.²⁰⁷ Thus de Duve argues that regardless of Greenberg's conception of modernist specificity "...it seems that a hybrid of painting and sculpture is permissible, and that can be even convincing".²⁰⁸ Furthermore, de Duve stresses Greenberg's conflict with his own conception of painting's specificity and that in regard to painting–sculpture links, as previously mentioned, Greenberg acknowledges Olitski's spray paintings "grainy surface" and "tactile associations". Here we would have – in de Duve's understanding:

...anti-illusionistic tactility turned against itself, this timed more highly abstract and 'micrological' since it is inscribed at the level of the "grainy surface" that the technique of spray painting achieves. Rosalind Krauss (*On Frontality*, 1968) has pushed this micrological analysis of the grain surface as tactile opticality into almost absurd refinements. Generally speaking the fact that Olitski, who nowadays appears as a sumptuously decorative painter but not much more, was a 'test case' for all the critics whom Judd nastily called the 'Greenbergers' has to do, it seems to me, with the extreme doctrinal importance that the sort of oxymoron represented by 'tactile opticality' had for the formalist / modernist approach. It has left its imprint on the writings, besides those of Greenberg himself and Krauss of Fried and Kenneth Moffett.²⁰⁹

In fairness to Krauss, de Duve notes that Krauss "...was still very much struggling with Greenbergian criticism when she wrote this piece [*On Frontality*] in 1968".²¹⁰ Krauss' claim in regard to Olitski's capacity "to state the framing edge as illusionistic"²¹¹ concurs with Michael Fried's assertion in regard to Olitski's ability to resolve the question of pictorial shape against literal shape through colour, as Fried regards the lines of blue, orange and green in *Magic Number, (1967)* [Fig. 14] as intervening between the limit of the support and the rest of the painting.²¹²

I have examined throughout this text works by painters such as Ryman, Olitski or Grosse that reflect painting's struggle in its opposition to being annexed by photography. Painters that in some way or another tried to find in *Informel's* main features a feasible approach to withstand photography's annexation. I have mentioned as well that de Duve regards *Informel* as a manifestation of the painting–photography contest.²¹³ It results then, as aforementioned, that in de Duve's view opticality or any kind of illusionistic approach in abstract painting fails in the task of resisting photography's challenge. I referred as well to de Duve's assertion in regard to the attempt to define painting "...in its specific form".²¹⁴ This definition – I have mentioned that also – has to be able to support the question of resistance to photographic reproducibility as a critical condition of painting since the beginnings of photography.²¹⁵ Following de Duve's appraisal of the historical meaning of Duchamp's readymade he contends that "...to paint after Duchamp means to paint in the hostile conditions set up by industrialization. Duchamp cannot be responsible for those conditions; he simply showed them".²¹⁶ This is the reason, de Duve maintains, that the readymade should be reconsidered in relationship to painting.²¹⁷

The art of painting means making, said Duchamp, thereby quoting a very traditional definition of art as skill and craftsmanship. But if craftsmanship has been rendered objectively useless by industrialization, then skillful making must also be subjectively felt as impossible by the sensitive artist.²¹⁸

It is clear that there is a loss here; craftsmanship regarded useless by industrialization, but despite this loss painting continues to hold a place in contemporary art practice. De Duve claims that "...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".²¹⁹ The melancholic approach noted by de Duve is for me an interesting point of view from where to focus on Sergej Jensen's restrained paintings.

4- Sergej Jensen's restrained paintings

Sergej Jensen's work can be identified with the language of minimalist abstraction. He uses a wide range of materials - such as cotton canvas, linen, sacking or sewn cashmere silk - in a singular manner to make tactile and to some extent silent paintings. Dominic Eichler stresses that Jensen has a particular sense of space as he incorporates not just the display possibilities of the walls but also the ceiling and floor as compositions of abstract fields, making explicit his interest in the relationship between painting and contextualizing space, which can be regarded as an extended picture plane.²²⁰ There are also references to other artists' works that one could refer to in evaluating Jensen's paintings - Eichler mentions Hans Hoffman and Blinky Palermo among others.²²¹ Thus the question to be answered should be related to the uncovering of Jensen's intention in revisiting these paths of abstraction. In first instance it can be said that the interplay between chance and the carefully calculated effects within the process of making is central to Jensen's paintings. Jensen conveys the notion of the picture plane as a location of an accident and also as a place where the application of a cautious harm is required within the work's construction process.

The effacement of the gesture, or the gesture conveyed to its minimal expression brings the notion of a restrained process of making and this might be the source of one of his procedures; the addition of knitted appliqués rather than the application of colour. For Alex Gartenfeld, by working mainly in monochromatic fields of fabric, Jensen "...paradoxically weds his interest in process the idiom of self-reflexive modernist painting in order to interrogate the work's objecthood. (...) [through] a hint of process-oriented singularity that will sustain the authorial mark".²²² Lisa Pasquiarello maintains that the question that arises analyzing Jensen's work is "...if [abstract] painting today refers less to material or object than to practice and action".²²³ Pasquiarello contends that Jensen's work reflects the latter. She suggests that what might be considered in the first instance is the way in which Jensen manipulates the wide range of textiles (burlap, linen, fabric, wool, thread, silk, etc) he uses in his paintings.²²⁴ But more importantly, Pasquiarello considers that Jensen's work addresses "...some of the thorniest matters of artistic production and reception of the past century – including questions of what happens to painting when it becomes decorative or encounters the strategies of the readymade".²²⁵

She adds consequently:

The sheer fact of disjunction itself – the negative space that erupts between means and meaning, longing and contemporaneity – seems more relevant. It is in this light that one must reckon with another obvious address of the work, its rather oblique relationship to modernism. Jensen's production (...) abounds with allusions to modernist painting, in a practice that might be described by the paradoxical formulation of referential formalism".²²⁶

For Eichler, "...Jensen's paintings don't want to graduate from the school of high modernism, but still need to be enrolled in some sense, if only in order to be perceived as dissonant, talented dropouts".²²⁷ **Untitled, (2008) [Fig. 16]** makes explicit Jensen's emphasis on the idea of painting without paint.²²⁸ Jensen spreads the textiles over the stretchers and attaches patches and other fabrics onto them. **Untitled, (2008) [Fig. 16]** affirms a radical economy of gesture, often incorporating reaches of empty space. Although there are in Jensen's work connections with modernist painters such as Agnes Martin's gridded patterns or Alberto Burri's sacks²²⁹ – the latter explicitly manifested in **Postauthentic times, (2010) [Fig. 18]** - these connections do not seem to be understandable as mere quotations of modernism tropes: "His quotations are neither arch nor disillusioned, and insofar as they have a kind of default quality, one might question whether it is even proper to understand them as quotations".²³⁰ Thus how could we understand Jensen's images? Are they a melancholic repetition of modernist practices? His sometimes dark palette conveys a complex meaning because it refers to both retrospection and nostalgia. Is he attempting to emphasize a centre line between these two positions? The frequently disturbed distinctiveness of the materials in Jensen's paintings relates to the idea of fragility, drawing attention as well to seemingly incidental details such as the frayed edges in **Green Digital Snake, (2010) [Fig. 17]**. As Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson remarks, Jensen's paintings "...are both additive and subtractive, as stains, holes, and other traces of use become pictorial elements with applied processes and treatments that evolve over several years".²³¹ The paintings display a balance of chance and clear intention. Zuckerman Jacobson adds that due to the use of fabric Jensen's work recalls Blinky Palermo's work, especially the *Stoffbilder*, or cloth pictures that Palermo made from 1966 through the early 1970s:

Palermo used commercially dyed monochrome cloth purchased in department stores and sewed it together to form abstract bands of colour. But whereas Palermo bought pre-prepared materials for their inherent beauty and

commercial reference, Jensen uses what he finds, celebrates and emphasizes its flaws, and often further manipulates the material himself by dyeing, washing, or sewing.²³²

Palermo's *Stoffbilder* are made of *Stoff*, 'cloth'. According to Christine Mehring, "...they also present *Stoff* in the sense of subject matter, meaning is in the material".²³³ It is quite obvious that the cloth pictures appeal to our sense of touch. As the fabric wraps around the stretcher and creates colour fields with sharp linear divisions, it gives the work the impression of solidity. The German term *Stoffbilder*, 'cloth pictures' has another relevant meaning here, for it also alludes to the pictures' materiality; *Stoff* can be both 'cloth' and 'subject matter' but also 'substance' or 'material'.²³⁴ For Mehring, Palermo's cloth pictures participated in and formed a backdrop to their historical time. Colourfulness appealed to the progressive and optimistic spirit of the 1960s in Germany: "...to a consumption-oriented German audience that reveled in the waning years of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the 'economic miracle', which had encompassed the rapid rebuilding of war-ravaged industries".²³⁵ Palermo's *Stoffbilder* have pristine surfaces and are mostly rectangular and two-dimensional. The purchased fabric is attached tightly to a stretcher and neatly stitched together with a sewing machine in order to create smooth, separate fields of colour horizontally placed one above the other in two, or sometimes three, broad bands. With the exception of early and experimental pieces in which Palermo used satin or silk the *Stoffbilder* are made with a matte cotton yardage whose surface texture and weave emphasize their communication of colour.²³⁶

Anne Rorimer argues that the arrangement of colour in Palermo's *Stoffbilder* is intuitive: "...the *Stoffbilder* seem not directly concerned with pointing out or analyzing colour relationships. Each colour stands on its own in differentiation from, through harmonious with its neighbor".²³⁷ Colour in the *Stoffbilder* was found and predetermined, purchased by Palermo according to what was manufactured and available at the time when he made the work. As Palermo superimposed commercially produced fabrics onto the traditional, two-dimensional framework of painting, he eliminated steps in the usual painting process to create new pictorial results. The substitution of expanses of dyed cotton fabrics fastened to a frame totally identifies colour with its format. Inseparable from its material and from its format colour is freed from being experienced from any reason other than its visual presence: "Colours in the *Stoffbilder*, like form in Palermo's objects, function as themselves. Identified as they are with their format and not subordinate to it, the rectangular areas of colour assume

independent meaning".²³⁸ Rorimer contends that Palermo's *Stoffbilder* have been mistakenly considered derivations of Ellsworth Kelly due to the superficial similarity of the large and contiguous fields of colour. Kelly's paintings, Rorimer argues, are founded on the very premise which Palermo's work redefines:

The flat surface of the canvas is a crucial factor in Kelly's treatment of colour and shape. Colours used in juxtaposition to define large flat areas of form neither advance nor recede, and the importance of Kelly's paintings lies in the fact that colour and form avoid illusionistic spatial relationships. Kelly's work expresses the reality of flatness while maintaining and relying on the fiction of the canvas confines. Like Kelly's paintings, the *Stoffbilder* are identified with the reality of flatness, but they abandon the fictional construct of a painted two-dimensional area by their appropriation of found coloured fabric. The existence of a surface onto which paint can be added or subtracted is denied and the painting is conceived of as an 'object'.²³⁹

Palermo's work marks another step in the history of the artistic developments in which painting has continued to raise questions about its relation to observed reality in the broadest sense. In Palermo's objects and *Stoffbilder*, form and colour are freed from their enclosure within the previous mental and physical boundaries of an intermediate flat surface and are allied with the space occupied by the wall, while his wall drawings and paintings extend the boundaries of art to coincide with actual space as defined by the wall. Palermo's *Stoffbilder* endow the very form of painting with material actuality as colour, and with the wall paintings, each by different means, reinterpret the conventional division between real and painted space. The objects imbue painted form with an independent existence in three-dimensional space. Though flat, the *Stoffbilder* set up painting with 'material', and the depicted forms of the wall paintings converge with the forms found in the reality of architectural space. Mehring considers Palermo's work in its relationship with Greenberg's view of modernist painting – its essentialism. She argues that Palermo's *Stoffbilder* achieved a singular approach to the question of Greenbergian essentialism in that they reduce painting to its proper ground (the tacked-up canvas), and even

...purify colour – the identity of dye and ground – while abandoning paint (strictly speaking) altogether. In their stead, the cloth pictures posit sewing as appropriate, medium specific means of treating the fabric that forms the ground

of painting. For Palermo, modernist painting does not mean closing down possibilities.²⁴⁰

For Mehring, Palermo's "twists and turns" prove that the blank canvas "...can be both a successful modernist picture and an (assisted) ready-made".²⁴¹ Each cloth picture Palermo produced had to be made in order to prove itself a successful modernist picture and to clear the way to the future, to open up the endless possibilities that arise with the conjunction of ready-made and formalist painting. It is for this reason, Mehring contends, that Palermo proves to be so important to contemporary painters.²⁴² His procedure of making within abstraction opened up a language of new sources and materials that is currently reformulated by a painter like Jensen. But in contrast to Palermo's pristine *Stoffbilder*, Jensen's paintings point to the marks, the scars and to the pattern of use and reuse of the different materials Jensen applies to the pictorial surface.²⁴³

Despite of the restrained appearance of his work there is in Jensen's process of making a wide range of formal properties and procedures that include wounds or punctures repaired, paint applied to the back surface of the support, textiles and fabrics patched together. Frame and canvas, which usually serve only as support media, are in Jensen not just part of the work but in fact become the picture. Zuckerman Jacobson emphasizes that "...although each painting exists as an individual gesture, they commingle to form a complex narrative of passage and loss".²⁴⁴ By employing found materials, Jensen extends the pictorial surface of his works all along the edges and onto the back as in ***Green Digital Snake, (2010) [Fig. 17]***. The oscillation between deliberate gesture and randomness make a set of tensions which is a characteristic of all Jensen's works. Thus, it can be said that to keep the artistic intervention as slight as possible is central within his process of making. Susanne Pfeffer declares that the materials in Jensen's work, "...takes on a life of their own and come to define the picture. The visible traces become painterly gestures, and painterly gestures appear to be traces. Front sides turn into backs, below into above, right to left. The picture itself determines the composition".²⁴⁵ Jensen focuses carefully in the framing of his paintings and grants the space to expand beyond its wooden support. As previously mentioned, he occupies the floor and ceiling of the exhibition space, thus deciding quite deliberately to ignore the classical parameters of exhibiting turning his shows into a meditation about the making of exhibitions, about what it means to exhibit something at all: "Exhibiting became part of his work, and the works in turn seem to reflect on their being exhibited, lifting the show to a second level: rather than merely being looked at, it

set its sights on itself".²⁴⁶ But at the same time he works within the conventions of painting's history and forms, with a few exceptions, his paintings are stretched, and they hang on the wall, they have a front and a back, they root themselves in the past. This belatedness is reinforced by Jensen's periodic references to outdated technologies – a hint at the anachronism of painting, but also at the outmoded history of modernism itself. Operating yet with that history, Jensen gives shape to a reconsideration of modernism.²⁴⁷ I have mentioned that nostalgia might appear as a centre line of his work, however, his paintings' frail and corporeal beauty allows modernism to seem comfortingly less distant. Art-historical knowledge and a meditation on what painting can be today form the core of Jensen's work. Jensen's procedure reduces the creative act "...to the maximum minimum – a reduction that unites all of his works".²⁴⁸

From the analysis of Jensen's restrained paintings I refer back to the assertion about painting holding space in contemporary art practice, or in Jonathan Harris words:

Painting is there still, jostling for position, wondering where it stands within the hierarchy of artistic production (wondering if there is a hierarchy at all) and anxious about how it gets its own representations represented. (...)The [issue] is then a problem of identity encountered as soon as we start to talk about painting, *now* –that term itself, 'now', is notoriously complicated having a convoluted relation to both of the terms contemporary and modern.²⁴⁹

Does this question suggest that even if modernism could be over – as de Duve indicates – "...it still retains a potential future in the form of a re-reading of modernism?"²⁵⁰ I argue that Grosse and Jensen's images can be regarded as re-readings of modernist painting. Grosse and Jensen's paintings can be considered as examples of a resonance of the works of the artists I have analyzed in Chapter 1.

Achim Hochdorfer focuses as well on these artists - he mentions precisely Rauschenberg among others – and analyzes the period roughly 1958-65s – "...in which artists explored possibilities that were subsequently largely suppressed, until recent practices reengaged them".²⁵¹ Harris agrees with Hochdorfer's contention by relating the terms contemporary and modern:

...contemporary paintings, though different from modernist painting, will be, in all cases, shown to bear some relation to artworks that came before them. (...)

These two terms, then, *contemporary* and *modern*, are tortuously interconnected and confused, almost especially when the attempt is made to rigorously separate them out. Of course the difficulties are partly to do with assumptions about when certain things, events, processes, are supposed to have 'started' and 'finished'.²⁵²

Hochdorfer names the strand of abstraction previously mentioned – noting as examples Rauschenberg, Johns and Twombly, among others - “the hidden reserve”²⁵³, adding that the potentiality of the works made during the aforementioned period appear to be reformulated – rather than rejected – by contemporary painters.²⁵⁴ I concur with Hochdorfer's assertion taking as examples Katharina Grosse and Sergej Jensen's paintings. Andrew Benjamin considers as well the relationship between contemporary abstract painting and (past) time, considering that by “...pursuing this complex relationship: painting- time.(...) a number of significant moments will have to be traced. An inescapable part of taking up the question of abstraction, therefore, will be repetition –abstraction's repetition”.²⁵⁵ Abstraction's repetition in regard to the 1960s – the period analyzed mainly throughout this text – is regarded by 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.²⁵⁶

For Benjamin the relevance of repetition is related to a particular question that has to be answered:

...the question to be addressed concerns the nature of that repetition. Here what is involved is abstraction's repetition. What is abstraction's repetition? Responding to this question of repetition involves a twofold move. In the first place it will mean working with the recognition that part of the repetition will comprise abstraction's own ability to engage with its history. In other words, instead of viewing each abstract painting as a unique and self-enclosed work, the work of pure interiority, there must be an allowance for the possibility that part of the work, and part of its own work as a work, will be a staged encounter with earlier determinations and thus forms of abstraction. This encounter can

take a number of forms all of which involve differing relations to what has been identified thus far as the economy of abstraction.²⁵⁷

Thus the economy of abstraction involves two meanings:

...a given history of paintings; existing paintings that taken together, provide a genre. In addition there is the sense of abstraction as linked to the relationship between the resolved and the yet to be resolved. Linking these two senses of abstraction becomes possible once it is understood that what has to be repeated is the genre; to that extent the nature of resolution must maintain a relation to the history of abstract painting.²⁵⁸

Within the repetition of the genre of abstraction there are obviously several strands that are explored by contemporary abstract painters; Benjamin names – among others – “...*the affirmation of the worked surface*”²⁵⁹ as an example of a thread developed by abstract painters such as David Reed or Fabián Marcaccio. Reed’s “...smooth, almost inscribed surface, the surface as a place of inscription. What is inscribed is of course paint’s work”.²⁶⁰ and Marcaccio’s “... complexity of the brush stroke, [thus] opening up the question of how to think through the temporality of paint’s inscription and thus the problem of determining ways in which the painting works to hold time”.²⁶¹ Despite the several differences between the works of Reed, Marcaccio and the works analyzed throughout this text, I borrow Benjamin’s term in order to remark upon the various approaches that have been tested for the construction of surface in contemporary abstract painting. Through the analysis made of the various strands of abstraction that stress tactile illusion and narrative, I focused on the relevance of revisiting these paths in a contemporary context as well as the manner through which these strands can be regarded now. Or as Harris indicates: how the question of identity (of contemporary abstract painting) might be resolved if *now* there is within abstraction an intricate interrelationship between contemporary and past practices.²⁶²

Following Thierry de Duve’s contention in regard to the possibility of a re-reading of modernism I have taken particular attention to the works of Katharina Grosse and Sergej Jensen, as possible examples that present the possible re-reading contended by de Duve.²⁶³ In accordance to this idea I considered the question of abstraction’s repetition and the value of abstraction’s persistence in the afterglow of the linear narrative of modernism. Subsequently, it is necessary to address also the question of abstraction’s temporality.

Daniel Birnbaum addresses these questions in his essay *Late Arrivals*.²⁶⁴ In this text, Birnbaum mentions Freud's notion of deferred action, the idea of belatedness.²⁶⁵ It is well known that the notion of deferred action can be used to describe the return of historical forms later in time. This Freudian perspective is also offered by Birnbaum as a suggestion to explain how the temporality of artworks might operate. Birnbaum notes the use of the notion of deferred action by critics such as Hal Foster,²⁶⁶ specifically in Foster's regard of the neo avant-garde, and also the many analyses that consider the neo avant-garde as a productive repetition of the avant-garde. For Birnbaum as well as for Achim Hochdorfer this notion might lead to the assertion that such repetitions occur as well today.²⁶⁷ Through that notion of temporality, Birnbaum suggests a model for the temporality of both history and artworks based upon deferral and repetition. He reminds us that "...painting no longer appears as a strictly circumscribed mode of expression, but as a zone of contagion, constantly branching out widening its scope. Painterly practices emerge in other genres, such as photography, video, sculpture, printmaking and installation".²⁶⁸

The same position is argued by Harris:

Painting since the 1980s had promiscuously reinvented itself in virtually every possible position, including trying to pass itself off as hot and expressive again. (...) Painting has become experientially, rather than simply theoretically, ineffable: it can be found virtually *everywhere else* in the material fabric of contemporary art: in what used to be called 'sculpture', or 'installation', or 'video', or all, none of these –all with inverted comas.²⁶⁹

Birnbaum and Harris' assertions in regard to painting's pluralism and to the wide scope of abstraction lead us back to the question of identity – of contemporary abstraction. In regard to contemporary abstraction I have argued – via Harris, Hochdorfer, Birnbaum, and de Duve – that although one can consider past practices – such as the period mentioned by Hochdorfer - roughly 1958-65, as a kind of distanced historical reserve contemporary abstract painting cannot "...rid itself entirely from this past".²⁷⁰ Where could we locate that identity, within the question of authorship, within the question of repetition, or by taking both and adding the melancholic hindsight mentioned by de Duve?²⁷¹

These questions surpass the scope of this thesis, and lead to a path of research I shall develop further. But at this point I refer to my own paintings, because my own work develops to some extent within the aforementioned questions. I have taken as the starting point for the construction process of my work some of the procedures adopted by the painters I have reviewed and thus my own paintings struggle within the interconnection previously stressed by Harris. In my paintings the construction of surface involves an overlapping of elements which are added and dismantled until a definitive form is achieved. The physical nature of the materials thus is central to the activity. Materials are added and removed, the latter process frequently being the more important. The construction of surface is worked through a restrained process of making, trading off one factor against another until a settlement becomes possible, not an end or a conclusion, but an outcome sufficiently worked through to withstand continual examination. As a result of that process the paintings articulate the space that they share with the viewer, that is to say that the work addresses the real space it inhabits rather than the illusionistic space, which, according to certain understandings - such as Greenberg's - is essential to modernist painting. By working with increased physicality plus highly reduced and austere means the ambition is then to engage the viewer as a total sentient being rather than a receiver of images. The works need not obey the conventions that govern the presentation of image-based paintings and to some degree this offers the possibility for the work to create an alternative sense of place.

Notes

Notes Chapter 1

¹ Manuel Borja-Villel maintains that American art critics' lack of interest in Tàpies' early work could be explained by the fact that his paintings did not fit into the aesthetic scene of the 1960s that was predominant in the United States. It was not recognizable in the mainstream scene of American art. In the debate between pop art and the abstract painters supported by Greenberg – i.e., Louis and Noland - Tàpies' work was startlingly out of place. Borja-Villel, M. "Writing on the Wall" In *Antoni Tàpies Writing on the Wall* Translated by Jordi Castells, Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, IVAM Centre Julio González, 1992, p.300.

² De Duve, T. (1980) "Irreproducible Ryman" In *Robert Ryman - Critical texts since 1967* edited by Vittorio Colaizzi and Kursten Schubert, London: Ridinghouse, 2009, p.103.

³ Greenberg, C. "Modernist Painting" In *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* edited by John O'Brian, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

⁴ "If it is true that the tendency of modern painting –of 'ambitious' or 'major' modern painting at least –has been towards a gradual elimination of the illusion of three dimensions, then it could be said that these are paradigmatic modern paintings." Harrison, C. - Wood, P. "Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered" (Chapter 3), In *Modernism in Dispute. Art Since the Forties* Paul Wood - Francis Francina - Jonathan Harris - Charles Harrison. New Haven & London: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1993, p.173.

⁵ Harrison, C. - Wood, P. "Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered" (Chapter 3), In *Modernism in Dispute. Art Since the Forties* Paul Wood - Francis Francina - Jonathan Harris - Charles Harrison, New Haven & London: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1993. p.170.

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